Alfred Tennyson

In Memoriam

by Peter Cash

English Association Longer Poem Bookmarks
No 4
Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892)
In Memoriam (1850)

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

The bibliography of this student guide is commended.


FURTHER READING
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SCOPE OF TOPIC
The central fact of Tennyson's poetical career (if not of his life) was the sudden death of his
close friend Arthur Hallam on 15th September 1833. Hallam – whom Tennyson had met
at Trinity College Cambridge in April 1829 – died in Vienna of a brain haemorrhage (a
cerebral aneurysm); born on 1st February 1811, he was just twenty-two years of age.
Tennyson heard of Hallam's death two weeks later (on 1st October 1833): from that moment,
this early death became the central inspiration and preoccupation of his poetry.

Christopher Ricks confirms that "no event in Tennyson's life was of greater importance."
Consequently, Tennyson's aim in In Memoriam is to commemorate

The passing of the sweetest soul
That ever looked with human eyes.

Here, in Part LVII, his superlative epithet for Hallam indicates the direction in which his
thinking travels. In Memoriam becomes the 133-part elegy which Tennyson wrote for his
student-friend; he began writing as soon as he learned of Hallam's death and did not publish
the complete work until seventeen years later. Robin Mayhead (1958) asserts that the elegy
is "the expression of a passionate, tormented grief". In order to express this grief, Tennyson
invents a quatrain form: four lines of iambic tetrameter which rhyme abba. This quatrain
becomes the vehicle which enables him to convey his profound feelings of loss with a peculiar
intensity and an unwavering dignity: in particular, his ear for rhymes alerts him to sound-effects which compose the solemn and soothing music of the poem. In Part LXXV, Tennyson acknowledges that writing these quatrains has a therapeutic effect on him: ‘In verse that brings myself relief’; in Part LXXXVII, he refers to ‘these mortal lullabies of pain’.

“Tennyson, with all his temperament and artistic skill, is deficient in intellectual power; and no modern poet can make very much of his business unless he is pre-eminently strong in this.” This ‘modern’ view, paying tribute to Tennyson’s ‘artistic skill’, but criticising his lack of ‘intellectual power’, was expressed by Matthew Arnold in 1860.

Tennyson’s intellect was more than equal to the ‘business’ of versification; both T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden take the view that no “poet in English has ever had a finer ear for vowel sound”. Arnold and Eliot agree that Tennyson was both technically gifted and temperamentally suited to articulating a mood of personal anguish – such as permeates In Memoriam; but they recognise that he had few ideas of his own and acknowledge that he found himself searching among the social issues of his age for worthy subjects, not all of them amenable to poetic expression. In 1847, The Princess explored women’s rights; in 1850, In Memoriam itself tackled issues of religious faith and doubt, but never with any great felicity. Like a schoolmaster, F. R. Leavis (1932) remarks that “Tennyson did his best”, but concludes that, “in spite of a great deal of allusion to scientific ideas, his intellectual interests have little to do with his successful poetry.”

In this Bookmark, the aim is to look at just eight of the 133 Parts (including Prologue and Epilogue) of Tennyson’s elegy. The concentration will be on those Parts which editors of anthologies have consistently selected – not least those in which Tennyson’s unique stanza-form is ideally suited to the expression of his elegiac mood, but also those in which he labours to express his thoughts in the poetic diction of his day. The aim is not to attempt a scholarly investigation of the ways in which In Memoriam is organised, but to subject eight Parts to close reading and practical analysis; the hope is that these exegeses will draw keener attention not to Tennyson’s Victorian weaknesses, but to his accessible and enduring strengths.

