

CHATTERTON LECTURE ON AN ENGLISH POET

TENNYSON'S METHODS OF COMPOSITION

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**I**N 1931 Sir Charles Tennyson, the poet's grandson, published a volume of *Unpublished Early Poems* by Alfred Tennyson. A passage from Sir Charles's introduction provides my title and theme. Nobody has done more for Tennyson studies than he has; it is a pleasure to pay tribute to him in the month of his 87th birthday—and it is to be hoped that such a tribute may counter any accusation that what now needs to be said by way of preamble shows a lack of piety.

Our evidence for Tennyson's methods of composition is, of course, his manuscripts. They are scattered all over the world—from the Public Library in Adelaide, South Australia, to the University of Hawaii (what better home could there be for the manuscript of 'The Lotos-Eaters'?). The major collections are three. The Tennyson Research Centre at Lincoln has a superb collection of letters and biographical material, including Tennyson's library and those of his father and of his brother Charles. The Houghton Library at Harvard has a superb collection of poetical manuscripts—and so does Trinity College, Cambridge.

But the Trinity manuscripts are under interdiction: they may not be copied or quoted *in perpetuity*—restrictions dating from 1924, when they were presented by the poet's son, Hallam Lord Tennyson. It has to be conceded, reluctantly, that the wording of the restrictions is unambiguous; the college is not, in my opinion, misinterpreting the restrictions, nor are its librarians discourteous to scholars. Indeed, the arguments for maintaining the restrictions are real enough. Piety proclaims that the wishes of benefactors should be heeded—and shrewdness murmurs that otherwise potential benefactors will be scared away. During the furore in 1964 about Mrs. Phyllis Grosskurth's excellent life of John Addington Symonds, the Librarian of Indiana University married morality to expediency in a letter to *The Times Literary Supplement* (31 December 1964):

There is indeed a very real danger that executors of literary estates, or of political figures, will hesitate before depositing controversial material with institutions if testamentary and other stipulations are to be blithely ignored. . . .

The ethical point for custodians seems clear. Either respect the restrictions on use, or simply do not accept the material in the first place.

'Blithely ignored'—few librarians ever do anything blithely. Nevertheless the case for soberly setting aside (not blithely ignoring) the Trinity restrictions is a very strong one. For the fact is that both the present Lord Tennyson and Sir Charles wish the restrictions to be relaxed. The reasons: that Tennyson permitted his son Hallam to publish variants, and Hallam himself published poems from these manuscripts. That Tennyson would probably have destroyed the manuscripts if he had dreaded quotation. That, although Tennyson disliked variant readings, he also said: 'I like those old Variorum Classics—all the Notes make the Text look precious.'<sup>1</sup> By now Tennyson himself is a classic.

But the wishes of the poet's descendants are not being met. One consequence is that there can be no authoritative correction of the many errors in transcription which Hallam Tennyson himself made in publishing poems from these manuscripts. In 1913 he published a fragment about Semele,<sup>2</sup> which begins:

I wish'd to see Him. Who may feel  
His light and love? He comes.

'Love' is an error; the manuscript clearly reads: 'Who may feel / His light and . . . '—but the correct reading may not be quoted. Since apparently no other manuscript of 'Semele' survives, an editor has either to perpetuate the error 'love', or to amend it without being able to cite his authority. In the circumstances, one is tempted to go in for crossword-clues: this is an evil setback.

Again, it seems unlikely that Tennyson would really have preferred to see his poem 'Armageddon' printed in 1931 (and in my forthcoming edition) from the damaged Harvard manuscript (which has grave lacunae in the first nine lines), rather than permit the supply of the missing words from the Trinity manuscript of the poem. The Trinity manuscripts include many unpublished poems and fragments, as well as fascinating drafts

<sup>1</sup> *Tennyson and His Friends*, ed. Hallam Tennyson (1911), p. 147.

<sup>2</sup> *The Works of Tennyson*, ed. Hallam Tennyson (1913), p. xxiv.

of Tennyson's best poems and a manuscript of *In Memoriam* (this latter presented by Lady Simeon in 1897). Not only do the restrictions make a definitive edition impossible, they also put great obstacles in the way of any edition. A detailed scholarly examination of the manuscripts, which is *not* forbidden by the donor's conditions, is rendered almost impossible by the ban on copying anything from the manuscripts, even though such material would not be released but would be used solely to investigate the manuscripts themselves. As it is, anyone studying the Trinity manuscripts has to hope to hold in his head all of Tennyson's published and unpublished poetry. The restrictions even encourage silly scandal about what may lurk in such closely guarded manuscripts—dark talk, whether about Tennyson's love for Arthur Hallam or about his (apocryphal) skill at the risqué limerick.

So the simple rule, 'Either respect the restrictions on use, or simply do not accept the material in the first place', does not fit such a situation. For one thing, restrictions in perpetuity are altogether different from those which specify a lapse of time (say, to protect friends or relations). Should a college accept manuscripts on conditions which in fact constitute a permanent denial of the *raison d'être* of a college: free scholarly inquiry?

