Alfred Tennyson: Problems of Biography

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In 1862, soon after the death of her beloved Prince Consort, Queen Victoria received Tennyson and said to him, 'Next to the Bible, In Memoriam is my comfort.' This famous remark reminds us of what we are looking at when we read In Memoriam: a great national monument which spoke centrally to the age about faith, love, and bereavement. Critics and biographers ever since have worked to exhume less noble and more personal topics from this poem, but in so doing they—we—have been working against the spirit both of the poem’s first audience and of the poet’s deeply held convictions. Tennyson himself hated biographical investigation into the lives of poets. He thought that Richard Monckton Milnes’s Life and Letters of John Keats (1848) was an outrageous intrusion into the personal life of the poet, and that all such enterprises were improper.

At the same time, Tennyson was a personal friend of Monckton Milnes (later Lord Houghton). The two men had been contemporaries and friends at Trinity College, Cambridge—and moreover, Milnes had written one of the warmest and most intelligent of the reviews of Tennyson’s 1842 volume. Tennyson’s son (and devoted secretary), Hallam, reported that his father ‘was indignant that Keats’ wild love letters should have been published’, but that he did not want to identify publicly the book that had so annoyed him. The poem therefore has the guarded title ‘To —— After Reading A Life and Letters’:

For now the Poet cannot die,
Nor leave his music as of old,
But round him ere he scarce be cold
Begins the scandal and the cry:
‘Proclaim the faults he would not show:
Break lock and seal; betray the trust:
Keep nothing sacred: ’tis but just
The many headed beast should know.’

Ah shameless! for he did but sing
A song that pleased us from its worth;
No public life was his on earth,
No blazoned statesman he, nor king.

I am grateful to Professor Leonée Ormond for her invaluable help with this essay.

1 Queen Victoria, quoted by Hallam Tennyson, Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1897), i, 485.


3 Hallam Tennyson, quoted in The Poems of Tennyson, ed. by Christopher Ricks, 2nd edn, 3 vols (London: Longman, 1987), ii, 297. Quotations from Tennyson’s poems other than In Memoriam are followed by volume and page number of this edition. Quotations from In Memoriam, all from vol. ii, are followed by the number or name of the section or lyric in parenthesis.

Yearbook of English Studies, 36.2 (2006), 78–95
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He gave the people of his best:
His worst he kept, his best he gave.
My Shakespeare's curse on clown and knave
Who will not let his ashes rest!

(II, 298)

Julia Margaret Cameron, the celebrated photographer who was Tennyson's friend and neighbour at Freshwater in the Isle of Wight, quoted him in 1862 as saying that the lives of great men were like 'pigs to be ripped open for the public'. He himself, he said, would be 'ripped open like a pig' and he 'thanked God Almighty' that he knew nothing 'of Shakespeare but his writings', and that 'there were no letters preserved either of Shakespeare's or Jane Austen's, that they had not been ripped open like pigs'. Tennyson's early life may have been something that he wanted to keep quiet about, although his biographers have all found rich and extraordinary material in it. He was the third of eleven children of the brilliant Dr George Tennyson, a depressed and angry Lincolnshire clergyman who died of drink in 1831 and may have suffered from epilepsy. Alfred certainly feared that he himself was epileptic. The trances and periods of absence suffered by some of the characters in his poetry—in The Princess, for example—may be based on this haunting fear of epilepsy and its symptoms. Sir Charles Tennyson, his grandson, described the rector's seven sons and four daughters as tall, swarthy, gifted people, almost all of whom wrote poetry and 'retained through life a marked Lincolnshire accent'. They were all 'eccentric, untidy, and absent-minded; all had a strong mystical tendency combined with a marked sense of humour and a habit of saying whatever was in their minds'. The 'neurosis' that affected all the siblings was extreme in the cases of Edward, who died in an asylum, and of Septimus, who became pathologically withdrawn. Their father's alcoholism was inherited by several of the brothers, including, probably, Alfred himself. The family sounds Gothic, but Charles Tennyson prefers to call them children of the Gothic Revival, and he quotes a contemporary who said that 'each sister selected a true knight or esquire from amongst the brothers, with whom their words of encouragement and smiles of approval were always high reward'.

Tennyson had known Monckton Milnes intimately since their undergraduate days. In 1829 they were both elected, on the same day, as members of the Cambridge Conversazione Society. This 'secret' society of twelve young men, most of them from Trinity, known familiarly as 'The Apostles', was of great importance in Tennyson's life. As Robert Bernard Martin puts it:


Charles Tennyson, 'The Somersby Tennysons', Victorian Studies, 7 (December 1963), 7–55 (pp. 7–8). For an excellent clear account of Tennyson's boyhood see Leonée Ormond, Alfred Tennyson: A Literary Life (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 1–11.

