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Tennyson’s Poetics: the Role of the Poet and the Function of Poetry

An Analysis of Tennyson’s ‘Art Poems’, His Explicit References to the Poet and the Image of the Dying Swan

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Preface

While most master dissertations by students of literature provide an analysis of a rather specific and single aspect of one specific work, the topic of this thesis appears rather general. Therefore, I deemed it necessary to at least explain how such a topic came into shape.

Although I had heard of Tennyson many times before during my scholarly career, I only developed a real appreciation for and interest in his poetry last year, when I took a class on Victorian poetry (English Literature: Older Period, taught by Prof. Dr. Marysa Demoor). We had to write a 1200-words paper on the imagery in an unseen poem by an author we had discussed in class and after considering my topic for a while, I picked a rather unknown, but beautiful poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson, “The Dying Swan”. The beautiful imagery of that poem – a dying swan which drifts on the river and pours out a grieving yet joyful song at the same time – spoke to me instantly, but it was not until I finished writing the paper that I realized how intricately meaningful it really was: the dying swan could be seen as a metaphor for the poet as a prophet, who could foresee not only his/her own death, but also the happiness that would follow in the after-life.

After writing this paper, reading Tennyson was never quite the same for me. I started to see metaphors for the poet everywhere, interpreting other Tennyson poems in the same way as I had analysed ‘The Dying Swan’. I realized that I was too interested in the subject to let it go already, so I decided to write my thesis on it. When I started my research, I found that other scholars, too, saw metaphors for the poet in many poems. However, they mostly focussed on one singular poem, while I had been looking for a more general overview of Tennyson’s opinion of the function of the poet and poetry. Therefore, out of my own interest, but also because I sensed nothing of the like had been done before, I decided to do a more general study of Tennyson’s poetics, combining not only the studies of other scholars, but adding my own research as well.
Acknowledgement

I would not have successfully succeeded in writing this thesis without the indispensable help of certain people. Although it would be impossible to thank every single person who has voluntarily or involuntarily contributed to the coming into being of this dissertation, I would at the very least like to thank the people who have added greatly to my work.

In the first place, I would like to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation for the help and advice of my supervisor Prof. Dr. Marysa Demoor. She has guided me throughout the entire writing process and thoroughly revised my work, for which I am very grateful. Moreover, she was the one who introduced me to Tennyson's poetry in the first place, during her third-bachelor course 'English Literature: Older Period (Victorian Poetry)'. Therefore, my interest in Tennyson's poetics can be traced back to her.

Subsequently, I would like to thank my dear friend and co-student, Elien Martens, who has been patient with me during the last stressful months of this semester and was kind enough to read some of my writing, as a result of which she was able to filter out some mistakes that had slipped through my spelling corrector.

Finally, it needs to be said that this dissertation could not have been written without the support of my partner, Sander De Booser. He pushed me when necessary, gave me time when possible and believed more in me than I did in myself. The amount of strength and confidence I gathered from his constant encouragement can hardly be put into words.
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1. Introduction

Just like so many Victorian poets and intellectuals, Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809 – 1892) found it hard to give poetry and the figure of the poet a place in society. Not only was he concerned with his public role as a poet (Stevenson 625), but he also struggled with the notion of art for art’s sake, at times propagating that art should have no purpose, while on other occasions claiming that art should be socially and morally committed (Alaya 274). This uncertainty about the role of the poet and the function of poetry was reflected in his poetry as well, for as Catherine Barnes Stevenson claims, Tennyson had been looking, since the very beginning of his career, for images that accurately portrayed his ideas on the poet’s role and the function of poetry (621). Now, what are these ideas exactly? Ever since the publication of Tennyson’s first volume of poetry, scholars have attempted to define the poetics of this great Victorian poet. Arguably the most famous review of his work is Arthur Hallam’s “On Some Characteristics of Modern Poetry” (1831), in which Hallam defines Tennyson as a “Poe[t] of Sensation” (191), a poet whose “predominant motive” (184) for writing poetry is "the desire of beauty" (184). Throughout this review, Hallam seems to portray Tennyson as a Romantic poet; not only does he compare Tennyson to the great Romantic poets Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats, but his description of Tennyson’s poetry of sensation also seems to remind us of “the Romantic ideal of the autonomy of the work of art” (Chadwick 13). However, whether Tennyson would continue to be greatly influenced by the Romantics, Hallam would never be able to assess, for he died unexpectedly in 1833, at the very beginning of Tennyson’s career as a poet. Therefore, his assessment of Tennyson as a poet of sensation is yet to be confirmed. More recently, Joseph Bristow has proposed a categorisation similar to that of Hallam. In his introduction to The Victorian Poet: Poetics and Persona (1987), Bristow claims that the Victorian poets can be divided into two general categories (Introduction 12). A first type, he says, is based on Carlyle’s concept of the poet as ‘Hero’ or rather as prophet and is idealized both by Robert Browning as by his wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Introduction 12-13). These poets, and especially Barrett Browning, believe that poets should fulfil a central role in society and instruct the masses (Bristow, Introduction 13).
The other model proposed by Bristow is that of the “poet of the margins” (Introduction 17): a poet “divorced from politics, [...] whose duty is to aesthetics, pleasure, beauty – and not prophecy, instruction and devotion” (Bristow, Introduction 17). For Bristow, the best example of this type of poet is Alfred Tennyson, who propagates, according to him, a view of the poet as isolated, “disengaged from public debate” and not interested in instructing the masses at all (Introduction 17). This view of Tennyson as a reclusive poet who focuses more on his own desire and pleasure than on the concerns of his contemporaries coincides with the image Lawrence Starzyk gives us of the Romantic poet, a poet who isolates himself and is merely preoccupied with “the self” (Starzyk 111). Moreover, Bristow even labels Tennyson as the best example of the “Romantic Victorians” (Introduction 2). Just as Hallam, then, Bristow ascribes Tennyson features which appear rather Romantic than Victorian.

However, I believe these classifications of Tennyson to be over-simplified and, consequently, inaccurate. Hallam articulates his definition of Tennyson as a “Poe[t] of Sensation” (191) after analysing only one volume of his poetry, and the very first for that matter (Poems, Chiefly Lyrical; 1830). What is more, Hallam’s untimely death in 1833 made sure that he had no notion of Tennyson’s further publications and his development as a poet. It would therefore seem unjustified to apply Hallam’s early classification of Tennyson as a poet of sensation to Tennyson’s entire body of poetry. Similarly, Bristow’s argumentation is based on the analysis of one single poem, “The Poet’s Mind”, which cannot be considered representative of his entire oeuvre. In my opinion, there are other Tennyson poems which seem to indicate a much more complex – at times even contradictory – view on poetry. Consequently, it would be wrong to classify Tennyson either as typically Romantic or Victorian without profoundly investigating his work.

In this dissertation, I will embark on such an investigation, in an attempt to define Tennyson’s poetics in general and his alignment with Romantic and Victorian notions of poetry in specific. More specifically, I will examine how Tennyson conceives of the poet’s persona, his/her\(^1\) role in society and the ultimate purpose of poetry. Only after that will I

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\(^1\) Although Tennyson himself refers to the poet with male pronouns in the vast majority of the times, his poetic practice seems to warrant the use of both male and female pronouns. Consider for instance how in “The Lady of Shalott”, Tennyson defines the artist as essentially female (Chadwick 16-17). Likewise,
be able to assess Hallam’s and Bristow’s correctness in labelling Tennyson as a reclusive, Romantic poet. However, since Tennyson’s oeuvre is too large for me to encompass every single one of his poems into my analysis, I will focus on a limited number of poems which, I feel, are representative of his entire oeuvre. In a first section, I will take a closer look at Tennyson’s much-studied “art poems” (Alaya 273; Grob 125; Simpson, “Aurora as Artist” 907; Simpson, “Elaine the Unfair” 345), a series of poems which provide an insight into Tennyson’s ideas on the figure of the poet by portraying an isolated artist-like figure in conflict with society. Although many of Tennyson’s early poems can be considered ‘art poems’, I will focus on four in particular – “The Lady of Shalott”, “The Hesperides”, “Tithonus” and “The Lotos-eaters” – which, in my opinion, represent best the characteristics of Tennyson’s artist-figures and Tennyson’s internal struggle between “social responsibility” and “artistic detachment” (Alaya 274). However, because I want to search for the poet in Tennyson’s poetry and not for the artist in general, I will dedicate a second section to those poems in which Tennyson explicitly employs the word ‘poet’. These poems, I believe, unambiguously reveal Tennyson’s view on the role of the poet and the function of his/her poetry. For this section, I consulted various digital copies of Tennyson’s complete oeuvre, as to ensure that I take into account every Tennyson poem which contains the word ‘poet’. The poems that will be analysed in this chapter are: “The Golden Year”; “The Wreck”; “The Gardener’s Daughter”; “Will Waterproof’s Lyrical Monologue”; “The Day-Dream”; “In Memoriam”; “The Princess”; “A Dream of Fair Women”; “The Throstle”; “To Mary Boyle”; “To Virgil”; “Poets and Their Bibliographies”; “Parnassus”; “To —, after reading a life and letters”; “The Poet’s Mind”; “The Poet’s Song”; “The Poet” and “Epilogue to The Charge of The Heavy Brigade At Balaclava”. Finally, I will analyse one of Tennyson’s most complex metaphors for the poet – the dying swan which sings a joyful song moments before its death. According to Stevenson, the dying swan is “a personal symbol for Tennyson of the triumph of the artist and the ascendancy of art” (633). By investigating how Tennyson uses this image in “The Dying Swan”, the 1832 version of “The Lady of Shalott”, “Morte D’Arthur” and “The Passing of Arthur”, I will hopefully find out more about Tennyson’s view on poetry.

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Tennyson’s poem “The Poet” seems to indicate that, for Tennyson, poetry should be “mediated through forms of femininity” (Bristow, “Reforming Victorian poetry: poetics after 1832” 11). Therefore, I will consistently refer to ‘the poet’ with double pronouns: s/he, his/her, him/her, him-/herself etc. 2 In an attempt to remain consistent throughout my dissertation, I will continuously employ this term coined by scholars such as Simpson, Alaya and Grob.
However, to be able to see if and where Tennyson fits amongst other Victorian authors and intellectuals, I will devote my first chapter to the Victorian poetry debate. As we will see, Tennyson was not the only Victorian anxious about the poet’s role in society and the function of poetry. Many Victorians, such as Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, John Stuart Mill and Arthur Hallam\(^3\), wrote essays on what the Victorian poet should do and what poetry should be. I will take a look at the poetic theories propagated by these four authors, as to provide a general overview of what the most important issues concerning poetry were at the time. At the end of my research, then, I will perhaps be able to determine with whom Tennyson shares his ideas on poetry.

\(^3\) I am fully aware that this list of theorists is far from exhaustive. Other important intellectuals who contributed to the Victorian debate on poetry were, for instance, John Keble, George Henry Lewes and John Ruskin. Moreover, the American Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) proposed some ideas that were very akin to those of Carlyle, but he is not of main concern to us, since he is not essentially ‘Victorian’, i.e. he did not live in Victorian Britain.
2. The Victorian poetry debate

The Victorian era was characterized by a climate of uncertainty about the function of poetry and the role of the poet. As Joseph Bristow argues in his introduction to *The Victorian Poet: Poetics and Persona*, the Victorians “were at something of a loss to define and defend the role of the poet, his poetry and indeed, his persona” (Introduction 1). This feeling of uncertainty resulted in a string of publications and essays on poetic theories; critics such as Arnold, Carlyle, Mill and Hallam were at the centre of what seems to be an unresolved discussion on the worthy subjects of poetry, its ultimate purpose and the relation between the poet and society. Isobel Armstrong points out how the Victorians struggled with the duality that the notion of art contained at the time: it was “at once apart and central” (4), because it belonged to an isolated “self-sufficing aesthetic realm [...] against practical experience” while at the same time meant as “a mediating function, representing and interpreting life” (4). Consequently, art and – more specifically – poetry had to remain secluded from everyday life but reflect it nevertheless. This dual vision had consequences for the view on the role of the poet as well: was s/he to participate in or withdraw from society? Should s/he address social and political issues or write about the inner self? Those questions seem to be the main concern of both Victorian intellectuals and writers (Bristow, “Reforming Victorian Poetry: Poetics After 1832” 4).

In what follows, I will try to summarize the most important contributions to the Victorian debate on the role of the poet and the function of poetry. To establish a theoretical framework, I will first provide a brief overview of the poetic theories of Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, John Stuart Mill and Arthur Hallam. After that, I will take a closer look at the importance of the poet’s participation in society and whether or not s/he should approach contemporary issues. For this purpose, it is imperative not only to take account of what the theorists thought on this issue, but also to include other socio-cultural factors, such as the expectations of the readers and their impact on the emerging literary market and the influence of the Romantics.
However, one cannot clarify Victorian Poetics without first explaining the term ‘Victorian’. Although most scholars of English literature will, in all probability, have a general idea of what is meant by the word ‘Victorian’, it is a term which often “loses any claim to specificity” (Bristow, Introduction 2). Therefore, I will first and foremost engage in a discussion of the most important ideas and values of the Victorian period and its relation to the movement that helped define it – i.e. Romanticism.

When looking for a definition of the word ‘Victorian’, one cannot but acknowledge that it is inextricably linked to the reign of Queen Victoria. The *Online Cambridge Dictionary*, for instance, merely defines the term as “belonging to, made in, or living in the time when Queen Victoria was queen of the UK (1837–1901)”\(^4\). What does this definition teach us, however, about the values and ideas of the time, except that these can roughly be situated between 1837 and 1901? Nothing. More and more, the term ‘Victorian’ is becoming merely a marker for a historical period, without any socio-cultural connotations. How can we even attempt, then, to define Victorian poetry? In *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (1993), Isobel Armstrong claims how wrong it is to conceive of Victorian poetry as merely characterized by belonging to a certain period in history (1). According to her, Victorian poetry must be interpreted in the light of the era’s smooth transition from Romanticism to modernism (Armstrong 1). Indeed, when looking at history from a different perspective, one could also argue that the early Victorians were late Romantics; Joseph Bristow even classifies certain authors from the Victorian era as “Romantic Victorians” (Introduction 2). In other words, the transition from Romanticism to ‘Victorianism’ did not happen overnight. However, for the Victorians themselves, the romantic period ended in an abrupt manner. With Keats, Shelley, Byron, Blake and Coleridge dying respectively in 1821, 1822, 1824, 1827 and 1834, Victoria’s crowning in 1837 was considered a turning point (Bristow, Introduction 4). “Victorian poetry”, as Bristow argues, “began in a vacuum” (Introduction 4):

> After the successive deaths of the major Romantics (bar Wordsworth, who lived until 1850), the decade that opened the Victorian era boldly declared the loss of the recently pre-eminent art […]. During the 1830’s […] periodical reviewers bemoan the supposedly moribund state

of English poetry, looking out all the time for new talents to express the nascent Victorian ‘spirit of the age’. (Bristow, Introduction 4)

The Victorians realized that they could not be classified as Romantics anymore (Bristow, Introduction 3). In order to define themselves, they had to renounce the values and ideas which they considered to be ‘Romantic’: the importance of emotions, the notion of poetry as recreation and a focus on “the authenticity, autonomy and creativity of the poetic mind” (Bristow, Introduction 2). For poetry, this rupture entailed the conception of new poetic theories. Typical ‘Victorian’ intellectuals, such as Thomas Carlyle, formed new opinions on the role of the poet and the function of poetry in Victorian society.