Nor do all reputable libraries concur with Trinity. The Bodleian has a manuscript of *Gareth and Lynette*, presented by Hallam Tennyson in 1922 on broadly the same conditions. A plea, supported by the family, has recently persuaded the library to relax the conditions. An optimistic letter then went to the University Library at Cambridge, where there is an important manuscript of *The Princess*, again with the same restrictions. Whereupon the Syndics of the Library decided that they had lately been rather remiss in enforcing the restrictions—henceforth the manuscript would be visible only in a glass case. My preamble does not wish to be shrill—it puts a case, and draws attention to some of the factors which still hinder Tennyson scholarship.

But is Tennyson criticism in any way affected by the obstacles to Tennyson scholarship? Yes, in so far as one of his major claims is simply that of craftsmanship. Whatever his limitations (in depth or range), his best poems are consummately made. And nothing can so sharpen understanding of what it is for a poem to be well made, as to study the processes by which it reached its final form. Why is that particular word so effective?

—an answer may be discoverable in the other possibilities which the poet weighed but found wanting.

Few people now believe that the Victorians were 'complacent', and of all Tennyson's freedoms from complacency none is more striking than his refusal to rest content with his skill, to rest on his laurels. It is recorded that

A friend once expressed to Housman the hope that [his] paper on Swinburne might be published, and, on hearing that it was to be destroyed after his death, ventured to suggest that if Housman thought it bad he would already have destroyed it himself. 'I do not think it bad,' said Housman; 'I think it not good enough for me'.<sup>1</sup>

Tennyson would never have spoken with such witty hauteur, but his revisions show at its best the perfectionist's restlessness—the question always forming itself, not as 'Is this good?', but as 'Is this good enough?'

Many poets would have found no difficulty in resting satisfied with 'Tithon' (the early draft of 'Tithonus'), or with the 1830 version of 'Mariana'. There are very few occasions when Tennyson alters a passage for the worse, and such occasions are the result, not of faulty craftsmanship, but of timidity, a wish to retreat from a notion that might offend. There are two such cases in *In Memoriam*. In the first edition (1850), Tennyson wrote:

But brooding on the dear one dead,  
And all he said of things divine,  
(And dear as sacramental wine  
To dying lips is all he said). . . . [xxxvii]

But *The Times* (28 November 1851) found this shocking: 'Can the writer satisfy his own conscience with respect to these verses? . . . For our part, we should consider no confession of regret too strong for the hardihood that indicted them.' The offending words were changed:

(And dear to me as sacred wine  
To dying lips is all he said). . . .

That 'to me' introduces an enfeebling tone of doubt or of the apologetically personal; there is now a disconcerting swaying ('to me . . . to dying lips'). And Tennyson had meant what he had written: sacramental, not sacred—the emphasis was on a solemn ceremony not only sacred in itself but having the power to make sacred. Tennyson would have done better to brazen it out, to stand by his fiercely truthful hyperbole.

<sup>1</sup> A. S. F. Gow, *A. E. Housman. A Sketch* (1936), p. 21.

A similar thing happens with the pre-publication history of *In Memoriam*. In the first edition, section CXXIX ended:

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.

Skilful writing, yet slightly swathed in the Tennysonian. 'Behold', 'dream a dream', 'mingle': these here have something of the plangent tremulousness which comes when Tennyson is writing with elegance rather than with energy. The lines perfectly fit Gerard Manley Hopkins's account of 'Parnassian verse', which he sketched out with particular application to Tennyson:

It can only be spoken by poets, but it is not in the highest sense poetry. . . . It is spoken *on and from the level* of a poet's mind, not, as in the other case, when the inspiration which is the gift of genius, raises him above himself. . . . Great men, poets I mean, have each their own dialect as it were of Parnassian, formed generally as they go on writing, and at last,—this is the point to be marked,—they can see things in this Parnassian way and describe them in this Parnassian tongue, without further effort of inspiration. In a poet's particular kind of Parnassian lies most of his style, of his manner, of his mannerism if you like.<sup>1</sup>

And, after quoting from 'Enoch Arden', Hopkins sums up: 'Now it is a mark of Parnassian that one could conceive oneself writing it if one were the poet.'

Behold I dream a dream of good  
And mingle all the world with thee.

But if Tennyson is so remarkable at perfecting his own poetry, how come that in the trial-edition of *In Memoriam*, printed for his own use a few months before the first edition, this stanza is so much better? Because Tennyson became concerned, not to consummate his wording, but to retreat from a possibly offensive notion.

Strange friend, past, present, and to be,  
Loved deeper, darker understood;  
Let me not lose my faith in good  
Lest I make less my love for thee.

No Parnassian, no Tennysonianisms, there. Instead, an austere confession that for Tennyson what counted supremely was not his faith in good but his love for Arthur Hallam. Because of the

<sup>1</sup> *Further Letters*, ed. Claude Collier Abbott (2nd ed., 1956), pp. 216-17.

very mildness of tone, the effect is sharp to the point of paradox, and Tennyson, as he gazed at the trial-edition, must suddenly have realized that he had virtually said: 'I could not love Honour so much, loved I not Hallam more.' It is not surprising, however unfortunate, that he replaced the lines with the ripe fluency of Parnassian verse. But these two changes for the worse are exceptions to the general rule. His wording was always considered; sometimes it was too considerate.

