

The Lily and the Rose in *Maud*

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In 1855, five years after *In Memoriam* which had won him high position with the English people, Tennyson's *Maud* was published. He had never written with more fire and originality, and naturally he had high hopes of its reception, but it met with almost universal reprobation. Gladstone "doubted whether the poem had the full moral equilibrium which is so marked a characteristic of the sister works," and "obscurity taken for profundity," "the dead level of prose run mad," "rampant and rabid bloodthirstiness of soul," "an unreal allegory of the Russian war," were a few of the hostile criticisms hurled at it by the reviewers.

The reason why *Maud*, which remained through life his favourite poem, the one which he loved best to read aloud and read with the most overwhelming effect, met with such adverse criticism is not difficult to see. A young man, speaking with apparently mad incoherence of the outside world is hardly a sympathetic figure, for one thing ; for another, the loosely connected succession of lyrics of which the poem is composed is difficult for the ordinary reader, nay, even the critic. In short, the novelty of the poem's form as well as of its content had alienated the ordinary reader.

Incidentally, Tennyson's inclination for the use of madness as a theme of his poetry is evident from such early poems of his as *The Outcast*, *Supposed Confessions of a Second-rate Sensitive Mind*, *The Two Voices*, and a later poem, *Lucretius*. The Tennysons themselves were, as his recent biography by his grandson Charles Tennyson tells us, an extremely

eccentric family. Certainly his poetry shows an acquaintance with symptoms of insanity which is uncommon in its period. Besides, characteristically enough, during the summer of 1840, he formed a friendship with Matthew Allen, doctor-in-charge of a lunatic asylum, famous then for his enlightened way of treating mental patients (one of whom had been the poet, John Clare).

As the several critical notices quoted at the beginning of this essay show, *Maud* was puzzling when it was published, and was long and considerably disliked. The most serious fault critics found with this poem was that it lacks coherence or consistency — the reader is simply baffled by the rambling way the neurotic hero speaks. Though *Maud* contains some of the finest love-lyrics in the English language, the standard criticism has been, as almost always with Tennyson, that the parts are greater than the whole. In my judgment, however, incoherence is more apparent than real, and it is the aim of this short essay to find what unity or coherence this poem yields after closer examination.

There are, I think, two ways of approaching this poem: one is a study of its varied prosody as a convenient clue to its different phases of passion, and the other is an inquiry into its imagery for an index to poetic logic or reason. Both approaches are valuable in their way, and probably supplement each other, but as the more accessible and tangible of the two I will take the latter approach.

When we read this poem closely, there emerges, among a cluster of images, the blood-and-death imagery as the most recurrent and reiterative. This is, in a sense, what we naturally expect of a mind nervous, hysterical, and out of tune with the world and himself. Dominant and insistent as this blood-and-death imagery is, however, it is, to my mind, too palpable to be significant enough. For imagery to be really effective

in a poem, it must have a meaningful link with the main theme of the poem. Interwoven with the insanity of the hero is love element. Can we find any significant imagery in this line? This is no easy matter, for the hero calls up image after image too numerous and varied for us to fix upon any one or two as more meaningful than others. But careful rereading with love element in mind makes us aware of flower imagery, the lily and rose imagery in particular.

These two images are mostly used for the description of the quality of Maud's beauty, but they have more than mere descriptive function. They have, I make bold to say, organic bearing on the central theme of the poem.

Before we proceed to trace the working of these images, however, it is pertinent to remember that the hero is intended by the poet to be more or less unhinged in mind for most of the poem. It may be argued that as a madman has little control over himself to concern ourselves with his words and to say something rational about them is highly disputable. Since it is not his rational self but his subconscious self that mostly direct his speech, he may not quite know himself what he is saying, it is true, but it is a well-known fact in psychology that a lunatic's words, if devoid of common-sense logic, have some unconscious logic of their own — they can have 'method in their madness'. Therefore, we can at least assume that the hero of *Maud* is mad but not hopelessly so as to render him incapable of verbal utterance that is intelligible for the careful reader.

Another point to be noted in this connection is the hero's failure to see other people and things around him objectively, still less himself. His descriptions of everything and everybody around him are tinged with his ego through and through most of the time : they are mostly a projection

of himself. This is manifest as early as in the opening stanza of the poem. The hollow where the hero's ruined father killed himself is red, flower and rock, to the eyes of his son.

Its lips in the field above are dabbled with blood-red heath,

The red-ribb'd ledges drip with a silent horror of blood

"Blood-red heath!" There is no such thing but in his morbid imagination.