There was, however, a sense of ‘belated’ Romanticism as well. As I have established before, the transition from Romanticism to Victorianism was not as abrupt as the Victorians liked to believe, and although they did their very best to distinguish themselves from the Romantics, it would be wrong to deny the strong influence the Romantic poets have had on them (Greenblatt and Abrams 996). It is from this duality that the discrepancies in Victorian poetics originate: while some Victorian authors and theorists are making efforts to move away from Romantic poetics, others still cling to them. To demonstrate what I mean by this, I will discuss the poetic theories of some of the most important intellectuals of the time – Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, John Stuart Mill and Arthur Hallam.

Although Thomas Carlyle (1795 – 1881) may, in some way, be considered a Romantic (he and Keats were born in the same year), he generally is classified as one of the greatest theorists of the Victorian age, as he foresaw “the problems that were to preoccupy the Victorians” and gave an account of them in his early works (Greenblatt and Abrams 1002). Carlyle had no confidence in democracy; for him, government should be left exclusively to those gifted leaders which he calls “heroes” (Greenblatt and Abrams 1005). In his essay “The Hero as Poet: Dante, Shakespeare” (1840), Carlyle makes a case for the ‘Vates’, or poet-prophet, as the real ‘Hero’ of the Victorian Age (65, 66). “Vates”, as he claims, “means both Prophet and Poet” (“The Hero as Poet” 65), for they are essentially the same: “they have penetrated both of them into the sacred mystery of the Universe” (“The Hero as Poet” 66). But what was the function of this prophetic poet, if Carlyle labelled him as the great leader of the Victorian Age? Carlyle himself gives us the answer: he is “a man sent hither to make [the divine mystery] more
impressively known to us” (“The Hero as Poet” 66). The Victorian Poet, then, for Carlyle, had a leading role in society: s/he was to participate in politics, for s/he had “direct Insight” (“The Hero as Poet”: 66) which allowed him/her to govern correctly. This appreciation of a poet’s participation in political issues can also be seen in other essays by Carlyle. In “Corn-Law Rhymes” (1832), for instance, he values Ebenezer Elliott’s attempt to employ poetry for a contemporary, political problem⁵ and argues that “all thinkers up to a very high and rare order” must do so (Carlyle, “Corn-Law Rhymes” 184). In conclusion, one might say that, for Carlyle, the function of poetry was to propagate the insights of the ‘Vates’ on political matters.

For Matthew Arnold (1822 – 1888), however, the main function of poetry was to bring joy (Greenblatt and Abrams 1352). Although Arnold was a poet as well, he is nowadays better known for his prose and theory on the purpose of poetry, which he had developed early in his career (Greenblatt and Abrams 1351, 1352). In the “Preface” to the first edition of *Poems* (1853), he pleads that poetry should aim for two goals:

> [...] it is not enough that the Poet should add to the knowledge of men, it is required of him also that he should add to their happiness. [...] A poetical work, therefore, is not yet justified when it has been shown to be an accurate, and therefore interesting representation; it has to be shown also that it is a representation from which men can derive enjoyment. (Arnold, “Preface to Poems” 71)

Poetry thus had to be both instructive and enjoyable. In a sense, Arnold shared with Carlyle the notion that the poet has a higher knowledge that s/he should communicate to the masses. However, for Arnold, this knowledge should not be employed to govern society more efficiently (as was the case with Carlyle’s ‘Vates’), but rather to comfort the people. In “The Study of Poetry” (1880), he describes poetry as the necessary complement to the knowledge science offers; “[w]ithout poetry”, he claims, “our science will appear incomplete” (Arnold, “The Study of Poetry” 199). According to Arnold, society will eventually prize “‘the breath and finer spirit of knowledge’⁶ offered to us by poetry” (“The Study of Poetry”, 200) over the hollow reasonings of science. The main function of poetry is consequently to console and to bring joy. Furthermore, Arnold

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⁵ In 1831, Ebenezer Elliott addressed – first anonymously – the Corn Laws and the discussion about them in a couple of short lyrics (Bristow, “Reforming Victorian Poetry: Poetics After 1832” 4).

⁶ Arnold here refers to the Preface to Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* (1800).
clashes with Carlyle on another point. As we have seen before, Carlyle wants the Poet to turn to contemporary, political matters. Arnold, however, strongly opposes this: he believes the view that poets should address modern issues which are relevant to society to be “completely false” (“Preface to Poems” 72). In his opinion, poetry should appeal to our “permanent passions” (Arnold, “Preface to Poems” 73), for which, he says, “the great human action[s] of a thousand years ago” are much more appropriate (Arnold, “Preface to Poems” 73).

If Arnold’s view on poetry is already a step away from Carlyle’s conception of poetry as instructive and providing an insight in political matters, Mill’s poetic theory constitutes its ultimate opposite. Primarily, John Stuart Mill (1806 – 1873) established himself as one of the greatest philosophers of the Victorian Age. He dedicated his writing to such topics as logic, economics and politics and was a follower of Jeremy Bentham’s Utilitarianism (although he did not always agree with him) (Greenblatt and Abrams 1043). In “Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties”7, however, he leaves his philosophical reasonings behind and reflects upon the nature of the poet and his poetry. For Mill, the key element of poetry is emotion. “What is poetry”, he asks us, “but the thoughts and words of emotion spontaneously embodying itself” (Mill 38)? Furthermore, he claims that there is a clear distinction to be seen between “the poetry of a poet” and “the poetry of a cultivated but not naturally poetic mind” (Mill 40): the true poet composes pure feeling and emotion – using thought merely as a medium – while the cultivated mind writes about thoughts – employing feeling and emotion to cover it up (Mill 40). According to Mill, true poetry should solely focus on emotion, instead of focusing on a thought or (political) idea. Moreover, for Mill, poetry needs to be confined to the poet’s private sphere; rather than being heard by an audience, poetry is “overheard” (Mill 37). By this he means that true poetry is always conveyed in solitude; it is the poet’s private confession of his feelings to himself (Mill 37). It is clear, then, that for Mill, the poet nor his/her poetry needs to fulfill a function in society. As Bristow argues, Mill shows an “emphatic wish to divide poetry [...] from the oratory of politics” (“Reforming Victorian Poetry: Poetics After 1832” 18), which is exactly the opposite of what Carlyle demands from poetry.

7 This essay is an amalgamation of two separate essays published in 1833: “What is Poetry” and “The Truth of Poetry” (Bristow, The Victorian Poet: Poetics and Persona: 35)
Arthur Henry Hallam (1811 – 1833) propagated a poetic theory somewhat similar to that of John Stuart Mill (Bristow, Introduction 19). Rather than being famous for his literary criticism, Hallam is primarily known for being the subject of one of Tennyson’s most important works – “In Memoriam”. Having met at Cambridge, where they both were members of the debate society ‘The Apostles’, the two remained close friends up until the premature death of Hallam in 1833 (Bristow, “Reforming Victorian Poetry: Poetics After 1832” 8). It should come as no surprise, then, that in his most significant essay, “On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry” (1831), Hallam does not only reflect upon the nature of poetry, but also gives a positive review of Tennyson’s Poems, Chiefly Lyrical (1830) (Riede: 661). Arguably, one of the most famous passages from that essay is Hallam’s distinction between the poets of reflection and the poets of sensation (Hallam 186). Reflective poetry, which he associates with Wordsworth, is a poetry that finds “pleasure in the truth of referential discourse” (Chadwick 13, 14). For Hallam, however, such writings might be “good as philosophy” (185) and “powerful as rhetoric” (185), but ultimately “false as poetry” (185). Contrarily, the poets of sensation – such as Shelley and Keats, but also Tennyson – compose what may tentatively be called ‘true poetry’: poetry of which the “predominant motive [is] the desire of beauty” (Hallam 184). Accordingly, poetry should fulfil no other function in society than bringing pleasure and beauty8. Furthermore, for Hallam, the poet (of sensation) should seek refuge from society and create a necessary distance between him-/herself and his/her readers (Bristow, “Reforming Victorian Poetry: Poetics After 1832” 10). Moreover, within the category of the poets of sensation, Hallam prefers Tennyson over Shelley and Keats, because he does not participate in politics, while the latter do (Riede 661). Contrarily to what Carlyle promulgates, then, Hallam seems to propagate a view of the poet as merely seeking pleasure, with no duty to society whatsoever.

After analysing these different Victorian opinions on poetry, it remains clear that there are two, inextricably related questions at the centre of the poetry debate. The first one involves the uncertainty about the worthy subjects for poetry: should poems tackle the contemporary, political or social issues of the era or remain a personal expression of the inner self? Should they provide an insight (either to guide the people or to console

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8 In this sense, Bristow states, Hallam refers back to the theory of Epicurus and points forward to Walter Pater’s aesthetic movement (The Victorian Poet: Poetics and Persona: 19).
them) or merely be a display of personal emotion or desire? The second problem comprises the poet’s relation to society; was s/he to perform a leading public role in it, or rather seek refuge from it and live like an outlaw, for the sake of his/her poetry? Regarding the first question, we could state, in short, that Carlyle propagates the employment of poetry as an instructive medium (as an expression of the omniscient poet’s insight on political issues), while Mill and Hallam want to clear poetry from all public duties. Arnold takes an intermediate position; he acknowledges that poets possess some higher, spiritual knowledge that they should share with the public, but, he says, that knowledge serves to console them rather than to instruct them how to govern. On the second matter, the critics disagree as well. While Carlyle expects the poet to come to the fore and take a leading role in society, Mill and Hallam consider it imperative that s/he retreets from it. For Arnold, the poet simply needs to bring joy to his/her readers, but whether s/he has to do this while participating in society or withdrawing from it, he does not say. To conclude, if we should place the four abovementioned critics on a scale with regard to the poet’s place in society and the (public) function of his poetry, Carlyle would be at one end promulgating full “social responsibility” (Alaya 274) and Hallam and Mill completely opposite to him, with their propagation of “artistic detachment” (Alaya 274), with Arnold somewhere in the middle. However, it is not solely the critics that define the literary field. Other socio-cultural aspects of Victorian society need to be borne in mind as well, such as the expectations of the readers, the emergence of the literary market and the weight of the Romantic tradition. Let us take a closer look at how these factors helped define – or complicate – the Victorian notion of what poetry is and what poets should do.

As we have seen above, Victorians intellectuals such as Carlyle, Arnold, Mill and Hallam were preoccupied with the function of poetry and the subjects it should tackle. However, another important party of the literary field needs to be taken into account as well: the Victorian readership. As Greenblatt and Abrams argue, Victorian readers “shared the expectation that literature would not only delight but instruct, that it would be continuous with the lived world, and that it would illuminate social problems” (994). The public thus insisted on poetry’s concern for contemporary, social matters – they

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9 Ultimately, these two questions can be seen as two components of one dialectic, which Flavia M. Alaya so accurately has described as the struggle between “artistic detachment” and “social responsibility” (Alaya: 274).
wanted it to address the worries that occupied the nation. Why, however, would poets take notice of that request? Arguably, the answer lies in the power of the emerging literary market. According to Kathy Alexis Psomiades, the power relationship between the poet and his/her readers undergoes an essential shift in the 19th century (28). More specifically, she claims that the development of the literary market concedes more importance to the expectations of the public, because the poet is now left at the mercy of the buyers:

When the market replaces the patron as the source of economic gain and the means of distribution to an audience, poets paradoxically are both more and less independent. No longer subject to the whims of patrons or to the favour of a court, they are instead at the mercy of a larger, more distant audience whose purchasing power can make or break them. (Psomiades 28)

Poets would thus be fools not to acknowledge the expectations of their readership. Moreover, those who did respect those expectations and turned to political and social matters in their poetry, were generally popular. Consider for instance the approval Elliott Ebenezer received when he published his pamphlet *Corn-Law Rhymes* in 1831, a compilation of protests against the recently instated Corn Laws, written in lyrics (Bristow, “Reforming Victorian Poetry: Poetics After 1832” 4). Not only did he succeed in winning the public’s affection, he was also praised by Thomas Carlyle for addressing a social and political problem that preoccupied the entire nation. Turning to popular topics, therefore, proved to be beneficial for the poets’ career and earnings. Nevertheless, writing specifically to meet the wishes of one’s audience and receive a larger income for it was condemned by some Victorians. As Dino Franco Felluga argues, the development of the nineteenth-century literary market coincided with the rise of what he calls “pure poetry” (783). While the bulk of the Victorians propagated a poetry that was concerned with the world – and its readers – some theorists demanded a poetry “untainted by the demands of the market” (Felluga 783). John Stuart Mill, for instance was an exponent of such a poetry; in his essay “Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties”, he argues that, when poetry is written for the “express purpose of being paid for it”, it ceases to be poetry (Mill 37). Only if the poet can “succeed in excluding from his work every vestige of such lookings-forth into the outward and every-day world, and can express his emotions

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10 As we have mentioned before, Carlyle applauded Ebenezer in his essay “Corn-Law Rhymes” (1832).
exactly as he has felt them in solitude” (Mill 37), may he continue to write for a living; but with a poem openly addressing social or political issues, that would not definitely not be the case. When considering all these – at times contradicting – opinions, it becomes clear that the concept ‘Victorian poetry’ is, even for the Victorians, difficult to define.

When considering the Victorians appeal and – at the same time – aversion to the poet’s retreat from society, one needs to bear in mind the importance of the Romantic tradition as well. In her article “‘The Fiery Consciousness of His Own Activity’: The Poet as Outcast in Early Victorian Poetic Theory” (1974), Lawrence J. Starzyk recognizes the poet’s alienation as being essentially a Romantic concept which the Victorians reject (110):

The generality of the critics in the early decades of the Victorian age share this antiromantic bias: they oppose the isolation from society [...] and their critical theory represents a concerted effort in this respect at making literature relevant to the times. (Starzyk 110)

As I have established before, it was not unusual for the Victorians to oppose typical Romantics notions. As the Romantic poets seemed to propagate an isolation from the community, the Victorians consequently did the best they could to oppose this and advocate the poet’s integration in society (Starzyk 110). Their strongest objection to the poet’s estrangement, Starzyk claims, is the fact that it leaves him ignorant and unaware of the world around him (111): the Romantic poet was merely preoccupied with the self whereas the Victorians, such as Carlyle for instance, but also Clough, made a case for more concern for society. Nevertheless, some Victorian critics, such as Hallam and Mill, were still prone to think – as the Romantics did – that alienation was a necessary component of being an artist (Starzyk 110). According to them, society was a threat to the poet’s vision; the public did not comprehend his insight in the world and could therefore have a negative influence on it (Starzyk 118). Ultimately, thus, the Victorian debate on the poet’s participation in society can be reduced to a dichotomy between those who still clinged to a Romantic notion of poetry, and those who, like true Victorians, wanted to distinguish themselves from the Romantics and their ideas on the role of the poet and the function of poetry. In this respect, Mill and Hallam can be seen as essentially Romantic theorists, while Arnold and Carlyle are more typically Victorian.
3. Tennyson’s poetics

Now that we have established a theoretical framework with regard to Victorian poetics, it is time to take a closer look at how one of the greatest Victorians poets, Alfred Tennyson, conceived of his role as a poet and the function of poetry. In what follows, I will examine how Tennyson focuses on the two questions that seem to be at the centre of the Victorian poetry debate: whether poetry should address social and political concerns or remain ‘pure’ and whether the poet should participate in society or withdraw from it. Furthermore, I will examine how Tennyson conceives of the persona of the poet. At the same time, I will explore if his poetry shows any correspondence to the poetic theories propagated by Carlyle, Arnold or Mill. Ultimately, I will investigate Hallam’s and Bristow’s correctness in labelling Tennyson as a reclusive, Romantic poet.

