

Reading Victorian Poetry



Richard Cronin

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Reading Victorian Poetry

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Reading Victorian Poetry

Richard Cronin

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For Clare and Alexandra

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Introduction: The Victorian Poetry Palace

There is no style that Victorian poets share, one reason for which is that they had too many to choose from. They had available to them, as their predecessors did not, the full history of English poetry. They were the heirs, as George Saintsbury puts it, of materials that had been ‘furnished by the thought and work of a score of generations of English poets, by the growth and development of seven centuries of English language and English literature’.¹ Saintsbury’s claim might be extended. The first scholarly edition of *Beowulf* which probably dates from the ninth century was published by Tennyson’s friend, J.M. Kemble, in 1833, and Victorian poets were not familiar only with English literature. Shelley had to teach himself Greek after some lessons from his friend, Thomas Love Peacock, but his successors were, many of them, classically educated at their public schools to a level that neither earlier nor later poets could reach, and some of their female contemporaries such as Elizabeth Barrett and Augusta Webster matched their achievements. Many were also widely read in the poetry of continental Europe and beyond. D.G. Rossetti translated the early Italian poets, Swinburne translated from the medieval French of François Villon, and introduced his countrymen to the contemporary French of Charles Baudelaire. Edward FitzGerald’s translation from the eleventh-century Persian of Omar Khayyam became, after initial neglect, one of the century’s more unlikely best-sellers. Tennyson’s ‘Locksley Hall’ (1842) with its vision of ‘the great world’ spinning ‘for ever down the ringing grooves of change’ (The short-sighted Tennyson explained, ‘When I went by the first train from Liverpool to Manchester I thought that the wheels ran in a groove’) is properly recognized as a quintessentially

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Victorian poem, but its idiosyncratic eight-stress trochaic line, 'slides the bird o'er lustrous woodland, swings the trailer from the crag,' (162) was probably borrowed by Tennyson from his Cambridge contemporary, Richard Chenevix Trench, who had himself found it employed in a German translation of a poem by another Persian poet, Omar Khayyam's younger contemporary, Sa'adi Shirazi.² The British poets of the nineteenth century recognized, too, their debts to their American contemporaries. Arthur Hugh Clough who, because of his family's American connections, was known to his Oxford friends as Yankee Clough, acknowledged that his own experiments with English hexameters were inspired by a reading of Longfellow's *Evangeline*, and the metres of Swinburne and Hopkins bear the impress of their reading of Whitman.

Nineteenth-century poets lay claim to a far wider historical and geographical range than their predecessors. Felicia Hemans is in this respect typical. In her 1828 volume, *Records of Woman with Other Poems*, she speaks as Sappho in the sixth century BC, as the wife of Hasdrubal at the end of the third, as the wife of Rudolph von Wart in the fourteenth century, the wife of Charles V in the sixteenth, and as Arabella Stuart in the seventeenth. Her geographical range is equally wide, from American Indians to those of the sub-continent, from the Russia of 'Ivan the Czar' to the tropical island home that the exile dreams of in 'The Palm Tree'. Nineteenth-century poets were conscious, as their predecessors had not been, that their poems had to find a place within a great poetry museum, which was, rather like the British Museum itself, remarkable for the breadth and the miscellaneousness of its collections. I begin with three poems, one from the beginning of the period, one from its middle and one from its end, all of which concern museums. All three are poems that reflect upon the state of British poetry in the nineteenth century, and all three poets seem tempted to represent that poetry as defined, rather like the space occupied by the Victorian museum, by its separation from the workaday world.

In Tennyson's 'The Palace of Art' the palace is inhabited by a solitary 'Soul' who gains access, through its collections, to what Tennyson describes as 'the supreme Caucasian mind' (126). The phrase is indebted to an essay in which Arthur Hallam, Tennyson's closest Cambridge friend and the friend he was to memorialize in *In Memoriam*, records his delight in contemplating 'the bonds by which the Law of the Universe has fastened me to my distant brethren of the same Caucasian race' (the expression is not for Tennyson and Hallam racially exclusive in the manner it has since become: for Hallam, for example, one of the principal constituents

of the Caucasian mind is ‘the Oriental, derived from the Arabians, and circulating especially through those provinces of Europe least remote from the extensive territories of their splendid domination’).³ In Tennyson’s palace the tapestries, paintings and stained glass make up a visual inventory of the contents of this mind, but in the version of the poem first published in his *Poems* of 1833 (it was heavily revised for its publication in the *Poems* of 1842: the earlier text can be recovered from Ricks’ edition of Tennyson’s poems) what impresses most about the character of this mind is how everything exists in it higgledy-piggledy. The stained glass windows, for example, seem over-crowded:

And in the sunpierced Oriel’s coloured flame
Immortal Michael Angelo
Looked down, bold Luther, largebrowed Verulam,
The king of those who know.