In 1931 Sir Charles drew attention to 'one curious characteristic of Tennyson's methods of composition' (p. x):

I have noted in these early poems a number of lines which the poet used again, often years afterwards, in quite different contexts, in his published work. It is known and has been remarked that Tennyson often stored observations and similes for long periods before finally working them into his poems, and this storage of actual lines from early compositions is a fresh illustration of the same tendency. The remarkable thing is that the lines, when finally taken from storage, fit so naturally and aptly into their new context that they are often among the best passages in the poems in which they are employed.

In what follows, I shall offer some new examples of such self-borrowing in Tennyson; my major concern is with Tennyson's poetic skill, but I want also to suggest that such self-borrowings are relevant to Tennyson's most impassioned subject: Time. 'He was', said Humphry House,<sup>1</sup> 'an Aeonian poet; one on whom the consciousness of time bore like a burden.' It was on the subject of time that Tennyson wrote those lines of his which are most likely to stand against time.

The point is implicit in a famous example of self-borrowing in Wordsworth. His sonnet 'Mutability' tells how the outward forms of truth

drop like the tower sublime  
Of yesterday, which royally did wear  
His crown of weeds, but could not even sustain  
Some casual shout that broke the silent air,  
Or the unimaginable touch of Time.

Why is it moving to learn that the last line, 'the unimaginable touch of Time', had been part of a 'Fragment of a "Gothic" Tale' about thirty years earlier? Mainly because of the sureness of Wordsworth's sense of context, the life which here pours into the cliché 'the touch of Time'. But perhaps we are moved too by the poem's subject, 'Mutability', by the fact that despite

<sup>1</sup> *All in Due Time* (1955), p. 127.

mutability and the touch of time, for Wordsworth something important endured unchanging and still new: the line of poetry which he had written thirty years before.

Of course, the point is not, strictly, literary criticism; it is a point about biography, or methods of composition—it concerns the question why, of all the good lines which Wordsworth had available from his juvenilia, it should have been this one which later meant so much to him and which he was able to use so beautifully. In discussing Tennyson's self-borrowings, I shall point in passing to the frequency with which they concern time, and at the end try to bring together the implications of this.

Yet there is nothing which a poet can use which he cannot also abuse, and *Maud* provides important evidence that Tennyson's self-borrowings can lead to the heart of his failures as well as of his successes. As is well known, the germ of *Maud* was the poem 'O! that 'twere possible', which Tennyson had written in 1833 or 1834, on the death of Arthur Hallam, and which he published in *The Tribute* in 1837. It was not until 1853 that he started seriously on *Maud*. It is not an accident that one reaches for an organic metaphor like 'germ' to describe the relationship of 'O! that 'twere possible' to the completed monodrama. What we find is not any change of context but the providing of a context. As originally published, 'O! that 'twere possible' had no dramatic or psychological setting; itself a cry, it cried out for one. That Tennyson was dissatisfied with it, is clear from his not including it in his volumes of 1842; by 1855, he had created its context.

*Maud*, then, shows the success of this method of composition, but it also shows us a failure. One section of *Maud* was bitterly ridiculed by many critics on publication, as falling far below the lyrical and psychological force of the rest: the song 'Go not, happy day' [I. xvii], which the hero exclaims in his love of Maud:

Go not, happy day,  
 From the shining fields,  
 Go not, happy day,  
 Till the maiden yields. . . .  
 Pass the happy news,  
 Blush it thro' the West;  
 Till the red man dance  
 By his red cedar-tree,  
 And the red man's babe  
 Leap, beyond the sea.

Blush from West to East,  
Blush from East to West,  
Till the West is East,  
Blush it thro' the West. . . .

And so on. The objection to this song is not to its happiness but to its being ill written: the graceless hyperbole which has the red man's babe leaping because of a love-match in England, and the cumbrous repetitions, uncharacteristically devoid of lyrical feeling.

There are indeed true moments of happiness in *Maud*—the section which follows this song ('I have led her home, my love, my only friend') is one of them. But 'Go not, happy day' is written in the wrong style; why does the hero fall into this nursery-rhyming? If we ask where we have met such a tone before, the answer is in some of the songs which Tennyson interpolated in the third edition of *The Princess* (1850). What has not been pointed out is that 'Go not, happy day' was originally one of the songs for *The Princess*;<sup>1</sup> Tennyson found no place for it there, and rather than waste it he made a place for it in *Maud* (made, not found). The tone resembles that of this song from *The Princess*:

And blessings on the falling out  
That all the more endears,  
When we fall out with those we love  
And kiss again with tears!<sup>2</sup>

The affinity is evident in the two poems which Tennyson published as 'Child-Songs' in 1880, but which he notes were originally for *The Princess*:

Minnie and Winnie  
Slept in a shell.  
Sleep, little ladies!  
And they slept well.

But such a tone was not right for *Maud*—and we can now see why the red man's babe appeared. Not because of any aptness to *Maud* but because of *The Princess*. Almost all the intercalated songs include a baby; indeed, Tennyson added them expressly in order to emphasize the importance of the baby in the story

<sup>1</sup> See the manuscript at the University Library, Cambridge.

