Tennyson, *The Lover’s Tale*
1832 (withdrawn from press), 1879 (revised and completed)

Introduction to Patrick Boyde’s abridgement for reading, with ‘waymarks’
2016, slightly revised for website 2023

“All allowance must be made for redundance of youth. I cannot pick it to pieces and make it up again. It is rich and full, but there are mistakes in it. (...) The poem is the breath of young love”.

(Tennyson, talking about *The Lover’s Tale* to his wife in 1868)

1. The context of the original poem
In 1864 Tennyson – by then aged 55 and having been poet laureate for the past 14 years – published a novella in blank verse called *Enoch Arden.* It rapidly sold 40,000 copies; and it went on hitting the spot for half a century (there were three early films). In 1879, aged 70, he published a blank-verse novella of similar length called *The Lover’s Tale.* Again it deals with a triangle of lovers who have known each other since childhood; again it ends with an act of renunciation by the protagonist. It has never been and probably never will be popular. But I hold it in great affection; and this introduction is a first step towards a ‘habilitation’.

Tennyson had begun the poem when he was still eighteen. He got to the point of letting the first half be set up in print (alongside poems like *The Lady of Shalott* and *The Lotos Eaters*) when he was still only twenty-two. But he was dissatisfied and withdrew it from the proofs of the volume at the last minute in November 1832 (despite the fact he thought ‘it might conduce to making me popular’). In 1868, he did finally compose the second half of the tale, publishing it as a separate poem called *The Golden Supper.* His wife ‘urged him’ to publish the earlier parts (which had been circulating, to his annoyance, in manuscript copies based on the proofs of 1832). But he was reluctant. He told her he still found it ‘rich and full’ and he went so far as to call it ‘the breath of young love’. But he also said it contained ‘mistakes’ and suffered from the ‘redundance of youth’. And at that point (early in 1868) he professed himself unable to ‘pick it to pieces and make it up again’.

2. The Reasons behind the Present Abridgement
Another eleven years went by before Tennyson completed the necessary remedial ‘tailoring’ to his own satisfaction; so it was not until 1879 that the whole poem appeared in a quarto volume of 95 pages, containing 1459 lines. But far from shortening the original first half, he had expanded it by another 200 lines. He had fallen again under the spell of the material and of his earlier self; and, while some of the new passages are gloriously lyrical and might fairly be described as the ‘breath of an old man’s love’, the poem suffers from the ‘redundance of age’ as well as the ‘redundance of youth’. In short, he had made it even harder to follow a sometimes rather evanescent plot.

It seems to me that the crucial first step in any process of ‘habilitation’ must be to allow the reader to engage with the music of Tennyson’s blank verse and follow the story effortlessly through to its conclusion. I have therefore begun my self-appointed task by preparing an abridgement intended for reading aloud to an audience (even if only in the confines of a small poetry-group).
In this version I have tried to ensure that every sentence will be immediately intelligible and that the whole may be performed, sensitively, in less than an hour. In terms of Tennyson’s implied dress-making metaphor, I have ‘picked the garment to pieces’, removed the crinoline, shortened the skirt, unpleated the waist, slimmed the sleeves and removed any frills; and I have then ‘made the garment up again’ so that the new seams cannot be detected by ear alone (I banish to an end-note a more literal description of my procedures).¹⁴

3. The Need for ‘Waymarking’

So much, then, by way of introduction to my abbreviation of Tennyson’s own words in the accompanying document (henceforth referred to as WALT) which preserves about 70% of the full text of The Lover’s Tale. It remains to explain the nature and raison d’être of the additional material which I have placed in the margins throughout as a kind of signposting or waymarking.