Cervantes, the bright face of Calderon,
Robed David touching holy strings,
The Halicarnasseän, and alone,
Alfred, the flower of kings,

Isaiah with fierce Ezekiel,
Swarth Moses by the Coptic sea,
Plato, Petrarca, Livy, and Raphaël,
And Eastern Confutzee.

There may be an attempt here at cultural comprehensiveness, but the selection seems merely random. It recalls the tables at Vivian-place in which the products of ‘every clime and age’ are displayed:

Jumbled together, celts and calumets,
Claymore and snowshoe, toys in lava, fans
Of sandal, amber, ancient rosaries,
Laborious orient ivory in sphere,
The cursed Malayan crease, and battle-clubs
From the isles of palm.

(*The Princess* (1847), ‘Prologue’,
17–22)

Hallam suggested finding a place in the Palace for Goethe, and Tennyson himself considered adding Pyrrho, Averröes, Virgil, and Cicero, but however many the additions it would still resemble a curiosity shop rather than

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a museum, and the effect would remain Cole Porterish rather than studiously encyclopaedic:

You're the top! You're the Coliseum.
You're the top! You're the Louvre Museum.
You're the melody from a symphony by Strauss.
You're a Bendel bonnet,
A Shakespeare sonnet,
You're Mickey Mouse!

The stained glass windows offer the Soul pictures of Cervantes and Livy, not their works. What she relishes is culture reduced to a series of illustrations, as in a child's picture book. But even this seems at times too substantial to suit her taste. She often prefers to sit on a dais that offers her a perspective from which the pictures dissolve into a play of many-coloured light: 'rose, amber, emerald, blue / Flushed in her temple and her eyes' (169–70). At moments like this the palace is like a kaleidoscope, fragmenting and multiplying impressions until the world is reduced to a pattern of colour. The palace only pretends to be the Soul's university, and pretends so even less successfully than the foundation established by Tennyson's Ida in *The Princess*. The Soul delights in it not because she wants to learn anything, but because its contents are so varied that she is able to find something to match 'every mood / And change of [her] still soul' (59–60).

The Soul is one of a succession of enclosed maidens in early poems by Tennyson, taking her place beside Mariana enclosed in her moated grange, the sleeping beauty enclosed in years-long slumber, and Oenone secluded within her Idalian valley. Lionel Stevenson surmises that all of these women derive from Shelley's 'To a Skylark' in which the bird reminds the poet of a 'high-born maiden' enclosed in 'a palace tower' as well as 'a poet hidden / In the light of thought.'⁴ But what kind of poet does Tennyson's Soul put one in mind of? She is first of all, to borrow a distinction made by Hallam in a review of Tennyson's *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* of 1830, a poet of sensation rather than reflection. For the poets of sensation, for Keats, Shelley, and Tennyson, 'so vivid was the delight attending the simple exertions of eye and ear, that it became mingled more and more with their trains of active thought, and tended to absorb their whole being into the energy of sense.' Tennyson, Hallam insists, bears 'no more resemblance to Byron or Scott, Shelley or Coleridge, than to Homer or Calderon, Firdúsí, or Calidasa,' but the form of the claim, by so clearly recalling a window in the Palace of Art that Tennyson had neglected to describe, contradicts its

substance. Poets of sensation emerge, Hallam admits, only when the ‘first raciness and juvenile vigor of literature’ has vanished, ‘never to return’. But in losing its juvenile vigour, literature has gained a history. ‘The energy of sense’ that Hallam celebrates in the new school is generated less by the objects represented in the poems than by the thick literary medium through which they are glimpsed. If the senses of the poets of sensation ‘told them a richer and ampler tale than most men could understand’,⁵ then the principal reason was that they had read more poems. Tennyson’s *Soul* in 1832 feasts herself

With piles of flavourous fruits in basket-twine
Of gold, upheaped, crushing down
Musk-scented blooms – all taste – grape, gourd or pine –
In bunch, or single-grown –

But the flavours of these fruit are very evidently intensified by the Keatsian medium through which they are seen (compare, for example, the spread prepared by Porphyro for Madeleine in *The Eve of St Agnes* (1820).

