CHAPTER 1

Introduction: two decisions

With characteristic humility, Hallam Tennyson omits to name himself as the recipient of this advice from his father:

> I cannot refrain from setting down his talk to a young man who was going to the University. – 'If a man is merely to be a bundle of sensations, he had better not exist at all. He should embark on his career in the spirit of selfless and adventurous heroism; should develop his true self by not shirking responsibility, by casting aside all maudlin and introspective morbidities, and by using his powers cheerfully in accordance with the obvious dictates of his moral consciousness, and so, as far as possible, in harmony with what he feels to be the Absolute Right.'

This advice is familiar in the Victorian public school fiction which promotes a 'muscular Christianity'. Heroism is selfless before it is adventurous; responsibility exists in facing the morbid, and bowing to the moral necessity of 'the Absolute Right'. This is an example of something that John R. Reed might describe as moving from the Romantic to the Victorian, from 'aggressive heroism, or what might be called the imperial will, to controlled heroism, or the reflective will'. Napoleon and Wellington are replaced by the model citizens of Samuel Smiles' *Self Help*.

In the midst of such counsel from his father, Hallam includes these lines from 'Oenone':

> Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control,
> These three alone lead life to sovereign power.
> Yet not for power (power of herself
> Would come uncalled for) but to live by *law*,
> *Acting* the law we live by without fear;
> And, because right is right, to follow right
> Were wisdom in the scorn of consequence. (142–8)

(The text here is Hallam's *Memoir* of his father; the italics are Hallam's.) This is a key passage for Tennyson, and also for his family. Yet the very

status of these lines, as moral instruction, impairs the quality of the verse. The yoking of the self into reverence, knowledge and control to achieve 'sovereign power' is easily said, but harder done. Even the ease which is supposedly a characteristic of Tennyson's verse has difficulty with this. There is a straining after self-evident truth, almost to tautology: 'because right is right, to follow right / Were wisdom . . .' Hallam's emphases, on 'law' and 'Acting', bringing together as they do necessity and freedom, or the freedom to act in acknowledgement of necessity, overstress the already strenuous at the very point at which the calm of conviction should hold.

In 'Oenone', these lines are related by the outcast and powerless heroine who speaks in the main body of what is a partially realised dramatic monologue. They come from the speech of Pallas Athene, describing the benefits which will follow if Oenone's lover Paris decides to opt for the way of will. The speech continues in the poem (not quoted by Hallam) a few lines after this, describing just what the bodily experience of this will might be:

> '. . . rest thee sure
> That I shall love thee well and cleave to thee,
> So that my vigour, wedded to thy blood,
> Shall strike within thy pulses, like a God's,
> To push thee forward through a life of shocks,
> Dangers, and deeds, until endurance grow
> Sinewed with action, and the full-grown will,
> Circled through all experience, pure law,
> Commeasure perfect freedom.' (156–64)

The quality of these lines is their very strenuousness, an imitation of the difficulty of the task proposed. The blank verse courts rhyme as the line ending 'like a God's' is picked up with a close sonic echo in 'life of shocks'. The verse itself admits its subject matter as one of great struggle: 'cleave . . . vigour . . . blood . . . strike . . . pulses . . . push . . . shocks . . . Sinewed'. The experience of will in the masculine body is experienced in the sonic body of the verse as it strikes off these vital signs of power. Yet this is a hard task, and pictures a life of great strain. 'Power of herself', gendered in this poem, will be given by the goddess to this man, as she says to Paris that she will 'push thee forward'. Her way is towards law, wisdom and power through a strengthening of habits of will.

Oenone, passive narrator of the poem, cries out that Paris, her former lover, should give the golden apple to Pallas, and we can hear the older Tennyson and his son concurring at this point, along probably with the

majority of their Victorian readership. Choices to be made, or moments of will like this one, have both the watching speaker Oenone, as well as an imaginary audience, urging them on. These are particularly Victorian moments, and they can be caricatured in the terms of Kipling's exhortation to the future officer class in 'If' ('And so hold on when there is nothing in you / Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!" ') or in the handbook for self-improving capitalism which is *Self Help*:

> there is no power of law that can make the idle man industrious, the thriftless provident, or the drunken sober; though every individual can be each and all of these if he will, by the exercise of his own powers of action and self-denial. Indeed all experience serves to prove that the worth and strength of a State depend far less upon the form of its institutions than upon the character of its men.