<sup>2</sup> Self-borrowings lead to wheels within wheels. Tennyson dropped these four lines from *The Princess* in 1851, temporarily; the Harvard MS. of *Maud* shows that he thought of using them in *Maud* at this time.



of *The Princess*. But in transferring 'Go not, happy day', Tennyson was for once under the ill influence of his habit.<sup>1</sup>

For the habit at its best, we may turn to some of the finest lines he ever wrote, from perhaps his finest poem, 'Ulysses':

To follow knowledge like a sinking star,  
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

In their context as Ulysses speaks (a context soaked in a consciousness of time):

Life piled on life  
Were all too little, and of one to me  
Little remains: but every hour is saved  
From that eternal silence, something more,  
A bringer of new things; and vile it were  
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,  
And this gray spirit yearning in desire  
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,  
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

In a Trinity notebook, these two lines form part of quite a different poem, 'Tiresias', which Tennyson did not complete and publish until 1885 but which he had begun at the same time as 'Ulysses': October 1833, the month in which he heard the news of Hallam's death. As published, 'Tiresias' begins:

I wish I were as in the years of old,  
While yet the blessed daylight made itself  
Ruddy thro' both the roofs of sight, and woke  
These eyes, now dull, but then so keen to seek  
The meanings ambush'd under all they saw . . . .

But in the Trinity manuscript, Tiresias had been in youth keen not 'to seek the meanings', but keen

To follow knowledge like a sinking star,  
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

(Again, in 'Tiresias', the oppressive sense of time.) It is the context which triumphantly justifies Tennyson's decision as to where to use his resonant lines. What has a star to do with Tiresias? Whereas Ulysses is speaking to his mariners, and mariners do indeed watch and follow stars. And what had Tiresias to do with bounds and horizons? Whereas in his last voyage Ulysses yearns

To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths  
Of all the western stars, until I die.

<sup>1</sup> The unevenness of 'The Sailor Boy' (1861) is explained, though not justified, by the fact that it too was originally a song for *The Princess*.

Again, notice how the contrast between Ulysses' aged frame and his burning spirit comes out in a juxtaposition absent from the context in 'Tiresias': the play of 'this gray spirit'<sup>1</sup> against the 'sinking star' (and of the 'suns' against the 'star'). All these details bind the lines into their context, and so does the echo of Dante in 'knowledge'. As Tennyson said, 'Ulysses' has as its primary source the speech by Ulysses in Dante's *Inferno*, urging his companions to their last voyage. Tennyson's 'knowledge' calls up Dante's *canoscenza*. The difference between the use of those two lines in 'Tiresias' and in 'Ulysses' is the difference between talent and genius. It is Tennyson's sense of context which releases all the energies of the lines.

The same is true of another of his great lines, again in a context heavy with time: 'The phantom circle of a moaning sea.' The scene is the last battle in *The Passing of Arthur* (1869)—a scene likely to bring out the best in a poet whose genius had shown itself more than forty years earlier in a poem on Armageddon.

Then rose the King and moved his host by night,  
And ever push'd Sir Modred, league by league,  
Back to the sunset bound of Lyonesse—  
A land of old upheaven from the abyss  
By fire, to sink into the abyss again;  
Where fragments of forgotten peoples dwelt,  
And the long mountains ended in a coast  
Of ever-shifting sand, and far away  
The phantom circle of a moaning sea.

Could any location be more apt to 'this last, dim, weird battle of the west'?—where the fighters are themselves phantoms in the mist, where not only the sea is moaning, and where the life of the king comes full circle?<sup>2</sup> And yet only a year before (1868), Tennyson had printed, though not published, the line as part of the last section of *The Lover's Tale*. In the trial-edition, which he suppressed once more, we hear of

A dismal hostel in a dismal land,  
A world of reed and rush, and far away  
The phantom circle of a moaning sea.

How fortunate that Tennyson somehow knew not to waste the line on such a context. Not, in fact, that he had created the line for *The Lover's Tale* either. More than thirty years before,

<sup>1</sup> Tennyson changed this from 'this old heart yet' (Kemble MS.).

<sup>2</sup> Tennyson frequently used, in symbolic contexts, such words as circle, sphere, orb, and round (all as verbs as well as nouns).

about 1833, it had formed the climax of his little poem describing Mablethorpe on the Lincolnshire coast. In 1850 he published these 'Lines', but without the second stanza which survives in a Trinity manuscript. The stanza may not be quoted, but it contains all but verbatim the line 'The phantom circle of a moaning sea'. In the fullness of time, Tennyson found for the line the right fullness of context.

For Tennyson, context often meant the mingling of a landscape with a mood. It was Arthur Hallam in August 1831 (*The Englishman's Magazine*) who praised Tennyson's 'vivid, picturesque delineation of objects, and the peculiar skill with which he holds all of them fused, to borrow a metaphor from science, in a medium of strong emotion'. The Harvard manuscript of *The Princess* includes these lines in its Prologue:

Within, the sward  
Was kept like any lawn, but all about  
Large ivy suck'd the joinings of the stones,  
Beneath like knots of snakes.

No fusion, because that muscularity, that mood, answers to nothing in *The Princess*. In *The Marriage of Geraint*, Tennyson fuses description and mood, a mood haunted by time:

And high above a piece of turret stair,  
Worn by the feet that now were silent, wound  
Bare to the sun, and monstrous ivy-stems  
Claspt the gray walls with hairy-fibred arms,  
And suck'd the joining of the stones, and look'd  
A knot, beneath, of snakes, aloft, a grove.