Part II

In Part II, Tennyson writes an ode to an ‘Old Yew’. It is a conventional address to the common yew (taxus baccata) in that it lists the traditional qualities of the tree – not least, its extreme longevity – and pays tribute to them. The yew is the tree of the English country churchyard, an evergreen tree ritually planted in these places to signify that the soul can likewise live for ever [= stay forever green]: in other words, it is a symbol of the immortality of the soul. What is less conventional is that Tennyson develops a morbid fascination with the yew-tree. For this Part, he is to be envisaged standing either by Hallam’s tomb in St Andrew’s Churchyard Clevedon in Somerset or in St Margaret’s Churchyard Somersby, located directly across the road from the Rectory in which he was born and lived.* From the grave-side, he observes that the yew’s branches grasp at the headstones on which the names of ‘the underlying dead’ are engraved and then assumes – gruesomely – that the yew’s roots will ‘net the dreamless head’ [= the skull] and be ‘wrapt about the bones’ of any body interred in its immediate vicinity. In effect, he confesses to suffering from Yew-tree Envy. * Neither vision is wholly satisfactory: whilst Clevedon (‘by that broad water of the west’) is where Hallam is buried, Part LXVII confirms that his ‘place of rest’ lies inside the dark church where his inscribed ‘tablet’ can be seen; whilst Somersby’s topography is a plausible and more suitable inspiration, it is not where Hallam is buried.

In the second and the third quatrains, Tennyson compliments the yew-tree on its evergreeness: whilst ‘the seasons’ come and go, the yew-tree remains unchanged. To this extent, the Clevedon/Somersby yew is an example of dendrological topophilia: that is, it supplies an image by which the relative impermanence of man can be measured. Echoing Shakespeare’s Prospero, Tennyson notes that, in the dusky shade of this yew, the church clock ‘beats out the
little lives of men’ (which are, of course, ‘rounded with a sleep’). ‘Not for thee’, says Tennyson

 to the enduring tree, ‘the glow, the bloom’ of spring; not even ‘summer suns’ can lighten ‘thy
thousand years of gloom’. The tone of this address is grimly admiring: in Part II, a yew-tree
is considered fortunate by virtue of its close, eternal proximity to the remains of the dead.

In the fourth quatrain, Tennyson is contemplating the ‘sullen tree’ and wishing that he could

become an organic part of it. There is little here of the wit which informs Thomas Hardy’s

poems Transformations (‘Portion of this yew ....’) and Voices from Things Growing in a

Churchyard (‘.... and have entered this yew’). Here, the iambic metre is adapted to express a

morose mood in which Tennyson envies the ‘stubborn hardihood’ of the evergreen tree and

finally imagines that he is incorporated into its very ‘fibres’: ‘And grow incorporate into thee.’

Tennyson’s mood (‘sick’) is an intense longing: finally, it is a ghoulish consummation for which

he is devoutly wishing. To the extent that he longs somehow to entwine himself with Hallam’s
corpse, Part II acts out a morbid fantasy, a kind of necrophilia.

Part VII

In Part VII, Tennyson explores the sense of loss that he felt in the immediate aftermath of

Arthur Hallam’s untimely death. His strategy is to imagine himself standing ‘once more’

outside Hallam’s house: 67 Wimpole Street in the Paddington area of West London. There,

he is ‘waiting’ in eager anticipation for his close friend to answer the door and clasp his hand.

In this situation, he commits the pathetic fallacy in order to convey his emotional state: that

is, he pretends that the natural atmosphere is attuned to his mood of ‘blank’ desolation. For

this reason, he depicts the scene outside Hallam’s house in a sequence of negative

adjectives: ‘dark’, ‘unlovely’, ‘ghastly’, ‘drizzling’, ‘bald’, ‘blank’. In short, it is as if the street –
rather than the poet – has been bereaved. It is especially significant that the house is ‘dark’
(its oil-lamps are out and its curtains drawn in mourning) and the street is ‘unlovely’ (awash
with rain). These literal adjectives show metaphorically that the light of Tennyson’s life has
gone out and that the Paddington address has been deprived of its former glory.