Henry Evan Smith, quoted by Charles Tennyson, p. 46.
The group remained all his life the model of what such an organization should be. Many of the clubs to which he subsequently belonged owed part of their character to the example of the Apostles. The Sterling Club, the Cosmopolitan Club, the Metaphysical Society, and even the London Library, of which he was President at his death, have all been claimed as offspring of the Apostles.7

The group also, of course, cemented Tennyson’s famous friendship with another undergraduate, Arthur Henry Hallam, who had been elected to the Apostles in the previous year, and had pressed for Tennyson’s election. The society existed for serious discussion of philosophical and moral topics, but it also existed for fun, fellowship, and laughter (there was never anything serious about Monckton Milnes, who was later to introduce Swinburne to the dubious joys of flagellant pornography). The Apostles would meet on Saturday evenings after hall in the rooms of one of the members. The outer and the inner doors were locked to keep out casual friends or nosy acquaintances, and a member would read a paper as the basis for discussion. There was complete confidentiality, no subject was forbidden, no speculation was too dangerous. Hallam was seen as the intellectual star of the society and Tennyson as its sombre genius. Those gatherings inform the parts of In Memoriam which recall Hallam’s brilliance in argument, his physical beauty as he spoke, and the sober quiet reflectiveness of the friends as they thrashed out the issues to which they addressed themselves.8 They also, I think, enabled Tennyson to explore Neoplatonism in his elegy for his brilliant friend.

In the latter part of his undergraduate years (and thereafter) Tennyson faced a series of reversals. Unwise investment in a mechanical wood-carving business set up by a supposedly trustworthy acquaintance in the 1830s dissipated the small capital that Tennyson inherited, and he suffered from depression and psychosomatic physical ill health during much of the 1830s—the consequences of the early death of his father from alcoholism, adverse reviews, the shattering death of Hallam, and the rejection, because of his poverty, by the daughter of a wealthy family (a woman called Rosa Baring, a model for the eponymous Maud). It is not clear how committed Tennyson was to this woman. Martin thinks that he was not at all serious about her, and Ormond gives a balanced account of the question,9 but it is beyond doubt that for one reason or another 1830–50 were years of financial stringency and personal and literary discouragement.

William Allingham and James Knowles became Tennyson’s self-appointed Boswells, often visiting him and recording his conversation. Allingham’s Diary is a major source for Tennyson scholars, and Knowles, who wanted to write a full-length biography, published a reminiscence of Tennyson three months after the poet’s death in 1892. This was received by Emily Tennyson, the poet’s wife, as ‘treachery’ and ‘grievous wrong’.10 The piece is wholly laudatory and is also of great value to subsequent scholars—Ricks quotes it regularly in his 1987

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9 Martin, pp. 218–22; Ormond, pp. 64–67.
edition of the poems—but in the reminiscence Knowles refers to Tennyson’s sensitivity to criticism, and that was enough to condemn him in the eyes of his widow. In 1897 Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir was published by his son Hallam Tennyson: a work designed by Lady Tennyson and her son to block all future biography and to put an end to the pig-ripping activities of the clowns and the knaves. Tennyson’s view of the biographer’s duty was simple: ‘The worth of a biography depends on whether it is done by one who wholly loves the man whose life he writes, yet loves him with a discriminating love.’

The poem on the Keats biography is in the same metre as In Memoriam, the elegy for his friend Hallam, who died in 1833. This poem was of course secret and private. It was written over a period of seventeen years as a personal meditation on love and grief, it was not intended for publication until the persuasion of friends and of his wife brought him to the point, and even then it was published anonymously in the first instance. As Tennyson famously told his friend Knowles:

It is rather the cry of the whole human race than mine. In the poem altogether private grief swells out into thought of, and hope for, the whole world. It begins with a funeral and ends with a marriage—begins with death and ends in promise of a new life—a sort of Divine Comedy, cheerful at the close. It is a very impersonal poem as well as personal. (Knowles, p. 96)

It is a reworking of Michelangelo’s and Shakespeare’s sonnets and of Dante’s Divine Comedy; it is an elegy in the tradition of Lycidas and Adonais and it echoes both those poems. Further, it is a formal working of Shelley’s passionate energy into a tight structure (Shelley had been a hero of Tennyson’s since his adolescence); it is an extended love poem addressed by a man to another man; it is an inventory of the major landscapes that structured the poet’s own being; it is lyrical, personal, and violently emotional; it is formal, architectural, and austere; it is in some ways a mess.

Michelangelo’s sonnets sometimes say that poetry is like sculpture, and where a sculpture will be destroyed by time the beauty perceived by the artist survives in an ideal world, or place. Shakespeare’s sonnets often say that the sonnet and the love that has prompted the sonnet may both survive and in any case both are transitory, both are a process, experienced as liberating, rather than a final form; Tennyson’s sequence of near-sonnets tells us that the process—life—is not liberating, it is a trap, and that the exits from it are labelled Christianity, Platonism, geology, landscape and the natural world, love, and evolution. All are considered. Christianity and evolution—the beloved friend who so closely resembles Christ being an evolutionary advance on the rack of current humanity—are the preferred exits, but they are also in violent tension with each other, and we can know that they are preferred only by noting their positions in the poem, namely first and last. And that in turn causes us to recall that those positions of those poems were arrived at very late—the order of the poems in In Memoriam, and the title of the whole work, appear to be the last two items over which Tennyson could bring himself to take decisions. There is thus a

11 Hallam Tennyson, ii, 165.
12 Peter M. Sacks, The English Elegy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), gives an account of the connections between In Memoriam and these precursor elegies which is unsurpassed.
case for the view that the whole poem is synchronic, that the entire text exists simultaneously in the mind, and that we are not really permitted to think of it as having a beginning and an end, nor even a title: its two working titles were ‘fragments of an elegy’ and ‘the way of the soul’. The final title was proposed by Tennyson’s wife at a very late stage indeed.

John D. Rosenberg remarks that ‘the nature of Tennyson’s sexuality in In Memoriam has been in question since the publication of the poem’ and he invites us to see the love between Hallam and Tennyson as a matter of ‘a sexuality so primal and all-encompassing that it lacks gender specificity or constancy’.

