'We do not profess perfectly to understand the somewhat mysterious contribution of Mr Alfred Tennyson, entitled “Stanzas”, declared the *Edinburgh Review* for October 1837. The stanzas referred to were those of the lyric beginning ‘Oh! that ‘twere possible’, published earlier in the year in *The Tribute*, an anthology edited by Lord Northampton. ‘Oh! that ‘twere possible’ is indeed a strange piece, but the obscurities which puzzled the *Edinburgh* reviewer conceal an important connection between *The Lover’s Tale* of 1832 and both *In Memoriam* and *Maud*.

I

The stanzas from *The Tribute* read in numerous respects like a concentrated version of *The Lover’s Tale*. There is none of the elaborate narrative of the earlier poem. Only a speaker in the present preoccupied with a lost loved-one. But some of the basic psychological and metaphysical formulae of *The Lover’s Tale* re-emerge, shorn of narrative complications and encumbrances, in the 1837 lyric:

Oh! that ‘twere possible,
After long grief and pain,
To find the arms of my true-love
Round me once again!

(1–4)

But it is not possible: insofar as there is a literal story in this lyric, the loved-one is dead: ‘Alas for her that met me, / That heard me softly call’
And yet her ghost haunts the speaker in the present of the lyric. More properly, it should be said, her ghosts: since she comes, on the one hand, as ominous ‘shadow’ (11) and, on the other, as ‘phantom fair and good’ (91). Thus it is that George Marshall can speak of the way in which the ‘mourner’ of ‘Oh! that ’twere possible’ is ‘governed by the dual aspect of the spiritual presence of the dead loved one’ (Marshall 1963: 229). ‘Spiritual presence’ is better, in fact, than ghost. In the closing stages of the poem, the speaker identifies the ‘good’ spirit of the lyric as the ‘phantom’ of ‘the maiden, that I lost’ (91, 79). ‘Fair and kind’ and ‘lovely by my side’ is this phantom (86, 88). But it is not some ‘literal’ gothic ghost. It has its origin in the speaker’s mind. ‘Would’ that ‘the happy Spirit’ would ‘descend /In the chamber or the street /As she looks among the Blest’ (71–73) reflects the speaker, but:

But she tarries in her place,
And I paint the beauteous face
   Of the maiden, that I lost,
      In my inner eyes again . . .

I can shadow forth my bride
   As I knew her fair and kind . . .
      In the silence of my life –
   ’Tis a phantom of the mind.

(77–80, 85–86, 89–90)

Similarly, the contrasting manifestation of the lost beloved, the ‘shadow’ or ‘abiding phantom cold’ (11, 35) which the speaker describes as ‘ghastly sister’ (94) of the ‘phantom fair’ (91), is also a power of the speaker’s mind. This ‘ghastly’ presence first ‘flits before’ the speaker in the third stanza (11), and in the fourth it

   …leads me forth at Evening,
     It lightly winds and steals
       In a cold white robe before me . . .

(17–19)

This might also be a property of paranormal romance, a dramatisation of the ‘visible but impalpable form of a dead person’ (OED). But the lyric undermines clear distinctions between speaker and shadow. The nightly emaciations of the speaker in the fifth stanza, for example, ‘Half the night