Now that his intimate friend is dead, Tennyson cannot sleep and feels guilty (‘like a guilty
thing I creep’) that he himself is still living. So intense is this feeling of survivor-guilt that the
stanza struggles to fend off a tone of mawkish sentimentality. Rather than come directly to
terms with the fact that Hallam ‘is not here’, Tennyson – in apologising for still being alive –
indulges in an active expression of grief that tends to romanticise it. So deeply does he
immerse himself in this emotion that his immediate environment seems to react in instinctive
sympathy with him; accordingly, it takes on the morose colours of his gloom. Dawn, then,
does not bring the traditional relief of this gloom; on the contrary, it serves only to illuminate
the urban environment from which his intimate is a missing figure. The street is ‘bald’ and
the day is ‘blank’ as marks of respect for the young man who is not there anymore.
Ultimately, the eight monosyllables which comprise this final line –

On the bald street breaks the blank day

– make the monotonous sound of a knell. In treating the subject of Arthur Hallam’s death,
Tennyson is examining his own difficulty in making sense of such a tragic loss. So acute is
his distress that he finds it difficult to accept that ‘the noise of life’ can carry on indifferent to
and regardless of his friend’s death. Standing on the street where Hallam lived, he finds it
‘ghastly’ that the whole world has not come to a stand-still in solemn recognition of his
sudden passing. It is this elegiac tone that the monosyllabic rhymes of the poem reinforce:
indeed, of 82 words in the poem, no fewer than 72 are monosyllables.
Part XI

“There is no joy but calm” — The Lotus-Eaters (1842)

It was at Cambridge in April 1829 that Tennyson and Arthur Hallam befriended each other; they became intellectual soul-mates and spent Christmas of that year together at Somersby where Hallam conceived his affection for Tennyson’s sister Emily. In 1830, they spent the summer together in the Pyrenees; in 1832, they spent both spring and summer at Somersby where Hallam, at the same time as he rambled the Lincolnshire countryside with his friend, pursued his romantic interest in Emily (to whom he finally became engaged early in 1833). Part VI ends with a reflection upon the implications of Hallam’s premature death for both Emily (‘perpetual maidenhood’) and Alfred himself (‘no second friend’).

For Part XI, one of the dawn walks that Tennyson and Hallam took over the Lincolnshire Wolds supplies the context. Retracing their steps in the immediate aftermath of his friend’s death, Tennyson derives inspiration from the meteorological calm of an October morn; he finds in the literal stillness a metaphor for the spiritual calm of which he is in search. He organises his feelings by means of anaphora:

Calm is the morn without a sound,
Calm as to suit calmer grief ....

Calm and deep peace on this high wold ....

Calm and still light on yon great plain ....

Calm and deep peace in this wide air,
These leaves that redden to the fall;
And in my heart, if calm at all,
If any calm, a calm despair.

Calm on the seas, and silver sleep,
And waves that sway themselves in rest,
And dead calm in that noble breast
Which heaves but with the heaving deep.

This network of quotations from the five quatrains does nothing to dispel the view that Tennyson’s poems are literary exercises in which he is primarily concerned to ensure that his verse makes a melodious sound. After all, his energy here has gone primarily into recycling one grammatical construction (‘calm +’) in order to create an overwhelming impression of calm: ‘dead calm’. In the process, his quatrains manage to accommodate the adjective ‘calm’ on no fewer than eleven occasions in twenty lines.* Hallam’s body ‘heaves but with the heaving deep’ because it is being returned to England by sea.

One argument is that Tennyson is seeking by means of this formulaic syntax to discipline his feelings of loss/that he wants to find a rational structure for his emotions. At the same time, Tennyson commits the pathetic fallacy: according to this strategy, the desolate expanses of the autumnal scene (‘this high wold’/ ‘yon far plain’/”this wide air”) become reflective of his own desolation at Hallam’s death. In Tennyson’s morbid imagination, there are no neutral tones; here, Somersby’s autumnal hues are appropriated to his poetic purpose/coloured or tinted ‘green and gold’ or red by his grief. He will not allow that there can be ‘any calm’ in the natural world unless it is ‘a calm despair’ at Hallam’s passing; by this means, he aspires towards the serenity (even ‘joy’) that the season exudes. By the following winter, he is able to write – significantly – of ‘the quiet sense of something lost’ (Part LXXVIII).

