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Introduction

SOMETHING OF THE LIFE

Tennyson lived from 1809 to 1892. The third son among eleven children of a Lincolnshire clergyman, he worked only as a poet and became wealthy by poetry. His work inherited gratefully from the past, weaving past writing into the new by allusion. At a time when the usefulness of studying the Greek and Roman classics in an industrial economy was being queried, he kept them within literary consciousness. His extensive knowledge came first from his father, who educated him at home between the ages of ten and seventeen, when he went up to Trinity College, Cambridge. From his father's library came the encyclopaedic information that went into poems like *On Sublimity*, published in 1827 in *Poems by Two Brothers*. His father, Dr George Clayton Tennyson, predicted that Alfred would be a great poet, but was also the source of deep anxieties.

The rectory at Somersby was crowded, its eleven rooms housing 23 people, family and servants, in 1824. In a sonnet to Tennyson's mother on her husband's death, Arthur Hallam addressed her as 'Oh woman tried in danger and in pain'.[1] Her husband had been the danger to her; his drunkenness and violent rages told on the health of them all. Foreign travel was prescribed for him; Alfred, taking responsibility, felt that the younger sons would benefit by removal from the brooding atmosphere. Insanity, alcoholism and the epileptic seizures, to which the father was also subject, were feared to be hereditary; one son was confined to an asylum.

Their paternal grandfather had made money by the law and become quite a substantial landowner. He clearly preferred his second son, Charles, to George, the elder. The Somersby family always spoke of a disinheritance; though this is not strictly accurate, the story dramatized the complex bad relations between father and elder son, and excused the son's hatred of his profession, especially when his younger brother prospered in the law and politics. Old George Tennyson expected his sons to work as he had

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done, and wanted his three elder grandsons educated for similar professions, which they dodged. The family grievance reflects the more general problem of what the functions of education and the educated classes were in the nineteenth century: a problem Tennyson addressed in *The Palace of Art* and which, as a discussion of the values of work and leisure, runs through the 1842 *Poems*. Refuge from toil is a kind of death in *The Lotos-Eaters*, but *Ulysses* suggests there might be more than one kind of work. For Dr George Tennyson and his sons art and learning were values in themselves – for the old man, it seems, such notions were above their class.

The second son, Charles, took over his father's house, Bayons Manor, and converted it into a magnificent Gothic building; he later took the name d'Eyncourt, as if he were creating an aristocratic tradition for himself, though he had entered Parliament on the Radical side. His pretensions and his success, which felt as though it were at the expense of the Somersby Tennysons, provided some of the animus for Tennyson's many poems which attack the thwarting of young love by pride based on land and money: *Locksley Hall*, *Edwin Morris*, *The Flight*, *Maud*, *Aylmer's Field*. A resentful sense of financial and social inferiority was intensified by Tennyson's love in the early 1830s for the wealthy Rosa Baring, whose beauty may have been the model for the 'Rose in roses' of *The Gardener's Daughter*. The grandfather's economic power over the Somersby family was felt keenly; on his death in 1835 the bequest to Alfred did not give him the means to travel which he wanted. George Clayton Tennyson died in March 1831. Alfred, who had left Cambridge to help his mother, wanted to return and take his degree, but the grandfather saw no point if he would not commit himself to the Church. Tennyson's father had left debts, to which the three sons at Cambridge added, and there were still all the younger children to be started out in life if possible. The poet's long years of combined domesticity and bachelor wandering were under way.

At Cambridge, Tennyson had formed the friendship with Arthur Hallam which has been taken as the major emotional relation of his life. The eldest child of the historian and literary scholar Henry Hallam, Arthur was widely recognized as a warm and attractive personality, and as very able, especially in debate. Gladstone, a close friend at Eton, retained an ideal view of him sixty years after his early death. Tennyson in *In Memoriam* presented him as a potential statesman; Gladstone saw him as a

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literary man. His work included a theodicy (a work justifying 'the ways of God to man') and translations from Italian poetry. Although Gladstone could describe him as an emanation from another, less darkly chequered world, he was as much subject to depression and doubt as Tennyson: the two friends supported each other, within a group of mutual friends. Hallam became engaged to Tennyson's sister Emily. He died suddenly in Vienna, on 15 September 1833, at the age of 22, from a brain haemorrhage caused by the abnormal enlargement of an artery. A local clergyman wrote of Tennyson in early 1834, 'Hallam seems to have left his heart a widowed one', foreshadowing *In Memoriam*'s imagery. But Tennyson went on writing: *Ulysses* in October 1833, and the fragments of elegy which became *In Memoriam* – XXX, IX, XVII, XVIII, XXXI–XXXII, some lines of LXXXV, and XXVIII.