Christopher Ricks finds sources for Tennyson’s *Palace* in *Ecclesiastes*, in *Luke*, in George Herbert’s ‘The World’, in Bacon’s *Advancement of Learning*, George Sandys’s *Travels*, Sir William Jones’s *The Palace of Fortune*, and in three poems by Shelley, but it is a poem so literary that the list might be extended almost indefinitely. The quatrain that Tennyson uses in which two ten syllable lines are separated by a line of eight syllables before the stanza closes with a six syllable line suggests that this is a poem that has its origin in the library as much as in life. It is the stanza of Henry Vaughan’s ‘They are all gone into the world of light’. Christopher Ricks believes that the stanza was ‘independently developed’ by Tennyson, an entirely reasonable supposition given that Vaughan’s poem was not reprinted until the 1840s, but *The Palace of Art* is dedicated to Richard Chenevix Trench, and it is surely more than a coincidence that in the summer of 1831, shortly before returning to Cambridge where he met Tennyson for the first time, Trench wrote of his ‘especial desire’ to read Vaughan’s poems.⁶ Tennyson himself might well have been irritated by any suggestion that he borrowed his stanza from Vaughan. ‘They allow me nothing,’ he complained to H.D. Rawnsley of his critics, and illustrated his point by adducing a celebrated line from ‘Ulysses’, ‘The deep / Moans round with many voices’ (54–5): “‘The deep”, Byron; “moans”, Horace; “many voices”, Homer; and so on.”⁷ Tennyson, far more intricately than

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Vaughan, exploits the rhythmic possibilities of the stanza. He seems especially interested in finding how many metrical variations he can devise for the stanza's short final line. The effects are often very fine, as in the desert landscape:

One seemed all dark and red – a tract of sand,
And some one pacing there alone,
Who paced for ever in a glimmering land,
Lit with a low large moon.

(65–8)

The metre is adjusted to the sense so exquisitely that the attention is seized less by the scenery than the display of metrical skill. But, as so often in Tennyson, the display is not empty: it carries the poem's meaning. It is one of the principal ways in which Tennyson tempts his readers to imitate the Soul by responding to the world as if it was offered to them simply for their fastidious aesthetic contemplation.

This all seems very unlike the other most celebrated Victorian poet, Robert Browning, the rough texture of whose verse was from the first contrasted with Tennyson's smoothness, not least by Tennyson himself ('He can conceive of grand dramatic situations, but where's the music?'⁸). But Browning too focuses attention on his metrical effects even when these are quite different from Tennyson's. He draws attention, for example, to the doggerel movement of *Christmas-Eve* (1850) as assertively as Tennyson focuses attention on the silky movement of his quatrains in *The Palace of Art* (like Tennyson in *Locksley Hall*, Browning finds in the railway the most powerful emblem of modernity):

A tune was born in my head last week,
Out of the thump-thump and shriek-shriek
Of the train, as I came by it, up from Manchester;
And when, next week, I take it back again,
My head will sing to the engine's clack again,
While it only makes my neighbour's haunches stir,
– Finding no dormant musical sprout
In him, as in me, to be jolted out.

(249–56)

Browning asks his reader to relish a rhythm made out of the 'engine's clack', which reminds us that just as much as Tennyson, he needed to

fabricate his style. He set about it very much in the manner of his own Sordello engaged in the task that Dante would complete of inventing a new language for vernacular Italian poetry. Sordello 'slow re-wrought' the language of poetry, 'welding words into the crude / Mass from the new speech round him, till a rude / Armour was hammered out' (*Sordello*, 2, 574–7). This seems a self-conscious reflection by Browning on the manner in which he had forged his own poetic style, but the analogy is pointed by the contrast. Sordello in Mantua at the beginning of the thirteenth century stands at the very beginning of a poetic tradition: Browning, in a poem that he published in 1840, looks at Sordello through the long expanse of literary history that has intervened between them, a literary history that includes, for example, all the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama that was so important to Browning when he set about hammering out his own style.