To return: we are now prepared to take up and interpret the lily and the rose as a reflection of the lover's states of mind at various stages of his morbidity, though how far we are justified in doing so depends upon the context in which these images appear.

In the first section of Part I, the hero, after a long shriek against the wrongs and curses which come of a vile peace, thinks of Maud, who was his childhood playmate and is coming home from abroad. "What is she now? My dreams are bad. She may bring me a curse." His diseased pride pictures her as cold and contemptuous, and though he cannot but admit her perfect beauty, his perversity is such as to make him seek fault where none is.

Faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null,

Dead perfection, no more;

"Dead perfection" — but which is dead in spirit, Maud or her lover? Rather he, who is unquestionably decadent in mind and spirit.

And now appears the rose image; he describes her face as

a paleness, an hour's defect of the rose.

Grammatically "an hour's" modifies "defect", but psychologically it may be presumed to qualify "rose" also. The rose is short-lived and diseased. Conventionally, the rose is very rich with associations of love, happiness, and felicity as well as of beauty. Maud's paleness, which is not, we may confidently assume by now, simply hers but a reflection of the

speaker's own languor, suggests something unnatural and inauspicious. Indeed, "an hour", "defect", and "rose" — these three words combined evoke in us a complex of meanings reminding us, by the way, of that enigmatically powerful poem of Blake's, "O Rose, thou art sick!"

Thus the first note is struck — the rose as a symbol of ephemeral love and happiness: a web of tragic irony which the hero weaves at the outset, and a fit preparation for the unfolding of the story.

Now pride and first love are at war, and he has no strength to decide between them. In order to escape from this vacillating state he longs for "a philosopher's life", "a passionless peace", and wishes to be "like a stoic or a wiser epicurean", letting the world have its way. And most of all he would "flee from the cruel madness of love, the honey of poison-flowers and all the measureless ill."

Ah, Maud, you milk-white fawn, you are all unmeet for a wife.

Your mother is mute in her grave as her image in marble above;

Your father is ever in London, you wander about at your will;

You have but fed on the roses and lain in the lilies of life.

The last line may roughly be paraphrased as 'you have been delicately brought up and live in luxury' or more censoriously as 'you are spoilt'. The roses and lilies of life can also be interpreted as the antithesis of the 'realities of life'. In the capacity of a pseudo-moralist the hero might have almost meant to say to Maud, 'You have been living a life of escape from the world'. Maud hardly deserves such a charge; being docile, she may have *been fed* on the roses and *been laid* in the lilies of life, but not necessarily at her wish, while on the other hand the hero raves and shrieks in mere words and inaction against the world, trying (in vain it proves to be) to flee from love itself. It is not so much Maud as her lover that is decadent.

What is noteworthy about these two images so far is that they both carry decadent connotations. The rose accompanied by decadent associations is easy to infer : from the cliché 'bed of roses' to Swinbure's "raptures and roses of vice" is just a step. The lily is an emblem of chastity, innocence, and purity in Christian art. To Ben Jonson it was "the plant and flower of light". But, nowadays, says Marjorie Boulton in her *The Anatomy of Poetry* (p. 118) , "thanks to the pictures of the pre-Raphaelites and Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*, it may also suggest a rather sickly, over-refined kind of purity that is more decadent than honest earthiness."

After many a morbid doubt and introspection, the hero's pride slowly gives way to love, and a strong yearning to be loved comes over the lonely soul. He meets Maud and is with her,

Gathering woodland lilies,
Myriads blow together.

Birds in our wood sang
Ringing thro' the valleys,
Maud is here, here, here,
In among the lilies.

"Gathering woodland lilies" and "In among the lilies" — 'lilies' in these lines carry no associations of decadence as they did when they were first used, but they merely sound a note of pure innocence and joy. The lily image is here purified and elevated in its quality as a symbol, attesting, at the same time, to birth of hope in the hero.

Heartened by hope, he climbs the hill to the gate of Maud's garden, overlooked by her "little oak-room". Here is a description of her garden, which is notable throughout the poem for its rare calmness.

Maud has a garden of roses
 And lilies fair on a lawn;
 There she walks in her state
 And tends upon bed and bower,
 And thither J climb'd at dawn
 And stood by her garden-gate.
 A lion ramps at the top,
 He is claspt by a passion-flower.

