

It is only as we see the *truth* of a poem that we see its real and characteristic beauty; and our sense of the beauty of a true poem grows as we more perfectly understand the truth which the poem embodies.

Nor can the poem with which we are dealing be regarded as a story told for its own sake. The poetic impulse never manifests itself in Tennyson in that way. This poem is most interesting, as being the earliest instance of Tennyson's use of the old Arthurian story. It here touched his young imagination as romance; but even here the story is not reproduced for its own sake, but for its fitness to be the medium of his message to his times. Here, as in the *Idylls of the King*, these old stories are told only because the poet sees in them an application to our modern life and its problems. The story is but the vessel which holds the wine of life; and how great is our error when we refuse to look within, and drink of its life-giving nectar!

But yet again, we must look beneath the surface of the story if we are to understand the action and make it probable. That is, we must interpret the poem; for the "interpretation" of a poem is only the obtaining such a view of it as will consistently account for the action. In the present case the action is made probable only by interpreting the whole as the story of the poet who so far forgets his mission as to be tempted by "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life." In the light of this interpretation the story has a meaning, and the lyrical fairy-tale has a beauty and a truth as wide and as deep as the universe. Beneath the ineffably beautiful verse we can feel the pulse-beats of a whole humanity, and through it we reach, with eyes purged as with euphrasy and rue, to the foundations of all great art—life itself.

Part I. It is in the harvest, and the lilies blow on the island in the river, and are seen by all as they go down to the city. The spirit of poetry is not far from any one of us, but most see only the ornaments of it—the lilies. On the island is the austere tower of poetry. Here is no self-delight, but only "four gray walls, and four gray towers," and the little space of flowers, seen alike by all. But what of the lady? From "the silent isle" comes there no sign? The barge and shallop are alike unhailed, none have seen her at the casement, and has she any connection with the realities of life? Yes, but she is not seen by the thoughtless and the careless:

Only reapers, reaping early
In among the bearded barley,
Hear a song that echoes cheerly,
From the river winding clearly,
Down to tower'd Camelot;
And by the moon the reaper weary,
Piling sheaves in uplands airy,
Listening, whispers "'Tis the fairy
Lady of Shalott."

Only the reapers, those chastened souls who labor on the uplands of the spirit, are susceptible to the spirit of poetry. To those who labor that the spirit of man perish not for spiritual bread, the Lady is known, and when the common light of things has melted into the softer influences of the night, and

"While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things."

Part II. Meanwhile poetry is engaged in its ceaseless task, and, unhasting yet unresting, it weaves into beautiful and enduring forms what is shown in the mirror of the imagination. The end of poetry must not be to go down "to Camelot," into the turmoil and excitement of political and social questions. It has the higher office of strenuously living in the presence of what is permanently true and good and beautiful; and, by holding ideal aims and ends before the people, prevent the masses from forgetting

what is man's real worth. This is not aloofness from the world, but it is rather life in the real and the true. All who passed were reflected in the mirror, not as they appeared, but as they really *were*. But the fair forms in the mirror were displeasing at last, and she forgot her mission in her desire to mix with the press.

Part III. It is in the heat of harvest, and the brave but fleshly Lancelot comes past the island, and in all his glory and splendor he is flashed into the mirror. Here is what the Lady, in her discontent, has wished for—like Guinevere, she thought she could not breathe in that fine air, that pure severity of perfect light—she yearned for warmth and color, which she found in Lancelot. No more of the Ideal for her, who had now fallen so far as to be satisfied with the crude Real. Imagination was killed, and its fair images desecrated, and in her fall she knew at last that the curse was come.

Part IV. It is no longer summer; as if to sympathize with her downfall, nature is weeping and complaining. Great indeed is her fall, for she will proclaim herself to the world, and writes her name on the boat, that the mob may know that it is she. Such is ever the way of the worst poetry, and it strives to be recognized as poetry by conventional forms and a hundred other tricks. Homer and Shakespeare never wear labels. And now, in her last hours, she floats on the broad stream down to the source of her woe—the towered city of Camelot. But her death was not all unlovely, nor unmusical; and they heard her sing her own death-song.

Out upon the wharfs they came,
Knight and burgher, lord and dame,
And round the prow they read her name,
The Lady of Shalott.

All knew her now; she had become a thing of curiosity. Who is this? they asked in fear. What thing has come to pass? they cried in their dismay. In all their lives they had never thought that there was a beneficent power amongst them, blessing and sanctifying their daily lives. But, now that the fair thing was gone, they knew that they had suffered an irreparable loss. Power became weak, and the glory had departed from pomp—

And in the lighted palace near
Died the sound of royal cheer;
And they crossed themselves for fear,
All the knights at Camelot.

And Lancelot, for whom she had died, gave her the highest praise of which his fleshly nature was capable: "She hath a lovely face!" Not one word of what she once had been, of the fair *soul* now stained, nor of the transcendent *song*. He had never perceived these—nothing but the pretty face! The Lady had loved to stand in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets that she might be seen of men; and verily she had her reward.

—"You will find it less easy to uproot faults than to choke them by gaining virtues. Do not think of your faults; still less of others' faults; in every person who comes near you look for what is good and strong; honor that; rejoice in it, and, as you can, try to imitate it, and your faults will drop off like dead leaves when their time comes."—*Ruskin*.

—"You might read all the books in the British Museum (if you could live long enough) and remain an utterly 'illiterate' uneducated person; but if you read *ten pages of a good book, letter by letter*—that is to say, with real accuracy—you are forevermore in some measure an educated person. The entire difference between education and non-education (as regards the merely intellectual part of it) consists in this accuracy."—*Ruskin*.