It was sly of Tennyson to choose that particular quotation from 'Ulysses' when he wanted to mock scholarly source hunters, 'the deep / Moans round with many voices'. He chose it surely because it is so unmistakably Tennysonian. Robert Douglas Fairhurst traces the line back to the stanza of *The Palace of Art* comparing the Soul to a traveller who 'A little before moon-rise hears the low / Moan of an unknown sea,' (279–80) and forward to the 'moanings of the homeless sea' of the 1850 *In Memoriam* (XXXV, 9), the 'phantom circle of a moaning sea' in *The Passing of Arthur* of 1869 (87), and 'the waves that moan about the world' in *Demeter and Persephone* (63), a poem published in 1889, just three years before Tennyson's death.⁹ When John Churton Collins classed Tennyson amongst the 'essentially imitative poets', and supported the claim by adducing sources, classical, Italian, or English, for many of his most famous passages, Collins stood revealed, Tennyson told Edmund Gosse, as 'a louse upon the locks of literature'. But Collins claimed that Tennyson's was a trait common to all literatures 'at a certain point in their development.' Tennyson and his contemporaries had 'inherited the splendours of Greece, of Rome, of Italy, and of the illustrious dynasties of English genius.' They were, in a phrase that Collins courteously borrowed from Tennyson himself, 'the heirs of all the ages' ('Locksley Hall', 178), which made it inevitable that their poems should be admirable for their refinement rather than their originality.¹⁰ Isobel Armstrong makes a similar point when she describes Victorian poetry as 'overwhelmingly secondary' in its character.¹¹ The Victorian poet, it seems, is as enclosed in the history of literature as is Tennyson's Soul in her palace, and like the Soul, the belated poets of

the nineteenth century took their colour from the masterpieces of the past that they moved amongst. But the violence of Tennyson's response to such suggestions is an index of the very high value that was attached in the period to originality.

Victorian poetry may be 'overwhelmingly secondary', but style, many Victorians believed, should express the individual personality of the poet. In consequence much Victorian poetry has a paradoxical character of the kind nicely exemplified in the career of Robert Browning. So much of his poetry is dramatic in character, as if he were entirely willing to speak in the voices of others, and yet Browning manufactures, like his own *Sordello*, and like other Victorian poets such as Swinburne and Christina Rossetti and Hopkins, a poetic manner startlingly and unmistakably idiosyncratic. As the passage from *Sordello* suggests, Victorian poetic styles tend to be forged rather than found, and one result is that the poetic styles so energetically developed often seem like performances, as if poets had found their own voices when they had shown themselves to be their own best impersonators. When Everard Hall, the poet of Tennyson's *Morte d'Arthur* reads, 'mouthing out his hollow oes and aes,' ('The Epic', 50) Tennyson, although he probably wrote the poem in 1837–8, before he was thirty, is already so aware of himself as a Tennysonian poet that he could make a quiet joke of it ('He is', Hopkins wrote of Tennyson in a revealing joke, 'one must see it, what we used to call Tennysonian'¹²). Swinburne more flamboyantly ended his volume of parodies, *The Heptalogia* (1880) with 'Nephelidia', in which he contrives the most accomplished Victorian parody of his own poetic manner, singing from 'the depth of the dreamy decline of the dawn through a notable nimbus of nebulous moonshine' (1). In 'Poeta Loquitur' (published posthumously in 1918) he matches this achievement by launching an attack on his own verse that effortlessly outdoes even his most belligerent critics such as Robert Buchanan:

Mad mixtures of Frenchified offal
With insults to Christendom's creed,
Blind blasphemy, schoolboylike scoff, all
These blazon me blockhead indeed.

(25–8)

Tennyson's Soul wanders through her Palace, the rooms of which are 'fitted to every mood / And change of [her] still soul'. Nothing in the palace or in its accoutrements impinges on her perfect self-absorption. And yet

there is also a sense in which the Soul has no self, existing only in so far as she reflects the objects that she moves amongst, 'a manyfacèd glass'. These might seem antithetical, if equally disturbing, ways of figuring the artist's role, and the poets of the century seem to oscillate between them. Browning, for example, introducing in 1852 a volume of newly discovered letters by Shelley (the letters, it later emerged, were forged), was driven to ponder the relationship between the person of the poet and the character of the poems, and came to the conclusion that there were two quite different kinds of poet. There were objective poets whose work was wholly independent of their personalities, and subjective poets whose work was inexplicable unless read as an expression of those personalities. Browning imagined that a perfect poet might combine the qualities of both, rather as Aristotle had imagined that the same dramatist might excel in both tragedy and comedy. It was clearly the ambition that he harboured for himself, but the essay leaves it unclear quite how the two poetic characters might be reconciled.¹³