Sometimes such a gift for placing may crystallize into a discreet pun. We know from Hallam Tennyson's *Memoir*<sup>1</sup> that the following fragment was jotted down at Torquay:

as the little thrift  
Trembles in perilous places o'er the deep.

But this jotting about the plant thrift was not used by Tennyson until he could engage with the other sense of thrift. His poem 'Sea Dreams' deals with his disastrous investing of all his funds in Dr. Matthew Allen's wood-carving scheme:

Small were his gains, and hard his work; besides,  
Their slender household fortunes (for the man  
Had risk'd his little) like the little thrift,  
Trembled in perilous places o'er a deep. . . .

<sup>1</sup> (1897), i. 465.

At the other extreme from such a tiny instance of self-borrowing comes the incorporation *en bloc* of a whole passage of blank verse. Context here means pace—Tennyson is a master of pace. Who would have thought that the finest lines in the magnificent closing passage of *The Princess* were originally part of another poem written fifteen years before? The tempo, with its superb *rallentando* and its tranquil finality, is perfect:

the walls  
 Blacken'd about us, bats wheel'd, and owls whoop'd,  
 And gradually the powers of the night,  
 That range above the region of the wind,  
 Deepening the courts of twilight broke them up  
 Thro' all the silent spaces of the worlds,  
 Beyond all thought into the Heaven of Heavens.

Last little Lilia, rising quietly,  
 Disrobed the glimmering statue of Sir Ralph  
 From those rich silks, and home well-pleased we went.

Tempo depends here on time as well as timing. 'Last', 'quietly': the full potentialities of the lines emerge only in this context, as can be seen if we look back at them in *The Lover's Tale* of 1832, which Tennyson suppressed before publication:

When thou and I, Cadrilla, thou and I  
 Were borne about the bay or sitting gazed  
 Till gradually the powers of the night  
 That range above the region of the wind  
 Deepening the courts of twilight, broke them up  
 Thro' all the silent spaces of the worlds  
 Beyond all thought, into the Heaven of Heavens.  
 When thou and I, Cadrilla, thou and I  
 Were moored by some low cavern, while without  
 Through the long dark. . . .

And so on, in a deft passage of Tennysonian verse. But those central lines needed to be something more than merely one among many memories; it was not till the end of *The Princess* that they found the placing which, as it were, they were made for.

A similar sense of what really constitutes the *end* of a poem informs Coleridge's great poem on time: 'Frost at Midnight'. Humphry House<sup>1</sup> pointed out how finely Coleridge changed the ending; in the version of 1798 the poem had ended:

<sup>1</sup> Coleridge (1953), pp. 82-83.

Or whether the secret ministry of cold  
 Shall hang them up in silent icicles,  
 Quietly shining to the quiet moon,  
 Like those, my babe! which ere tomorrow's warmth  
 Have capp'd their sharp keen points with pendulous drops,  
 Will catch thine eye, and with their novelty  
 Suspend thy little soul; then make thee shout,  
 And stretch and flutter from thy mother's arms  
 As thou wouldst fly for very eagerness.

This, in House's words,

was a stopping rather than an end; for once the vista of new domestic detail was opened there was no reason why it should not be indefinitely followed, with increasing shapelessness. This was informal and conversational as family talk. The decision to stop at line 74 was one of the best artistic decisions Coleridge ever made. For not only is the present ending one of the finest pieces of short descriptive writing in the language, intricate and yet at the same time sparsely clear, compressing so much of the moods of various weather; but it also perfectly rounds the movement of the mind which has been the poem's theme:

Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,  
 Whether the summer clothe the general earth  
 With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing  
 Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch  
 Of mossy apple-tree, while the night thatch  
 Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall  
 Heard only in the trances of the blast,  
 Or if the secret ministry of frost  
 Shall hang them up in silent icicles,  
 Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.

Tennyson's artistic decision was different in form but the same in intention—like Coleridge, he found an end rather than a stopping, and perfectly rounded the movement of *The Princess*.

Such self-borrowings not only reveal Tennyson's sense of context and his preoccupation with time; they also underline the extreme rashness of the generalizations as to his development, the growth or decline of his powers. The little poem 'Poets and Critics' was not published till his posthumous volume of 1892, and its manner suggests that it encapsulates his long battling with the reviewers:

Year will graze the heel of year,  
 But seldom comes the poet here,  
 And the Critic's rarer still.

Yet it was written sixty years before, and is Tennyson's reaction, not to a lifetime of reviewing, but to the reviews of his earliest volumes. And for Tennyson, year had indeed grazed the heel of year before he came to publish it.

It is the same with the honeymoon song that introduces the late poem 'The Ring', published in 1889, a song which must not be taken as evidence that his lyrical gift had astonishingly survived (or sadly declined) since it in fact dates from 1833.

Shall not *my* love last,  
Moon, with you,  
For ten thousand years  
Old and new?

Love may last, as the poem itself had lasted—though this could be known to none but the poet and his immediate circle. The 'Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington' (1852) is imbued with a sense of the passing of an era:

For tho' the Giant Ages heave the hill  
And break the shore, and evermore  
Make and break, and work their will . . . .

But this vision of time was one which had come to Tennyson far back in time, twenty years before; it is the Soul, in a manuscript of *The Palace of Art*, who sees this vision:

Yet saw she Earth laid open. Furthermore  
How the strong Ages had their will,  
A range of Giants breaking down the shore  
And heaving up the hill.

