That Abiding Phantom Cold: *Maud*

Tennyson’s *Maud. A Monodrama* was originally titled *Maud or the Madness* (Tennyson, Hallam 1897: I.402; Shatto 1986: 22). It seems that Tennyson was still toying with the idea of this title even after its first, 1855, publication simply as *Maud*, since ‘or the Madness’ is added in his hand on the title page of a copy of the first edition now in the University of Virginia Library (Ricks and Day 1987–93: XXX.298). The addition of ‘A Monodrama’ to the title was made in an 1875 edition of Tennyson’s *Works*. Both Tennyson’s subtitle and his original title are relevant to a reading of *Maud*; the first in respect of the poem’s form and the second in respect of its subject.

I

Many of Tennyson’s contemporaries were perplexed by the formal features of the poem. Tennyson himself called *Maud* ‘a drama, i.e. a monodrama and one sui generis’ (Lang and Shannon 1982–90: III.47). It was, he said, ‘a drama in lyrics. It shows the unfolding of a lonely, morbid soul, touched with inherited madness’ (Van Dyke 1920: 97). He also commented that the ‘peculiarity of this poem is that different phases of passion in one person take the place of different characters’ (Tennyson, Hallam 1897: I.396). Many contemporary readers found it difficult to follow the dramatic narrative of the poem. It can still be awkward, since the narrative connection between lyrics that show different phases of passion often has to be inferred. The problem is there from the start. In the very first lines of *Maud* we are plunged, without narrative explication, into the midst of one of the protagonist’s phases of passion. Eric Griffiths has commented on this opening:

The speaker has an odd way of, as it were, button-holing the absence of his interlocutor. The opening of the poem is very frank and
communicative, too much so, in fact, for no conversation could comfortably start as this poem starts:

I hate the dreadful hollow behind the little wood,
Its lips in the field above are dabbled with blood-red heath,
The red-ribbed ledges drip with a silent horror of blood,
And Echo there, whatever is asked her, answers ‘Death’.

(I.1–4)

Nothing can be answered to these lines. (What could you say – ‘Oh, really, how fascinating’ or ‘Yes, yes, so do I, so do I’?) ‘The dreadful hollow’, ‘the little wood’: the definite articles press on us the obsessive predominance of these places in the speaker’s imagination but as yet the reader, not knowing the story, has no idea which hollow and wood are of such concern, and so even less idea why they matter.

(Griffiths 1989: 158)

One of the most impressive things about Maud is the way that it sustains – across the entire poem – the intense, anxious pace established in its opening stanza. It is a pace achieved by the way in which Tennyson repeatedly casts the protagonist’s imagination at least one step beyond the reader’s grasp. The reader does, at points, catch up, in passages where he or she is allowed to breathe, passages which partly explain what is happening. But then she or he is thrown back into the position of having to catch up again and yet again. Even in sequences where we have understood what is going on, the speaker’s shifting feelings and reflections frequently follow each other with dizzying speed. The formal properties of Maud are not seriously problematic a century and a half later, for readers who have had to negotiate the fragmentations and non-sequiturs of much twentieth-century modernist and postmodernist writing. In its relative dislocation the work anticipates those movements, even though a plain narrative sequence in the poem is recoverable. For many readers in the mid-nineteenth century, however, it was an unacceptable challenge.

When the review in the Press for 11 August 1855 used the word ‘incoherent’ of the poem, it was articulating a widely held reaction. The reviewer in the Morning Post of 2 August had observed that either of the two vowels in the title of the poem could be excised in order to get an idea of its nature. ‘As it is a new form of Poem altogether, the critic not