That is generously meant, but too opaque to be helpful. Nor, despite the good intelligent arguments of (among others) Christopher Craft, Jeff Nunokawa, and Alan Sinfield, is the word ‘homosexual’ appropriate to this relationship. As Mark Kinkead-Weekes says (in connection with D. H. Lawrence):

Our culture is seriously at fault in having no language for the whole spectrum of possibility and satisfaction that lies between the admission of sexual attractiveness between men, and the fulfilment of sexual desire in acts of sodomy and mutual masturbation. The word ‘homosexual’—especially if opposed to ‘heterosexual’ as though these were categorically exclusive—is of confusing span, and hence intolerable crudity.

Plato and Shakespeare help us to explore the nature of this love. The high-minded and argumentative Cambridge Apostles could see themselves mirrored in the guests at The Symposium, and that and the Phaedrus were texts that Tennyson would certainly have discussed with Hallam. In 1831 Hallam explored the teaching in those works that love of the beautiful leads to moral love of the good, ‘a practice favoured by the language of his country, where from an early period the same τὸ καλὸν had comprehended them both’.

Hallam confronts the fact that Plato is speaking of love between men. He writes warmly of Plato’s ‘frequent commendation of a more lively sentiment than has existed in other times between man and man the misunderstanding of which has repelled several from the deep tenderness and splendid imagination of the Phaedrus and the Symposium’. Such ‘misunderstanding’ clearly worried Tennyson a great deal, and during the seventeen years that he took to write In Memoriam he often revised his lyrics ‘to obscure and make less personal the references to himself and to Arthur Hallam’.

The Platonic dream is union with Hallam through memory or through the action described in the Phaedrus as a moral condition which lifts the individual out of selfish narrowness into a visionary and noble condition of mind.

In the 1530s Michelangelo fell in love with a young nobleman, Tommaso de’ Cavalieri, and he seems to have found that the Neoplatonism of the Florentine circle to which he belonged helped him to explore this love in his sonnets. Michelangelo knew Plato’s *Symposium*, and in particular the interpretation of that ancient text by Marsilio Ficino, the Florentine philosopher who flourished under the patronage of Lorenzo de’ Medici. In essence Ficino’s Neoplatonism privileges spiritual love above sexual love and thus allows the *Symposium* to be compatible with Christian teaching: the beauty of the beloved male friend is a reflection of the greater beauty of the creator. The best known of Michelangelo’s sonnets to Tommaso, normally published as no. 83, is fully Neoplatonic: erotic love for this man’s physical beauty leads to knowledge of the divine source of all beauty. We may feel that the poem aches with restraint:

Veggio nel tuo bel viso, signor mio,  
quell che narrar mal puossi in questa vita:  
l’anima, della carne ancor vestita,  
con esso è gia più volte ascesa a Dio.

I see in your beautiful face, my lord, what can scarcely be related in this life: my soul, although still clothed in its flesh, has already risen often with it to God.

His second quatrain defends this love with angry dignity from mischievous ‘misunderstanding’:

E se ’l vulgo malvagio, isciocco e rio,  
di quell che sente, altrui segna e addita,  
non è l’intensa voglia men gradita,  
l’amor, la fede e l’onesto desio.

And if the evil, cruel, and stupid rabble point the finger at others for what they feel themselves, my intense longing is no less welcome to me, nor my love, my faith, and my virtuous desire.

Michelangelo’s opinion of certain kinds of commentary was as robust as Tennyson’s.

Book x of the *Republic* identifies God as he who makes the one thing, the thing-in-itself of which all visible things are a lower representation. The perfect Form is at all times greater than mere art. In the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* this is linked directly to homoerotic love which both maddens and elevates the lover, leading him upward to a perfect state. In *In Memoriam* persistently figures the beloved as a man to be compared to those who in one way or another embody perfection. Hallam is compared to Michelangelo’s Adam and to his David. He is also compared delicately but clearly to Christ. ‘It is the day that he was born’ (107) juxtaposes Hallam’s birthday—1 February 1811—with the third of the three Christmases.

It is Platonic to personify Time (by giving the word a capital T). Modern editors of Shakespeare’s sonnets tend to Platonize his use of the word, as in Sonnet 60:

18 I am paraphrasing the introduction to *The Poetry of Michelangelo*, ed. by James S. Saslow (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 30–33. My quotations from Michelangelo are from this edition; the English translations of his work are by Saslow.

19 Saslow, p. 195.
Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end,
Each changing place with that which goes before,
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.
Nativity, once in the main of light,
Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crowned
Crooked eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,
And Time that gave doth now his gift confound.

Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth,
And delves the parallels in beauty's brow,
Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow.
And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,
Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand.

Time thus Platonized figures in In Memoriam’s ‘Be near me when my light is low’:

Be near me when the sensuous frame
Is racked with pangs that conquer trust;
And Time, a maniac scattering dust,
And Life, a Fury slinging flame.

And union with the beloved friend in a Platonic might-have-been is poignantly imagined in the mystical poem in which Tennyson is reunited in spirit with the friend. The poet recalls how he and some friends at Somersby remembered Hallam one hot summer evening when the bats ‘went round in fragrant skies’ and the poet reread Hallam’s letters: ‘strangely on the silence broke [The silent-speaking words]’. This leads directly to a spiritual embrace:

So word by word, and line by line,
The dead man touched me from the past,
And all at once it seemed at last
The living soul was flashed on mine,
And mine in this was wound, and whirled
About empyreal heights of thought,
And came on that which is, and caught
The deep pulsations of the world[.]