The convergence for Tennyson of self-borrowings and a preoccupation with time is implicit in two examples furnished by Sir Charles. The early unpublished poem 'An Idle Rhyme' provided a line for *In Memoriam* [xcv. 40]—the line is 'The deep pulsations of the world', which in *In Memoriam* goes on: 'Æonian music measuring out / The steps of Time.' And the early poem 'Sense and Conscience' provided a simile for *The Lover's Tale*—the simile ponders youth and age:

Ev'n the dull-blooded poppy-stem, 'whose flower,  
Hued with the scarlet of a fierce sunrise,  
Like to the wild youth of an evil prince,  
Is without sweetness, but who crowns himself  
Above the naked poisons of his heart  
In his old age.'

Yet, as these examples bring out, this is not the case of an artist who has outlived his gift and who is forced to clutch at his unpublished juvenilia—rather as James Thurber, when blind and unable to draw, is said to have devised new captions for his old drawings. In Tennyson the habit was a lifelong one, as is well known from the composition of his first notably successful poem, 'Timbuctoo', with which he won the Chancellor's Gold Medal at Cambridge in 1829. For this, 'he patched up an old poem on "The Battle of Armageddon" '; in fact the Trinity manuscript shows that about 120 lines, or roughly half of 'Timbuctoo', was lifted whole from 'Armageddon'.<sup>1</sup> It is characteristic of Tennyson that he went on to borrow from 'Timbuctoo' itself; one of its lines turns up in *The Lover's Tale*, and two lines in the 'Ode to Memory'. What is also characteristic is the subject of these further self-borrowings: 'A center'd glory-circled memory', and 'the lordly music flowing from /The illimitable years'.

There is no breach between the young Tennyson and the old. His first political pronouncement as a peer was the poem 'Freedom', published in, and dated, 1884. Sir Charles has pointed out that its closing stanza was taken from the poem 'Hail Briton' which Tennyson had written but not published fifty years before. And it is not just the closing stanza which was taken over; the Trinity manuscripts make clear that much of 'Freedom' was culled from political poems of 1832-3. The political viewpoint is altogether consistent.<sup>2</sup> Robert Frost wrote:

I never dared be radical when young  
For fear it would make me conservative when old.

But Tennyson had no need of this 'Precaution'; when he wished to speak as a septuagenarian, he simply published at last the words which he had written in his twenties.

For Tennyson there was never a breach between the political and the personal. Yet when a man's son dies, and he writes a

<sup>1</sup> *Memoir*, i. 46. For an account of the Trinity MS. (which differs considerably from the 1931 text), see my note in *Modern Language Review*, lxi (1966), 23-24.

<sup>2</sup> 'England and America in 1782' (published 1872) dates from 1832-4. Even 'Riflemen Form' (published 1859) was not a reaction to an immediate crisis, but dates from 1852; see my note in *Review of English Studies*, n.s. xv, (1964), 401-4. On 'Hail Briton', see M. J. Donahue, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, lxiv (1949), 385-416.

poem about the death, one would expect all of that poem at least to be newly created. When Tennyson's son Lionel died on his way home from India in 1886, Tennyson's funeral poem began (as Sir Charles has noted) with a stanza which he had written more than fifty years before in 'Hail Briton'. 'To the Marquis of Dufferin and Ava' thanks the Viceroy for all he had done for Lionel.

At times our Britain cannot rest,  
At times her steps are swift and rash;  
She moving, at her girdle clash  
The golden keys of East and West.

Not swift or rash, when late she lent  
The sceptres of her West, her East,  
To one, that ruling has increased  
Her greatness and her self-content.

And so through masterly transitions to personal thanks.

But if we look back fifty years, we see that in the earlier context 'East and West' was no more than a ringing description of the British Empire; it had none of the personal aptness here found for it. Dufferin had been Ambassador in Constantinople and Viceroy in India; Lionel Tennyson had died visiting India on his work for the India Office. And once again the lines seem to have risen to Tennyson's mind because of their sense of time, of an era. 'Not swift or rash'—the words may, without flippancy, be applied to the habit of composition itself.

For Tennyson, there had never been an era's end so unforgettable as the French Revolution—from his first to his last poems, it preys upon his mind. In 'Hail Briton', he has eight lines on revolution and time; these eight lines<sup>1</sup> he transferred to *In Memoriam*, cxxiii, where they became some of the noblest lines which he wrote in praise of Hallam, whose death had removed a man of great political promise:

Should licensed boldness gather force,  
Becoming, when the time has birth,  
A lever to uplift the earth  
And roll it in another course,

With many shocks that come and go,  
With agonies, with energies,  
With overthrowings, and with cries,  
And undulations to and fro.

<sup>1</sup> They are in the Harvard MS. but not the Heath MS.



The political and the personal are here truly joined, in the converging of self-borrowing and the sense of time.

The deep biographical roots of his self-borrowing (its being not a convenience but a cast of mind) are evident in the impulse to borrow from similar contexts.<sup>1</sup> Take these lines about time, from *The Princess*:

all the rich to-come  
Reels, as the golden Autumn woodland reels  
Athwart the smoke of burning weeds.