The long opening section of the tale, it must be borne in mind, is spoken by the Lover himself, whom we are to imagine as having button-holed a group of listeners in something like the same way as the Ancient Mariner accosted the Wedding Guests. It proves to be of the essence of his misfortunes that he has a streak of madness in him. And, as he relives his sufferings in the act of narration, he becomes increasingly agitated and sometimes unable to distinguish between hallucination and reality. Hence we are not surprised when the Lover dashes away from his listeners before the end, and when he is later described as ‘crazed’ by the matter-of-fact friend who completes the Tale for him in the final section.⁵

Partly as a result of this attention to psychological verisimilitude (and partly no doubt because of Tennyson’s inexperience) the Lover’s narrative is sometimes hard to follow even after the digressions and repetitions have been discreetly cleared away. I have therefore followed the example given by Coleridge himself in The Ancient Mariner, and I have placed brief rubrics and glosses of my own, in tiny print, alongside the passages to which they refer.

These marginal notes contain a mixture of precis and commentary, and they are intended to function like subtitles in the performance of plays in a foreign language. It should be easy to ignore their existence altogether. But the quickest of glances will offer a guide to ambiguities or complexities of diction; and, cumulatively, the rubrics offer an unobtrusive system of ‘waymarking’, such as might be used to help competitors in a cycle race.

4. Summary

To summarise: in the accompanying version of the poem which you are now invited to read aloud, Tennyson’s text has been both abridged and provided with a system of waymarking. The acronymic, provisional title – WALT – may be decoded as ‘Waymarked, Abridged Lover’s Tale. And if WALT should send you to the original in the right frame of mind, the process of habilitation will have got off to a good start: ‘Well begun is half done’.

Patrick Boyde, June 2016
According to his wife, Emily (diary, 11 January 1868), Tennyson ‘talked of publishing “The Lover’s Tale” because someone was sure to publish it some day’. She ‘urged this. We heard that written copies were being circulated. He said: “Allowance must be made for redundance of youth. I cannot pick it to pieces and make it up again. It is rich and full, but there are mistakes in it. (…) The poem is the breath of young love”’. 

A novella may be provisionally defined as a short-story which is in fact relatively long and which focusses on just one theme, symbol or climactic moment, thereby allowing the author to develop the subject on much the same scale as a novelist.

Letter to Edward Moxon [20 November 1832]. ‘Dear Sir, After mature consideration I have come to the resolution of not publishing the last poem in my little volume entitled ‘Lover’s Tale’—it is too full of faults and though I think it might conduce towards making me popular, yet to my eye it spoils the completeness of the book and is better away’.

I relegate to this note four points of detail concerning my abridgement.
(i) I have excluded all the older poet’s additions to the aborted edition of 1832, and indeed preserved all the readings of that early state of the text. As a result, anyone who is minded to study developments in Tennyson’s diction and syntax over many decades will find it easy to compare the abbreviated text of Parts I and II in WALT (all from 1832) with the corresponding parts of the full text in any edition of Tennyson’s Complete Works (as expanded or revised by him in 1879).
(ii) I have introduced more paragraphs in WALT than there are in the original, partly to lighten the page, and partly to suggest where one reader might take over from another in a group reading.
(iii) In order to assist reading at sight, I have made a few alterations to the punctuation in WALT (e.g. some full stops are mine, as are some of the accents or apostrophes placed as a guide to the appropriate metrical pronunciation of words like beloved – which may be belov’d or belovèd according the context). But I have been very conservative in this respect.
(iv) I have not indicated the position or the size of my excisions, which cumulatively amount to 30% of the 1879 text (the lengths are: WALT 991 lines, Full Text 1459). It should be borne in mind that Part III has not been cut at all while Part IV has lost only about a quarter.

Here are three relevant extracts from the third-person narrative of Part IV:
(a) ‘I thought him crazed, / Tho’ not with such a craziness as needs / A cell and keeper)…’
(b) ‘I heard a groaning overhead, and climb’d / The moulder’d stairs (for everything was vile) / And in a loft, with none to wait on him, / Found, as it seem’d, a skeleton alone, / Raving of dead men’s dust and beating hearts’ (this being a reference to the first meeting between narrator and Lover).
(c) ‘…Some warning —sent divinely—as it seem’d / By that which follow’d—but of this I deem / As of the visions that he told—the event / Glanced back upon them in his after life, / And partly made them—tho’ he knew it not’ (doubting the Lover’s reliability).