In draft this read: ‘His living soul was flashed on mine, [And mine in his was wound].’ Presumably the suggestion here of physical love-making between two souls (if such a thing is conceivable) again raised anxiety about ‘misunderstanding’, so the poet revised it. The narrow margin between the erotic and emotional is impeding the poet’s quest for the right words in which to frame his love. Language is coarse and clumsy, like the ‘weeds’ of a widow’s mourning:

In words, like weeds, I’ll wrap me o’er,
Like coarsest clothes against the cold:

Some of Tennyson’s early sonnets are Shakespearian love poems to Hallam. Two of these, published in the 1832 volume, seem to be two stages in a drama. The first echoes the pain of Shakespeare’s sonnets to his lordly young idol. The speaker’s commitment to the beloved is absolute, but he fears that his love is not reciprocated:

If I were loved, as I desire to be,  
What is there in the great sphere of the earth, 
And range of evil between death and birth, 
That I should fear,—if I were loved by thee? 
All the inner, all the outer world of pain 
Clear Love would pierce and cleave, if thou wert mine, 
As I have heard that, somewhere in the main, 
Fresh-water springs come up through bitter brine. 
'Twere joy, not fear, claspt hand-in-hand with thee, 
To wait for death—mute—careless of all ills, 
Apart upon a mountain, though the surge 
Of some new deluge from a thousand hills 
Flung leagues of roaring foam into the gorge 
Below us, as far on as eye could see. 

This poem is balanced by a happier and more domestic sonnet, where the two friends are together in an undergraduate room in Trinity, companionably quiet. The union of their minds is mystical and timeless, and the speaker remembers that their love dates from the moment of their first meeting. ‘When first I looked upon your face’, he says confidently, the two young men knew that they were made for each other:

As when with downcast eyes we muse and brood,  
And ebb into a former life, or seem  
To lapse far back in some confused dream  
To states of mystical similitude;  
If one but speaks or hems or stirs his chair,  
Ever the wonder waxeth more and more,  
So that we say, ‘All this hath been before,  
All this hath been, I know not when or where.’  
So, friend, when first I looked upon your face,  
Our thought gave answer each to each, so true—  
Opposed mirrors each reflecting each—  
That though I knew not in what time or place,  
Methought that I had often met with you,  
And either lived in either’s heart and speech. 

What was the nature of the love between Hallam and Tennyson? One answer to that would be to say ’Why complicate the obvious?’ Seamus Perry puts the matter simply: ’Tennyson was clearly much in love with him (and loved in
Some of the lyrics seem to display that love in joyously physical terms. The poet begs Hallam’s ghost to penetrate him, ‘Descend, and touch, and enter; hear, the wish too strong for words to name’ (93). (Wilde’s ‘love that dare not speak its name’ sounds like an echo of that second line.) Again, to avoid ‘misunderstanding’ (presumably), the first line of 93 was revised from ‘Stoop soul & touch me; wed me: hear, The wish’ (and so forth).23 To modern ears the revised state, ‘touch, and enter’, is far less decorous than was ‘touch me: wed me’. John D. Rosenberg says firmly that if we think we overhear the act of sodomy at this point that is because we have been over-sensitized to sexual meanings by Freud and his successors. We now believe that reality ‘wells up from within us’, and we will inevitably experience much of the poem as having ‘sexual force’. ‘Tennyson’s contemporaries, in touch with a more ancient tradition, and used to looking up rather than down or within for the sources of the real, would have been more aware of the Christian iconographic, than the phallic, allusion.’24

We look down (at the genitals) while Tennyson is looking up, and the passion for Hallam is finely balanced between the erotic and religious. Rosenberg refers helpfully to Hopkins, whose emotional feeling for boys and men—the ‘bell-bright bodies huddling out’ in ‘Epithalamion’, for example—is both transparent and unconscious, while the declared, overt passion is for a very male, strong, and physical Christ, whose ‘world-wielding shoulder’, in ‘Hurrahing in Harvest’, is ‘very-violet-sweet’.25

In the sonnets from Tennyson that I have cited here, as well as in In Memoriam, Hallam is both a beautiful beloved man and an embodiment of the good, which is virtually the same as saying that Hallam is a beautiful beloved man because he is an embodiment of the good.

The three-stanza lyric in In Memoriam is deployed to focus, stabilize, and distil the swirling patterns of meditation and feeling that mark the progression of the longer lyrics. With its tightly packed formal structure it approximates to the Shakespearian or Petrarchan sonnet. Tennyson obviously knew that Shakespeare’s pivotal Sonnet 126 has only twelve lines.26 We can assume that he knew that some of Michelangelo’s sonnets, like some of Shakespeare’s, express love for another man, and we can assume that he knew that there are eight-line stanzas which stand as complete poems among Michelangelo’s fourteen-line sonnets. With their radical compression the twelve-line lyrics that we find studding the whole work from its beginning force us to use reading skills that we have acquired from reading sonnets by Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Keats, Wordsworth, Hopkins, Rossetti, and Yeats. This is true of 5 (‘I

22 Shatto and Shaw, p. 110 n.
23 Rosenberg, p. 307.
25 Colin Burrow follows the First Quarto of 1609 in printing the two pairs of italic brackets to indicate the missing thirteenth and fourteenth lines, arguing that ‘the curves of the lunulæ (or brackets) may graphically evoke both a crescent moon and the curve of Time’s sickle’ (p. 632).
sometimes hold it half a sin'), 7, 119, 123 (‘There rolls the deep where grew the
tree’), 131, and, especially, 129.