Early in 1838 Tennyson became engaged to Emily Sellwood, the sister of his brother Charles's wife, but the engagement was suspended in 1840. His financial situation was doubtful, and Charles's marriage had broken down because of his addiction to laudanum; but this was not all. When Tennyson proposed again in 1848, Emily refused him on the grounds that the worlds of religious thought in which they moved were too different. At this time of the Evangelical movement, the revival of an enthusiastic religion of personal commitment, Christian women often stressed their independent relation to God, unmediated by priest, father or husband: marriage could interfere with meditation and charity, the duties of a spirit which had to answer for itself before its maker. The tone of the correspondence which survives between Tennyson and Emily is intensely spiritual; once they were married in 1850 she encouraged him in studies of the mysteries of pain, the virtues of sacrifice for a high good, marking passages for him to read, in works which suggest the masochistic side of idealization, especially of service to nation and Empire. She was the niece of Sir John Franklin, whose ill-fated Arctic expedition of 1845 provided a painful example of dedication and disaster.

In 1837 the Tennysons had been obliged to leave Somersby. At the first of a succession of new homes Tennyson came under the influence of a doctor, Matthew Allen, who persuaded him to improve his financial prospects by investing in a scheme for mechanical wood-carving. By early 1843 this scheme had failed completely, though most of the money was recovered on insurance when Allen died in 1845. In spite of their critical success the slow

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selling 1842 *Poems* looked unlikely to redeem the family fortunes. One of those poems, written in 1833, was the monologue of St Simeon, who martyrized himself on a pillar. Edward FitzGerald records Tennyson reading this aloud 'with grotesque Grimaces, especially at such passages as "Coughs, Aches, Stitches, etc.", laughing aloud at times' (Ricks, *Poems*, p. 542).

During the 1840s Tennyson's physical and mental health were bad; later he called it hypochondria. The treatment he went in for was the water cure, which aimed to encourage the circulation of the blood and the excretion of impurities; most dramatically the internal and external application of water produced 'crises', eruptions of boils. Tennyson wrote with rather Simeon-like pride of the remarkable quantity of his crises. At best the treatment had real virtues in that it took the whole person, their mental state and social situation, into consideration, and avoided the use of drugs in order to cure the body through its own natural resources: a thoroughly Romantic treatment.

Tennyson's most acute anxieties had eased by 1848. In 1845 he accepted a Civil List pension which he had twice refused, not liking the connotations of 'pension' and expecting hostile criticism, which duly came. Even when poetry had made him both popular and rich, Tennyson kept this pension: a sense of grievance and anxiety about money was one legacy from his grandfather. The major work of these years was *The Princess*, which had been discussed with Emily Sellwood before their estrangement. When it came out in 1847 the critical response was cool and puzzled, but it sold well. In March 1850 half a dozen copies of *Fragments of an Elegy*, the trial edition of *In Memoriam*, were sent to friends, and a copy was lent to Emily Sellwood. Soon after the publication of *In Memoriam* in June, they were married, rather hurriedly; no member of Tennyson's family was there, and even his mother 'did not know of it till it was done'. At Emily's request they went first to Clevedon in Somerset, where Hallam was buried. Tennyson said that his wedding was the nicest he'd ever been at, and wrote to a mutual friend, Sophie Rawnsley: 'We seem to get on very well together. I have not beaten her yet' (Ricks, *Tennyson*, p. 208). Later he said: 'The peace of God entered into my life when I married her.'