For Kipling and Smiles, as well as for Tennyson and Browning, the first mover behind such an ideology of resilience and activity is Thomas Carlyle, who posits a conception of heroism revealing itself to the hero-worshipper, thus acting as a powerful example to all. In his lecture, 'The Hero as King', Carlyle works no less than the meaning of life, for all of his audience, around the importance of vital and active willing:

> And yet, I say, there is an irrepressible tendency in every man to develop himself according to the magnitude which Nature has made of him; to speak out, to act out, what Nature has laid in him. This is proper, fit, inevitable; nay, it is a duty, and even the summary of duties for a man. The meaning of life here on earth might be defined as consisting in this: to unfold your *self*, to work what thing you have the faculty for. It is a necessity for the human being, the first law of our existence.

Duty and necessity both go out to meet volition and individualism. We can actively control our destiny, but only insofar as that destiny reveals itself to us. We are not prompted to act by will, as a first cause, but by what, as Carlyle's rhyming prose stresses it, 'Nature has made' of us, what 'Nature has laid' in us.

Yet such exhortations are as much the source of an anxious sense of powerlessness in the writing of the nineteenth century, and the centrality of individual agency in the unfolding of the self is often inspected to reveal a hollowness, a sense of being without just such a centre. For every official exhortation of Tennyson, Carlyle, Kipling or Smiles, there is a voice, like Arthur Hugh Clough's, which might ask that the struggle nought availeth, or as his speaker confronts the issue in *Sa Majesté Très Chrétienne*,

> Alas, and is it true
> Ought I can purpose, say, or will, or do,
> My fancy choose, my changeful silly heart
> Resolve, my puny hand enact,
> To that great glory can in ought conduce
> Which from the old eternities is Thine?
> Ah never, no! (52–8)

This drama of weakness before the imperatives of action, and the sense of failure in purpose, speech, will, action, choice, resolve is trapped here where 'can' meets 'ought', and issues only in passive denial. With duty laid before him, Clough's speaker can only turn to an intuited sense of a contained subjectivity which may never have to engage in a world in which it may fail: 'Somehow I think my heart within is pure'(122).

Decisions such as face Paris in Tennyson's 'Oenone' are founded in a testing of the will, a version of self which is held up in a dramatic verse which allows itself to work as mimic, counterpoint, enemy or ally, of the efforts of poet or speaker to work their way into a position of informed choice carried through with a strong will. These moments are marked in the poems discussed in this book by their rhythms in the way that a speech such as Pallas Athene's is conveyed in a poetry which seeks for a rhythm of will. The dilemma which is presented to Paris captures not only a Carlylean account of history as the individual responding to crisis, but it captures the way in which the poetry that wished to work within such moments sought to find form, here narrative as well as prosodic, for insight into processes of mind which were dependent not only upon thought and feeling, but also on will. Tennyson is not alone in such a seeking, and as John R. Reed and Isobel Armstrong, to name but two, have recently told us, the will is a central and often unquestioned part of Victorian accounts of self and mind. The implicit logical shift in equating volitional power with moral strength in Tennyson's advice to his son, and the related terms of Pallas' offer show this: the ethical, the psychological and the means of describing action as experience and necessity meet in a strenuously argued medium. That medium is a Victorian poetry, which, as Dennis Taylor and Eric Griffiths have also stated, is one which has been concerned with moving towards the rhythmic representation of the human voice. Add to this the moral and psychological preoccupations of a poetry which explores character in dramatic monologue and loss in elegy, and we have a concern with sounding a sense of self or

caracter through the experience of that character's volitional abilities or failings.