Skills acquired from classical poetry also come into play. ‘Elegy’ has had its
modern sense only since the sixteenth century, as Shatto and Shaw point out. Greek elegies from the third century BC were tightly formal love lyrics, and that
tradition was followed by the great Latin poets, including Propertius and Ovid:

Sections 7 (‘Dark house, by which once more I stand’) and 119 (‘Doors, where my heart
was used to beat’) — the admired companion-pieces on the poet standing outside Arthur
Hallam’s house in Wimpole Street — are adaptations of the genre (paraclausithyron) in
which the poet-lover stands outside the house of his mistress at night and laments that
the door is bolted against him. 25

Lyric 129 combines the ancient and the modern senses of ‘elegy’ with the
compression of the sonnet, and it presents a culmination of the several ‘Hallams’
whom the poem has celebrated: father of the coming race, the supreme scientist
who has explored further than mere mortals can, and here the perfection by
which the rest of creation is to be measured. He, Hallam, becomes for a moment
the Platonic measure of absolute good, the thing-in-itself:

Dear friend, far off, my lost desire,
So far, so near in woe and weal;
O loved the most, when most I feel
There is a lower and a higher;
Known and unknown; human, divine;
Sweet human hand and lips and eye;
Dear heavenly friend that canst not die,
Mine, mine, for ever, ever mine;
Strange friend, past, present, and to be;
Loved deeper, darker understood;
Behold, I dream a dream of good,
And mingle all the world with thee.

(129)

Hallam was the supreme orator among the ‘Apostles’, and as his rhetoric took
wing so his physical beauty became irresistible and Godlike, he was illuminated
from within and his eyes shone, he came to resemble Michelangelo’s David
with the great ridge of flesh — ‘the bar of Michael Angelo’ (87) — above the
nose, which is said to have been a feature of Michelangelo himself.

Poem 85 also compares Hallam to a Michelangelo figure, this time with Adam
on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel:

My blood an even tenor kept,
Till on mine ear this message falls,
That in Vienna’s fatal walls
God’s finger touched him, and he slept.

(85)

The history of God’s seeming arbitrariness in this poem is bound up with
its attitude to evolution. To speak of evolution in connection with the poem
is a slight anachronism because it was published in 1850, and Darwin’s great

25 Shatto and Shaw, p. 27.
work *On the Origin of Species* was not published until 1859. But evolution in a pre-Darwinian sense was a hot topic while Tennyson was writing the elegy. In 1844 the publishing sensation of the century took place. A work of geology called *Vestiges of Creation* took the nation by storm, had sensational sales, and caused great anxiety in the Church of England because it appeared to say that the story of mankind given in the books of Moses were simply wrong and that man was one of a species. Worse, it said that man was the product of mutation. Much excellent geology had been published by this time, by William Buckland, Adam Sedgwick, William Whewell, and others, but all these men were priests of the Church of England and senior figures at Oxford and Cambridge, and their geological findings tended not to rock the theological boat. Buckland in particular was very careful to write an account of creation that could accommodate itself to the 'six days' of the Mosaic narrative, yet he was a serious experimental geologist who was making major discoveries in the 1820s. He, Sedgwick, Whewell, and other distinguished men all felt bound to retain and somehow fit the Mosaic story—especially the story of the Flood—to their empirical findings. Charles Lyell in *Principles of Geology*, who did not have the same professional reasons for displaying caution, nevertheless does not propose that species mutate, though his central finding—that the fossil record forces us to acknowledge that the earth is much older than any biblical narrative seems to permit—was in itself sufficiently startling. *Vestiges of Creation* was clear about mutation. It anticipated Darwin by saying that man was not in God’s image, man was a descendant of apes. *Vestiges* remained anonymous until after its author’s death. The first edition of the book to acknowledge its authorship on the title-page appeared in 1884. In the 1840s, though, the authorship was widely guessed and hinted at—the young Darwin, already famous for his book about the voyage of the *Beagle*, was suspected, so were Prince Albert, Harriet Martineau, Anna Jameson, and Lady Pauline Trevelyan. If it was Darwin or the Prince then it had to be taken seriously—if, though, it was the work of a woman, or of some political radical, or of a Scottish journalist such as Robert Chambers, then it was not a serious scientific work and could be seen in a different way. The author was, of course, the last-mentioned, one of the two brothers who published Chambers’s *Edinburgh Journal* and a prolific and successful journalist rather than a scientist. Chambers took the view that it would damage his business and alienate all his respectable Edinburgh friends if his authorship were known. Lady Trevelyan, to return to her, was a close friend of Chambers, she was in Edinburgh when the *Vestiges* was published, she heard the gossip and was reasonably sure that Chambers had written it, but she did not have hard evidence. Nobody did. Only three men—Robert Chambers’s brother, and two friends who acted as channels for the anonymous publication of the book—knew who the author was.

