CHAPTER IV

POEMS ON MYTHICAL PLACES AND MISCELLANEOUS USES OF GREEK MYTHS

In the preceding chapter the discussion centred round Tennyson's mythological poems on personages. We are now to take up the set of poems named after mythical places, viz., "Ilion, Ilion," a fragment (not published in his life time), written during the poet's Cambridge days and hence belonging to his early youth, and "Parnassus," a poem written when the poet was an old man. Though the titles of these poems are drawn from mythological places their themes are related to these places only to the extent to which they are relevant to Tennyson's aspiration as a poet. While the poems on personages are the repositories of his tensions as a man and a poet, with claims and counterclaims of pure art and social responsibility on him, these two poems are about this dream of being a great poet and the ultimate blighting of that dream.

1. The Poems of Tennyson, p. 258.

2. Ibid., p. 1410.
Tennyson's aspirations were based on an early realization of his exceptional power as a poet. The first poetry that moved him was his own when he was just five years old. He says of his early compositions:

"... when I was about eight years old, I covered two sides of a slate with Thomsonian blank verse .... About ten or eleven Pope's "Homer's Iliad" became a favourite of mine and I wrote hundreds and hundreds of lines in the regular Popeian metre...." He continues: "At about twelve and onward I wrote an epic of six thousand lines à la Walter Scott,— full of battles, dealing too with sea and mountain scenery...."

Hallam writes, "These poems made my grandfather say with pardonable pride, 'If Alfred die, one of our greatest poets will have gone'." The awareness of his own poetic potential made him ambitious. Once, in one of his "long rambles" with his brother Arthur, Tennyson emphatically said, "'Well Arthur, I mean to be famous'. (From his earliest years he felt that he was a poet, and earnestly trained himself to be worthy of his

4. Ibid., I, p. 11.
5. Ibid.
vocation)."

The life time dream of almost every poet has been to write a great epic. Jenkyns, however, draws our attention to a strange phenomenon regarding a queer kind of diffidence that had come over the poets of the nineteenth century. It was a failure of confidence. He writes:

This failure of confidence may seem strange in the age of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron and Shelley, but it is an attitude that runs through much nineteenth century literature. Its origins are in the experience of an earlier generation. 'By the general consent of critics', wrote Johnson, 'the first praise of genius is due to the writer of an epic poem'; yet the eighteenth century produced no great epic poem, either in England or anywhere else. The critics called for epic, but the poets failed to provide it, and this failure was bound to produce a sense of defeat. Shelley wrote, 'The human mind attained to a perfection in Greece which has impressed its image on those faultless productions, whose very fragments are the dornair of modern art'....

Thirty years before Keats even Goethe had felt the same oppression. Realizing that the Iliad is inimitable ....never again did he attempt epic poetry. In his old age... he declared that modern writers could create only heroines: 'Nothing can be done with the men. Homer has got all beforehand in Achilles and Odysseus, the bravest and the most prudent'.


Browning said of Tennyson, "...nobody has more fully found at the beginning what he was born to do-- nor done it more perfectly."

(Chantiai Tennyson, Alfred Tennyson, p. 326).

"Ilion, Ilion" can be said to reflect the secret ambition of the poet to venture into a region where even Goethe dreaded to tread. Poets have often treated Apollo as the lord of the bards, the supreme, incomparable and heavenly poet. In his "Hymn to Apollo" Keats pays homage to him as "God of the golden bow, / And of the golden lyre," (ll. 1-2). Tennyson makes him his symbol of the supreme poet -- an ideal poet -- who created 'Ilion' on the notes of his music and alludes to him as such in "Ilion, Ilion," "Oenone," "Tithonus" and "Tiresias."

"Ilion, Ilion," however, appears to be underlined with the poet's deep yearning for another masterpiece like *Iliad*, wherein figure the archetypal poet Apollo's melody born Ilion. Remembering it he sings:

Ilion, Ilion, dreamy Ilion, pillared Ilion, holy Ilion,
City of Ilion when wilt thou be melody born?
(ll. 1-2)

and thus brings alive the "blue Scamander" and "yellowing Simois" from the heart of "piny Ida" in the following words:

Roll Scamander, ripple Simoës, ever onward to a melody,
Many-circled, overflowing through and through the
flowery level of unbuilt Ilion,
City of Ilion, pillared Ilion, shadowy Ilion, holy Ilion,
To a music merrily flowing, merrily echoing
When wilt thou be melody born?