This book presents readings of a number of poems in order to discuss varying Victorian accounts of agency through comparable accounts of voiced rhythm. Bringing these concerns together, it describes the workings of human will through poetic effect both in the narrative and lyrical forms which move towards dramatic monologue and in Victorian versions of elegy. The means of sounding the many voices which the poetry of Tennyson, Browning, Hopkins and Hardy presents us, is through an ear for prosodic innovations. These innovations are concerned with laying the line of a lyric or dramatic consciousness within the line of poetry, working one with or against the other, within or outside metrical norms or inventions. An attention to prosodic practice in Victorian poetry is no mere technical matter. Rather, it enables us to listen for the rhythms of will which emerge from the representation of experiences of self through the bodily experience of a poetry which is conscious of itself as voiced sound.

The dramatic and elegiac poetry of the nineteenth century investigates agency through speech, a sense of agency which is posited as central to the identity of the self. The self, in turn, strives to make its presence felt in the speech which is recreated in Victorian verse. This happens both in the individual decision and in the greater sense of the marking of these decisions in history. What is sounded along the line of poetry aspires to be either the sound of the self facing the moment of decision or a life spent avoiding such decisions. Before poet and speaker the options for change are always open. The possibilities of new life for the subject in the poem, or new form available to the subject who is the artist, tug this poetry into the challenge of something that we might call modernity, but the Victorians would call the future. Passionate about the past as they were, the attitude to the will as the faculty which places the agency of the individual in a position to determine the future, to effect change, to bring into form the new, is represented with the ambivalence shown in many poems discussed in this book. The poems do find rhythms for representing agency in crisis, but they might just as easily sound the inertia attendant upon a conception of the agent existing only in a scene of aftermath.

Robert Browning's *Sordello*, a poem so innovative it is still nearly unreadable, sees action, event and character often circling around themselves with varying degrees of crisis, inertia and obscurity. Book v attempts to move the poem away from the enervation which threatens

its poet-hero, and out to its story of a European civilisation emerging from the Dark Ages. Speaking directly to his hero 'in modern speech', the 'low voice' of Browning's narrator counsels the despondent Sordello to take a part in the history of man. He advances a theory of history which will exemplify how 'collective man / Outstrips the individual' (103–4) and points to 'The Multitude to be materialized' (124–5). History is 'loose eternal unrest' (126) and while it needs individuals to bring it to form, those individuals are destined to be subsumed both by the materialized multitude for which they work and a human progress which will in its turn need other individuals to advance it. So the narrator, steeling himself to make his point clearly for once ('Speak plainer!'), shows Sordello how from one specific of policy, a single Pope's decision to take the responsibility for ecclesiastical appointments, the position of Roman power in history has been secured:

> 'Speak plainer! Is't so sure
> God's church lives by a King's investiture?
> Look to last step! A staggering – a shock –
> What's mere sand is demolished, while the rock
> Endures: a column of black fiery dust
> Blots heaven – that help was prematurely thrust
> Aside, perchance! – but air clears, naught's erased
> Of the true outline. Thus much being firm based,
> The other was a scaffold' (v, 153–61)

The cataclysmic blotting of heaven here is due to the process of the realignment of social organisations into their true forms. A critical moment of upheaval clears to show, in a conflation of two passages from St Matthew, the destruction of the house made of sand (vii, 24–7) and the surviving outline of the rock of Peter's Church (xvi, 18). The scaffold of a temporal organisation makes way for the true outline of eternal forms, in this case Rome.

This reorganisation contributes to an emergence of what is prophesied in scripture from what is temporary. The expedient of the scaffold is no longer needed, and history progresses, further revealing the eternal, an achievement in time which reveals the timeless. Yet that achievement, the revelation of the outline of truth from the clearing air, is one which has to be realised by an individual, even though that individual is obeying what history will reveal to be necessity. The individual reveals this truth from the processes of his own body. The passage continues:

> 'See him stand
> Buttressed upon his mattock, Hildebrand
> Of the huge brain-mask welded ply o'er ply
> As in a forge; it buries either eye
> White and extinct, that stupid brow; teeth clenched,
> The neck tight-corded, too, the chin deep-trenched,
> As if a cloud enveloped him while fought
> Under its shade, grim prizers, thought with thought
> At dead-lock, agonizing he, until
> The victor thought leap radiant up, and Will,
> The slave with folded arms and drooping lids
> They fought for, lean forth flame-like as it bids.
> Call him no flower – a mandrake of the earth,
> Thwarted and dwarfed and blasted in its birth,
> Rather, – a fruit of suffering's excess,
> Thence feeling, therefore stronger: still by stress
> Of Strength, work Knowledge!' (v, 161–77)

