
A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE III.

TENNYSON'S "IN MEMORIAM."

BY PROFESSOR THEODORE W. HUNT, PH.D., LITT.D.

THERE are few readers of Tennyson who, if compelled to select one of his poems to the exclusion of all others, would not choose the "In Memoriam" as the most representative single production. Whatever praise may rightfully be accorded to the "Idyls of the King," to "Maud," or "The Princess" or to "Becket" as the best of his dramas, this magnificent threnody is so comprehensive and vital, so full of mind and soul and art and suggestion, that it stands alone, and unapproachably alone, among the poems of the author and among those of any of his contemporaries.

It is, in fact, a poem so much greater than the theme of it, or the sad event that suggested and inspired it, that there is almost an incongruity in the contrast, and the wonder increases, upon every renewed reading of it, that such a work of thought and feeling could have been based upon a foundation so limited and local. Our purpose in the study of this poem will best be subserved by noting, with some degree of regularity, the various topics of interest that arise as we peruse and examine it.

1. As to its Occasion. This is a matter of historical fact, and is found, as we know, in the death of Arthur Henry Hallam, the poet's college companion and intimate personal friend. His death at Vienna, September 15, 1833, marks the actual origin as well as the occasion of the poem, inasmuch as it was in this year that Tennyson began

its composition, not completing it fully until seventeen years after, the year 1850, the middle year of the century, and the forty-first of the author's long and illustrious career. It is thus that he calls it, An Elegy, while it is also a Eulogy, as he reiterates and impresses the varied virtues of his beloved Arthur; taking occasion, thereby, to exalt the personal qualities of all true characters in every age and clime. As already suggested, such an event as this, the untimely death of a college friend, would scarcely seem a fitting theme for so elaborate a production, and seems like magnifying one of the most ordinary incidents of our every-day life into a place of undeserved prominence; and yet the poet deals with the theme, both in its local and universal character, as a specific event of sorrow in his personal history as a man, and, also, as a general event of historic character in the developing history of men. The death of the gifted Hallam is thus but the text of a broad and thoroughly elaborated system of truth—a fact in life and providence and human history awakening attention to a thousand other related and wider reaching facts—a germinal idea or principle whose prolific fruitage is as undying as it is abundant.

Just as the "Idyls of the King" grew from small beginnings to spacious proportions as a poem of epic range, so did the death of Hallam occasion the author's greatest poem; the most notable elegy of the English tongue or of modern literature, and one of the representative poems of the literary world.

2. As to its Structure, we note that it is made up of one hundred and thirty sections, exclusive of the Prologue and Epilogue, containing in all seven hundred and twenty-four stanzas, of the peculiar Tennysonian order, the Quatrain, with its rhyme of the first and fourth lines, and of the second and third.

Throughout the poetry of Tennyson, various orders of

verse are found—Blank Verse, as in his "Harold" and other dramas, in the "Idyls of the King," and "Enoch Arden," "The Princess," and others of the longer poems; the Couplet, as in the "May Queen" and "Locksley Hall"; the three-line stanza, as in the "Two Voices"; the Quatrain, as in the "Palace of Art," "The Talking Oak"; the six-line stanza, as in "The Sisters"; the seven-line stanza, as in "Fatima"; the eight-line stanza, as in "The Miller's Daughter"; the twelve-line stanza, as in "Mariana"; while in so short a poem as "Eleanore" the stanzas vary from the minimum of nine lines to the maximum of twenty-four lines, in which a large variety of combinations is expressed.

The peculiar Quatrain of "In Memoriam," however, is Tennyson's own, as much as the Spenserian Stanza of the "Faerie Queene" is Spenser's, used here by him in its best form and made by its use an historic English stanza.

Here and there, outside of "In Memoriam," Tennyson employs it, as in his significant lines to the Queen, in 1830, three years before the death of Hallam.

> "Revered, beloved—O you that hold
> A nobler office upon earth
> Than arms, or power of brain or birth
> Could give the warrior kings of old,
>
> "Victoria,—since your Royal grace
> To one of less desert allows
> This laurel greener from the brows
> Of him that uttered nothing base."

So, in the poems entitled, "The Blackbird" and "To J. S.," written in the earlier years.

Further, as to structure, it may be stated, that critics and commentators have gone to the extreme either of denying any unity of plan in the poem, or to that of reducing it to a close and technical, logical analysis, as if it had been so divided according to the canons of the schools.