Another argument for Tennyson’s use of syntactical parallelism has to do with the sound that the systematic repetition of ‘calm’ produces. Given the long, soothing effect of this a-sound, it can be said that the repetition of this euphonious monosyllable has a therapeutic effect on

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the bereaved poet: in short, that he can be heard breathing deeply/literally calming himself. The ‘calm despair’ which he attributes to the Lincolnshire landscape is an antidote to ‘the wild unrest that lives in woe’ which he diagnoses in Part XV; indeed, he sets the two states – ‘calm despair and wild unrest’ – in explicit antithesis to each other at the start of Part XVI. In this way, Tennyson realises his ambition to compose ‘verse that brings myself relief’ (Part LXXXV) and propels himself towards ‘the low beginnings of content’ (Part LXXXIV).

**Part XXVII**

In Part XXVII, Tennyson examines his own psychological condition and confronts one particular hypothesis: that, if he had never met Arthur Hallam, then he would not be suffering from such incapacitating grief at his premature death from a cerebral haemorrhage. How would that be? Part XXVII begins as if he is answering this question:

I envy not in any moods
   The captive void of noble rage,
   The linnet born within the cage,
   That never knew the summer woods.

Tennyson’s image is persuasive: if he cannot know ‘the summer woods’ round Somersby, then he would not want to be a linnet [= a small bird of the finch family]. In the second quatrain, he adds that he would not want to be a ‘beast’ of ‘the field’ because he would then be without ‘a conscience’. Tennyson is assessing what makes his life worth living: first, there is the freedom to enjoy the Lincolnshire woods – which he did with Hallam; second, there is the sense of moral responsibility which he feels towards his friend – ‘the human-hearted man I loved’ (Part XIII). This second reflection prepares us for the third quatrain in which he emphasises how much he values commitment to personal relationship. Here, it has to be acknowledged that, in the rhyme between ‘plighted troth’ and ‘weeds of sloth’, we can hear the death-knell of Victorian poetry. Diction is archaic, contrived and poetical; as such, it is unable to convey personal feeling with any conviction, immediacy or directness. In this quatrain, the language (also ‘want-begotten rest’) is not adequate to express the delicate sentiment at which Tennyson is hinting.

Famously, the language of the fourth and final quatrain of Part XXVII is a different matter. It conveys the same sentiment with an epigrammatic simplicity:

I hold it true, whate’er befall;
   I feel it, when I sorrow most;
   ’Tis better to have loved and lost
   Than never to have loved at all.

Throughout the elegy, Tennyson is looking for an attitude of mind to support him in the continuing aftermath of Arthur Hallam’s death; in Part XXVII, he finds for himself the precise consolation for which he has been searching. In his darkest hours, Tennyson consoles himself with the positive thought that, although they are easily ‘lost’, it is ‘better’ to have experienced the best things in life than to have gone nowhere and risked nothing. Christopher Ricks points out that this proverbial wisdom has been articulated before: by the Irish playwright William Congreve in *The Way of the World* (1700) and by the Scottish poet Thomas Campbell in *The Jilted Nymph* (1799). What often was thought had never been so well expressed. The irony, of course, is that this proverbial saying – which commonly suggests itself to disappointed lovers – should have arisen out of one heterosexual man’s friendship for another.

At the start of Part LXXXV, Tennyson modifies this quatrain:
This truth came borne with bier and pall,
    I felt it, when I sorrowed most;
    'Tis better to have loved and lost
    Than never to have loved at all.

In doing so, he ensures that it acquires a choric function: at the same time as it testifies to the enriching experience which has ended, it continues to express his chivalric loyalty to his late friend.