This middle year of the century was the turning point for Tennyson. The wide admiration for *In Memoriam* made him the strongest candidate to succeed Wordsworth as Poet Laureate. The remaining forty-two years were ones of domesticity and friend-

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ships, and extraordinarily sustained work. They had two sons: Hallam, born in 1852, who devoted his life to his father, taking over as secretary when his mother's health failed; and Lionel, born in 1854, whose death at 32 is mourned in *To the Marquis of Dufferin and Ava* (1889). It has been questioned whether Emily Tennyson's piety and loving care for 'dearest Ally' were good for his poetry, but this can hardly be fairly answered. Why blame the woman? She was not as strait-laced as she has been made to seem: the nonsense writer Edward Lear adored her and she visited George Eliot, whose liaison with G. H. Lewes made many respectable women reluctant to receive or visit her. Earlier, she had no qualms about the relation of Elizabeth Siddall to Dante Gabriel Rossetti – his model, student, and later wife. When Moxon's *Illustrated Edition* of Tennyson's poems was being planned in 1855, Rossetti told a friend that Mrs Tennyson had written to the publisher 'declaring that she had rather pay for Miss Siddall's designs herself than not have them in the book'. However, these designs were not included in the end, except in so far as they influenced Rossetti's own work.[2] Elizabeth Siddall's passion for Tennyson's poetry is typical of young artists and writers at this time. That she and Rossetti also went on a pilgrimage to Clevedon suggests that *In Memoriam* had made Hallam a minor saint.

After 1869, when the *Holy Grail* volume was added to the *Idylls of the King*, a younger generation including Swinburne and J. A. Symonds, who had come to Tennyson's work through the admiration for it of fathers and teachers, were finding the poetry oppressive and dishonest, though Symonds in particular kept up a reverential attitude in his personal contacts with Tennyson.[3] Opinions were mixed about the *Idylls*, but Tennyson's popularity and sales increased. In December 1883 he accepted a barony, taking his seat in the House of Lords in March 1884. He had turned down lesser honours three times since the offer of a baronetcy in 1865, only accepting it now as an honour to Literature rather than to himself, he maintained. His informal title, 'Poet of the People', marked his own consciousness and that of others, of how his poetry could make for national cultural unity: Alexander Strahan, for a time one of his publishers, wrote in 1870 of the need for Literature to 'strike our grappling-iron in the working-people's soul, and chain them, willing followers, to the car of advancing civilization'.[4] I doubt if Tennyson would have liked that image, though he was himself capable of thumpingly reactionary statements, as of more generous and sceptical withdrawals: with the

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liberal Gladstone or the Irishman William Allingham, he adopted a wilfully antagonistic pose. As he aged he tended towards pessimism about advancing civilization and especially democracy, but 'freedom' remained an ideal.

In the 1840s the continuity of his later work would have seemed incredible. Besides selections and collected editions there were new volumes in 1880, 1885 and 1886; *Demeter and Other Poems* in 1889; and, posthumously, *The Death of Oenone* in 1892. In 1875, at the age of 66, he had turned to the theatre, with *Queen Mary* – a work whose original version, based on the historical writing of J. A. Froude, displays hostility to Roman Catholicism, the Oxford Movement and subsequent High Church Anglicanism, but whose acting version toned this down to a more general distaste for religious intolerance.

Since I do not intend to deal critically with the plays I will say something of them now, in tribute to Tennyson's late energy and readiness to take risks with his reputation. From the 1840s, developments in stage lighting and machinery had made possible spectacular productions with heroic dramas and acting styles to suit. Tennyson was a great reader of his own poetry, in more or less intimate groups; his voice can still be heard on recordings made in 1890, some of them in support of what Kipling ironically called the 'charge' of the Light Brigade, the impoverishment of Crimean War veterans. Henry Irving told him, 'You are a good actor lost.' It was Irving's star performances which made theatre a major cultural focus in the 1870s; Tennyson saw his famous *Hamlet* in 1874, and Irving acted in *Queen Mary*, which was neither a disaster nor very successful. Henry James wrote that although individual scenes were richly worked it remained 'a dramatised chronicle, without an internal structure'. *Harold*, on the last Saxon king, was less unwieldy but was not acted; it was published in 1876. *Becket*, completed in 1879 but not published until 1884, was considered too long and too expensive to produce; but Irving had one of his greatest successes in it, the year after Tennyson died. *The Falcon*, from a story by Boccaccio, followed in 1879; *The Cup*, acted in 1881 by Irving and Ellen Terry, was Tennyson's first success on the stage. A classical story of marriage and murder, it had a huge cast, and grandiose costumes and sets whose historical accuracy was verified by the British Museum. *The Foresters*, on the Robin Hood story, was a popular success in America after Tennyson's death. The last play, *The Promise of May*, in Lincolnshire dialect, Tennyson's only published work in prose, was a total

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failure in 1882. Tennyson's bid to fill in the gaps left by Shakespeare in the national chronicle did not come to much in the end.