Professor Genung, in his interesting study of the poem, falls into the latter extreme, and gives us an elaborate plan

of Prologue, First, Second, and Third Cycles, and Epilogue, stating the specific stanzas that belong, as he thinks, to the respective divisions. In fact, more than one-half of his book is taken up with the statement and attempted proof of this theory, so that, in not a few instances, he is compelled to adopt forced analyses in order to reach such a result. He even goes so far as to suggest, that the poet gives us in the poem the hint of his own plan that we are to discover and unfold. This, to our mind, is not only impossible to find, but undesirable.

In order to the fullest enjoyment and understanding of the poem, as well as to the fullest expression of its poetical character, all that is needed is, to bear in mind its definite occasion, its general order of thought and form, and the double purpose, specific and general, which it is intended to subserve.

In fact, even the general method of it is often at fault, if we press closely the claims of logical rule, in that topics once treated are reintroduced, and in that additional stanzas were composed after the poem had been subsequently written. This afterthought could not have been in the original plan, so called, while the manner in which such stanzas adjust themselves to the general object of it shows that any such principle as a logical nexus was absent, and that the author wrote what he wrote on a comprehensive and flexible method.

In this respect, the poem is in keeping with "The Idyls of the King," the parts of which were composed at different periods, and to the latest critics still present the open question as to how little and how much sequence and logical connection exists, and as to just what the author's plan and aim may be said to have been. The poet himself never saw fit to solve these questionings, which in itself is but an additional proof that he preferred to leave the matter of method to itself.

The actual content or subject-matter of the poem is the best answer as to what it is and what it is designed to teach.

3. If we thus inquire as to the Purpose of the poem, the best general answer is, that it is an attempt to state and solve the problem of life—as life is inseparably connected with death and destiny and immortality. Professor Genung prefers to state it in the form of a proposition, "That Love is Intrinsically Immortal." This he calls the "fundamental idea" of the poem, as expressed in the first stanza.

> "Strong Son of God, immortal Love,
> Whom we, that have not seen thy face,
> By faith, and faith alone embrace,
> Believing where we cannot prove."

We revert, however, to the purpose stated—the attempt to examine and solve the problem of life, as it presented itself to the poet's mind. This includes the doctrine of Immortal Love and others equally and more important,—those of man's origin, and history and destiny; his hopes and fears; his joys and sorrows and struggles; his victories and reverses; his successes and disappointments; his relation to God and the world and the eternal life beyond.

It is here that the poem sweeps out beyond the local and temporal into the immensities and infinities, and embraces, as Dante's "Divina Commedia," the confines of heaven, earth, and hell.

The poem is thus essentially inquisitive and interrogative. It investigates phenomena, scientific and religious, if so be it may come at length to the disclosure of the hidden truth, the resolution of the complex problem, the successful finding of the way. The question of Pilate to Christ is the question of the poet—What is Truth? only asked and presented in the reverential spirit and, therefore, with the promise of an approximate solution. In the course of this inquiry, manifold questions and teachings arise—as to the transientness of all things human; as to the folly of

ambition and worldly preferment; as to the depressing effects of sorrow, and the mission of the divine discipline; as to the blessedness of friendship, and the moral relation of the present to the future. It is in fine "this search for reality" that constitutes the purpose as well as the inestimable value of the elegy—an earnest, and often an intensely passionate, attempt to reach foundations, and mark the limits of truth and things; to discover certainty amid ceaseless change, and "justify the ways of God to man." "In Memoriam" is Tennyson's Essay on Man, with a deeper meaning and a wider purpose than belonged to the poem of Pope, and a representation of Victorian England as that was of Augustan.

4. This last statement naturally calls to mind the Relation of "In Memoriam" to the Age in which it was produced. Stedman speaks of it as "an eminently British poem, in scenery, imagery, and general treatment." In this sense, it is national as well as universal. More specifically, it is a poem of nineteenth-century England, as distinct from any preceding period, as much so as Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales" was a picture of fourteenth-century England, or Addison's "Spectator" that of the age of Anne. There is a sense, moreover, in which all antecedent English thought and life, from the days of Elizabeth to Victoria, had accumulated and expressed itself in this closing century, the individual life of the century itself being added thereto, and being, as the latest factor, the most impressive and vital. It was in 1809, just as the century had fairly opened, that Tennyson was born. Beginning his great Elegy in the third decade, its completion is coterminous with the close of the first half of the century, and may be said, in time and in character, to mark the high tide of the nation's thought and life. It was a time when scientific research, after the modern method, was taking on its positive and pronounced forms. Metaphysicians and theologi-

ans, stimulated by continental thinkers, were speculating, as never before in England, on the great questions of philosophy and ethics. English politics and the English church were alike stirred to the center.