Part LVI

    “Halfway down
    Hangs one that gathers sapphire – dreadful trade!
    Methinks he seems no bigger than his head.”
    Edgar, King Lear Act IV Scene 6

    “So careful of the type she seems,
    So careless of the single life.”
    Part LV

Since he is writing an elegy, Tennyson devotes much of his energy to expressing his personal feelings of grief. Part LVI has a different aim: here, he is seeking not to express his personal loss, but to set it in a cosmic or geological perspective. Although Charles Darwin’s On the Origin of Species was not published till 1859, Tennyson had read Charles Lyell’s Principles of Geology, first published in 1830. Lyell, having studied the processes of geological change, argued that the present has evolved from the past. It is this idea that informs Tennyson’s thinking in Part LVI.

In Part LV, Tennyson has arrived at the philosophical/scientific conclusion that Nature, whilst ‘she’ may be protective of ‘the type’, cares less (if at all) about individual/‘single’ members of any ‘type’ [= species]. In Part LV, he concludes that, in the light of this troubling discovery, he can only ‘trust the larger hope’: that is, trust in God not only to ensure the continuation of the human race, but also to grant mercy to each individual soul. This [= ‘trust’] Tennyson does only ‘faintly’ with the result that Part LVI begins with the immediate questioning of his earlier conclusion:

    ‘So careful of the type’? but no.
    From scarped cliff and quarried stone
    She cries, ‘A thousand types are gone:
    I care for nothing, all shall go.

T. S. Eliot wrote of In Memoriam: “It is not religious because of the quality of its faith, but because of the quality of its doubt.” By swiftly quoting his own phrase back at himself, Tennyson is indeed doubting God’s effectiveness in Creation; moreover, it is instructive that his imagery (‘scarped cliff and quarried stone’) is of a geological character which associates his revised perspective with Edgar’s chilling look-down from Dover Cliff. In this estimation, man – even such a gifted soul as Arthur Hallam – is a mere sapphire-gatherer: if he falls off the cliff, what difference will it make to the ‘larger’ scheme of things? Significantly, Tennyson’s non-rhetorical question is not ‘Who will notice? Who will care?’ because the man’s friends and relatives will; ‘no’, the point is that to Nature ‘nothing’ matters. By the second quatrain, Tennyson is prepared to entertain the materialistic thought that ‘spirit means but breath’. 
This pessimistic thought gives rise to the open question which occupies the third, fourth and fifth quatrains of Part LVI: shall ‘man’, singer of ‘psalms’, sayer of ‘prayers’, long-suffering campaigner for Truth and Justice, be reduced in the end to ‘desert dust’? Famously, the perception here is not that God does not exist, but that He will fail in the end to protect his loving creatures from ‘Nature, red in tooth and claw’. The pert antithesis between God’s law [= ‘love’] and Nature’s claw [= an unsentimental survival of the fittest] is not well made. Despite the memorable phrase, Tennyson’s addiction to the poetic diction of the nineteenth-century tends to impede the logical movement of his argument; a lyric quatrain is not a comfortable vehicle for an idea. Putting this idea into a more congenial prose, Glennis Byron explains that, “while Nature may seem to have little concern for the individual, she does at least preserve the type” and concludes that Part LVI, “while marking the climax of despair, challenges even this comforting belief.” Is man no more than this? If not, then the ‘dragons of the prime’ [= prehistoric ‘monsters’, dinosaurs] constitute a superior species – or, rather, are not inferior species if man too is heading for extinction. In this context, Tennyson is entitled to despair: if men become likewise extinct, then ‘life’ is as ‘futile’ as it is ‘frail’. He wishes that Hallam were there to ‘soothe’ him, for he realises that he can ‘hope’ to have his ‘answer’ only after his own death: that is, ‘Behind the veil, behind the veil’ (as he portentously puts it).

Part CI

“Tennyson is especially and pre-eminently a landscape-painter in words, a colourist, rich, full and subtle.”