Writing from the nineteenth century, Browning pictures key moments which assist him in his version of history as eternal progress. To do this he pictures not only the government of the 'Multitude' but also of the self, and the critical moment of history is placed in the eleventh century body of the 'suffering', 'feeling' Pope Gregory VII. That body has come dramatically to the decisions which here burst into the present tense at 'thought leap radiant up', and show a contorting rhythmic portrait of the mechanisms of will.

Browning portrays an intellectual strife within the self. Processes of mind are shown allying power with will: at one point decision-making is compared to a prize fight. The body of the Pope is locked into its processes of thought, vigorously disputing with itself and showing the fierceness of that dispute in brain, eye, brow, teeth, neck and chin. The rhyming verse chafes with the strain: 'ply/eye', 'clenched'/'trenched', 'fought'/'thought'. These rhymes hold the couplets into the deliberating body that the rhythms of the passage scan. Those rhythms are chopped up into seemingly random caesura, sudden substitutions and enjambments which, due to the semantic emphasis of the couplets, never really allow the verse to throw off its constraint. They work with the mind which is stressing its body so. 'Teeth clenched / The neck tight-corded, too, the chin deep-trenched': the lines pack their metrical stresses around the moments of physical stress shown in the hyphenated tension of the tightened neck and impacted chin. They must relax, and do. 'At dead-lock, agonizing he, until / The victor thought leap radiant up, and

Will': the strain is released gradually into that isolated iamb, and the 'until/Will' rhyme works us out of the impasse of thought, through decision, and into action. This action results from the capitalised 'Will', a faculty which, the decision taken, 'bids' with the sudden destructiveness of a flame. This faculty is in the service of one who knows an excess of suffering, of one who feels. It only increases his strength to work Knowledge.

This is exactly what Pallas Athene promises Paris in 'Oenone', the abilities of a 'full-grown will', and the corresponding civic and political virtues which will involve hard decisions, but decisions that Paris can make. As I have said, these would be the virtues that an official version of a strong will would hold up before a society keen to materialise a multitude of autonomous individuals. Such choice is a necessary fiction of the newly liberal society which was then in its infancy in Victoria's Britain. Yet choice may be compromised by other factors. Oenone has told us of the 'clear and bared limbs' of Pallas, a candid nudity which is, we suspect, mediated by what is undoubtedly the sort of advice you give to young men going to the university. The way of will is open, but other factors can influence the way in which we make decisions.

The allure of overpowering sexuality may be one of them. Thus Paris is faced with the half-naked, half-shadowed body of Aphrodite, slowly drawing back her hair in a tempting display of erotic dissemblance. She,

> 'With rosy slender fingers backward drew
> From her warm brows and bosom her deep hair
> Ambrosial, golden round her lucid throat
> And shoulder: from the violets her light foot
> Shone rosy-white, and o'er her rounded form
> Between the shadows of the vine-bunches
> Floated the glowing sunlights, as she moved.' (172–8)

It takes four enjambed lines of rolling blank verse, so different in rhythmic style from Pallas' speech, to effect this revelation. Even Aphrodite's foot is 'light', the pun stressing the growing brightness that this goddess' nudity brings to the scene. She offers a single sentence as her speech to Paris, 'The fairest and most loving wife in Greece', and this and the above erotic picture (narrated to us by a woman) make up his mind. He chooses to reject the faculty which will make more and better choices part of his personality. The option of power is given up in favour of the option to continue as a 'bundle of sensations'.