Reminiscences of Tennyson in later life are full of a fascination with 'genius', with coming near the mystery of greatness which his recalcitrance and impressive physical presence did little to dispel. But when the genius is a contemporary, people fear being taken in by a conceited pose. What is emphasized about Tennyson instead is his simplicity, his unguardedness, his indifference to conventional behaviour, and his geniality, the gift of 'bestowing *himself*'. Broadly, the summary of James Knowles, journalist and architect of Aldworth, will do for a late-Victorian view of Tennyson: 'An immense sanity underlay the whole – the perfection of common-sense – and over all was the perpetual glamour of supreme genius.'[5] A more intimate memory was recorded by Tennyson's grandson Charles:

> a very powerful old man, and a man who still had a lot of life in him . . . a strangely-dressed old man, very much intent on his own business and his own life, and very conscious that he has a lot of work to do and doesn't meant to let anybody stop him from doing it.[6]

'TYPING ALL MANKIND'

When Tennyson's first mature volume came out in 1830 the boom in poetry publishing, with the great success of Scott and Byron, was fading. During the post-revolutionary wars with France the expensiveness of paper had given an advantage to shorter volumes of poetry, but cheaper production methods were being developed; and as innovations in printing such as the power press and the stereotyping process also reduced costs, poetry was rivalled by long prose works and by the new periodicals carrying serials and short stories. From the 1820s, Annuals were popular, intended as Christmas gifts for ladies: 'picture books for grown children', the poet Southey called them. Tennyson like other poets reluctantly published in *The Gem*, *The Tribute*, *Friendship's Offering* and *The Keepsake*. Assumptions about the audience for these Annuals had their effect on the poems that were written, or at least on those that were accepted.[7]

The price of individual volumes of poetry remained high; a much smaller and more educated readership was assumed for them. The publishers required their poets to share the losses as well as any profits, and those who could not guarantee their

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publishers in this way, such as Hood, Darley and Beddoes, had to seek other means of support. Wordsworth tried to keep his prices low, to reach as wide a public as possible, and so did Tennyson once he was established in mid century. We can see a division in Tennyson's work between the more trivial of the lyrics and, say, the classical monologues, but *The Princess*, *In Memoriam* and *Maud* do not fit this pattern, while *Enoch Arden* and *Idylls of the King* challenge the novel by their appeal as stories of marriage and its deviations. They were Tennyson's greatest financial successes, and among the most popular poems of the period, with other narrative poems such as the *Ingoldsby Legends* and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. They share with contemporary narrative painting and drama the aim of pictorial 'realization': to produce both strong emotion and a sense of actuality in effects or 'situations' which would influence moral and social consciousness.[8] Guinevere lying at Arthur's feet is a theatrical situation of that kind, which Edward Lear thought would be too strong for the prudish. Effects in the theatre were directly modelled on paintings, for example the tableau recalling Wilkie's 1815 painting *Distraining for Rent* in Jerrold's play *Rent Day* (1832). When Walter Bagehot criticized *Enoch Arden* (1864) for its application of an ornate style to a 'dismal' story of people it would be 'horrid to meet' he was echoing the opposition of Scott and Coleridge to sentimental Jacobinism (revolutionary or radical sympathy) in painting, fiction and the theatre. In drawing attention to the working class as a subject for art and demanding respect as well as sympathy for them, Tennyson's poem stands in a long humane tradition.

A poet's work is not wholly determined by its audience, nor can the ways in which an audience impinges on a poet's work be reduced to economics, technology and publishing practice. But these things clearly had their effect on the choices and anxieties of a beginning poet, quite as much as the reviewing to which frequent attention has been paid in Tennyson's case. The review by Arthur Hallam of Tennyson's *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, in *The Englishman's Magazine*, August 1831, begins defensively with the assertion made by Wordsworth and others, that popularity was not the test of poetry; Hallam's anxiety relates to the whole climate in which Tennyson's poems came out. The Tory J. W. Croker boasted notoriously that he would kill off Tennyson as he had killed off the 'Cockney' poet Keats, with whose poetry and radical politics he associated Tennyson's 1832 *Poems*. Tennyson published no volume for ten years after 1832; and when the *Poems*

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came out in 1842, earlier poems which were reprinted had been impressively revised.