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28 (London: Murray, 1833).
29 Robert Chambers, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1884).
30 The story is given in full in James Secord, *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publica-
Anonymous publication was far more common then than it is now. Most reviews in most journals were anonymous and used the first-person plural—‘we’ think this or that—as though to say that the opinions expressed were those of the periodical and not of an individual. Much backstabbing resulted from this, of course. The literary world was quite rough, hence perhaps the anonymity of all Lady Trevelyan’s journalism—published by Chambers—and also the anonymous, or pseudonymous, publication of some of the most famous novels of the day, including, obviously, those of the Brontës and George Eliot. Dickens, that extravagantly self-promoting figure, adopted the opposite policy and had his name all over his periodicals to the exclusion of those of his contributors.

The publication of In Memoriam was anonymous not because Tennyson did not want to be ‘known’ as a poet—he very much wanted public recognition—but for reasons to do with the private and personal nature of the work and also with the risky nature of some of the passages to do with geology. The authorship did not remain a secret for long, but when it first appeared the effect of its anonymity was rather like the effect of that of Chambers’s book. This was a public work, clearly by a major writer, which by virtue of having no name attached to it seemed to be voicing general preoccupations and anxieties of the age. Tennyson read Vestiges of Creation and was fascinated by it, and much of the evolutionary content of the poem could appear to have come from it. Yet the dates do not tally; the history of the poem’s composition shows that the relevant lyrics were actually written before the sensational appearance of Vestiges.

When dealing with the natural world, In Memoriam asks a stark question. How can a divinely ordered universe permit such a disastrous and meaningless event as the death of Hallam? Does this mean that the universe is not divinely ordered, that there is no scheme? The questioner tentatively hopes that the rules of what used to be called ‘natural theology’, the title of a celebrated work by the churchman and geologist William Paley, are still operating. 31 Paley’s book was gratefully seized on by theologians because it appeared to accommodate the record of the rocks with Genesis. N. A. Rupke’s influential study of William Buckland and other early nineteenth-century geologists proposes that, despite the unsettling voices of Charles Lyell, Robert Chambers, and others, the ‘English School’ of geology was able to make a comfortable reconciliation of theology and geology for much of the nineteenth century. Rupke devotes an important chapter to his study of Tennyson’s reading of geology, which he sees as belonging to the tradition of the English School, and therefore ‘sharply contrasted to the views of Lyell’. He says that ‘Neither organic evolution nor Lyellian geology occurs in The Princess or In Memoriam. The reading of organic evolution into these poems [i.e. poems 50–56] is based on the elementary mistake of confusing the theory of progressive succession with that of evolution.’ 32

164, 165

is indeed the case that the succession of species is the cause of distress in lyric 56; man, the ‘last work’ of Nature, has succeeded the dinosaurs but will be succeeded in his turn. Later in the poem, though, Tennyson does appear to permit mutation of species.

The most sceptical lyrics of *In Memoriam* ask daring questions, but they are not answered; instead the focus moves from the question to the questioner. This is not discursive prose; this is lyrical and dramatic art. Poem 54 offers no more than a hope ‘that somehow good Will be the final goal of ill’. And it closes by turning the lens on the speaker:

So runs my dream: but what am I?
An infant crying in the night:
An infant crying for the light:
And with no language but a cry.

The questioner asks, further, whether the premiss of Lyell—that God has created a great machine, called the natural world, and then left it to its own devices—has gone horribly wrong:

Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life.

(55)

The perceived strife between God and Nature seems to be confirmed in the following lyric, which is openly sceptical of the sequence. Man, ‘who trusted God was love indeed’, receives no more mercy from this horrible machine called Nature than did the dinosaurs. Like them, man will vanish:

A monster then, a dream,
A discord. Dragons of the prime,
That tare each other in their slime,
Were mellow music matched with him.

(56)

As all readers of the poem will have discovered, this despair is balanced later (after the third Christmas) in a group of lyrics which seem to anticipate the resolute social and biological optimism of reformers such as William Morris and H. G. Wells, together with Wells’s mentor Thomas Henry Huxley—the famous popularizer of Darwin who taught Wells biology at the ‘Normal School of Science’ in South Kensington (now Imperial College). The human species will evolve above the animal and will steadily improve. Time, personified enemy of Shakespeare’s sonnets and of earlier sections of *In Memoriam* (the ‘maniac scattering dust’ (50)), is now an ally in the cause of human progress:

Contemplate all this work of Time,
The giant labouring in his youth;
Nor dream of human love and truth,
As dying Nature’s earth and lime.

pp. 226–27. In the 1969 edition of *The Poems of Tennyson* Ricks sees the poet as influenced primarily by Lyell, but in the 1987 revised edition, in the light of Rupke’s work, he modifies that position and quotes this passage from Rupke (Ricks, ii (1987), p. 371 n.).
We are all steadily getting better, we can leave the animal part of ourselves behind. Plato said this as well, and Tennyson here anchors Platonism and Victorian geology to each other to create a vision of man rising above his animal nature:

> Arise and fly
> The reeling Faun, the sensual feast;
> Move upward, working out the beast,
> And let the ape and tiger die.

(118)

Apes and tigers, those endangered species, are being all too thoroughly marginalized in favour of a kind of Super-Hallam, or Uber-Hallam, who will inherit the earth in the final poem, the marriage poem for his sister Cecilia and his friend Lushington. The poet figures himself leaving the wedding party to look at the familiar landscape lovingly lit by a splendid and tender moon. He thinks of the whole solar system in motion and the aeons of time to come, matching those that have already elapsed. In this future will emerge the ‘crowning race’ of which Hallam is the forerunner:

> No longer half-akin to brute,
> For all we thought and loved and did,
> And hoped, and suffered, is but seed
> Of what in them is flower and fruit;
> Whereof the man, that with me trod
> This planet, was a noble type
> Appearing ere the times were ripe,
> That friend of mine who lives in God[.]