William Allingham (Diary, 1907)

According to Allingham, Tennyson is to English poetry what John Constable (1776-1837) is to English painting: in other words, he is neither more nor less than a descriptive poet who paints landscapes as he sees them/with a naïve realism. What is more, he is to English poetry what Edward Elgar (1857-1934) is to English music: by this analogy, listening to Tennyson’s verse-descriptions of the Lincolnshire Wolds can be like listening to Elgar’s variations of the Malvern Hills. Few parts of In Memoriam correspond more exactly to Allingham’s view than Part CI in which Tennyson the landscape-artist appears to be painting the Lincolnshire countryside by numbers: that is, by the number of ‘un’ + past-participle adjectives which he can use to colour in his negative sentiments.

For this Part, he relies upon the anaphora that he deployed to resonant effect in Part XI. For his quatrain-form, he decides upon a syntactical structure and keeps returning to it in order to give shape to his feelings of loss:

Unwatched, the garden bough shall sway,
    The tender blossom flutter down,
    Unloved, that beech will gather brown,
This maple burn itself away;

Unloved, the sun-flower, shining fair ....

Unloved, by many a sandy bar ....

Uncared for, gird the windy grove ....

In this part, Tennyson – albeit on the second anniversary of Hallam’s death – still seems to feel that the whole of natural creation is without point. He feels that its existence is futile for two reasons: first, Somersby’s autumnal hues may as well not ‘burn’ now that Hallam (‘the human-hearted man I loved’) is no longer alive to bear witness to them; second, these natural beauties remain in any case unappreciated (‘unloved’) because Tennyson is unable in
his protracted grief to take any delight in them. It is in order to make this painful point that Tennyson busies himself over four quatrains in listing the picturesque qualities of the scene: ‘the tender blossom’, ‘the humming air’, ‘the haunts of hern and crake’. He is disaffected by the natural world not only because he cannot share its joys with Hallam, but also because he would feel ‘like a guilty thing’ if he were to enjoy any such sensations when Hallam cannot. Even after two years, he is still ‘in the midmost heart of grief’ (Part LXXXVIII).

For Tennyson, the problem remains that he associates Somersby’s autumnal beauties with his beautiful friend (‘the sweetest soul/That ever looked with human eyes’) and with the times that they shared together in this spot; it is therefore by association with Hallam [= by a pathetic fallacy] that the natural world around Tennyson’s birth-place takes on the “rich, full and subtle” colours of his sorrow. For this reason, Tennyson is left to console himself with the wishful thought that ‘a fresh association’ will eventually replace his obsessive connection of this beautiful landscape with his ‘dear friend’. At the end of the fourth quatrain, after the fourth semi-colon, he develops the single sentence of the poem (‘till’) and permits himself to envisage a process in which ‘year by year’ the landscape will grow out of its sombre mood, recover its familiarity and no longer remind him that it was once the backdrop to Alfred’s adventures with Arthur.

**In Memoriam** is a self-indulgent poem in that Tennyson repeatedly indulges himself in such expressions of regret at Hallam’s early death; for most parts, its tone is glum, resolutely and wilfully morose. Coming – after one hundred parts of this elegy – upon a poem in which he begins to countenance the prospect that his turmoil (“the wild unrest that lives in woe”) may eventually subside, it is therefore tempting to think that **Part CI** marks a swing in his mood. But Paul F. Baum (1948) reminds us that **In Memoriam** was not assembled according to any systematic plan; rather, it is “a discontinuous record of incidents, moods and meditations” which, while it may “show a kind of progress”, is “so frequently interrupted and diverted that the reader is constantly left in uncertainty”. Sure enough, Tennyson – at the end of **Part CXXIII** – still feels obliged to admit that his fixation upon Hallam remains:

> For tho’ my lips may breathe adieu,  
> I cannot think the thing farewell.

**Part CVI**

Four years after Hallam’s death, Tennyson’s family left Somersby and relocated to Epping in Surrey where it spent its first Christmas in 1837. Listening to ‘a single peal of bells’ from the church below the hill, Tennyson feels alienated from the sources of his inspiration (‘these are not the bells I know’) and seeks to respond imaginatively to the spirit of change. Quite literally, **Part CVI** has the ‘ring’ of a carol; as such, it is both a public address to the nation (on pious subjects) and a private exhortation to himself not to mope.