Tennyson created these lines from the conclusion to *In Memoriam*, which in the Lincoln manuscript includes this stanza:

We pace the stubble bare of sheaves,  
We watch the brimming river steal  
And half the golden woodland reel  
Athwart the smoke of burning leaves.

When Tennyson's mind went back and rescued those lines he was not simply gleaning natural description, he was reaching to the context of ideal married love (itself golden and autumnal). In *The Princess*, the lines go on to 'My bride, / My wife, my life'. In the manuscript of *In Memoriam*, they describe how the wedding-guests stroll through the countryside after the marriage of Tennyson's sister. The change from 'burning leaves' to 'burning weeds' is a fine one, in its slight unexpectedness, and in the way in which it transforms 'weeds' into part of the golden scene.

Only one of Tennyson's notable poems has self-borrowing at its very heart. 'Edwin Morris' is one of the best of Tennyson's 'English Idyls', a distillation of memory. The speaker remembers his rambles by the lake with the poet Edwin Morris and the curate Edward Bull, and how they used to talk about love. The speaker's own love-affair with Letty Hill came to nothing—he simply was not rich enough. Tennyson here did not so much indict as deprecate 'The rentroll Cupid of our rainy isles', and he hit precisely the right note, neither soft nor bitter. In the perfect conclusion of the poem, it is the word 'smoulders' which does full justice both to the landscape and to the erotic memory:

<sup>1</sup> Sir Charles observes that *In Memoriam*, xciv. 54–55, incorporates two descriptive lines from 'In deep and solemn dreams'. It may be added that the latter too is an elegiac poem, and that the former is one of Tennyson's greatest evocations of 'Æonian music measuring out / The steps of Time'.

long ago

I have pardon'd little Letty; not indeed,  
 It may be, for her own dear sake but this,  
 She seems a part of those fresh days to me;  
 For in the dust and drouth of London life  
 She moves among my visions of the lake,  
 While the prime swallow dips his wing, or then  
 While the gold-lily blows, and overhead  
 The light cloud smoulders on the summer crag.

Elsewhere in the poem, in the character of Edwin Morris the poet, Tennyson wrote one of his most lucid and attractive pieces of self-criticism; he stood back from his own 'Parnassian' mannerisms, and treated them with ironical affection. Into the mouth of Edwin, Tennyson puts the words of early Tennyson, self-borrowing but now with self-criticism. He did not just make up lines of plangent self-indulgence (they might have become too much like parodies), he quoted his young self.

And once I ask'd him of his early life,  
 And his first passion; and he answer'd me;  
 And well his words became him: was he not  
 A full-cell'd honeycomb of eloquence  
 Stored from all flowers? Poet-like he spoke.

We should not miss the irony in 'poet-like' and 'well his words became him'; and the self-regarding simile ('a full-cell'd honeycomb of eloquence / Stored from all flowers') was an indulgence which Tennyson had permitted himself in an early draft of 'The Gardener's Daughter'.

Then Edwin speaks; of these ten lines, all but two are from the manuscripts of 'The Gardener's Daughter', so that if we feel the effect is sonorously Tennysonian, Tennyson would have agreed:

'My love for Nature and my love for her,  
 Of different ages, like twin-sisters grew,  
 [Twin-sisters differently beautiful,  
 To some full music rose and sank the sun,]  
 And some full music seem'd to move and change  
 With all the varied changes of the dark,  
 And either twilight and the day between;  
 For daily hope fulfill'd, to rise again  
 Revolving toward fulfilment, made it sweet  
 To walk, to sit, to sleep, to wake, to breathe.'

As Parnassian verse (lovely, incidentally, in its feeling for time), this is exquisite. But by this date Tennyson was dissatisfied with the Parnassian.

For Edwin's second speech, too, Tennyson found no need to create plangencies; once again he culled them from drafts of 'The Gardener's Daughter'. So here too is self-quotation:

'I would have hid her needle in my heart,  
To save her little finger from a scratch  
No deeper than the skin: my ears could hear  
Her lightest breath; her least remark was worth  
The experience of the wise. I went and came;  
Her voice fled always thro' the summer land;  
I spoke her name alone.'

But the poet Edwin was not allowed to rest satisfied; in a remarkable passage of self-criticism, the speaker bridles at the mannerisms:

Were not his words delicious, I a beast  
To take them as I did? but something jarr'd;  
Whether he spoke too largely; that there seem'd  
A touch of something false, some self-conceit,  
Or over-smoothness: howsoe'er it was,  
He scarcely hit my humour, and I said:  
'Friend Edwin, do not think yourself alone  
Of all men happy . . .'

The poem 'Edwin Morris' is one of Tennyson's best on the power of time (seen here by him confidently, not tragically); it is also a poem which has at its heart his perennial habit of self-quotation, used here with a different kind of awareness and with humour.

It seems important that so many of these self-borrowings have to do with time, but there are three counter-arguments. First, that there are dangers in even speaking of Tennyson's 'characteristic' preoccupation with time—everybody is preoccupied with time, and literary critics are always fudging up 'characteristics' of an author or a period which are simply common to humanity. Second, that if most of Tennyson's poems *are* about time, it is hardly surprising or significant that most of his self-borrowings are also about time. Third, that 'time' is so elastic a concept that it is hard to imagine a poem which couldn't in some sense be claimed as 'about' time. Mr. John Russell Brown has studied in Shakespeare's comedies the themes of love's wealth, love's truth, and love's order, but such words are hold-alls.