In order to answer these questions accurately and on various levels, I will divide my research in three sections. The first section will concentrate on Tennyson’s well-known art poems- a series of poems in which Tennyson displays, according to some scholars, his view on art and the function of the artist in general. After that, I will shift my focus to the figure of the poet, analysing a couple of poems in which Tennyson directly refers to the poet’s role in society and the purpose of his poetry. Finally, I will take a closer look at Tennyson’s use of the image of the dying swan, which, according to Catherine Barnes Stevenson (621), is for Tennyson the ultimate metaphor for the poet.
3.1. The ‘art poems’: a definition of the Tennysonian artist

A number of scholars – amongst whom Simpson, Alaya, Grob and Stange – argue how Tennyson, in a couple of poems, displays his view on the function of art by means of a story-line revolving around an isolated artist-figure. According to them, poems such as “The Lady of Shalott”, “The Lotos-eaters”, “Tithonus” and “The Hesperides”, but also “The Palace of Art” or “The Mystic” portray “socially alienated and hostile artist figures” in conflict with the moral demands of society (Simpson, “Elaine the Unfair” 343). Flavia M. Alaya, for example, argues how “The Lady of Shalott” constitutes the ultimate “expression of the unresolved dialectic assumed to be characteristic of the early Tennyson, artistic detachment vs. social responsibility” (274). Being one of Tennyson’s most famous works, “The Lady of Shalott” is a depiction of an isolated, artist-like figure locked up in a tower, which dramatizes the struggle between wanting to protect one’s creative abilities from external influences and longing for contact with society at the same time. Similarly, Tennyson’s version of “The Lotos-Eaters”, based on a famous passage from The Odyssey, comments and plays on the “fable of the artist who becomes enamored of poesy and loses all sense of responsibility to the world of men” (Grob 120). It needs to be pointed out, however, that these “art poems” (Alaya 273; Grob 125; Simpson, “Aurora as Artist” 907; Simpson, “Elaine the Unfair” 345) do not depict artists in the strict sense of the word – the protagonists often do not “pain[t], dra[w], or mak[e] sculptures” or “creat[e] things with great skill and imagination”11. With a exception made for the Lady of Shalott and the Hesperides, who are described as singers, the ‘artists’ in Tennyson’s art poems are not explicitly described as disposing of artistic abilities. However, all of them share certain features that allow them to be identified as artist-like figures: they are socially isolated, possess a superhuman nature and are characterized by a special kind of perception (Simpson, “Elaine the Unfair” 344, 345). Furthermore, the art poems share a similar geographical setting that enhances the sense of isolation and withdrawal from society. In what follows, I will investigate how the Tennysonian artist is defined in four poems – “The Lady of Shalott”, “The Lotos-Eaters”, “The Hesperides” and “Tithonus” – which, I feel, illustrate best the most important

characteristics of Tennyson’s artist figures and Tennyson’s dilemma between living for art and living in society. In doing so, I will be able to assess if and how the art poems reveal Tennyson’s view on the role of the artist and the function of art.

As I have said earlier, the protagonists of these art poems can be seen as secluded artist-figures, who have withdrawn from the community. The Lady of Shalott, for example, lives in isolation; nobody “hath seen her wave her hand” (Tennyson 1: 115) or “at the casement seen her stand” (Tennyson 1: 115) and only the early reapers have heard echoes of her song. However, this sense of social isolation is enhanced by a spatial isolation as well; typically, Tennyson’s artist-like figures live in “an isolated environment of retirement apart from the concerns of ordinary people” (Simpson “Elaine the Unfair” 343). In “The Lady of Shalott”, for example, this isolation is accomplished through the confinement of the Lady in the highest room of a tower. Spatially, this confinement is even enhanced by the location of the tower; it is situated on a little island in the middle of a river:

Willows whiten, aspens quiver,
Little breezes dusk and shiver
Thro’ the wave that runs for ever
By the island in the river
    Flowing down to Camelot.
Four gray walls, and four gray towers,
Overlook a space of flowers,
And the silent isle embowers
The Lady of Shalott. (Tennyson 1: 114)

A similar kind of retirement can be found in “The Lotos-eaters”, where Ulysses and his crew want to stay on an isolated island, far away from their home and family: as they sit

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13 Although I am aware that scholars tend to refer to poetry by indicating the line(s), I will refer each time to the page number(s). The main reason for doing this is the fact that the poetry volumes I consulted do not indicate the lines.
on the beach, “the gushing of the wave / [f]ar far away did seem to mourn and rave / [o]n alien shores” (Tennyson 1: 205). Ulysses’ crew thus seems to live at the end of civilization, just as Tithonus and Aurora, who dwell “at the quiet limit of the world” (Tennyson 2: 30) in “Tithonus”. In “The Hesperides”, the three artist-figures remain on an island as well, but instead of staying at the shore, they seek solace in the heart of nature: we find descriptions of a secret garden, “[b]eneath a highland leaning down a weight / [o]f cliffs, and zoned below with cedar-shade” (Tennyson 1: 326), which would lose its magic if anyone else should enter. Robert Stange recognizes the Hesperides’ “garden-isle” as “both a type of the Garden of Eden and a figure of the poet’s secret life”, “remoteness and isolation” being its most significant features (740). Moreover, as Stange argues, this image of the garden as a secret bower for the artist/poet also returns in other poems, such as “The Poet’s Mind”, and functions as the ultimate expression of “the necessity of the poet’s separation from other men” (Stange 741). Either way, whether the artist seeks refuge into a stone tower, on an exotic island or in a reclusive garden, a gap is established between the artist and society, which prevents other human beings from entering into the private life of the creative mind. (Grob 119; Simpson, “Elaine the Unfair” 343)

As mentioned before, the art poems are also characterized by what Simpson calls “the celebration of private, special perception” (“Elaine the Unfair” 344), which relates to the way in which the artist perceives the world and how that perception contributes to the creative process. A good example of this special perception can be found in “The Lady of Shalott”. As the Lady is seated with her back towards the window, she does not perceive the outside world directly, but through the reflection of a mirror. Setting aside the discussion whether her art is once, twice or thrice removed from reality (Wright 287), it is clear that the mirror does not reflect the world objectively; it projects “shadows of the world” and “magic sights” (Tennyson 1: 116). Later on, the Lady is depicted like “some bold seër in a trance” (Tennyson 1: 119), which again refers to the subjective perception of the artist. This element of a trance-like state is an interesting one, for it also appears for example in the “The Lotos-eaters”. In his article “Tennyson’s "The Lotos-Eaters": Two Versions of Art” (1964), Alan Grob argues that the consumption of the lotos projects “the mind into a realm of imaginative experience where pleasures and perceptions are so intense and so compelling that all appetite for normal experience is quickly forgotten” (123). Moreover, as Grob claims, this state of frenzy related here to
the lotos was depicted by the Romantic poets as the perfect moment for creation (124). Indeed, the lotos, as described in the *Odyssey*, allegedly has a narcotic effect on those who eat it and can therefore invoke the dream-like state many artists claim to seek in order to create. “Tithonus” and “The Hesperides” show no traces of such a state of trance or frenzy, but they do portray the artist-figures as all-seeing. In “The Hesperides”, we encounter three artist-like, “Keen-eyed Sisters” (Tennyson 1: 327) who watch all corners of the earth to prevent the golden fruit from being stolen. Likewise, in “Tithonus”, we discern that Aurora is omniscient and therefore has a unique view of reality (Simpson, “Aurora as Artist” 910): “Thou seëst all things” (Tennyson 2: 33), Tithonus tells her. Moreover, in the same poem, Tithonus explicitly distinguishes human perception from the artist’s perception: “[W]ith what other eyes/ I used to watch”, he laments, “[i]n days far-off” (i.e. when he did not yet share Aurora’s artistic life and god-like status) (Tennyson 2: 32). All of the discussed artist-like figures then are depicted as having a special perspective, which sets them apart from ‘ordinary’ humans.

Another feature Tennyson scholars describe as typical of the art poems is that the artist-figures do not seem to be of human nature; as Simpson argues, they often get “semi-deified” (“Elaine the Unfair” 345) or are ascribed features that appear magical, divine, out of this world. Let us consider for a moment the characters of the poems we have already discussed. Firstly, we have the lovely Lady of Shalott, who is both fair as she is a “fairy” (Tennyson 1: 115) – a supernatural creature which is often described as having magical powers (Simpson 345). Moreover, throughout the entire poem, the Lady of Shalott is defined as a magical character in a ‘fairy’ tale: she looks into a magic mirror, weaves a “magic web” (Tennyson 1: 115) and is under the spell of a curse. In “The Hesperides”, we encounter three demi-gods in the literal sense of the word: the three sisters are described as the daughters of Hesper, the Greek God of the Evening, also known as the Evening Star. Likewise, in “Tithonus”, we encounter two artist-figures defined as gods. Aurora, whom Simpson recognizes as another manifestation of Tennyson’s artist-figures ( “Aurora as Artist” 907), is the immortal goddess of the Dawn, who “renew[s] [her] beauty morn by morn” (Tennyson 2: 33). Tithonus himself, once a human, has been granted immortality by Aurora, so he could join her in her artistic, alienated world. Consequently, his human nature has been altered by Aurora’s “mystic change” (Tennyson 2: 32) (Simpson, “Elaine the Unfair” 345). Finally, we need to consider the artist-figures in Tennyson’s “The Lotos-eaters”. At first sight, this art poem
seems to function as a counterexample to Simpson’s claim that Tennyson depicts his artists as god-like, superhuman creatures (“Elaine the Unfair” 345): the crew of Ulysses consists entirely of human beings. Nevertheless, as Simpson himself argues, Ulysses’ men “are transformed in inclination and will such that they are alienated from and hostile to the world of men” (“Elaine the Unfair” 345). Consequently, the Tennysonian artist can thus be considered as not only socially and spatially alienated from the society of men, but also ethnically: s/he is of a superhuman nature.

Arguably, the most important aspect that these art poems reveal about Tennyson’s poetics, is his internal struggle between ‘artistic detachment’ and ‘social responsibility’ (Alaya 274). In all of the above-mentioned poems – i.e. “The Lady of Shalott”, “The Lotus-eaters”, “Tithonus” and “The Hesperides” – Tennyson dramatizes the conflict between the isolated artist and the society that expects and demands more involvement from this artist. Generally, the art poems start out with a depiction of the artist-figure, initially safe and secluded in his/her own mind and world. All of a sudden, however, the artist comes in touch with or is reminded of the outer world, i.e. ‘society’, and is forced to reconsider his/her decision to isolate him-/herself. In “The Hesperides”, we stumble upon three isolated artist-figures who have retreated on an island, in secluded bowers. When the three sisters become aware of the threat posed by society, they ardently wish to protect their secret garden and the golden fruit, which, according to Stange, stands for wisdom and the “artist’s powerful insight” (735). Hence, “The Hesperides” can be seen as an example of Tennyson’s desire for artistic detachment (Stange 741). “The Lady of Shalott”, on the other hand, depicts the artist’s wish to break out of his/her isolation and become part of society. The Lady of Shalott, who has been separated from society since she can remember, watches young boys and girls, happy lovers and handsome knights in her magic mirror and decides she does not want to live in isolation any longer. However, the attempt to blend back into society brings about pernicious consequences for the Lady. When she finally leaves her secluded tower and rushes back into the world of men, she finds herself the victim of a ‘curse’ and dies even before she actually encounters a human soul. Many scholars have therefore treated this poem as a kind of manifesto of Tennyson’s attitude towards art: the artist, although haunted by the desire for company and a wish to show his/her art to society, should remain secluded and isolated from the outer world, because it harms the creative mind and diminishes the artist’s ability to produce art. Lona Mosk Packer, for example, concludes in her article “Sun and Shadow:
The Nature of Experience in Tennyson’s ‘The Lady of Shalott’” (1964) that Tennyson considers contact with the ‘outer world’ a danger to artistic creativity:

[Tennyson] is not at all convinced that this kind of human experience may be acquired without destroying the creative capacity of the artist. Paradoxically, the liberating “curse”, which can free the creative personality from a cocoon-like seclusion – one both desired and detested – and bring him into the main current of life, may at the same time prove his undoing as an artist. (Packer 8)

However, other poems seem to indicate a different approach to the role of art. Sometimes, the artist-figures are not threatened by contact with society but by their very choice to isolate themselves. Especially noteworthy in this respect is the poem “Tithonus”. Tithonus, out of love for the goddess Aurora, retreats from the world of men and commits himself to an isolated life with her. In his article “Aurora as Artist: A Reinterpretation of Tennyson’s Tithonus” (1972), Simpson analyzes Aurora as one of Tennyson’s prototypic artist-figures and recognizes her world as a “negatively qualified version of the environment of artistic retirement which recurs in various forms and for various purposes in the art poems of the 1830-1833 period” (907). Tithonus, then, in committing himself to such a world, enters into an environment which is “humanly and socially destructive” (Simpson, “Aurora as Artist” 913): Aurora’s world “beat [him] down and marr’d and wasted” (Tennyson 2: 31) him and, as a result, he “wither[s] slowly in [her] arms”, lives as a “white-hair’d shadow” (Tennyson 2: 30). More than anything, Tithonus desires to leave Aurora’s world and live amongst men once again, where he was much happier; “Why should a man desire in any way”, he asks himself eventually, “[t]o vary from the kindly race of men” (Tennyson 2: 31)? According to Simpson, Tennyson thus seems to say that the life for art’s sake is harmful and is to be rejected ( “Aurora as Artist” 913).

Tennyson’s art poems consequently not only mirror the Victorian discussion on whether poets should participate in society or not, but they also reflect Tennyson’s own internal struggle as an artist. While some of his poems portray a “reasoned intention to participate in the world’s work” (Stange 737), others seem to advocate a life of detachment and isolation. Most scholars, however, have come to the understanding that there is a certain evolution in Tennyson’s aesthetic vision: after a period in which he favoured the private celebration of art and beauty, he supposedly came to recognize the
importance of a morally and socially committed art (Simpson, “Elaine the Unfair” 344). According to Simpson, this insight would have been the reason for the various revisions of some of his earlier poems (e.g. “Tithon”, 1833; “The Lotos-eaters”, 1832), causing them to favour more explicitly socially committed art over private art (“Aurora as Artist” 918). He demonstrates this by analysing how Tennyson’s alterations to his 1833 poem “Tithon” result into a more explicit dismissal of the life of art in the 1860 version, renamed “Tithonus”. Similarly, Grob argues that the 1842 version of “The Lotos-eaters” moves away from the original poem’s praise of the life of art – although it did not fully succeed in rejecting it (126, 129). Moreover, the same insight, Stange argues, supposedly instigated Tennyson to suppress his 1832 poem “The Hesperides” (742). Being one of those early works that explicitly promulgated the artist’s separation from society, “The Hesperides” expressed an attitude which Tennyson did not want to be associated with later in life (Stange 742). Overall, Tennyson’s art poems and the manner in which they were published, revised or suppressed thus tell us that Tennyson “by 1842 [...] was ready to acknowledge the primacy of morality over art” (Grob 129). For the larger part of his life and of his career, Tennyson advocated a view of the artist as a moral example and a participating figure in society – very much like the ‘Vates’ Thomas Carlyle had in mind.