(ll. 5-9)

... ... ... ... ...

To a music from the golden twanging harpwire heavily drawn.
Many-gated, heavy walled, many towered city of Ilion,
To a music sadly flowing, slowly falling,
When wilt thou be melody born?

(ll. 17-22)

It is noteworthy that the poet is young, conscious
of his powers, with an ambition to prove his mettle and
yet, instead of closing the verses with lines suggesting
that he will make it "melody born," he persists with
the refrain—"When wilt thou be melody born?" It can
safely be conjectured that it is not mere modesty but
the general mood of defeatism of the poets, added to
Tennyson's own self consciousness, that has contributed
to his hesitation. We are, however, positive that he
had a deep yearning to create a masterpiece like Iliad,
and Ilion which figures in it, is its symbol. In "Tithonus"
he writes that in the first flush of his love for Eos,
he "could hear the lips that kissed/ Whispering I knew
not what of wild and sweet,/ Like that strange song I
heard Apollo sing, / While Ilion like a mist rose into towers." (ll. 61-63). Tithonus' love for Eos has been described as "the first thrilling visitation of the creative impulse" by E.D.H. Johnson. And this "creative impulse" is "whispering" things both "wild and sweet" like the strange songs of Apollo to whose music rose the towers of Ilion. When the poet is under the spell of a strong creative urge, his vision inspires him for something similar to what Apollo achieved with his music — an Ilion in an epic like Iliad. In "Tiresias" he says that in his explorations of the hills "Subjected to the Heliconian ridge" his "wont/ Was more to scale the highest of the heights/ With some strange hope to see the nearer God." (ll. 26-28). This again points to his deep rooted desire and attempts at writing poetry which would be "the highest of the heights" — obviously the greatest epic. Adumbrated in the refrain "When wilt thou be melody born?" is a ray of hope which keeps assuring him that he himself would be the creator of such a creation on the notes of his melody.

"Parnassus" is a poem of his old age. A long interregnum separates "Ilion, Ilion" and "Parnassus." His life during this period can be succinctly summed up in the words of his own Ulysses: "... all times I have enjoyed/ Greatly, have suffered greatly, both with those/ That, loved me, and alone ...." ("Ulysses," ll. 7-9). The searing pain of bereavement at the death of loved ones, the sense of loneliness in the face of calumny in the garb of criticism, the sweet taste of success at the reception of "In Memoriam," the quiet pride in the recognition of his genius on being honoured as poet Laureate—all these seem to compress and condense themselves in these soulful lines composed much before success came to him. One dream, however, remained unfulfilled—the dream of writing a great epic. But by the time the poet reached "Parnassus," the hope that underlined "Ilion, Ilion" was already dead. Time, people, values, all had changed. Poetic vision and imagination had been gradually eroded by the new cult of science and knowledge. The poet, in this poem, rues that two mighty and fearful Muses—Geology and Astronomy—have created a havoc on the sacred mount. They have blasted the evergreen laurels of the bards, till now secure on Parnassian heights, and have caused all the other Muses to fly from their sacred habitat.
This makes the poet despair of ever attaining the greatness
and immortality achieved by the bards of old. The age
and its environment in no longer conducive to the creation
of a great epic. Imaginative creativity can hardly
withstand the onslaughts of science and its new knowledge.
The onset of scientific temper is a sign that the age of
poets and poetry is past. The poet should no longer "hope
for a deathless hearing." The note of hope gingerly
sounded in "Ilion, Ilion" is dead, not because of the
poet's diffidence but because of the changed values of
the people. The spread of industrialism, along with new
inventions and discoveries, made life more materialistic
and matter of fact. Just as "Ilion, Ilion" symbolizes the
poet's secret aspiration to write a great epic, "Parnassus"
pronounces the impossibility of the creation of such a
work any more.

A major part of Tennyson's poetry is built out
of his reminiscences of Homer, Virgil, Theocritus, Catullus,
Pindar, Horace, Sappho, Ovid, Euripides, and other classical
writers. He used some of the myths culled from their works
as subjects of his poems. They have already been discussed.
We now take up his use of Greek mythology in two other
ways:
(a) as allusion and imagery in his non-mythical poems and
(b) translations of passages from Greek epics into English.