Yet it still seems that Tennyson writes about time with an unusual depth and imagination; that, even so, unexpectedly

many of his self-borrowings are concerned with time; and that no far-fetched meaning has to be sought for 'time' in order to accommodate them. The habit of self-borrowing manifests both an awareness of, and a means of countering, time. It has the 'emotional importance' which Humphry House<sup>1</sup> brilliantly picked out in Tennyson's fascination with description:

Many of Tennyson's poems—*Maud* most notable among the longer ones—totter on the edge of madness. Constantly the one rallying-point in them as poems is the description of external things. . . . In a number of poems he uses description as if it were in itself the final aim of poetic art. . . . These descriptions . . . had for him a central emotional importance. They stabilised his mind in the contemplation of unending processes, and allayed the restlessness of the searching and journeying involved in his view of what poetry should do.

Does self-borrowing (a method of composition which became a means of composition) have for Tennyson a comparable function? The dangers of melancholia, even of madness, were not remote from Tennyson; in a world of unending flux, a world where all seemed ephemeral (even the works of the greatest poets), a world where personal identity was a mystery and often a burden, Tennyson found some rallying-point in the continuity of his own creativity. What helped to 'stabilize his mind' was the reassurance offered by his own past (as in his 'Passion of the Past'), and nothing was more reassuring in that past than the surviving, and still living, evidences of his powers. To revise a published poem was to show that the past was not done with, irrevocable, immutable. To quarry from his unpublished work was to show that the past was indeed a quarry, its geological obduracy the source of its riches. The threatening melancholia crystallizes in two lines in the poem 'Walking to the Mail' about the 'morbid devil in his blood':

He lost the sense that handles daily life—  
That keeps us all in order more or less. . . .

Is it just a coincidence that those lines too had originally been part of another poem ('The Gardener's Daughter')?

Tennyson's self-borrowings, then, seem to have the same emotional importance as his preoccupation with description. Just how important this continuity was to him can be seen from the Tennyson *Concordance*. Self-borrowing needs to be related not only to the word 'time' (over 300 times in the *Concordance*) or the favourite adjective 'slow', but also to his persistent need

<sup>1</sup> *All in Due Time*, p. 129.

for the prefix 're-', itself a signal that the past still lives, can revive. 'The blossom that rebloom'd'; 'Remade the blood and changed the frame'; 'Rewaken with the dawning soul'; 'Re-merging in the general Soul'; 'Can I but relive in sadness?'—there are innumerable examples.<sup>1</sup> For, Tennyson, revision is truly a second vision.

It would be wrong, though, to imply that what is learnt from Tennyson's manuscripts is always solemn. A reminder of a different kind of creativity may be found in a *mot* by Browning, itself, as it happens, on time and endurance. Browning reports Tennyson as saying "This pair of dress boots is forty years old". We all looked at them, and I said it was good evidence of the immortality of the sole."<sup>2</sup> The gap between 'soul' and 'sole' is ludicrously wide—but Tennyson himself had leapt it. The Trinity manuscript of 'Love thou thy land' shows that the final reading 'the soul of Discord' grew from the idea of the giant footprint of Discord, its sole.

Tennyson's self-borrowings go to the heart of his poetic skill and of his preoccupation with time. They also bring out the conflict which is often felt in reading Tennyson, the conflict between confidence in his extraordinary expertise and faint uneasiness about the extent to which the expertise is verbal or purely verbal. There is something strange about the predicament of a poet whose wife had continually to urge his friends to provide him with subjects or stories for poems. Yet the end-products are sheer Tennyson. The theme of 'Enoch Arden', of the long-lost traveller returning to his wife, is one that had haunted Tennyson; the Lotos-Eaters knew that if they returned to Ithaca they would come as ghosts to trouble joy, and *In Memoriam* (like the very early poem 'The Coach of Death') expresses the same fear. But the story of 'Enoch Arden' was given to Tennyson by his friend Thomas Woolner.

The oddity of Tennyson's sources is analogous to that of his style: how come that such apparently dangerous habits so often resulted in something magnificently personal? Certainly the habit of self-borrowing leads to a central point: Tennyson's verbalism. The best criticism of Tennyson is by Walt Whitman:<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Notably: recommenced; regather; re-inspired; reissuing; re-listen; re-makes; remodel; re-orient; re-reiterated; re-risen; resmooth; resolder'd; retake; retaught; re-told; revisit.

<sup>2</sup> 19 March 1881; *William Allingham: A Diary*, ed. H. Allingham and D. Radford (1907), p. 311.

<sup>3</sup> 'A Word about Tennyson', *The Critic*, January 1887.

To me, Tennyson shows more than any poet I know (perhaps has been a warning to me) how much there is in finest verbalism. There is such a latent charm in mere words, cunning collocations, and in the voice ringing them, which he has caught and brought out, beyond all others—as in the line, ‘And hollow, hollow, hollow, all delight’, in *The Passing of Arthur*.

It comes agreeably to hand that even that line, ‘And hollow, hollow, hollow, all delight’, had originally been groped for in a line which Tennyson rejected from ‘Locksley Hall’: ‘hollow, hollow, hollow comfort’.