Although it includes his banal ideas for moral and social improvements, **Part CVI** constitutes an important attempt by Tennyson to shake off the morbid persistences of his own past (‘the old’) and reinvigorate the present:

> Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,  
> The flying cloud, the frosty light:  
> The year is dying in the night;  
> Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

> Ring out the old, ring in the new,  
> Ring, happy bells, across the snow ....

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Here, Tennyson is to be imagined listening to the church bells at High Beech ringing out the old year and ringing in the new; as a result, it makes complete sense to suggest that the verbal resolutions of the poem are New Year Resolutions. The rhythms of his iambic tetrameters enact his ‘new’ determination to re-shape his attitude to Hallam’s death: ‘let him die’. Put another way, the ‘ring’ of the ‘happy bells’ represents his readiness to wring changes in his own frame of mind; even though the platitudes (‘the nobler modes of life’/ ‘the common love of good’) pile up, the insistent repetitions seem more intent on motivating him to keep his promise to himself.

Tennyson’s attempts to associate his personal feeling with the elation that the bells express results in a series of eight quatrains that resembles a peal of bells; the total of twenty-four ‘rings’ (fourteen ‘ring out’ and ten ‘ring in’) is functional in creating the music of the poem. If Tennyson was previously a landscape-painter, here he is a campanologist; this aural effect is endorsed by the series of plangent monosyllables in which this entire poem is rhymed.

Tennyson seems to have developed a fresh habit of mind: rather than transfer his pessimism to his immediate environment, he permits his environment to transfer its optimism to him. Two particular imperatives – ‘ring out the grief that saps the mind’ and ‘ring out a slowly dying cause’ – seem pointedly self-directed. Year by year, Tennyson’s ‘cause’ has been to keep Hallam’s memory alive; all of a sudden, he sounds resolved to let his memory fade in the comforting knowledge that he lives forever in Christ (‘Ring in the Christ that is to be’).

Part CXIV

Between the date of Arthur Hallam’s death (15th September 1833) and the publication of Tennyson’s complete elegy In Memoriam, seventeen years elapse. In Part CXIV, Tennyson is not therefore writing immediately after Hallam’s death; in this case, he is recollecting his emotion in tranquillity. On this occasion, his strategy is to imagine himself not standing on Wimpole Street in November drizzle, but walking through his own Lincolnshire countryside in April sunshine. In this situation, Tennyson makes an original and resourceful use of the pathetic fallacy: here, he pretends that the Lincolnshire Wolds are somehow in active sympathy with the more advanced stages of his grief. Rather than write as if his mood requires a bleak background, he notes the signs of the re-awakening year and transforms them into signs of his re-awakening ‘regret’.

To this end, Tennyson depicts the rural landscape in twin series of positive adjectives (‘flowering’, ‘lovelier’, ‘living’, ‘milker’, ‘greening’, ‘happy’) and positive verbs (‘burgeons’, ‘rings’, ‘dance’, ‘build’, ‘wakens’, ‘buds and blossoms’). It is as if ‘the woodland’ – rather than the poet – is elated that Hallam’s memory remains fresh. It is especially significant that Tennyson connects his regret to ‘an April violet’: after all, the violet is the living emblem of such remembrance.

In Part CXIV, Tennyson conveys his regret also by rhythmical means. To monitor the tumultuous flow of his emotion, he makes a familiar use of anaphora:

*Now fades* the last long streak of snow,  
*Now burgeons* every maze of quick ....

*Now rings* the woodland loud and long ....

*Now dance* the lights on lawn and lea ....

*Where now* the seamew pipes, or dives ....

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Through four quatrains, the syntactical parallels structure the fluent movement of his feeling. In the fifth quatrains, he makes a frequent use of enjambment likewise to suggest that his grief continues to flow profusely:

that live their lives

From land to land; and in my breast
Spring wakens too; and my regret
Becomes an April violet,
And buds and blossoms like the rest.