Next to showing how Tennyson more and more came to see the artist as morally and socially committed to society, the art poems also give an idea of how Tennyson perceived the persona of the artist. As I have established before, all of the above-mentioned poems portray the artist as having a special – at times even omniscient – perception and as being of superhuman nature. Again, these two categories seem to be united in the persona of Carlyle’s ‘Vates’ – a poet-prophet sent to educate us in the ways of the universe. However, Tennyson describes these artist-figures merely in general terms – none of them is explicitly defined as a poet. Consequently, what occupies me is whether Tennyson conceives of the poet in the same way as he does of these artist-figures, portrayed in his art poems. In what follows, I will investigate more profoundly how Tennyson portrays the persona of the poet and his/her role in society.
3.2. ‘The poet’ in Tennyson’s work

To which extent Tennyson’s vision on the role of the artist is based on his attitude towards the figure of the poet, is hard to tell. Surely, one could state that the artist-figures portrayed in the afore-mentioned art poems actually refer to or even stand for the poet and, consequently, that their mentality and world reflects Tennyson’s ideas of what a poet should be, think and do. For Tennyson, art was poetry and poetry was art. Therefore, it would be plausible to argue that he broadened his vision on the function of the poet and poetry and ascribed them to the artist and art in general. However, I believe that these art poems do not entirely reflect Tennyson’s perception of what defines a good poet and what role he has to fulfil. As I have discussed before, most of his artist-like protagonists share a set of characteristics that define them as typical artists, but they are not characterized by features that define them as poets. His art poems, such as “The Lady of Shalott”, “The Lotos-eaters”, “The Hesperides” or “Tithonus” might indirectly be seen as manifestoes of Tennyson’s view on the purpose of art, but they are not explicit and detailed enough to show us how Tennyson felt about the purpose of poetry specifically. Since the objective of this research consists in attempting to define Tennyson’s vision on the poet’s role, an analysis of these vaguely described artist-like figures does not suffice. To really search for the persona of the poet in Tennyson’s poetry, I need to focus on the word ‘poet’ itself. After analysing his complete poetical oeuvre, I have discovered a small number of poems in which Tennyson makes explicit references to the poet (by utilizing the very word ‘poet’). The length and importance of those passages vary extensively; in some poems, the reference to the poet is merely made so as to invoke a certain image, while in others, the entire poem is dedicated to him. Yet, most of the passages contain relevant information on how Tennyson perceived the poet’s role. In what follows, I will try to discover and establish some unambiguous poetic features, by closely reading and examining the passages in question (excerpts from “The Golden Year”; “The Wreck”; “The Gardener’s Daughter”; “Will Waterproof’s Lyrical Monologue”; “The Day-Dream”; “In Memoriam”; “The Princess”; “A Dream of Fair Women”; “The Throstle”; “To Mary Boyle”; “To Virgil”; “Poets and Their Bibliographies”; “Parnassus”; “To —, after reading a life and letters”; “The Poet’s Mind”; “The Poet’s Song”;
“The Poet”; “Epilogue to The Charge of The Heavy Brigade At Balaclava”\textsuperscript{14}). For practical reasons, the poems will not be discussed individually. Instead, I will combine their readings in order to clarify three important aspects of the poet’s life: his/her public role and relation to society, his/her prophetic vision and the ultimate purpose of his/her poetry.

3.2.1. The poet’s public role and relation to society

To say that Alfred, Lord Tennyson was “anxious about his proper public role” (Stevenson 625), would be an understatement. When reading and analysing his poetry, it very rapidly becomes clear that his function as a public figure and his place as a poet in society were his chief preoccupation and the leading thread in his poetry throughout his entire career. Tennyson’s own relation to society was rather ambiguous: he preferred to live in seclusion, but nevertheless had become the voice of a nation when he was appointed Poet Laureate in 1850 (Greenblatt and Abrams 1110). In her article “Tennyson’s Dying Swans: Mythology and the Definition of the Poet’s Role”, Catherine Stevenson argues how Tennyson, in his early years, strived to be a popular poet (625), while Joseph Bristow, on the other hand, claims that he shunned the public and did not want to be “vexed” by it (Introduction 17). This ambiguity Tennyson feels towards the community of his readers is reflected in his poetry as well. Let us investigate how the poet-figure is described in the following excerpts, which relate to different aspects of the poet’s public life: the poet’s relation to his/her readership, his/her retreat from social contact and his/her notion of fame and popularity.

In the first lines of the 1830 poem “The Poet’s Mind”, Tennyson already makes a clear statement about his ideas on the relationship between the poet and society:

Vex not thou the poet’s mind
With thy shallow wit:
Vex not thou the poet’s mind;
For thou canst not fathom it. (Tennyson 1: 61)

\textsuperscript{14}In “Epilogue to The Charge of The Charge Of The Heavy Brigade At Balaclava”, no explicit reference to the word ‘poet’ is made in verse. However, the poem consists in a dialogue between a woman called Irene and a second speaker denoted as ‘Poet’. When analysing the words spoken by this ‘Poet’, we also find some interesting statements on the different aspects of the poet’s life, from the point of view of a poet.
Society, thus, is requested to leave the poet alone; their wit is too shallow to understand the complex thoughts and nature of the poet, their ears are too “dull” (Tennyson 1: 62). According to Tennyson, the readers should not try to approach the poet: “come not anear” (Tennyson 1: 61), he pleads, because he realizes their smiles are “hollow” (Tennyson 1: 61) and he cannot stand their “frozen sneer[s]” (Tennyson 1: 61). Moreover, Tennyson even claims that there is danger in their presence: “[i]n your eye there is death” and “[t]here is frost in your breath” (Tennyson 1: 61). In order to protect him-/herself, then, from the threat posed by society, the poet retreats into a secluded garden which his/her readers are not to enter – “the merry bird” (Tennyson 1: 62), a metaphor for the poet, would “fall to the ground” (Tennyson 1: 62) if any one were to come in and disturb it. This desire to flee from social contact is also expressed in other poems. The first four stanzas of the 1833 version of “Dream of Fair Women”\(^\text{15}\), for instance, describe the poet as a man trying to escape from society in a hot-air balloon:

\begin{quote}
As when a man, that sails in a balloon,

Downlooking sees the solid shining ground

[...]

So, lifted high, the poet at his will

Lets the great world flit from him (Tennyson, *The Suppressed Poems*)
\end{quote}

Here, we see not only that the poet retreats from society, but also that he towers above it – literally and figuratively speaking. As we will see later on, Tennyson often associates the poet with high and elevated regions, which indicates his/her superiority over the ‘ordinary’ humans on earth. More allusions to the poet’s typical seclusion from society follow in his later poetry. In “The Day-Dream”, written in 1842, Tennyson defines hours spent in isolation as “[t]he Poet-forms of stronger hours” (Tennyson 2: 68): “[W]ere it not a pleasant thing”, he asks us, “[t]o pass with all our social ties” and “silence from the paths of men” (Tennyson 2: 68)? Indeed, as Greenblatt and Abrams argue, Tennyson not only considers it imperative to live in isolation but also finds joy in it (1110). By 1846, the employment of the figure of the poet as an image for anyone living outside of society

\(^{15}\) These were to be suppressed by Tennyson after 1842
has become a standard for Tennyson. Consider what he writes in his 1846 poem “The Golden Year” to describe a man who isolates himself from his friends:

They said he lived shut up within himself,
A tongue-tied Poet in the feverous days. (Tennyson 2: 22)

It thus becomes clear that Tennyson – not only in his earliest poems, but also in later writings – reflects upon the poet as a person living in isolation, trying to escape his/her readership. At the same time, however, the poet cannot deny that he wants to be famous and loved by the people. As we have seen before, Tennyson endeavoured to be a popular poet (Stevenson 625). Arguably, this desire must have been strengthened by his designation as the country's Poet Laureate, which transformed him into the voice of a nation. Over the years, Tennyson has written a couple of poems which allow us to examine his appreciation of his fame and his wish to be popular. In the 1842 poem “Will Waterproof’s Lyrical Monologue”, the poetic persona ardently exclaims how he “had hope, by something rare, / [t]o prove [him]self a poet” (Tennyson 2: 92). However, how does one prove oneself a poet? For Tennyson, we could say, it is by being approved as a poet. As he himself was not immediately praised by the critics – the first two volumes he published (1830 and 1832) received bad reviews – Tennyson had experienced first-hand that poets needed to work for their acceptance (Greenblatt and Abrams 1110). We again see this reflected in “Will Waterproof’s Lyrical Monologue”, where the first person speaker claims it takes a lot of time and work to prove himself, for “while [he] plan[s] and plan[s], [his] hair / [i]s gray before [he] know[s] it” (Tennyson 2: 92). That Tennyson himself reacted poorly to criticism has already been claimed by Greenblatt and Abrams (1110). Indeed, we can also read it in his poetry: in one of his most famous works on the figure of the poet – namely “The Poet”, written in 1830 – Tennyson claims that the poet is “dower’d with the hate of hate, the scorn of scorn” (Tennyson 1: 58). Tentatively, this statement could express Tennyson’s hate for criticism: the poet scorns ‘scorn’ and hates ‘hate’, i.e. s/he hates the ‘scorn’ and ‘hate’ of the critics and wanted their approval. In this respect, the “[h]ollow smile and frozen sneer” (Tennyson 1: 61) in “The Poet’s Mind” also acquire a new meaning: they refer to the scorn of the critics.

Ironically, once Tennyson’s poet has earned that approval and gained fame, s/he maintains an ambiguous relationship with that fame. It is almost as if the poet, though
desperately wanting to be acknowledged, wishes to remain at a distance from his/her readership instead of being at the centre of attention. Let me explain what I mean by this. In one of his early works, “The Poet” (1830), Tennyson describes the poet as treading “[t]he secretest [sic] walks of fame” with “echoing feet” (Tennyson 1: 58). Those lines seem, at least at first sight, contradicting: how can the walks of fame be secret? Arguably, the answer lies in the struggle between the poet’s two contradicting desires: a desire to be acknowledged and approved by society and yet, at the same time, a desire to isolate himself from society. Although known by his/her readers, the poet might refuse to be a public figure and stand at the centre of attention. The ‘echoing feet’ can then be interpreted as the necessary distance between the famous poet and his/her public. In the 1833 version of “Dream of Fair Women”, the notion of fame as an echo returns. However, this time, the roles are reversed: it is not the public who hears the echoes of the poet, but rather the poet who hears echoes of his success. As we have seen before, “Dream of Fair Women” describes a poet as a man flying away from his audience. Subsequently, when he is lifted unto a higher level, he “[h]ear[s] apart the echoes of his fame” (Tennyson, The Suppressed Poems). Again, we see how the poet desperately creates a distance between himself (herself) and society. For Tennyson, therefore, poets should not live the life of a celebrity; they should keep seeking refuge and merely hear the echoes of their fame.

Another line from the same poem – “Dream of Fair Women” – introduces Tennyson’s appreciation of the positive side of fame, i.e. that it keeps poets alive in the heart of their readers. Although the poet distances himself (herself) from his (her) readers, “memory/ [s]owed” their “deepfurrowed thought” with his (her) name, so that his (her) “glory will not die” (Tennyson, The Suppressed Poems). It is a theme that also returns in later works of his. For example, in the short poem “Poets and Their Bibliographies”, written in 1885, Tennyson addresses three famous poets of the Classical Age – Virgil, Horace and Catullus to be precise – and states that they would be happy and proud to know they are still famous and being read:

If, glancing downward on the kindly sphere

16 Because the poet in “Dream of Fair Women” is explicitly identified as a man, it would be wrong to refer to him with the double pronoun. However, because we need to bear in mind that the characteristics displayed in this poem are also valid for female poets, I will put the female pronoun here between brackets.
That once had roll’d you round and round the sun,
You see your Art still shrined in human shelves,
You should be jubilant that you flourish’d here. (Tennyson 6: 348)

Even after centuries and centuries, their poetry is still “shrined” (Tennyson 6: 348), i.e. still valued by the people. Significant in this respect is also the depiction of the poet-figure in “Parnassus”, written in 1889. “Lightning may shrivel the laurel of Caesar”, the poet-figure argues, “but mine would not wither” (Tennyson 7: 106). Again, the poet claims to live on forever due to his/her fame. Moreover, we can see a clear analogy between the poet’s ‘laurel’ and the laureateship – both indications of the importance of the poet and his/her success – which cannot but reflect Tennyson’s own appointment as the Poet Laureate. Throughout the first stanza, Tennyson’s poet-figure continues to value his/her fame and his/her impact on the nation in a positive way: s/he, the poet, will “roll [his/her] voice from the summit, / [s]ounding for ever and ever thro’ Earth and her listening nations” (Tennyson 7: 106-107). However, in the next stanza, the poet-figure retracts his/her appreciation of fame and its possibility to keep the poet alive.

Poet, that evergreen laurel is blasted by more than lightning!
Look, in their deep double shadow the crown’d ones all disappearing!
Sing like a bird and be happy, nor hope for a deathless hearing!
’Sounding for ever and ever?’ pass on! (Tennyson 7: 107)

Just like in the first stanza, the word ‘laurel’, but also the image of the ‘crown’d ones’, refers to the laureateship. However, the speaker has taken up a different stance towards his/her acknowledgement as a poet. While in the previous stanza s/he still praised his/her laurel, s/he now claims it is blasted. “The crown’d ones”, s/he says, are “all disappearing” and should not hope for a “deathless hearing” (Tennyson 7: 107). Nevertheless, even though the name of these ‘crowned’ poets will not be known for eternity, “the fire within [them] would not falter” (Tennyson 7: 108). Ultimately, thus, Tennyson’s poet-figure expresses a hope to be famous long after his/her death, just as Catullus, Virgil and Horace were, but realizes this hope might be futile: what matters in the end is the fire within, s/he realizes, and not the poet’s eternal glory. Moreover, when considering the time of publication of “Parnassus” – 1889 – we could even say that this late poem expresses a sense of hindsight, which Tennyson gained at the end of his
career. Perhaps, after years and years of longing for the approval of the critics and his readers, he finally realized that his quest for fame was a trivial one.