(a) Some of his mythical allusions in non-mythical poems are so picturesque that they seem to be inspired by actual paintings. Given below is an allusion to Aphrodite in "The Princess":

Glowing all over noble shame; and all
Her falser self slipt from her like a robe,
And left her woman, lovelier in her mood
Than in her mould that other, when she came
From barren deeps to conquer all with love....

(VII, 11. 145-149).

Similarly, a blend of Christian faith and pagan myth, visually realized, is noticed in the following allusion in "On a Mourner":

And when no mortal motion jars
The blackness round the tombing sod,
Through silence and the trembling stars
Comes Faith from tracts no feet have trod,
And Virtue, like a household god

Promising empire; such as those
Once heard at dead of night to greet
Troy's wandering prince, so that he rose
With sacrifice, while all the fleet
Had rest by stony hills of Crete.

(ll. 26-35).
Allusions, by their very nature may either "build a remote, unearthy world of imagination, or they may lift everyday things into ideal perfection." In Tennyson's use of allusions one can say that "mythology becomes a kind of evocative short-hand, a language that satisfies the human need for imaginative and emotional transcendence of mortal and earthly imperfection." Sometimes Tennyson gives titles drawn from mythology to his non-mythical poems, e.g., "Amphion" and "The Golden Year." These titles are a kind of artistic device to reinforce the theme and are, in a way, a novel use of the technique of allusion.

(b) Tennyson was fond of translating passages from the classics. His first extant poem is a translation into English of part of the myth of Persephone from Claudian's De Raptu Proserpinae, which he did between the age of eleven and fourteen. He often translated passages from Homer's Iliad. Rawnsley considered these attempts to be extremely good. It was often suggested to him that he should translate the whole of Iliad or Odyssey, but

11. Ibid., p. 20.
12. The Poems of Tennyson, p. 3.
Tennyson always declined, saying he did not think it a poet's task.\(^\text{13}\) The poet felt translating Homer was difficult. As for his own translated passages from Homer, he said their merit could be judged only by a comparison with the Greek original, for it "can only be appreciated by the difficulties overcome."\(^\text{14}\)

In his translations and compositions he did not seem to make a distinction between Greek and Roman names of the gods and heroes and used them according to the appeal of their sounds to him. He used Roman names of Greek deities in his translation of a passage from \textit{Iliad} (XVIII, 202). Gladstone criticized it and argued with him on the usage. He (Gladstone) insisted that the very softness of the sound of Jove instead of Zeus, and Greek instead of Achaens made the passage appear less Greek

\(^\text{13}\) H.D. Rawnley, \textit{Memories of the Tennysons} (Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1900), p. 141-142.

Palgrave recalls: "One evening...he read off-hand Pindar's great picture of the life of Heaven in the second Olympian into pure modern prose, splendidly lucid and musical. This feat, incomparably more difficult and effective than when pseudopoetic facile disguise of some archaic form of language is resorted to, so struck me, that I begged him to think of preparing a version of these all but unique relics of the Greek Heroic Ode for English readers. But he smiled and said that 'in his mind the benefit of translation rested with the translator'."

inspite of his assertion that "These lines are word for word. You could not have a closer translation...."\(^\text{15}\)
The fact that Tennyson eventually accepted the contention is obvious from his substitution of Greek names.\(^\text{16}\)

Tennyson translated orally, too. Hallam recalls that when at Farringford in 1854, the poet translated aloud three idylls of Theocritus -- "Hylas," "The Island of Cos" and "The Syracusan Women." This dabbling in translation is significant only to the extent to which it throws light on his great love of the classics and the use he made, as a pastime, of the myths contained in them. As stated earlier, he never undertook to translate a whole epic. He considered himself to be only a poet who had a deep and tender love for Greek epics and legends.

\(^{15}\) Philip Henderson in *Tennyson, Poet and Prophet*, p. 146.

\(^{16}\) The translated passage is printed in *The Poems of Tennyson*. In the headnote to the passage Ricks has pointed out the substitution, p. 1158.

Herbert Paul writes:

It is a commonplace and a platitude to lament that we have not more of Tennyson's Homeric translation. Only two short fragments have ever been given to the world. The first is the comparison of the watch-fires kindled by the Greeks with the stars shining in the heavens, from the eighth book of the *Iliad*. It is a test passage. The man who could translate that could translate anything.

*(Men and Letters*, pp. 22-23).*