For most of its length *The Palace of Art* describes the galleries through which the Soul wanders. The organizational problem that seems most to exercise Tennyson is the question of where each stanza will show best, where it might most effectively be hung. In 1833, for example, the stanza describing the 'maid-mother', the Virgin with child, was daringly followed by a Venus, but Tennyson seems quickly to have decided that this arrangement was vulgar. In a version of the poem preserved in the Heath manuscript he inserts a stanza on the Magi, before allowing the Virgin to find her counterpart in another virgin, the traitress Tarpeia, and in 1842 we glide from the 'maid-mother' to Saint Cecily before we encounter a 'group of Houris' gracefully preparing to solace a 'dying Islamite'. The hanging decisions are usually intelligent, and yet they remain provisional. It would be rash to claim that any version of the poem achieved finality. Tennyson's decisions as to which stanzas to include and which to exclude from the poem seem equally casual. The poem's earliest readers, Tennyson's Cambridge friends, felt free to offer their advice. Hallam wrote to Tennyson: 'I hear that Tennant has written to dissuade you from publishing Kriemhilt, Tarpeia, and Pendragon. Don't be humbugged, they are very good.'¹⁴ In 1832 even the reader of the printed text is allowed to participate in this exercise. Tennyson includes notes in which he gives supplementary stanzas, inviting the reader to judge whether room should have been found for them in the printed poem. He admits into his poem a circumstantial description of

the architecture of the palace, and yet the poem that results serves only to underwrite Arnold's charge that contemporary poetry lacked the architectonic power that for him was most powerfully embodied in the Greek drama. Tennyson seems to have made the poem piecemeal, as he made *In Memoriam* and as he made his *Idylls of the King*. But in this he was, as Arnold allowed, the true representative of the century's poetry, even of Arnold's own.

The Palace of Art ends when description is replaced by narrative. The Soul's life of luxuriant ease breeds self-loathing, her solitude leaves her shrieking for very loneliness: 'No voice breaks through the stillness of this world' (259). She bitterly repents the life she has lived in the Palace: "'Make me a cottage in the vale," she said, / "Where I may mourn and pray."' (291–2) It seemed to John Sterling, a close associate of Tennyson's, a regrettable instance of monkish asceticism:

The writer's doctrine seems to be that the soul, while by its own energy surrounding itself with all the most beautiful and expressive images that the history of mankind has produced, and sympathising with the world's best thought, is perpetrating some prodigious moral offence for which it is bound to repent in sackcloth and ashes.¹⁵

The poem ends by repudiating the 'beautiful and expressive images' that make up the greater part of the poem. It is a gesture that several of Tennyson's contemporaries repeated. One thinks of Arnold devoting so much of the preface to his *Poems* of 1853 to an explanation of why he had chosen to exclude from the volume the major poem that he had published only the previous year, *Empedocles on Etna*, or Elizabeth Barrett ending *Aurora Leigh* (1857) by allowing her heroine to acknowledge the limitations of her masterpiece, a poem that is clearly very like *Aurora Leigh*. Hopkins's anxiety that his priestly and his poetic vocations might be incompatible is obviously a special case, and yet his anxiety, as the self-loathing of Tennyson's Soul suggests, was not as idiosyncratic as might be assumed. But *The Palace of Art* is not quite so conflicted as a summary of its plot suggests. The Soul delights in her palace, and loathes it, and leaves it, with an impartial gusto. The sequence of her actions mimes a moral progress, but our understanding of the import of her gestures is at every stage diverted into an appreciation of their charming, charade-like theatricality. It is somehow entirely appropriate that even the account of how the Soul is stricken by self-contempt yields a landscape as hauntingly

beautiful as any hung in the palace's picture galleries. The Soul comes to see herself as

A still salt pool, locked in with bars of sand,
Left on the shore; that hears all night
The plunging seas draw backward from the land
Their moon-led waters white.

(249–52)

It is, as John Sterling would say, a beautiful and expressive image, a memory of the Lincolnshire coast near which Tennyson grew up, but a memory so vivid that it slips the lead of the solemn moral truth that it seems intended to figure. In the introductory lines presenting the poem to Trench, Tennyson describes it as 'a sort of allegory' carrying the moral that 'Beauty, Good, and Knowledge, are three sisters' that 'never can be sundered without tears'. But in the poem that follows the sisters seem strangers to one another. As John Sterling rather stiffly points out, the poem's beauty seems almost wholly disconnected from the knowledge that it is supposed to impart.

The Palace of Art was prompted, Tennyson recalls, by Trench's remark, 'Tennyson, we cannot live in art.' It is the lesson learned in the poem by the Soul, but when she abandons her palace for prayer and a cottage, she asks that the Palace not be demolished:

Yet pull not down my palace towers, that are
So lightly, beautifully built:
Perchance I may return with others there
When I have purged my guilt.