(Epilogue)

The landscape most closely linked in Tennyson’s mind to this epiphanic vision of Hallam is that of Cauteretz, in the French Pyrenees (and near the Spanish border), where he remembered travelling with Hallam on their way to Spain in 1830. The two young men were supporting (with an impulsiveness worthy of Tennyson’s beloved Shelley) a group of conspirators against ‘the Inquisition and the tyranny of Ferdinand, King of Spain’. Alan Sinfield thinks that the love between them was consummated during this stirring expedition. That seems unlikely; if it were true one would surely have expected reticence and circumspection in place of the passionate openness with which Tennyson remembers the scene.33 The poem In the Valley of Cauteretz revisits in 1861 ‘a valley in the Pyrenees, where I had been with Arthur Hallam’:

> All along the valley, stream that flasheth white,
> Deepening thy voice with the deepening of the night,
> All along the valley, where thy waters flow,
> I walked with one I loved two and thirty years ago.
> All along the valley, while I walked today,
> The two and thirty years were a mist that rolls away;
> For all along the valley, down thy rocky bed,
> Thy living voice to me was as the voice of the dead,

33 Hallam Tennyson, i, p. 51; Sinfield, p. 131; see also Ormond, pp. 32–33.
And all along the valley, by rock and cave and tree,
The voice of the dead was a living voice to me.

(II, 618–19)

The most mysterious of Wordsworth’s ‘Lucy’ poems is surely recalled here: the involvement of the dead with rolling of the earth’s diurnal course, and its rocks and stones and trees. The real place visited in the present and the passionately remembered scene fold over onto each other so that real and ideal, worldly and Platonic, memory and experience, for a moment become one. The dream or utopian landscapes—the isle of the Lotos-eaters, the eastern isle in *Locksley Hall*, the receding horizon in *Ulysses*, the interior of *The Palace of Art*—are on the whole kept firmly separate from the real. In *Locksley Hall* the utopian landscape is part of the empire—therefore real—but represents a release for the trapped and frustrated young man. This too, of course, refracts a distantly perceived political reality, since the empire was the arena in which younger sons could make enough money to live the gentlemanly life to which they were born. Still, this young man clearly thinks of his exotic islands not as extensions of industrial Britain but as welcome contrasts to it, and it is sensual delight rather than wealth that he looks for in this virgin world. The speaker longs ‘to burst all links of habit—there to wander far away, On from island unto island at the gateways of the day’ (II, 128).

Richard Chenevix Trench, a fellow Apostle at Trinity and later Archbishop of Dublin, rebuked Tennyson for his escapism: ‘Tennyson, we cannot live in Art’ (quoted by Ricks, I, 436). *The Palace of Art* springs from that rebuke. Tennyson wishes to show that we can live ‘the Godlike life’. But in fact the poem finds the Godlike perspective tiring and retreats comfortably from it to return to the domestic and the prosaic. The poem begins like a quieter version of Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’—‘I built my soul a lordly pleasure-house Wherein at ease for aye to dwell’ (I, 438), and it continues as very much a Cambridge Apostles’ poem, a product of undergraduate society and undergraduate thinking, just as *The Princess* was a little later. And in *The Lotos-Eaters* Odysseus’s companions take refuge on a utopian island which frees them from all responsibility. Their wives will have taken new husbands, their deeds are forgotten, their sons will have inherited, their little Greek communities will be all in confusion: who would want to go back to that?

How sweet it were, hearing the downward stream,
With half-shut eyes ever to seem
Falling asleep in a half-dream!
To dream and dream, like yonder amber light,
Which will not leave the myrrh-bush on the height;
To hear each other’s whispered speech;
Eating the Lotos day by day,
To watch the crisping ripples on the beach,
And tender curving lines of creamy spray;
To lend our hearts and spirits wholly
To the influence of mild-minded melancholy.

(I, 472–73)

The Lincolnshire of Tennyson’s young manhood was not always associated
with love and home. It could be, and was, a landscape from which he longed to escape. He testifies that in childhood the phrase ‘Far, far away’ haunted him, and in old age—1889, to be precise, when he was eighty years old—he made the phrase the refrain of a song:

What sight so lured him through the fields he knew
As where earth’s green stole into heaven’s own hue
Far—far—away?

... Far, far, how far? From o’er the gates of Birth,
The faint horizons, all the bounds, of earth,
Far—far—away?

(iii, 197–98)

Far away from—among other things—the sour, damp, dark landscape of *Mariana* (1830), ostensibly Shakespeare’s Vienna but clearly the young Alfred’s Lincolnshire:

The broken sheds looked sad and strange:
Unlifted was the clinking latch;
Weeded and worn the ancient thatch
Upon the lonely moated grange.

(i, 206)

Far away and therefore over the sea, which Tennyson addressed shortly after Hallam’s death in the most haunting of all his lyrics:

Break, break, break,
On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!
And I would that my tongue could utter
The thoughts that arise in me.

(11, 24)

Tennyson recalled what he first saw at Mablethorpe, on the Lincolnshire coast: ‘all the rest of his long life he could remember the feel of the wind catching him as he stood on the high, tussocked bank that protected the level land behind him from the sea’.34 Here the sea’s music offers a release for the depth of feeling for which the words will not come.