It was now, as historians have been quick to note, that such representative men as Dr. Arnold and Frederic Robertson, Maurice and Newman, and the leading exponents of the great Oxford movement were agitating, in their own way, the fundamental questions of state and church and human life. The great English writers of the time in Fiction, Miscellany, History, and Sociology, were doing phenomenal work, while Thackeray and Carlyle protested against the imposing frauds of the era, whatever their guise or name or sanctions.

As Matthew Arnold and Browning, so Tennyson, aimed to reach and disclose the deepest instincts of the age, and thus to make his poem but a reflex of his nation's thought. There is a sense, therefore, in which, as we read this Elegy, we seem to see the faces of Keats and Shelley, Coleridge and Wordsworth, Southey and Scott, Morris and Clough, and all the cardinal characteristics of the period. It was Tennyson's aim and high vocation to gather up and express in verse, as he only could do it, the prevailing ideas and feelings of these epoch-making minds, and with them all to express his own profoundest self. It is thus historically as well as poetically just to answer the question propounded, as to whether or not Tennyson is a great poet, in the words in which a recent American critic has answered it, by saying, "That will depend on whether you think the nineteenth century is a great century, for he is the clearest, sweetest, and strongest voice of the century."

So true is this that Tennyson, in so far as we can see, would have been a poet out of place in the Augustan, and even in the Elizabethan age, and, if, indeed, out of his own epoch, far more at home in the ever-developing civilization

of the twentieth century than in the conservative history of the eighteenth. In his "Second Locksley Hall," as in the "In Memoriam," his eye often peers beyond the limits of the present age, and looks far on into the century just at hand.

5. As to the Relation of "In Memoriam" to Other Poems, something may be said. If the question of time of composition is taken into account, we note, that, the poems published before 1833 apart, the first Collection closely connected with the Elegy was that published in 1842 under the title, "Poems by A. Tennyson," in which such pronounced examples as "Ulysses," "Locksley Hall," "The Two Voices," and "Morte d' Arthur" appeared. Then followed, previous to 1850, the "Princess" in 1847, it being noticeable that, in 1850, the year of the publication of "In Memoriam," there occurred the marriage of the poet to Miss Sellwood, and his appointment, as the successor of Wordsworth, to the English Poet Laureateship, which he held to the day of his death, in 1892. The year 1850 thus marks the completion of the first half of his life, the second half being coterminous with the possession of the Laureateship.

It is natural to infer, therefore, that many of these antecedent poems, between 1833 and 1850, were more or less preparative to this one consummate work, as Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales" show the preparative influence of his earlier work. Especially is this presumable in reference to the poems of 1842; "The Two Voices" being, perhaps, as significant as any in this historic and literary sequence.

The opening three-line stanza indicates its character,

> "A still small voice spake unto me,
> 'Thou art so full of misery,
> Were it not better not to be?'"

So, the sixth—

> "I said, 'When first the world began,
> Young Nature thro' five cycles ran,
> And in the sixth she moulded man.'"

So, later—

> "And men, thro' novel spheres of thought
> Still moving after truth long sought,
> Will learn new things when I am not."

So, on through the poem, we are reminded of the reflective lines of the Elegy seeking after the light and the truth and the solution of the pressing problems of time and eternity.

If this relation of the Elegy to Tennyson's other work, preceding and subsequent, be examined apart from the principle of time, and mainly with reference to those poems that breathe the same spirit and seek the same ends, the subject will assume a wider and fuller form.

Referring, at this point, to Van Dyke's sixfold classification of Tennyson's poems:—

I. Melodies and Pictures.

II. Stories and Portraits, including Ballads, Idyls, and Character Pieces.

III. Epics.

IV. Dramas.

V. Patriotic and Personal Poems.

VI. Poems of the Inner Life [of Art, Life, Love and Death and Doubt and Faith],

this last division—Poems of the Inner Life—would almost, without exception, indicate the line of thought in the Elegy, particularly those dealing with Doubt and Faith, such as, "The Higher Pantheism," "Vastness," "De Profundis," and "Crossing the Bar," while others, such as, "The Vision of Sin," "My Life is full of Weary Days," "Love and Death," suggest the same great truths and questions. So, in each of the other five categories, pertinent examples may be found, as in, "Nothing will Die," "All Things will Die," "The Death of the Old Year," "A Farewell,"

"A Dirge," "Ode to Memory," "Far, Far Away," "The Golden Year," "Despair," and the two Locksley Halls.

It is thus that "In Memoriam" may be seen to stand as a poem midway in the author's work, as midway in his life, looking before and after, expressing in most fitting form what had been and what was yet to be expressed, though in less effective manner, and thus concentrating in one supreme effort all the best qualities and tendencies of the author's genius.