(293–6)

The Soul's repudiation of the palace and of the life that she has lived there seems less than wholehearted. There may be an implication that the pleasures that the Palace offers are guilty only if their enjoyment is solitary. Tennyson described the poem as 'the embodiment of [his] own belief that the Godlike life is with man and for man,'¹⁶ but it seems more appropriately described as the embodiment of his own radical uncertainty as to what the poet's civic responsibilities might be. A letter from J.W. Blakesley offered Tennyson naively robust encouragement to step forward as a social commentator:

The present race of monstrous opinions and feelings which pervade the age
require the arm of a strong Iconoclast A volume of poetry written in a

proper spirit, a spirit like that which a vigorous mind induces by the study of Wordsworth and Shelley, would be, at the present juncture, the greatest benefit the world could receive. And more benefit would accrue from it than from all the exertions of the Jeremy Benthamites and Millians, if they were to continue for ever and a day.¹⁷

Blakesley's reference is presumably to James Mill. His son, John Stuart Mill, took a rather different view. He distinguished writing addressed directly to its reader, writing that he termed eloquence, from poetry, which, he suggested, its reader only ever overheard.¹⁸ *The Palace of Art* does not choose unequivocally between the two kinds of writing, and it is precisely in its equivocations that it exemplifies a good deal of the century's poetry. It is a poem, like the two other museum poems that I will discuss in this chapter, preoccupied and puzzled by the relationship that poets should establish with their societies.

Tennyson's *Palace* accommodates an imaginary exhibition space (although the palace's architecture, as has often been noticed, is loosely based on Tennyson's Cambridge college, Trinity). D.G. Rossetti's, 'The Burden of Nineveh', a poem that he began in 1850, first published in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* in 1856, and revised for its inclusion in the *Poems* of 1870, is set on the steps of the British Museum. The museum's impressive neoclassical façade looking onto Great Russell Street was completed only in 1848, and the main gates and forecourt still later, in 1852. But for Rossetti, despite the ongoing building work, it is a space almost as distant from the 'London dirt and din' (7) as Tennyson's palace:

In our Museum galleries
To-day I lingered o'er the prize
Dead Greece vouchsafes to living eyes, —
Her Art for ever in fresh wise
From hour to hour rejoicing me.

(1–5)

Greek art is at once 'for ever' and 'fresh', a thought that establishes Rossetti as the heir not only of classical sculptors, but of English poets. He has been lingering, as Keats had before him, over the Elgin marbles, and has been taught the lesson that Keats rehearses in his 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' (1820), that the paradoxical power of art is that it may be at once in time and out of it, 'For ever panting, and for ever young'. But that is how

Rossetti began his poem in 1870. In 1856, in its first printing in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, the contents of the Museum had inspired less reverence, and Rossetti had scarcely lingered. He stays only an hour:

I have no taste for polyglot:
At the Museum 'twas my lot,
Just once, to jot and blot and rot
In Babel for I know not what.
I went at two, I left at three.

(1–5)

The contents of the Museum in mid-century were even more chaotically eclectic than the contents of Tennyson's Palace. It was, for William Cobbett, 'the old curiosity shop'.¹⁹ For Rossetti in 1856 it seems a cacophonous Tower of Babel. The museum's main staircase, for example, was dominated by three stuffed giraffes. The museum had its origin in the decision to purchase Sir Hans Sloane's collections for the nation in 1753, collections which, Horace Walpole observed, were highly valued by 'anybody who loves hippopotamuses, sharks with one ear, and spiders as big as geese' (the animals were not removed to the newly built Natural History Museum until the 1880s).²⁰ In the poorly lit reading room (construction of the great circular Reading Room did not begin until 1854) scholars were far outnumbered by novel readers, all the museum's British antiquities were displayed in four cases in a single room, and the treasures unearthed by Sir Austin Henry Layard in his Assyrian excavations, amongst them the 'wingèd beast from Nineveh' (10) that Rossetti witnessed as it was being hoisted up the museum's steps, were first displayed, for lack of space, in the basement.

In 1856 the Museum had not impressed Rossetti as offering any kind of haven from the city streets outside. Once the Assyrian bull-god is installed, the 'kind of light' that falls on it will be the light that 'London takes the day to be':

Here cold-pinch'd clerks on yellow days
Shall stop and peer; and in sun-haze
Shall clergy crimp their eyes to gaze;
And misses titter in their stays
Just fresh from 'Layard's Nineveh'.

(66–70)