In fact the early volumes were generally well received, and not just because Cambridge friends were promoting Tennyson's work. Reviewers' assumptions about the status of poetry differed considerably from the wariness of publishers. One sample review, interesting in itself, is John Sterling's of the 1842 *Poems* in the *Quarterly Review*, LXX, September 1842.[9] Sterling had been an influence on the Cambridge debating society, the Apostles, of which Tennyson and Arthur Hallam were members in their time. His view of *Morte d'Arthur* is likely to have been one of those which stopped Tennyson from carrying on with Arthurian material at this stage; he said it was 'jewel-work' without strong human interest: 'The miraculous legend of Excalibur does not come very near us, and as reproduced by any modern writer must be a mere ingenious exercise of fancy.'

Like many reviewers of the period Sterling does not isolate Tennyson's work within a distinct sphere of literature but views it historically and politically, in relation to the 'state of the nation'. Tennyson's way is being prepared by judicious counsel, to be the national poet. Sterling writes in full consciousness of Britain's world power, and of the situation produced by the 1832 Reform Act, with an enlarged electorate addressed by newspapers and journals:

> it is a great thing that the whole country must at least be willingly deceived if it is to be gained over – must seem to itself rationally persuaded . . . Within a year after the Election in an English village, its result is felt in the more or less cost of food and clothes in Kaffir huts, and in the value of the copper saucepans trafficked at Timbuctoo for palm-oil and black babies.

(While at Cambridge Tennyson had won the Chancellor's medal with a poem on Timbuctoo – a vision poem which mourned the diminishment of fantasy into fact.) Just as Hallam had boldly placed Tennyson's first volume in relation to Dante and Shakespeare and to the Romantic poets, allying him with Shelley and Keats as poets of sensation, so Sterling reviews the contenders, Scott, Byron, Crabbe, Wordsworth, in 'the poetic representation of our age', this 'huge, harassed and luxurious national existence' in which both 'severity of conscience in the best minds' and 'the fierceness of the outward struggle for power and riches' might absorb those energies which produced a Shakespeare

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or a Milton. But their art throve on the conflict of their times. Sterling's own writing has point and energy in his condensed account of Protestant capitalism:

> The power of self-subjection combined with almost boundless liberty, indeed necessitated by it, and the habit of self-denial with wealth beyond all calculation . . . The death-struggle of commercial and political rivalry, the brooding doubt and remorse, the gas-jet flame of faith irradiating its own coal-mine darkness – in a word, our overwrought materialism fevered by its own excess into spiritual dreams – all this might serve the purposes of a bold imagination.

Sterling's insistence that women constitute a major part of the new public deserving representation is significant for Tennyson's sense of his destiny as poet; the point was made also by W. J. Fox in his review of the 1830 *Poems*. In 1837 a woman, Victoria, had become the sovereign head of state. Reviewing the first four *Idylls of the King* in 1859, Gladstone was to call Tennyson 'the poet of woman': 'he has studied, sounded, painted woman in form, in motion, in character, in office, in capability, with rare devotion, power and skill'.[10]

With the attainment of political power by the middle class, the possibility of a place for women in public life was beginning to be imagined and debated. Capitalism's dream of individual enterprise needed adaptation to fit the economic dependency of women; this was most often done by celebrating their 'moral culture' and private influence, but men committed to reform do show a sense of women as a specific interest group. Although Hallam had argued that a fit audience for the poetry of Tennyson, Shelley and Keats would be small because of the effort of intellectual and moral sympathy required, this was a way of sending out a challenge and an invitation. Ideas like Sterling's, that Tennyson should speak to and for a reformed England, were more frequent. The Christian Socialist Charles Kingsley has the hero of *Alton Locke, Tailor and Poet* (1850) enthuse at length about Tennyson's poetry, in Chapter VI: 'This is what I call democratic art – the revelation of the poetry which lies in common things.' With such definitions of his destiny and constituency we can see why Tennyson's first published poem of any length was one on women's powers in relation to social ideals, *The Princess*, and not an Arthurian romance.

Presuppositions about gender appear in an equally important but different light in some lines which Tennyson wrote in 1839.[11] I use 'gender' to mean cultural assumptions about masculinity and femininity, rather than biological differences of sex. The lines were

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