In a way of closing this section on Tennyson’s relationship with society, I would like to take a closer look at Tennyson’s rather unknown poem “To – after reading a life and letters”. First published in 1849, it was an expression of his indignation towards Lord Houghton’s publication of Keats’ love-letters (1848) (H. Tennyson, ed. in Tennyson 2: 335). Since Keats was Tennyson’s great example, it should come as no surprise that Tennyson came to his defence. The poem, however, uses no names or direct references to Keats, as a result of which it can also be read as a more general argument for the poet’s right to privacy. In the very first stanza, Tennyson addresses an anonymous poet and claims the name of ‘Poet’ was much more valuable in previous days:

You might have won the Poet’s name,
If such be worth the winning now,
And gain’d a laurel for your brow
Of sounder leaf than I can claim; (Tennyson 2: 135)

Arguably, Tennyson here addresses Shakespeare, for the poem is introduced by Shakespeare’s epitaph: “Cursed be he that moves my bones”. In that case, Tennyson not only acknowledges that Shakespeare was his superior as a poet, for his “laurel” is of “sounder leaf” than his (Tennyson 2: 135), but he also indicates that Shakespeare lived at a time when poets were still respected. The emphasis on the word ‘now’ in the sentence “If such be worth the winning now” (Tennyson 2: 135) obviously shows that Tennyson refers to an event that has occurred recently – the publication of Keats’ private life. Tennyson goes on:

But you have made the wiser choice,
A life that moves to gracious ends
Thro’ troops of unrecording friends,

17 Scholars such as Margaret A. Lourie claim for example how Tennyson had been greatly influenced by Keats and can be considered “the inheritor of much of Keats’s epistemology, language, and subject matter” (Lourie: 4).
A deedful life, a silent voice:
And you have miss’d the irreverent doom
Of those that wear the Poet’s crown:
Hereafter, neither knave nor clown
Shall hold their orgies at your tomb. (Tennyson 2: 135)

Another reference to the epitaph, “neither knave nor clown / shall hold their orgies at your tomb” (Tennyson 2: 135), makes it clear that Tennyson indeed is addressing Shakespeare. According to Tennyson, Shakespeare has had the luck to live in an age where his “unrecording friends” (Tennyson 2: 135) would not publish anything compromising about his private life. Moreover, he argues that, nowadays, poets cannot escape the “irreverent doom” (Tennyson 2: 135) of being disrespected after their death. Accordingly, the link between Shakespeare’s epitaph and the actual theme of the poem – the violation of Keats’ privacy – is introduced:

For now the Poet cannot die,
Nor leave his music as of old,
But round him ere he scarce be cold
Begins the scandal and the cry:
’Proclaim the faults he would not show:
Break lock and seal: betray the trust:
Keep nothing sacred. (Tennyson 2: 135-136)

Again, the emphasized ‘now’ points at the topicality of the event. Although Tennyson keeps talking about ‘the Poet’ in general terms, it is clear that he is actually referring to Keats and “the scandal and the cry” (Tennyson 2: 136) around his personal love-letters. Tennyson considers this ‘proclamation of faults’ absolutely sacrilegious and claims that it is yet another argument for the poet to retreat from society:

[...]
My Shakespeare’s curse on clown and knave
Who will not let his ashes rest!
Who make it seem more sweet to be
The little life of bank and brier,
The bird that pipes his lone desire
And dies unheard within his tree,
Than he that warbles long and loud
And drops at Glory’s temple-gates,
For whom the carrion vulture waits
To tear his heart before the crowd! (Tennyson 2: 136)

Again, just like in the previously discussed poems, Tennyson seems to come to the conclusion that a private life is to be preferred over a life in the middle of the spotlight. However, instead of focusing on the readers’ lack of understanding, this poem gives another argument for the poet to withdraw from society. In the end, Tennyson concludes, he would rather be a bird that “dies unheard within his tree” (Tennyson 2: 136), than live a public life and fall prey to the sharp and disrespectful attacks of the critics. In Tennyson’s opinion, poets therefore need to withdraw from society in order to protect themselves against the critics, for the critics will not only tear them down during their lives, but also after their deaths.

In conclusion, it appears that an analysis of Tennyson’s explicit references to the figure of the poet asks for a modification of the earlier conclusion made after the analysis of the more general art poems. As we have seen before, the noticeable evolution between the early versions of the art poems and their revisions seems to point to a change in Tennyson’s opinion on the necessity of the artist’s isolation. During the 1830s, Grob argues, Tennyson “had been plainly touched by the spirit of the age and felt it necessary to renounce the ideal of total seclusion” (126). However, this change of heart is not at all apparent in the poems directly addressed to the persona of the poet. Even in the late 1840s, with the poem “To – after reading a life and letters” (1849), Tennyson still supports a withdrawal from society. In this light, the art poems might have to be reconsidered and other interpretations might be more valid. Their rejection of the life of art does not necessarily reflect a wish to live amongst men once again, but the realization that one should not write art for art’s sake or that art should address morally and socially relevant topics. The poet him-/herself, however, should stay clear from society, because his/her readers cannot fathom his/her wit and insight and the critics
will tear him/her down as soon as they get the chance. Furthermore, the analysis of Tennyson's explicit references to the figure of the poet shows that Tennyson portrays his poets as wanting to be famous and acknowledged by the critics. Yet, he claims, they still need to maintain a necessary distance between themselves and society. Finally, the above-mentioned poems indicate that Tennyson's poet-figures hope to live forever through their poetry. However, by the end of his career, Tennyson considered this hope futile and trivial, for he had realized that immortality is not about glory but about the eternal fire burning inside the poet.

3.2.2. The poet as a prophet

After considering the poet’s ambiguous relationship with society, let us have look at the persona of the poet. Although Tennyson frequently alludes to the figure of the poet as a musical character – utilizing songs and singers as metaphors for respectively poetry and the poet –, the analysis of the passages in which he explicitly mentions the poet show the importance of another aspect of the poet as well: his/her prophetic vision. As Buckley asserts in Tennyson, The growth of a poet, Tennyson “felt himself always something of a seer, privileged on occasion to receive intimations of the ‘glory’” (19). That he should portray the figure of the poet in his poetry as a prophet-like persona should come as no surprise then. In her article “Tennyson’s Dying Swans: Mythology and the Definition of the Poet’s Role” (1980), Catherine Stevenson argues that Tennyson’s association between the poet and the prophet can be traced back to his earliest poems (621). According to her, we can already find instances of this prophetic poet in his very first verses – the compilation of poems he wrote with his brother, Charles Tennyson:

His contributions to Poems by Two Brothers (1827) frequently employ the persona of the bard-prophet, a morally superior, visionary figure who voices divine injunctions (“The High-Priest to Alexander”) and denunciations (“Babylon,” “God’s Denunciations Against Pharaoh Hophra”), or who laments the present while prophesying a different future (“The Druid’s Prophecies,” “Lamentation of the Peruvians,” “The Fall of Jerusalem”). (Stevenson 621)

Moreover, Stevenson claims that this bard-prophet functions as a prototype for the Tennysonian poet and that he has been searching throughout his entire career for a proper image that embodies the visionary characteristics of his poet-figure (621). Later
on (chapter 3.3), I will have a look at one of these images: Stevenson makes a very good case for the image of the dying swan as one of the strongest manifestations as a “priest-prophet” (622). Nevertheless, I will first focus on Tennyson’s direct descriptions of the poet as a prophet; that way, the poet’s prophet-like qualities come across more clearly and unambiguously. There are two important aspects one can take into consideration when identifying Tennyson’s poet-prophet: his/her omniscience and vision and his/her belief that, in spite of deplorable prospects, things will turn around and the future will look bright again. Although the prophet’s vision and insight are intricately related, they will be discussed separately because they do not always appear together. Another feature typical of Tennyson’s prophetic poet is his/her superhuman, high-born nature that distinguishes him/her from the ‘ordinary’ humans. I will discuss each of those characteristics, providing excerpts from the poems in question.

Let us consider the poet’s high-born, superhuman nature, for it clearly constitutes the basis for his visionary powers. Already in his 1830 poem “The Poet”, Tennyson sets the poet apart from ‘ordinary’ humans; “[t]he poet in a golden clime was born”, he states, “[w]ith golden stars above” (Tennyson 1: 58). From their birth onwards, then, poets are destined for greatness. Furthermore, Tennyson’s poet-figures generally do not live on earth; they are associated with higher regions, such as mountains or the sky, which points at their superiority over the human race. In “The Poet”, for example, “[t]he viewless arrows of [the poet’s] thoughts” (Tennyson 1: 58) roam through the sky; his/her words are compared to “vagrant melodies” (Tennyson 1: 59), carried by “the winds which bore / [t]hem earthward till they lit” (Tennyson 1: 59). Although there is no explicit indication given that the poet lives on a mountain, his/her proclamations need to be carried by the wind before they can reach earth, which proves that s/he does not live on earth him-/herself. In the 1833 version of “A Dream of Fair Women”, we again encounter the idea of the poet towering above the earth. As mentioned before, “A Dream of Fair Women” compares the poet to a man escaping from earth in a hot-air balloon:

As when a man, that sails in a balloon,

Downlooking sees the solid shining ground

[...]

So lifted high, the Poet at his will

Let the great world flit from him, seeing all,
Higher thro' secret splendours mounting still. (Tennyson, *The Suppressed Poems*)

Here, the poet’s retreatment to higher, more elevated regions is obviously linked to his (her) omniscience. As he (she) mounts higher and higher, he (she) takes in more and more ‘secret splendours’ and eventually sees everything. Finally, in “Parnassus” (1889), we find a description of poets living on a mountain. “What be those crown’d forms high over the sacred fountain” (Tennyson 7: 106) the speaker asks; “Bards, that the mighty Muses have raised to the heights of the mountain” (Tennyson 7: 106). Here, the poet is also associated with the Muses, the Greek goddesses of art, inspiration and literature, who, according to Greek mythology, lived on mount Parnassus. Moreover, these Muses have granted the poets immortality, for they not only lifted them “to the heights of the mountain” (Tennyson 7: 106), but also “over the flight of the Ages” (Tennyson 7: 106). Just like Tithonus, then, the poet is elevated to a higher plain and lives among the gods as an equal. What’s more, when associating the poet with mount Parnassus, Tennyson establishes a connection between the poet and the god Apollo, to whom the mount Parnassus was dedicated. Not accidentally, Apollo is the god of both poetry and prophecy; a connection between the poet and Apollo therefore not only reflects the poet’s superhuman, godly nature, but also indicates that the poet can be associated with Apollo’s prophetic powers.

The only poem in which Tennyson explicitly compares the poet to a prophet is in *The Throstle* (1889), where he calls the “wild little poet” “a prophet so crazy” (Tennyson 7: 121). However, the poet’s omniscience and prophetic vision is also visible in earlier Tennyson poems. As early as 1830, in the poem “The Poet”, Tennyson conceives of the poet as all-seeing: “The poet’, he begins, “saw thro’ life and death, thro’ good and ill” and even “thro’ his own soul” (Tennyson 1: 58). This poet-prophet then can not only predict how his (her) life will develop, but he can also see further than his (her) own death, i.e. he (she) can look into the future. Likewise, in “To Virgil” (1882), Tennyson addresses—again – a famous poet from the Classical Age and calls him “Thou that seëst Universal” (Tennyson 6: 316); hence, the vision of the poet is not limited to his/her own life, but extends to the entire universe. Moreover, s/he can even see “the doubtful doom of human kind” (Tennyson 6: 316). The idea that the poet can look into the future of the world, was already expressed in “The Poet’s Song” (1842), where the poet “sings of what
the world will be / [w]hen the years have died away” (Tennyson 2: 140). It needs to be said that these visionary powers of the poet share a striking resemblance with the special perception of the artist-figures in the previously discussed art poems. In this respect, the art poems clearly reflect Tennyson’s idea on the special powers of the poet. What is more, the way in which this prophetic poet is described in “The Poet”, “To Virgil” and “The Poet’s Song”, clearly shows that Tennyson was greatly influenced by Carlyle’s notion of the ‘Vates’. Both Tennyson and Carlyle consistently amalgamate the figure of the poet and the figure of the prophet and describe them as having an insight into the ways of the universe.

Arguably, the most important aspect of the poet’s prophetic vision is his/her insight that, despite bad prospects, the future of mankind still looks bright. The 1842 poem “The Poet’s Song”, for example, depicts a poet happily singing of the world’s future in a “melody loud and sweet” (Tennyson 2: 140). This sweet song – a metaphor for poetry – seems to excel the beauty of nature, for it impresses a series of birds generally associated with singing, such as the swan and the lark. At the end of the poem, the nightingale – again, a bird known for its beautiful song – acknowledges the superiority of the poet’s song:

‘I have sung many songs,
But never a one so gay,
For he sings of what the world will be
When the years have died away.’ (Tennyson 2: 140)

As I have already mentioned before, this passage portrays the poet’s ability to look into the future. However, it also depicts the poet’s assessment of that future. As the nightingale observes, this prophetic song is the gayest melody he has ever heard. Accordingly, if the joyful song of the poet reflects the future of the world, that future cannot be but positive. Similarly, the “Epilogue” to Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Heavy Brigade at Balaclava” (1885) portrays a poet reflecting upon the future of mankind, who states that all will be fine in the end:

And tho’, in this lean age forlorn,
Too many a voice may cry
That man can have no after-morn,
Not yet of those am I.
The man remains, and whatsoe'er
He wrought of good or brave
Will mould him thro' the cycle-year
That dawns behind the grave. (Tennyson 6: 314)

Again, the poet here counters the pessimistic thought that mankind will perish. Moreover, this poem seems to hint at the cyclic nature of life and the possibility of life after death: man will live to see his ‘after-morn’, for his good and brave deeds will “mould him thro’ the cycle-year / [t]hat dawns behind the grave” (Tennyson 6: 314). This emphasis on the cyclic nature of life can also be found in another of Tennyson’s late poems, namely “The Throstle” (1889), which praises the arrival of summer. At the beginning of the poem, the poetic persona announces that “summer is coming” (Tennyson 7: 121) and asks the poet to praise the rebirth of life by way of song, for, according to the speaker, summer does not only bring back “light” and “leaf”, but also “life” (Tennyson 7: 121):

Sing the new year under the blue.
Last year you sang it as gladly.
New, new, new, new! Is it then so new
That you should carol so madly? (Tennyson 7: 121)

Very much like the figure of the poet in “The Poet’s Song”, then, the “wild little poet” (Tennyson 7: 121) in “The Throstle” is described as a crazy prophet who can foresee the rebirth of life (summer) after the death of nature (winter).

In conclusion, I could therefore say that, for Tennyson, the poet is a prophet-like figure who, thanks to his/her insight and vision, can look into the future and predict what life will bring for mankind after death. Furthermore, a link can be found between the depiction of the poet as prophet in the above-mentioned excerpts and the representation of the artist in the previously analysed art poems. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, Tennyson depicts the artist figures in poems such as “The Lady of
Shalott”, “The Lotos-Eaters”, “Tithonus” and “The Hesperides” as being of a superhuman nature and as having a special kind of perception. In a certain way, then, Tennyson’s art poems express in a more general way his view on the figure of the poet and his/her prophetic vision. Therefore, that Tennyson should portray the figure of the poet as a prophet does not come as a surprise. Moreover, Tennyson was not the only Victorian who believed the poet has prophetic powers. Although particularly present in Tennyson’s poetry, the image of the poet as prophet can also be found in other Victorian literary texts. For Thomas Carlyle, as I have already explained in the introduction, the Poet and the Prophet are essentially the same. In his essay “The Hero as Poet: Dante, Shakespeare”, Carlyle argues that, in old languages, ‘poet’ and ‘prophet’ are often expressed by the same word, for “at all times, Prophet and Poet, well understood, have had much kindred of meaning” (“The Hero as Poet” 65-66). According to Carlyle, the prophet and the poet have in common that they are initiated in the “sacred mystery of the Universe” (Carlyle, “The Hero as Poet” 66); therefore, he claims, they have an insight in the ways of life and make excellent leaders for the people (Carlyle, “The Hero as Poet” 66). Another Victorian writer who points out the visionary powers and intellectual superiority of the poet is, according to Joseph Bristow, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. As Bristow argues in The Victorian poet: poetics and persona (1987), Barrett Browning’s “Aurora Leigh” brings to the fore an image of the poet as the ultimate guide for the people (13):

Barrett Browning beholds the poet as God’s messenger: the last species of ‘truth-teller’ on earth, someone with greater capabilities than either the philosopher or scientist. The poet is, in other words, the saviour of the secular age. (Bristow, Introduction 13)

Tennyson represents the figure of the poet in a similar way; just like Carlyle and Barrett Browning, he portrays the poet as having an insight into the future and, accordingly, into the ways of the universe. In this respect, Tennyson belonged more to the Victorian era than Joseph Bristow gives him credit for. As I have explained before, Bristow classifies Tennyson as a “Romantic Victoria[n]” (Introduction 2), because he, at least according to Bristow, shares his ideas on poetry with the Romantic poets. However, this classification
by Bristow seems rather unjust, for the fact that Tennyson depicts the poet as a prophet identifies him clearly as Victorian\(^\text{19}\).