Unlike Hildebrand's effort, which rights the course of the history of Western Europe, this is an instance of incontinence, the choice of a course of action taken against the agent's better judgement. Paris surrenders to sexual attraction, giving up the opportunity of divine assistance towards absolute moral control. Pallas Athene had offered an intermingling of godly power with the human body: her vigour and his blood are shown in the internalised image of a perpetual adrenalin rush of power which will 'strike within thy pulses', and then give Paris the moral muscularity of one who is 'Sinewed with action'. However, the method which Pallas uses to tell Paris how he can have a full grown will is one which does not sweeten the facts of a life spent struggling towards it. The 'shocks, / Dangers, and deeds' are hardly attractive, and the strenuous rhythms and straining syntax of that speech too perfectly mimic the harshness of what she is outlining. Neither the myth nor Tennyson can allow us to see what might happen if Paris were to take up Pallas' offer. The cataclysmic effects of his choice are elsewhere well documented, ready to meet with the consequences of another action, and, as Yeats says, 'The broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead'. Rhythmically acknowledged human shortcomings cannot allow Paris to grasp fully the idea, or even the physicality, of the metaphors used to express Pallas' offer and the consequences in history of his decision.

It takes only a split-second shutting of Oenone's 'sight for fear' (184) for Paris to give the apple to Aphrodite, and for her narrative to come to a close. This is a decision which goes desperately wrong for the poem's heroine, who has had no part in the drama enacted in front of her. A passive spectator to a process of choosing, her complaint is the complaint of the powerless, one who has had no opportunity to choose, no option of will. Alluding to the last line of 'Ulysses', Gerhard Joseph summarises a tradition of criticism of 'Oenone' and Tennyson's early poetry, in terms which are applicable to the marginalised yet titular heroine: she is in 'that hovering state between the fatality of suffering victim and the striving, seeking, unyielding hero'. Her grieving situation is the result of the denial of Pallas' offer. Another's choice leaves her alone, and her predicament is one where another's actions have irrevocably affected her circumstances.

Oenone cannot know what Tennyson called 'The happiness resulting from power well exercised'. This phrase appears in the fragment of a letter that he sent to his fiancée Emily Selwood in 1839, one of the few remaining pieces of evidence we have of a relationship which nearly

foundered on circumstance. The letter works from power on earth to silence in eventual knowledge:

> The happiness resulting from power well exercised must in the end far exceed the mere physical happiness of breathing, eating and sleeping like an ox. Can we say that God prefers higher happiness in some to a lower happiness in all? It is a hard thing that if I sin and fail I should be sacrificed to the bliss of the saints. Yet what reasonable creature, if he could have been asked beforehand would not have said 'Give me the metaphysical power, let me be the lord of my decisions: leave physical quietude and dull pleasure to lesser lives'? All souls methinks would have answered thus and so had men suffered by their own choice, as now by necessity of being born what they are, but there is no answer to the question except in a great hope of universal good . . . Let us be silent for we know nothing of these things and we trust there is one who knows all.

Writing within a particularly difficult moment in his relationship, Tennyson asks to be lord of its decisions. He moves at first towards the orthodox Christianity of the recipient of the letter, but then veers away in claims of ignorance, and the assertion only of 'trust'. The 'reasonable creature' asks for power and will, yet questioningly. The sacrifice of the self in failure is the 'hard thing' of responsibility, but 'all souls methinks' would want it. Suffering and necessity do condition such freedoms, and they exist only as the 'great hope of universal good'. Paris repudiates just such an opportunity, and Oenone is shown to possess very little in the way of 'the metaphysical power'.

Power, decision and choice are all placed before characters such as these in Victorian poetry; often they remain ungraspable, held there either only by a 'trust' in 'one who knows all', or in the merely intuited sense of a need to pursue a progress barely to be felt in the hero's own lifetime. The 'low voice' of Browning's narrator wonders whether Sordello himself might effect the move to the final stage of human progress:

> 'Knowledge by stress of merely Knowledge? No –
> E'en were Sordello ready to forego
> His life for this, 'twere overleaping work
> Some one has first to do, howe'er it irk,
> Nor stray a foot's breadth from the beaten road.'
>
> (v, 211–15)

The theme is that Rome wasn't built in a day, but it is also one which allows the self to play a crucial part in its construction. That part may be neither an easy nor an attractive option. For the first time in Book v,