It is by these rhythmical means that the In Memoriam stanza-form becomes functional in the expression of an undying and unvarying aching and longing.

Tennyson's diction is the poetic diction of the Victorian age: in other words, it makes use of a lexicon borrowed from Spenser/Milton/Keats and applied without an energy of its own. Robin Mayhead (1958) confirms that Tennyson is "the dominant figure in confirming this Spenserian-Miltonic tradition as the established poetic mode of the later nineteenth century". Entirely characteristic of this archaic mode is Tennyson's consistent recourse to metonymy. For instance, the language in which he describes the spring countryside contains numerous examples of this contrived figure of speech: in this language, a mere lawn becomes 'a maze of quick' and the sky becomes 'yonder living blue'; the sky becomes 'yonder greening gleam'. It is fair comment that these epithets, though they are meant to sharpen a perception of the landscape, are generalised and vague; they tend to deaden, rather than bring to life a view of the scene and the emotions that it awakens. What is more, the woodland rings 'loud and long' and the light dances on 'lawn and lea' not because the descriptions are piercingly accurate, but because the l-sounds alliterate.

It could therefore be argued that Tennyson is less concerned to articulate a personal anguish, more concerned to complete a literary exercise. In Part CXIV, he confines himself to those poeticsisms ('a lovelier hue', 'down the vale') which maintain a strict decorum; he makes a self-conscious habit of pairing words ('build and brood', 'loud and long', 'lawn and lea', 'buds and blossoms') which happen to share consonants. As T. S. Eliot observes, In Memoriam is "the concentrated diary of a man confessing himself"; at the same time, the first function of Tennyson's style is not to confess a deep sense of bereavement, but to conform to Victorian convention.

APPENDIX

Peter Cash
SOMERSBY

In what sense these five buildings contribute to English life is any ingenunous tourist's guess. The approach may be through landscape that an exhaustive elegy embodies in metonymy, but here – in the muddy, midwinter Wolds – you're not in any spot that ever – even in Victoria's reign – had much to do with history. No matter when you come, there's never anybody about.

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These days, the bridge
which bumps across the narrow brook
is of an anachronistic brick;
even then, that ‘rivulet’, that ‘tinkling rill’,
inspired no more than doggerel.
What it bequeaths to posterity
is not romantic, not even twee.
From here, you can ramble or rev uphill.

Ramble in summer, as many do,
you’re in a pastoral fiction.
From the larches, a linnet sings;
it’s mellifluous rhythms
mock the moated grange.
Like Cambridge choirs, bees and gnats
rehearse inevitable murmurings.

Drive in midwinter, as we have done,
the sky remains in folds.
The Rectory hides behind its hedge.
The greenstone church – irrelevant – squats
asleep on its slope-top;
only thickets of snowdrops fist
through the graveyard grass.

We twist
an iron ring and struggle in.
The thirteen pews take shape.
“How dark and strange!”
Finally, we purchase
bland postcards of this picturesqueness
and sign the book in cold biro.

Even then, there’d have been little to spy
beneath the haggard cedar-limbs;
these days, there’s less ....
Why, then, may we be seen,
malingering up this lane,
listening out for a sonorous voice
that dully addressed a century
in an archaic diction
– the code of legends and hymns?
It isn’t our idea of erudite fun.
Stand too long and look,
an east-wind leaps and bites;
crows complain across the field.
We loiter, then, without intent
to understand this world?
Not quite:

above the brook,
we seek an inspiration
where the language of the nation
was perfected to death;
its terminal ornateness
brought a kind of greatness,
brings us to this bend:
not — so you might think — to mourn,
but to take in a place of birth,
contact a muse more suited to refine
than to invent ....
Somersby, we like to note, is not a dead-end;
three roads meander out.

**Somersby** is one of sixteen poems in Peter Cash’s **Lincolnshire Churches**, published by Shoestring Press of Nottingham in 1998. Among the others are Bag Enderby and Harrington, also about places closely connected with Tennyson.

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