### 3.2.3. The ultimate purpose of poetry

Those same poems that contain explicit references to the figure of the poet not only reveal aspects about the poet’s relation to society and his/her prophetic vision, but also encompass statements about the purpose of poetry. Not surprisingly, however, we find a couple of contrasting elements with regard to this purpose. More specifically, a tension can be found between poems that advocate a poetry without aim or cause – or as we have seen with the art poems: art for art’s sake – and poems that express the poet’s desire to reach society and move the public. Scholars who have based their work on an analysis of Tennyson’s more general art poems, such as Alan Grob, claim that a certain evolution can be found in Tennyson’s view on the relation between art and society. According to Grob, Tennyson realized during the 1830s that his first two volumes (1830 and 1833) were too far removed from society, which is why his 1842 volume more explicitly acknowledges “the primacy of morality over art” (Grob 129). When analysing the poems which contain explicit references to the figure of the poet (in opposition to the art poems which encompass only vague and implicit references to artist-like figures), we can discern a similar evolution, although not as clear-cut. In what follows, I will discuss the excerpts in chronological order, so that this evolution in Tennyson’s view on the purpose of poetry comes across more clearly. Furthermore, I will examine if Tennyson’s opinion of this purpose resembles the thoughts other pre-eminent Victorian figures, such as Carlyle, Arnold, Hallam or Mill.

In the first half of his career, Tennyson publishes four poems in which he explicitly writes about or refers to the intention of poetry: “The Poet” (1830), “The Gardener’s Daughter” (1842), “The Princess” (1847) and “In Memoriam” (1850). Nevertheless, the opinions expressed in those excerpts seem rather contradictory. In “The Poet” (1830),

\(^{19}\) For more information about the difference between ‘Romantic’ and ‘Victorian’ ideas on poetry, I refer back to chapter 2.
Tennyson seems to portray poetry as having a noble cause – bringing wisdom and truth to the people. The poet composes

 [...] vagrant melodies the winds which bore
Then earthward till they lit;
Then, like the arrow-seeds of the field flower,
The fruitful wit

Cleaving, took root, and springing forth anew
Where’er they fell, behold,
Like to the mother plant in semblance, grew
A flower all gold,

And bravely furnish’d all abroad to fling
The winged shafts of truth,
To throng with stately blooms the breathing spring
Of Hope and Youth. (Tennyson 1: 59)

The poet’s ‘vagrant melodies’, a metaphor for poetry, are described as the seeds of wit, which spread knowledge and truth on earth. Moreover, they seem to bring hope and good news, for they “throng with stately blooms the breathing spring / Of Hope and Youth” (Tennyson 1: 59). In this respect, we again find a trace of the poet’s prophetic powers (cf. 3.2.2. The Poet as Prophet) – the poet foresees the world’s hopeful future, for he speaks of ‘Hope’ and ‘Youth’. Tennyson then continues; “truth was multiplied on truth” (Tennyson 1: 59) and ‘Wisdom’ visited the earth:

Her words did gather thunder as they ran,
And as the lightning to the thunder
Which follows it, riving the spirit of man,
Making earth wonder,

So was their meaning to her words. No sword
Of wrath her right arm whirl’d,
But one poor poet’s scroll, and with his word
She shook the world. (Tennyson 1: 60)

The poet thus brings the people wisdom and truth with his (her) poetry: he (she) shocks his (her) readers and makes them wonder about life. Poetry consequently becomes an
instructive medium; it is composed to educate the people and to initiate them in the mysterious ways of the universe. A similar line of thought can be found in Tennyson’s “The Princess”, published in 1847. Although in the main this poem is a response to the so-called Woman Question, it also contains a small reference to the figure of the poet. At the beginning of book II, Lady Psyche argues that

[...] everywhere the broad and bounteous Earth
Should bear a double growth of those rare souls,

Poets, whose thoughts enrich the blood of the world. (Tennyson 4: 29)

Again, the ‘thoughts’ of the poet – i.e. poetry – are described as instructive; they ‘enrich’ the thoughts of the people. Excerpts like these then seem to indicate that, for Tennyson, poetry has a higher purpose: it serves to educate people. In this sense, Tennyson appears to agree with Carlyle and Arnold that poetry can provide the people with a higher knowledge which can enlighten or ‘enrich’ them.

Nevertheless, as I have said before, other poems published in his early years seem to argue that poetry should have no cause at all. Let us consider the 1842 poem “The Gardener’s Daughter” for instance, in which a comparison is made between poets and singing birds. Eustace, a character who comments upon the singing of the birds, asks the poetic speaker if birds sing “[l]ike poets, from the vanity of song” (Tennyson 1: 273). By doing so, this character thus claims that poets ‘sing’ without cause or aim: they merely compose poetry out of vanity, which indicates that they do not wish to reach anyone else. Moreover, the poetic persona claims that birds – and poets – should not sing to praise some higher cause: “Were there nothing else / For which to praise the heavens but only love, / That only love were cause enough for praise” (Tennyson 1: 273). Consequently, we can infer that Tennyson here argues that poetry should have no purpose and that he advocates ‘poetry for poetry’s sake’. Likewise, in “In Memoriam” (published in 1850) Tennyson seems to argue that poetry is at its best when it is not written for a special cause. In sonnet XXXIV, he describes the earth as

Fantastic beauty such as lurks

In some wild Poet, when he works

Without a conscience or an aim. (Tennyson 3: 73)
This excerpt, which recognizes beauty as the true motive of poetry, reminds us in a certain way of the poetic theory propagated by Hallam. Hallam, not only a great friend of Tennyson, but also one of his most famous critics, advocated a poetry which was solely written out of a desire for beauty and pleasure (cf. Chapter 2: The Victorian poetry debate). Undoubtedly, he had a major influence on Tennyson’s poetry, and especially in “In Memoriam”, a poem dedicated to Hallam, Tennyson's alignment with his poetic theory seems apparent. Nevertheless, the other above-mentioned poems show no trace of Hallam’s ideas on poetry. As a matter of fact, they even seem to contain ideas which oppose Hallam's poetic theory. Just like the art poems expressed a more general vacillation between “artistic detachment” and “social responsibility” (Alaya 274), the early poems in which Tennyson explicitly writes about the poet and his/her poetry then embody Tennyson’s uncertainty about the function and purpose of poetry.

However, when analysing later poems which contain explicit mentions of the word ‘poet’, we detect no such contradictory statements. Two rather unknown poems that comment upon the purpose of poetry (“The Wreck” and “To Mary Boyle”) seem to recommend poetry that moves people or inspires them. In “The Wreck” for instance, published in the 1885 volume Tiresias, and Other Poems, the poetic persona talks about the “word of the Poet by whom the deeps of the world are stirr’d” (Tennyson 6: 215), which seems to indicate that the poet and poetry should leave a deep impression on the people. Likewise, the 1889 poem “To Mary Boyle” expresses the poet’s wish for an emotional response to his poetry:

Take, read! and be the faults your Poet makes  
Or many or few,  
He rests content, if his young music wakes  
A wish in you  
To change our dark Queen-city, all her realm  
Of sound and smoke,  
For his clear heaven, and these few lanes of elm  
And whispering oak. (Tennyson 7: 85)
Moreover, it is explicitly declared that the poet wishes to inspire the people and instigate them to change their world. Poetry then becomes – again – an instructive medium, which the poet can employ to make the ways of life known to mankind. In these later poems, Tennyson thus seems to pick up the line of thought expressed in his 1830 poem “The Poet”; he rejects Hallam’s praise of beauty as the sole motive for poetry and adheres to a poetic theory more closely aligned with that of Carlyle and Arnold.

Since the poems containing an explicit reference to the purpose, aims or function of poetry are rather scarce, it would be wrong to draw any hard conclusion from them with regard to Tennyson’s opinion of the function of poetry. However, they do shed an interesting light on Tennyson’s poetics. In his early years, Tennyson published a couple of poems which contained contradictory statements with regard to the purpose of poetry. While “The Poet” (1830) and “The Princess” (1847) seem to refer to poetry as an instructive medium, “The Gardener’s Daughter” (1842) and “In Memoriam” (1850) appear to plead for a poetry without a cause, or, as you will, ‘poetry for poetry’s sake’. However, in his later poems, such a contradiction cannot be found anymore. In two poems published at the end of his career, Tennyson seems to advocate a poetry which engages with society, which educates the people and makes them wonder. An explicit claim for a poetry without a motive of cause, as found in earlier works such as “The Gardener’s Daughter” and “In Memoriam” was not detected. Tentatively, this could indicate that Tennyson changed his opinion on poetry and that he during his career came to believe in the importance of a ‘socially responsible’ poetry. Such a conclusion appears more than plausible when considering the evolution discerned in the previously discussed art poems; as scholars such as Alan Grob have argued, Tennyson’s art poems – and their various revisions – point out that, over the years, Tennyson rejected the life of art for the sake of it and that he wanted to fulfil a more central role in society. According to Grob, this transition takes place somewhere in the late 1830s, for he recognizes the 1842 volume as Tennyson’s first promotion of morally and socially responsible art (Grob 129) (cf. 3.1. The ‘art poems’). Although the six poems analysed above were published during too big a time-span to allow us to delineate a clear-cut transition, they do seem to fit (partially) into Grob’s theory. “The Gardener’s Daughter”, although published in 1842, was written during Tennyson’s time at Cambridge (H. Tennyson, ed. in Tennyson 1: 390) and can therefore be considered an example of Tennyson’s early ideas on poetry. Likewise, “In Memoriam” was composed after and in response to
Hallam’s death in 1833, even though Tennyson did not release it until 1850. One could consequently claim that this long poem uncovers a poetic theory reminiscent of the younger Tennyson. Nevertheless, Tennyson still published both poems at the indicated dates (1842 and 1850), which suggests that he must not have completely rejected the idea of ‘poetry for poetry’s sake’ at that time. The transition in his opinion must therefore be seen as a more gradual phenomenon and might have extended well into the 1840s.
3.3. The dying swan as a manifestation of Tennyson's poet figure

Finally, now that we have analysed Tennyson’s rather explicit references to the poet in chapter 3.2 and have a clearer view of how the artist-figures in the art poems of chapter 3.1 reveal Tennyson’s view on the role of the poet and the function of art, I would like to take a look at a more complex and metaphorical rendering of the figure of the poet in Tennyson’s poetry. Surely, at some level, Tennyson’s artist figures already constitute a more complex rendering of the figure of the poet. Nevertheless, all of them are ‘human’ and are ascribed artist-like features (cf. chapter 3.1), which makes it easy to recognize them as poets. As Tennyson’s poetry is full of rich images and metaphors, it seems plausible that he would have also employed more complex images to portray the figure of the poet. One such an image, as Catherine Stevenson and Soong Hee Kim argue, is that of the dying swan. Stevenson, for instance, asserts that the dying swan, as it appears in the poetry of Tennyson, “is a personal symbol for Tennyson of the triumph of the artist and the ascendancy of art” (Stevenson 633). Indeed, the image of the swan that sings a joyful song at the point of its death can be interpreted as a metaphor for the prophetic poet who envisions the joyous times to come after death and who tries to comfort the people (Stevenson 632, 634-635). As such, the dying swan is yet another manifestation of the Tennysonian poet. Moreover, Soong Hee Kim claims that, throughout his career, Tennyson shows “consistent interest in swan imagery” (173): while the dying swan and its funeral song can be found in “The Dying Swan” (1830), the 1832 version of “The Lady of Shalott”21, “Morte D’Arthur” (1842)22 and “The Passing of

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20 This chapter is an elaboration of a short paper I wrote earlier on Tennyson’s use of the dying swan, in the context of a class on Victorian poetry (cf. Preface). Although the core argument has remained the same, I have done much more research here than I was able to do in that 1200-word paper. Moreover, within the frame of this thesis, the image of the dying swan reveals much more than in my analysis of the symbol in itself.
21 The 1842 version of “The Lady of Shalott”, which had undergone much alteration, would become the canonical version.
22 Date of publication, when “Morte D’Arthur” was published within the frame of “The Epic”. The original poem (without the frame of “The Epic”) is definitely older, but there seems to be some uncertainty about when exactly it was written: while Hallam Tennyson claims it was first written in 1835 (H. Tennyson, ed. in Tennyson 1: 384), others (such as Stevenson 630) argue that the poem was written in 1833. There is, however, a general consensus about the fact that the poem was written in response to the death of Tennyson’s close friend Hallam, whose first name (Arthur) conveniently coincided with that of the great king of Camelot.
Arthur” (1869), references to the swan in general appear in “The Palace of Art” (1832/1833), “The Poet’s Song” (1842), “Lancelot and Elaine” (1859), “Tithonus” (1860) and “The Holy Grail” (1869) (Kim 173; Stevenson 621-622). In what follows, I will attempt to explain why the swan is such a compelling symbol for Tennyson and what it reveals about his view on the function of poetry. First, I will investigate how the mythological origin of the legend relates the dying swan to the prophet we encounter in other Tennyson poems. Secondly, I will examine how the swan can symbolize the figure of the poet, referring not only to its connotations in Ancient Greece, but also incorporating Catherine Stevenson’s allusion to the poet-like qualities of the swan. Ultimately, with the help of Soong Hee Kim and Stevenson’s analysis of “The Lady of Shalott”, “The Dying Swan”, “Morte D’Arthur” and “The Passing of Arthur”, I will clarify how Tennyson employs the image of the dying swan in his poetry to express his view on the function of poetry.

