

Tennyson and Pre-Raphaelitism:
Symbolism and Point of View in "Mariana"
and "The Awakening Conscience"

In a fairly recent article David Palmer, challenging a widely-held notion concerning Tennyson's imagery, asserts that "the emphasis upon the sheer accuracy of observation in this imagery, and therefore its apparent resemblance to the aims of Pre-Raphaelite painting, are misleading." Tennyson, he argues, is a "picturesque" poet, and "picturesque poetry is above all concerned with the treatment of natural scenery, and with the feelings which could be expressed through landscape by the association of ideas. The Pre-Raphaelite painters, on the other hand, were scarcely concerned with landscape at all, but rather with the human figure, and their work was characteristic in its dramatic inspiration." He cites Arthur Hallam and John Stuart Mill as reviewers of the early poetry who recognized what Tennyson was up to, and then says that "what Mill describes as Tennyson's 'power of creating scenery, in keeping with some state of human feeling' is fully displayed throughout the 'Idylls of the King.'" After commenting on a passage which describes the setting of "Morte d'Arthur" he goes on to say: "The Tennysonian landscape is characteristically of this kind, not a mere setting or background, but an image so powerfully charged with symbolic feeling that in itself it seems to inspire the figures and events of the story. In fact, it is not the naturalism of the early Pre-Raphaelites that resembles Tennyson's poetic method, but rather the preternatural intensity of a Burne-Jones."¹

To dispute Palmer's claims it can be observed that Tennyson indeed is interested in the "human figure" in "Mariana," which is one of the poems that Mill had in mind when he made his remarks, and that he is interested in it in other poems too (including the "Morte d'Arthur"). Mill recognized that the "feeling" of "Mariana" derives from the feelings of the central figure, but Palmer ignores this insight. Furthermore, early Pre-Raphaelite painters like Holman Hunt and, to a certain extent, Ford Madox Brown, can be seen to have had a concern with setting (though it is not always landscape) which corresponds to what Mill and Palmer himself say about Tennyson's. Their attention to detail is not always naturalistic nor, when painting the items in the background, do they pay attention to detail simply to provide