He dreamt of escape but also enjoyed, in a sense, his entrapment, and he certainly believed that he, not Hallam, would be the first to die. Many of the earliest poems are about death and thoughts of suicide. In 1832 he published ‘My Life is full of Weary Days’, dedicated to ‘the lordly browed and gracious Hallam’. This is of course before Hallam’s death. The touch of Hallam’s hand as the friends part makes the poet imagine himself dead and buried in the Lincolnshire mud but still able to answer his friend’s voice, as the ghost of Hamlet’s father, the old mole, can still answer his son from the cellargerage:

And now shake hands across the brink
Of that deep grave to which I go

[. . .]

34 Martin, p. 22.
When in the darkness over me
The four-handed mole shall scrape[.]

(i, 383–84)

He was in bondage to landscapes that were psychologically charged, like that of *Maud* (1855): ‘I hate the dreadful hollow behind the little wood, [Its lips in the field above are dabbled with blood-red heath’ (ii, 519). This wood, scene of the suicide of the speaker’s father and the murder of Maud’s brother, is marked by Ruskin’s pathetic fallacy (red heather?) and replete with synecdoches which mark the violence of the world at large: ‘The Mayfly is torn by the swallow, the sparrow speared by the shrike, [And the whole little wood where I sit is a world of plunder and prey’ (ii, 529–30).

To read backwards from this poem of 1855 to the earlier poetry is to see many such landscapes both as projections of inner disorder and as marks of the trapped and depressive self that was the young Tennyson. Like Mariana in her grange, or the Lady of Shalott in her tower, or the Kraken at the bottom of the sea, the poet in the early works is typically immobilized, imprisoned, sequestered away from, and by, hostile landscapes. For the Lady of Shalott and for the Kraken release is achieved at the cost of their lives. And what does the future hold for Tennyson’s Mariana? In the source, *Measure for Measure*, she marries Angelo, but if we lift the lyric out of the play, then what? The draining of the daylight from stanza to stanza creates a mood suggesting that she must serve a life sentence in this Grange.

The biographer must read these moods in these landscapes and relate them to the recorded facts of Tennyson’s young life lived against the Tennysons’ collective drama of drink, violent rages, diffidence, depression, and outright insanity. The poet’s terror of adverse reviews, loathing of visitors and crowds, and hatred of lion-hunters, Americans, tourists, and biographers should all be seen against this background. Tennyson had famously poor eyesight and once emerged from his house at Farringford (at the western end of the Isle of Wight) yelling with rage at what he thought was a party of visitors on their way up to his house to catch a glimpse of him. It was actually a flock of sheep.

So which of the escape routes from the real did Tennyson take? The world of Platonic perfection would have been that in which Hallam had not died. The fallen world in which Hallam has in horrible fact died was pale and bloodless by contrast. The poet reads the letters of the beloved friend and immediately experiences him as restored, physically present (95)—the touch of the hand denied outside the house in Wimpole Street (7) has as it were been compensated for, as it will be fully and literally, outside the same house, in a later lyric (119). The friends are removed to an ideal world which appears to be that of τὸ καλόν, not that of any Christian ideal. The reader of the Prologue, resonantly starting with ‘Strong son of God’, will believe himself to be in a Christian poem; and indeed the first four stanzas reappear as Hymn 455 in *The New English Hymnal*. Poems 50–57 tell us with equal clarity that we are not in a Christian poem.

The Epilogue is a marriage poem or epithalamion; it is richly ambiguous about its belief but the balance favours evolution rather than Christianity, since it predicts a magnificent future race based on racially pure figures such as
Hallam presided over by a beneficent (pagan, visionary, and Romantic) moon. The rich chaotic blend of Romanticism, classicism, Shakespeare, and ardent chivalric homoerotic feeling which animates this poem helpfully frees it from any particular generic identity. It is an 'elegy' if we bear in mind both the ancient and the early modern usages of that term, and a Romantic landscape poem if we allow that the landscape becomes Platonized just as one begins to trust the notion that the poet may be using memory for the Wordsworthian purpose of reacquainting the mature poet with a young and lost self.

The close of the poem appears to say that the conflict between Christianity and science is resolved, but this 'conclusion' is not a conclusion; it does not put to rest the questions raised earlier in the most anguished, grief-stricken, and sceptical passages of the poem. Like the angel at Christ’s empty tomb, the lover in 7 says 'He is not here’, and we wait until 95 to have that aching absence at last reversed. The lover is granted a joyous embrace—'the dead man touched me from the past’—but this consummation, in which flesh and spirit have become one, is all too brief: 'At length my trance \(W\)as cancelled, stricken through with doubt’. The restoration of the lover is only partial. The relief from the agony of religious doubt is also no more than partial. The cruel and meaningless universe in 50–56 (‘Are God and Nature then at strife [. . .]?’) forces the poem to offer the formulation which expressed the dilemma of most thinking people in 1850: ‘There lives more faith in honest doubt \(B\)elieve me, than in half the creeds’ (96).

‘Trance/doubt’ in 95 and ‘faith/doubt’ in 96 form a double antithesis, leaving the questions both of religious faith and of Tennyson’s sexuality on a double knife-edge. The lyrics following the third Christmas, and the Epilogue, lead both of these issues away from danger and back to orthodox Christianity and sanctioned love in a single ceremony, the marriage of Tennyson’s sister to his friend Lushington. But the poem does not attempt to unsay what it has said about love between men and about the inadequacy of traditional faith; it prefers instead to leave these themes and their ostensible resolutions in an uneasy coexistence.