The swan has been ascribed powers of prophecy for almost as long as the civilized world can remember. Tentatively, the Greek were the first to express the prophetic character of the singing bird in literature; Arnott (149) claims for instance that the legend of the swan’s prophetic death-song appears for the first time in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* (458 B.C.). Frederick M. Ahl mentions another classical source, Plato’s *Phaedo*, which links the dying swan to powers of prophecy:

In a famous passage (Phaedo 84D-85B), Socrates hopes his own prophecy will match that of swans, “who, though they also sing in earlier times, sing especially well when on the point of death, because they are about to go off to the god whose servant they are.” They do not sing from grief: “Since they are Apollo’s birds, they are prophetic. They know beforehand that what is in Hades’ [...] realm is good [...]” (Ahl 374)

In Ancient Greece, swans were thus linked to Apollo, the god of prophecy, and as such, they were considered prophetic. However, the origin of the swan myth is much more

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23 This poem is actually an adaptation of the earlier “Morte D’Arthur”, framed within the story of *Idylls of the King*
24 Kim classifies this poem with the other poems that contain the image of the dying swan, while Stevenson argues that “Tithonus” merely alludes to swans in general. As a matter of fact, both are partially right: the poem contains a reference to a dying swan, but there is no allusion to the swan’s death-song. Since the swan’s song is the most important aspect of the image of the dying swan, I will exclude “Tithonus” from my analysis.
25 Plato’s *Phaedo*, as quoted in Ahl (374)
26 Plato’s *Phaedo*, as quoted in Ahl (374)
complex. As Catherine Stevenson argues in her article “Tennyson’s Dying Swans: Mythology and the Definition of the Poet’s Role”, the legend of the swan singing joyfully only moments before its death can be traced back to an old pagan ritual. At the core of her argumentation lies George Stanley Faber’s The Origin of Pagan Idolatry, in which the figure of the swan is identified as a participant in a Helio-Arkite27 funeral rite for a transmigrating god who was about to be reborn again (Stevenson 623-624). According to Faber, she claims, priests would dress up as swans and lament by way of song the death of their beloved god; yet at the same time, these ‘swans’ would rejoice at the thought that their god would one day be reborn again and come back to them. Outside the context of these rituals, the true reason for the swan’s song became unclear and “[t]hus arose the myth of the swan’s dirge for itself” (624), Stevenson concludes. Consequently, the swan’s powerful song at the point of its demise can be seen as a chant in which the prophetic swan delights in the hopeful prospect of its life after death. That Tennyson would have known about the prophetic origin of the swan’s song seems plausible: he was acquainted not only with Greek literature and myths (Markley 4), but also with the Helio-Arkite theory (Paden 152-159; Stevenson 631). Moreover, as Stevenson (623) points out, he might even have read Faber’s The Origin of Pagan Idolatry. Furthermore, the prophetic qualities of the swan, which according to Stevenson is a “key figure” in “a ritual which is designed to affirm not only the rebirth of the dead god but the eternal regeneration of the world” (624), seem to remind us of the prophet-poet we have seen in other Tennyson poems (cf. chapter 3.2.2), even more so when one considers that the swan can also be seen as a metaphor for the figure of the poet.

The connection between the swan and the poet has, again, been in existence since the Classical Age. As we have seen, the swan is the bird of the Greek god Apollo, who is not only the god of prophecy, but also the god of poetry. Furthermore, as a singing bird, the swan became easily linked to the figure of the poet, who can be seen as a type of ‘singer’ as well. As the Dictionary of Literary Symbols points out, Greek philosophers and authors compared the swan and its song to the poet and his poetry, or vice versa, the

27 ‘Helio’, from the Greek word for ‘sun’ and ‘Arkite’, ‘referring to Noah’s Ark’. According to Stevenson (623-624), Faber advocated the Helio-Arkite theory, according to which deceased sun gods can be considered ‘corruptions’ of Adam, who died and then was reborn into the person of Noah. As Stevenson claims, “rites of this god reenacted his death, his entombment in an ark (symbolic of a coffin and of the “womb” of the great earth mother) and his transmigratory rebirth” (624). During these rites, the priests performing the ritual would dress up as swans.
poet and his poetry to the swan and its song: Lucretius allegedly compared the swan’s song to music played on a lyre (which was associated with poetry) and Horace expressed his desire to become a famous poet through a conceit in which he changes into a swan and flies over many a nation (A Dictionary of Literary Symbols, “Swan”). That same Horace, the Dictionary of Literary Symbols states, started the tradition of literally calling poets ‘swans’:

In describing Pindar as the “swan of Dirce” (one of the rivers of Thebes), Horace [...] began a tradition that continued into modern times, e.g., Homer is the Swan of Meander, Shakespeare is the “Sweet Swan of Avon” [...], Vaughaun is the Swan of Usk, and so on. (A Dictionary of Literary Symbols, “Swan”)

From such comparisons eventually sprang the well-known phrase ‘swan song’, which points to an artist’s (usually a poet, author or musician) last work. As such, the swan became a symbol for the poet not only because of its connection to the god of poetry, but also because it functioned as a standard to which singers/poets were compared. That Tennyson, educated and interested as he was in the Classical Age (Markley 4), should have known about this mythological connection between the swan and the poet is without question. However, Catherine Stevenson pleads for an even profounder association between the swan and the figure of the poet - an association that is based on the qualities of the swan as a prophet. According to her, Tennyson selected the dying swan as a metaphor for the ideal poet, because the swan possessed some qualities Tennyson himself wanted to possess: it “voices the ‘common feelings and thoughts’ of a people (in this case the sorrow of the community at the god’s death) and produces a spiritually uplifting song that asserts the triumph of life over death” (Stevenson 625). These attributes, as Stevenson (625) asserts, are indeed characteristic of what Tennyson, for most of his life, strived to be: a purposeful poet, who can comfort the entire nation with his poetry.

Now that we have analysed the dual character of the dying swan (both ‘prophet’ and ‘poet’), let us consider how Tennyson utilizes this duality in his poetry to comment upon the function of poetry. The first time the image of the dying swan appears in his poetry is 1830, when he dedicates an entire poem to the symbol – “The Dying Swan”. It seems as

28 Christopher North, Blackwood’s Edingburgh Magazine 31 (May 1832), as quoted by Stevenson (625)
if, in this first mention of the dying swan, Tennyson wants to introduce his readers to the complex nature and mythological connotation of the swan, for he seems to focus on the paradoxical character of its joyful funeral song: “[t]he wild swan’s death-hymn”, Tennyson writes, “took the soul/ [o]f that waste place with joy/ [h]idden in sorrow” (Tennyson 1: 68). The paradox continues in the next lines: the swan’s “warble” was “low”, yet “full”, and sung with an “awful”, yet “jubilant voice” (Tennyson 1: 68). These paradoxical characteristics, Stevenson argues, do not make sense unless one is acquainted with the mythological origin of the legend of the swan’s song (Stevenson 627). Perhaps this is the reason why Tennyson elaborates a bit more on the original setting and context of the swan’s song. First, Stevenson claims, Tennyson introduces the word ‘coronach’, to facilitate the comparison of the swan to a group of lamenting people (628):

The warble was low, and full and clear;

And floating about the under-sky,

Prevailing in weakness, the coronach stole

Sometimes afar, and sometimes anear; (Tennyson 1: 68)

By consulting the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Stevenson encounters the different meanings ‘coronach’ can adhere: it can not only refer to a “funeral song”29 and “a shouting of many”30, but can also be used for the “company crying the coronach”31. “Implicit in this word then”, Stevenson concludes, “is a sense of a group of people making a lamentation over the dead” (628). As such, Tennyson links the swan more explicitly to the group of prophet-priests lamenting the death of their god. A couple of lines later, as Stevenson (627) acknowledges as well, Tennyson again equates the swan with a group of people, this time emphasizing the joyful aspect of the ceremony: the swan pours out “a carol free and bold;/ [a]s when a mighty people rejoice/ [w]ith shawms [sic], and with cymbals, and harps of gold” (Tennyson 1: 68). Consequently, it is clear that Tennyson was acquainted with the mythological origin of the swan’s song, for he not only explicitly opposes the two sentiments of the song, grief and joy, but also connects the swan’s song

to a group of people lamenting and rejoicing at the same time. The swan thus becomes a metaphor for the prophet, who can look into the future and foresee that the tide will turn around eventually. Nevertheless, as I pointed out before, Tennyson uses the swan as a metaphor for the poet as well. In this light, “The Dying Swan” becomes a poem in which Tennyson demonstrates “the power of the artist to confront grief, to produce a controlled creation under emotional duress and ultimately to transmute sorrow into joy” (Stevenson 632).

Now that Tennyson has familiarized his readers with the dying swan, he can employ the swan as an image to invoke, once again, the power of art and the immortality of life. This is what happens for example in the 1832 version of “The Lady of Shalott”, where the Lady and her ‘last song’ are compared to dying swans and their ‘warblings’:

She loos’d the chain, and down she lay;
The broad stream bore her far away,

The Lady of Shalott.

As when to sailors while they roam,
By creeks and outfalls far from home,
Rising and dropping with the foam,
From dying swans wild warblings come,

Blown shoreward; so to Camelot

Still as the boathead wound along

The willowy hills and fields among,

They heard her chanting her deathsong. (Tennyson, “The Lady of Shalott (1832)”)

Moreover, the Lady’s ‘deathsong’, just like the swan’s, is described as joyful and sorrowful at the same time:

A long drawn carol, mournful, holy,

She chanted loudly, chanted lowly (Tennyson, “The Lady of Shalott (1832)”)

53
While the words ‘mournful’ and ‘lowly’ are associated with sadness and grief, ‘carol’ – usually a joyful song\(^\text{32}\) – and ‘loudly’ could be connected to a more joyful mood. This seeming paradoxical nature of the Lady’s song could indicate that the Lady was not too sad to go, for she knew perhaps of the temporality of her death. Indeed, when we consider that only one paragraph earlier, the Lady is compared to “some bold seer in a trance” (Tennyson, “The Lady of Shalott (1832)”), assuming that she possesses prophetic powers would not be so far a stretch. Moreover, by describing the song as ‘holy’, Tennyson relates the Lady’s song to a ceremony, perhaps connecting it to the pagan ritual at the origin of the swan’s song. In the light of this reading, the Lady of Shalott can be considered a prophet, who is aware of her bleak condition and yet knows a better future is coming. Furthermore, just like the swan, the Lady can be a metaphor for the poet. As I have explained in chapter 3.1, the Lady of Shalott can be labelled as one of Tennyson’s most prominent artist-figures. I have argued then that, although Tennyson implicitly might have meant for the Lady to be read as a poet, nothing of the like is explicitly expressed in the poem. However, the comparison to the swan clears all doubt: the fact that Tennyson employs the image of the swan, the ultimate metaphor for the poet, to express the power of the Lady’s song, unambiguously identifies the Lady as a poet. That Tennyson excluded the dying swan imagery from the canonical version of The Lady Shalott (1842), Stevenson argues, demonstrates that Tennyson, after writing the first version, came to realize that the reference to the dying swan was inappropriate in the context of the poem (632). According to Stevenson, the Lady of Shalott cannot be compared to the dying swan, for her song, so Stevenson says, is a “purely melancholy adieu to life” and contains no hint of joy at all (630). Yet, as I have said earlier, I believe the Lady’s song does contain elements of joy, making it very much comparable to that of the swan. In his article “The Image of the Dying Swan in ‘The Lady of Shalott’”, Kim responds to Stevenson’s argument, stating that the final version of “The Lady of Shalott” (1842), although not containing an explicit reference to the dying swan anymore, “is filled with images and circumstances which evoke the paradigm of the swan symbolism introduced in “The Dying Swan”’ (177). Moreover, he claims that even the 1842 version

of the poem contrasts the two contradictory elements of the Lady's song, making it a "song of paradox", just like the swan’s song is (Kim 178). Soong Hee Kim then concludes:

In short, the Lady coalesces within herself the role of the singing priestess and that of the dying prophetess, thus intensifying the symbolic meaning of the dying swan. With all of its mythological implications, then, it is obvious that the Lady's song is employed as the metaphor of a prophetic voice of the poet, [...]. (Kim 184)

In this, I agree with Soong Hee Kim: the swan symbolism in “The Lady of Shalott”, even in the altered version of 1842, is too strong to deny the Lady her status as prophet-poet. As such, she becomes one of the strongest manifestations of Tennyson's poet-figure, composing comforting poetry, inspired by the knowledge she gathers from her prophetic insight.

Finally, let us consider how the swan imagery Tennyson wielded in his narration of King Arthur's death expresses his view on the power of the poet and the function of poetry. According to Stevenson, the swan symbolism used in the first version of “Morte D'Arthur”, written between 1833 and 1835, was expanded two times to portray more fully the hope-inspiring effect of the swan’s song and – analogously – of poetry. The original simile remains the same, however: Tennyson writes how the barge, in which the dying Arthur is about to depart

Moved from the brink, like some full-breasted swan
That, fluting a wild carol ere her death,
Ruffles her pure cold plume, and takes the flood
With swarthy webs. (Tennyson 1: 266)

Although it is the barge which is explicitly compared to the swan, the true comparison, Stevenson asserts, is between the swan and king Arthur: the “effortless grace with which the swan ‘takes the flood’” and the “elegant nonchalance with which the bird ‘ruffles her...plume’” “testify to the swan's self-restraint in the face of death and, thus, suggest the kingly dignity of Arthur in the same circumstance” (632). This calm and elegant attitude, found both in the dying swan and in the dying Arthur, can only be explained by their foreknowledge of what is to come: only because they are prophetic and can see that their death is not the end, they can remain calm in their dying moment. Yet, as Stevenson (633) indicates correctly, the swan’s song in the first version of “Morte
D’Arthur” is not really described as hopeful and, as such, King Arthur’s rebirth is not confirmed. Therefore, when Tennyson publishes the “Morte D’Arthur” in 1842 within the frame of “The Epic”, he adds a more positive note (Stevenson 633). He does this by making the narrator of “The Epic”, after hearing the “Morte D’Arthur”, envision Arthur’s return in a dream:

There came a bark that, blowing forward, bore  
King Arthur, like a modern gentleman  
Of stateliest port; and all the people cried,  
‘Arthur is come again: he cannot die.’ (Tennyson 1: 267-268)

By adding this scene and confirming that Arthur will not die, Tennyson corroborates the prophetic character of the swan and the appropriateness of the symbol in this specific poem. However, when Tennyson transforms the poem into “The Passing of Arthur” and integrates it into _Idylls of the King_, he deletes the frame of the “The Epic” and – accordingly – the final scene in which the narrator of “The Epic” dreams of Arthur’s return (Stevenson 633). Consequently, he needs another passage in which the swan’s hopeful prophecy is confirmed. This confirmation, Stevenson pleads, can be found in the extra paragraphs Tennyson adds at the end of the original version of “Morte D’Arthur” (633). Especially of interest to her is the following paragraph, in which Sir Bedivere hears an echo of a people rejoicing:

Then from the dawn it seem’d there came, but faint  
As from beyond the limit of the world,  
Like the last echo born of a great cry,  
Sounds, as if some fair city were one voice  
Around a king returning from his wars. (Tennyson 5: 417)

This scene, Stevenson claims, again confirms the rebirth of Arthur and thus validates the swan’s prophecy of hope (Stevenson 634). To conclude, we can therefore say that, just like in “The Dying Swan” and the 1832 version of “The Lady of Shalott”, Tennyson employs the image of the dying swan in “Morte D’Arthur” and “The Passing of Arthur” as a metaphor for a prophet who brings hope in the face of despair. Yet, we need to keep in
mind that, in Tennyson’s poetry, the swan is not only a prophet, but also a poet. The swan’s inspiring and hopeful song thus comes to represent, as Stevenson puts it, “art’s ability to inspire hope in the face of a seemingly hopeless reality” (632).