This is a fairly objective description and tells us that he has had a lucid interval. Lilies and roses, purged of their sickly qualities, are described as they are. What sentiment is revealed is one of adoration; Maud "walks in her state" — she is queen of the garden-flowers, "Queen rose and lily in one" (which characterization of her is soon to appear). But with the last two lines some disturbing note again creeps in. It is hardly quieting to become aware of the figure of a sculptured lion ramping, that is, standing in a threatening posture in Maud's garden. Moreover, the figure "is claspt by a passion-flower", a flower symbolical of Christ's suffering at the cross, or is the flower somehow associated with the young man's 'passion' of love? It is the special note in this lover's nature that the moment of his joyous hope all too easily passes into presentiment of evil.

For some time from now on, though not released from "some dark undercurrent of woe", a hopeful note predominates. There is nothing but joy in the following lines,

Rosy is the West,
 Rosy is the South,
 Roses are her cheeks,
 And a rose her mouth,

The lover hates Maud's brother. But Maud says her brother is rough but kind,

— I see her there,

Bright English lily, breathing a prayer

To be friends, to be reconciled.

The lily image is further elevated and glorified in its purity and innocence by the two epithets, purging the young man of his cynicism and raising him to a pure love which in turn elevates his whole nature for a while.

What about the rose image by now? Tomorrow there is to be a political dinner and a dance, at which Maud, her brother, and some "fool lord" are to be present. Maud's lover is not invited, but she is to come out to meet him in her garden, and he will see her in her ball-dress and jewels. He finds a rose in the stream that runs down to his ground from the Hall,

O rivulet, born at the Hall,

My Maud has sent it (=the rose) by thee —

If I read her sweet will right —

On a blushing mission to me,

Saying in odour and colour, "Ah, be

Among the roses to-night."

We may gather from the above passage that the rose has also been completely rid of its decadent overtones, although a touch of secrecy is somewhat sinister.

We now come to the concluding section of Part I, that justly praised lyric of love, beginning with "Come into the garden, Maud." The speaker transfers all the passion of his heart to the garden-flowers, and they are made the confidants of his passion. Maud is described as a kind of

nature goddess, whom both he and the flowers properly worship. Many other flowers as well as the lily and the rose share the lover's anticipation, but these two flowers play a prominent part.

The lilies and roses were all awake,
They sigh'd for the dawn and thee.

At the emotional climax of the whole poem the lily and rose imagery is turned into a symbol of worship pure and simple. But in this lyric we cannot but notice some note of delirium, which serves as a bridge to the hero's complete madness of the second part.

Going over the use of this imagery in Part I, we can say that it has been gradually idealized in conformity with the hero's improving states of mind, but in another sense we cannot help suspecting that the use of the same imagery by a single person in several different symbolical meanings is a strange obsession. Is he using this imagery consciously, or is the imagery itself manipulating him in some way? I am inclined to the latter view, and am forced to have a suspicion that deep below he is not at all in his right mind.

In the second part, in which are told in nightmarish visions a duel, Maud's death from shock, the lover's flight overseas and return to London now completely mad, this imagery does not appear for some time. But in the eighth section he has a vision of Maud's rose-garden.

But I know where a garden grows,
Fairer than aught in the world beside,
All made up of the lily and rose
That blow by night, when the season is good,
To the sound of dancing music and flutes :
It is only flowers, they had no fruits,
And I almost fear they are not roses, but blood;

In the midst of his fevered hallucination, the speaker finally comprehends the nature of his obsession with the lily and rose imagery, particularly the latter. In Part I he was flirting with the rose symbol with little or no consciousness of the submerged meanings it might have had for him, but now is revealed its true nature: fruitless violence. Psychologically this is a fine touch. With this realization comes self-knowledge, and we may well hope that it will not be long before he is sane, not again but for the first time.

In Part III, the hero, now mentally and morally restored, is determined to devote himself to the good of his country by joining the Crimean War.

This concluding part has been condemned as a sop to Victorian taste, and the criticism is probably right. The resolution of fruitless private violence into equally fruitless public violence is weak and facile in conception, and I myself wish this part to be left out. As for imagery, there seems to be no link with the foregoing parts (though it may be natural after the hero's release from the lily and rose obsession) unless we dare assume that line 54,

The blood-red blossom of war with a heart of fire
has some psychological basis in the rose imagery.

Leaving Part III out of consideration, we may say that *Maud* is a fine piece of brain work that shows rare insight into morbid psychology in the days Freud was unknown. Our inquiry into its imagery has revealed in a measure that the poem is not just a string of exquisite love-lyrics, but has a coherence and unity of its own.