We can conclude, then, that the dying swan, in its totality, becomes the ultimate symbol for Tennyson to refer to the ideal poet. As such, the image of the dying swan reveals two things about Tennyson’s poetics. First of all, if the swan embodies both the figure of the poet and the persona of the prophet, we can confirm that Tennyson indeed believes the poet to dispose of a higher knowledge and that he considers the poet the prophet of his/her age – or in Carlyle’s terms, a ‘Vates’. Just like the ‘poet’ figure in other Tennyson poems (cf. 3.2.2.), the swan can foresee the future and knows that, despite bad prospects, things will turn around eventually. Secondly, if the swan’s joyful funeral song can be identified as a metaphor for poetry, Tennyson’s use of the image of the dying swan illustrates his belief in the power of poetry. As Stevenson concludes, the swan’s song

testifies to the fact that art can express grief without succumbing to it, can face despair in the present while also anticipating a better future, can incorporate the hope of life’s renewal into the mourning for its passing. (Stevenson 635)

For Tennyson, consequently, poetry has one ultimate purpose: it serves to comfort the people and bring them joy during times of despair. In this respect, Tennyson not only agrees with Carlyle that poetry should be instructive (cf. 3.2.3.), but also coincides with Arnold in that poetry should bring joy and comfort (cf. The Victorian poetry debate). With regard to the poet’s relationship to society, the image of the dying swan does not indicate whether the poet should retreat from society or not. I can only relate here what the Dictionary of Literary Symbols has to say about swans in this respect: “As swans are migratory, and are frequently seen alone, they can be imagined as exiles from their homelands” (“Swan”). Indeed, as we have seen in the poems above, Tennyson’s swan always seems to appear alone. Tentatively, this could indicate that the poet, although wanting to comfort the people, prefers to remain at a distance from society.
4. Conclusion

After profoundly analysing multiple poems from different periods of Tennyson's career, I can now confidently confirm what so many Tennyson scholars have claimed before me: throughout his entire life, Tennyson was concerned – if not obsessed – with his role as a poet and the place he needed to fulfil in society. In this respect, he definitely belonged to the Victorian era, which was characterized by a sense of uncertainty about the role of the poet and the function of poetry (Bristow, Introduction 1). Nevertheless, as I have explained in my introduction, many scholars – amongst whom Arthur Hallam and Joseph Bristow – have described him as belonging more to the Romantic period than to the Victorian era. In this dissertation I have investigated Tennyson's poetry in order to examine Hallam's and Bristow's correctness in labelling Tennyson as a reclusive, Romantic poet. For this purpose, I have analysed how Tennyson conceives the persona of the poet, how he feels about the relation between the poet and society and what he believes the ultimate function of poetry to be. However, in an attempt not only to define Tennyson's poetics, but also to place them within the range of other poetic theories propagated by Victorians, I felt it was necessary to first have a look at the works of some of the most important intellectuals of the time: Thomas Carlyle, Mathew Arnold, John Stuart Mill and Arthur Hallam. As I utilized their poetic theories to define and situate Tennyson's poetics, I believe it to be imperative that I recount my analysis of their works here in short, before I move on to my findings with regard to Tennyson's view on the role of the poet and the function of poetry.

As I have explained thoroughly in chapter 2, Carlyle, Arnold, Mill and Hallam published a series of essays on what poetry is and who the poet should be; yet, they could not seem to agree on either of those questions. For Carlyle, the poet is a 'Vates', a great leader with insight into the mysteries of the universe, as a result of which s/he has a better understanding of the world ("The Hero as Poet" 65-66). Therefore, Carlyle implies, his/her poetry should address political matters and provide the masses with his/her insight on the ways of life ("Corn-Law Rhymes" 184; "The Hero as Poet" 65-66). Poetry, according to Carlyle's theory, then becomes an instructive medium, which can be employed to educate the people. Arnold agrees with Carlyle that the poet has a higher
knowledge s/he should share with the masses, but claims that poetry should primarily bring joy and comfort to the people ("Preface to Poems" 71). Moreover, according to Arnold, poetry should not necessarily address political issues or contemporary problems in society, but rather the spectacular events from history, because those appeal much more to the people's senses ("Preface to Poems" 72-73). Although Carlyle and Arnold already seem to disagree on certain aspects, they both coincide in the fact that the poet should engage with the masses and – consequently – participate in society. John Stuart Mill and Arthur Hallam, however, argue that the poet should retire from society entirely. For Mill, real poetry consists in “the thoughts and words of emotion spontaneously embodying itself” (38). Consequently, the poet should compose pure emotion and not focus on a thought or political idea at all (Mill 38-40). Furthermore, for Mill, poetry should be conveyed in solitude: it is not to be heard by an audience, rather it is “overheard” (Mill 37). Hence, the poet should not compose his/her poetry for the masses, but rather for him-/herself. It becomes clear, then, that for Mill, the poet should not participate in society. Similarly, Arthur Hallam propagates that the poet should distanciate him-/herself from his/her readership and that s/he should withdraw from society (Bristow, "Reforming Victorian Poetry: Poetics After 1832” 10). Furthermore, he claims that the only true motive for writing poetry is “the desire of beauty” (Hallam 184). For Hallam, then, poetry should not be wielded to instruct the masses or comfort them; it is created as the result of the poet’s own search for beauty.

When considering the poetic theories of these four critics, it becomes clear that the notion of poetry was hard to define for the Victorians. It is exactly in the light of this Victorian poetry debate that the poetry of Tennyson needs to be seen. Moreover, with the help of Lawrence J. Starzyk’s article on early Victorian poets, I was able to distinguish between typical Victorian poetic theories and more Romantic ideas on poetry. As Starzyk (110) claims, the tendency of the poet to retreat from society was characteristic of the Romantics, while the Victorians generally opposed the poet’s alienation from society. Therefore, the above-mentioned critics can also be read in a different light: while Carlyle and Arnold propagate a more typical Victorian theory, promoting the poet’s participation in society, Mill and Hallam, by pleading for the poet’s withdrawal from society, advocate a more Romantic notion of poetry. In a similar way, Tennyson’s poetry can be analysed as either more Victorian or Romantic. To be able to classify Tennyson, however, one needs to bear in mind – as I have done – various
elements. How does Tennyson define the relationship between the poet and society? How does Tennyson conceive of the persona of the poet? What is Tennyson’s motive for writing poetry? In my research I have attempted to answer these questions and more. In what follows, I will summarize the results of my analysis, by answering each research question separately, thus providing a better overview than my temporary conclusions after each chapter have done.

Perhaps the most complicated question of this dissertation was whether Tennyson showed a desire to withdraw from society or not. Throughout this career, Tennyson has published various poems which express a very different – at times even contradictory – opinion towards living amongst men. The art poems have displayed Tennyson’s internal struggle very well; while poems like “The Lady of Shalott” and “The Hesperides” can be read as a warning for society’s destructive influence on the creative qualities of the artist, other art poems, such as “Tithonus” (1860) and “The Lotos-eaters” (1842) can be seen as pointing to the dangers of the artist’s isolated world. What is important when analysing these poems, scholars such as Simpson (“Aurora as Artist” 918), Grob (126, 129) and Stange (742) have shown, is keeping in mind that many of them have either been revised or suppressed. According to Grob (126, 129) and Simpson (“Aurora as Artist” 918), the revisions Tennyson made to the original poems “Tithon” (1833) and “The Lotos-eaters” (1832) seem to indicate that Tennyson, after a period of promoting the isolation of artist, came to realize that art should have a moral or social purpose. Likewise, Stange argues that Tennyson suppressed his early poem “The Hesperides” (1832) later on in his career, because it too explicitly advocated the artist’s alienation from society. (742). Arguably, the evolution discerned in the art poems could be considered as Tennyson taking a step closer to society; as Grob has argued, “between 1832 and 1842, Tennyson had plainly been touched by the spirit of the age and felt it necessary to renounce the ideal of total seclusion that he might give voice to the aspirations of man in his time” (126). However, when we took a closer look at Tennyson’s direct references to the ‘poet’ (as opposed to the more general ‘artists’ in the previously discussed poems), we did not detect such a development. Even as late as 1849, Tennyson published a poem – “To – after reading a life and letters” – which seems to promote the poet’s isolation from society. The main reason for this desire, as Tennyson expresses in his poetry, is the disrespect of the critics, who not only have the power to run the poet’s works into the ground, but also the tendency to violate the
poet’s right to privacy (cf. 3.2.1). I felt it was necessary, then, to reconsider the way in which other scholars had interpreted the art poems. The evolution discerned between the earlier art poems and the art poems published in or after 1842 indeed points at Tennyson’s realization that a poet should be morally committed to society; however, for Tennyson, this only meant addressing the social and political issues of his time, not living amongst men in the centre of attention. Similarly, the analysis of the poems which refer explicitly to the word ‘poet’ has shown that, although Tennyson wished to be famous, he still wanted to remain at a necessary distance from his readership; as stated in “The Poet”, he wanted to tread “[t]he secretest [sic] walks of fame” with “echoing feet” (Tennyson 1: 58). Ultimately, the image of the dying swan seems to confirm that Tennyson indeed conceived of the poet as solitary. Although the relationship between the swan and society was not really defined in Tennyson’s use of the image, swans do appear to be solitary birds, which, according to the Dictionary of Literary Symbols, “are frequently seen alone” and “can be imagined as exiles from their homelands” (“Swan”). Indeed, in each Tennyson poem that contains the image of the dying swan, the swan appears to be alone and remains at a distance from the community.

With regard to Tennyson’s conception of the persona of the poet, I can conclude that Tennyson thinks of the poet as a type of prophet, a guide from above who has insight into the future. Throughout his career, Tennyson describes the poet as omniscient and as being superior to ‘ordinary’ humans. First, when analysing his art poems, we have seen that Tennyson defines his artist-figures as having a special kind of perception: they are often omniscient or in a state of trance (Simpson, “Elaine the Unfair” 345). Furthermore, they are described as demi-gods (Simpson, “Elaine the Unfair” 345) or out of this world, which validates their superiority over mankind. Although these characteristics are rather vague and are merely applied to more general ‘artist-figures’, they do already point us in the direction of the conception of the poet as prophet. However, it was only when investigating Tennyson’s explicit references to the poet, that I was able to identify Tennyson’s poet-figure as a true prophet. Especially in poems such as “The Poet”, the original version of “A Dream of Fair Women”, “Parnassus”, “The Poet’s Song” and “To Virgil”, Tennyson wrote of a poet who could see “thro’ life and death” (Tennyson, “The Poet” 1: 58) and consequently “sings of what the world will be / [w]hen the years have died away” (Tennyson, “The Poet’s Song” 2: 140). During my analysis of these poems, I encountered that this prophet-poet was characterized by
three qualities: he is indeed – just as the art poems hinted at – superior to humankind, can look into the future and above all, is convinced that the future will be brighter than the deplorable prospects of the present. Tennyson’s poet-figure is thus a bringer of good news; he predicts that the tide will turn around again. This conception of the poet as prophet was confirmed by the analysis of the image of the dying swan. As explained in chapter 3.3, the swan – metaphor for the poet – pours out a joyful song at the point of its death, because it can foresee that it will be happy again in the after-life. That Tennyson should use this image in his poetry, indicates that he conceives of the poet, again, as a prophet. Following the analogue, the swan’s song becomes the poet’s poetry, filled with happy prospects about the future.

Tennyson’s view on the function of poetry, then, needs to be seen in the light of this interpretation of the poet as prophet. First, the analysis of the art poems has taught us that, although Tennyson first seemed to promote art for art’s sake, he slowly came to realize the importance of a morally and socially committed art. When analysing the poems in which Tennyson explicitly refers to the poet, a similar evolution was detected. Only the poems “In Memoriam” and “The Gardener’s Daughter”, both probably written in Tennyson’s early years (cf. 3.2.3), seem to promote a poetry without purpose – ‘poetry for poetry’s sake’ –, while poems such as “The Poet” and “The Princess” seem to portray poetry as instructive and enlightening. Other, later poems with references to the word ‘poet’ (“The Wreck”, “To Mary Boyle”) have shown that Tennyson, in the second half of his career, was convinced that poetry should have a purpose: it should instruct and comfort the people, inspiring emotion in them. Ultimately, when investigating how the image of the dying swan depicts Tennyson’s view on the function of poetry, I discovered that the function of poetry is linked to Tennyson’s perception of the poet as a prophet. Just like other manifestations of the figure of the poet in Tennyson’s poetry, the dying swan can be seen as a prophet, who can foresee that death is not the end and that the future will bring better prospects. Accordingly, the swan’s song – a metaphor for poetry – can be considered as bringing comfort to the people and initiating them into the ways of the universe (i.e. showing them that better times will follow after death). For Tennyson, poetry then becomes a medium through which he, as a Poet Laureate, can comfort and instruct the nation.
To conclude, then, Tennyson conceives of the poet as a prophet, who is of a superhuman nature and disposes of higher knowledge about the universe and the future. This prophet-poet should, according to Tennyson, employ his/her poetry to instruct the people in the ways of life and also comfort them during periods of grief and distress, showing them that the future will bring better prospects. In this respect, Tennyson wants to employ poetry for a moral and social purpose. Yet, despite this commitment to society, Tennyson still believes that the poet him-/herself should remain at a distance from society, for he fears the critics' disapproval of and disrespect for his/her private life. According to this analysis, Tennyson's poetics can be aligned with the ideas of several Victorian intellectuals. First of all, with regard to his conception of the persona of the poet, Tennyson can clearly be affiliated with Thomas Carlyle: both men believe the poet is some kind of prophet, sent from above to make the ways of the universe known to mankind. However, although both Tennyson and Carlyle want to employ poetry as a medium to instruct the people, they would disagree about the ultimate purpose of poetry. For Carlyle, the poet, or ‘Vates’, is the ultimate leader of society; accordingly, his poetry should provide the people insight on political matters and show them how to govern more correctly. Tennyson, however, wants to instruct the people on a more emotional level: in his poetry, we encounter a desire to teach the people about the mysteries of the world and the eternal regeneration of life, comforting them in times of despair and grief. In this respect, Tennyson coincides with Arnold, for whom the most important function of poetry is to bring joy and comfort. Moreover, it would even appear that Tennyson agrees with Arnold’s statement that poetry can offer finer and more comforting knowledge than science (“The Study of Poetry” 199 – 200). Finally, Tennyson's desire to live in isolation and withdraw from society reminds us of the poetic theories propagated by Mill and Hallam, who both claim that it is better for the poet to retreat from society. As a final point, I can therefore conclude that Tennyson has a very particular opinion of the function of poetry and the role of the poet. Consequently, he should not be simplified and classified under general terms such as “Poe[t] of Sensation” (Hallam 191) or “poet of the margins” (Bristow, Introduction 12). As I have explained before, both Hallam and Bristow, by categorising him under those terms, define Tennyson as more of a Romantic poet. Moreover, Bristow even labels Tennyson a “Romantic Victoria[n]” (Introduction 2). Indeed, the fact that Tennyson desires to retreat from society shows that he still clings to certain Romantic notions of
poetry (cf. 2. The Victorian poetry debate). Nevertheless, his poetry also shows traces of typically Victorian characteristics: the conception of the poet as a prophet (as seen in the works of Carlyle and Elizabeth Barrett Browning) and the idea that poetry should be morally and socially committed. In this respect, Bristow's classification of Tennyson as a “poet of the margins” (Introduction 12) is incorrect, for Tennyson clearly also shares characteristics with the other type of poet Bristow distinguishes, the prophetic poet who instructs mankind (Introduction 12). As a matter of fact, Tennyson floats between the two categories distinguished by Bristow, sharing characteristics with both of them. Perhaps Bristow had better established a third category in his classification of the Victorian poets; one for Tennyson alone. Ultimately, Tennyson was a unique poet who, thanks to his singular vision on poetry, will not easily be replaced in the canon of the greatest English poets.
Works Cited