It is for this reason, if for no other, that it may be called the poet's most representative work, as it is his richest and greatest—the one that could least be spared from the large volume of verse which he has written. The relation of "In Memoriam" to "Paradise Lost," as of Tennyson to Milton, is a difficult question and has recently been ably discussed by a living American critic.

6. We may now turn to one or two of the more specific Characteristics and Qualities of this poem.

And, first, as to its Poetic Form or Type. The author has distinctly called it, An Elegy, while the nature of the theme, as well as that of the method, sentiment, and purpose, would so indicate. Thus, critics such as Genung and Davidson have sought to establish close parallelisms between it and other English Elegies, notably, Milton's "Lycidas" and Shelley's "Adonais," and the autobiographical Sonnets of Shakespeare. In so far as each is an elegy, "In Memoriam," "Lycidas," and "Adonais;" in so far as each refers to the loss, on the author's part, of a beloved personal friend, of Hallam and Edward King and Keats, the comparison may be said to hold; while the Sonnets of the great dramatist also point to his sincere affection for some unnamed friend. Here, however, is the limit of the resemblance, while in comprehensiveness of plan, in imaginative outlook, in range of power, and intrinsic poetic quality, the Laureate's dirge is so incomparably superior to

any other elegy of our language that any attempt to institute extended likeness is as invidious as it is impracticable. Emerson's "Threnody" over the loss of his son, or his "In Memoriam" over the loss of his brother, or Arnold's lament of Clough in his "Thyrsis" are suggestive and beautiful poems, but can with no more justice be brought into favorable comparison with the Elegy upon Hallam than can Tennyson's "Harold" or "Queen Mary" be closely compared with "Julius Caesar" or "Richard III."

It may be noted, further, as to Form, that "In Memoriam," being specifically elegiac, is essentially a Lyric, and would thus take its place among the poems of the author's first collection of 1830, "Poems chiefly Lyrical." Devoid of anything like a distinctive dramatic type, it has not enough of the epic or heroic element to modify its general lyric character, while the nature of the theme and the prevalence of deep emotion would constitute it of the lyric order.

The external form of "In Memoriam" apart, its most striking feature is its masterly combination of the intellectual and artistic, so that each is expressed in appropriate measure and manner, and each is made to contribute to the highest excellence of the other. It is questionable whether such a fusion is so fully effected in any other English poem —certainly not in "Paradise Lost," nor in Pope's "Essay on Man," nor in Browning's "Ring and the Book," nor in Longfellow's "Evangeline." In each of these, one characteristic, the mental or artistic, is conspicuously prominent over the other, nor would it be aside from the truth to suggest, that the author's "Idyls of the King" is the closest approximation to his own ideal established in the elegy.

What Dowden calls the "mind and art" of Shakespeare, is here seen in Tennyson. When Bagehot speaks of the "ornate art" of Tennyson, intimating that it is lacking in the mental quality, and is ornate only, however just the criticism may be as applied to other poems, it has no valid

illustration in the Elegy. Here there is seen artistic unity, the unity of art and nature; of idea and form; of thought and feeling and taste; of the creative and constructive, in such a masterly manner that we view them as one and the same thing in the sum total of the effect that the poem has upon us.

In other words, "In Memoriam" represents the union of poetry and philosophy, and in a way superior to that of any of its poetic contemporaries. Herein lies one of the author's chief claims to a precedence over Robert Browning, in that where Browning deals with the intellectual only, Tennyson has presented the intellectual in vital union with the æsthetic.

It is one of the impressions ever deepening as we read "In Memoriam," that we are reading an author who is a master of thought and imagination as well as of words and meters, and the question starts ever anew, as we read a stanza, which is the greater, the depth and reach of its ideas, or the exquisite finish of its construction. We read—

> "Our little systems have their day;
> They have their day and cease to be;
> They are but broken lights of thee,
> And thou O Lord art more than they."
>
> "I held it truth with him who sings
> To one clear harp in divers tones,
> That men may rise on stepping stones
> Of their dead selves to higher things."

and, as we read, we are instructed and enchanted, for we have found a thinker and a bard in one, and, in so far as "In Memoriam" is concerned, the thinker is always present. We may allude here to a possible and tenable criticism of Tennyson in the love of art for art's sake, in the undue emphasis of the elaborative and decorative, but the criticism does not hold in the poem with which we are dealing, nor, we may add, does it hold to any marked degree in the longer poems, but chiefly in the shorter mis-

cellaneous lyrics, as in "Lilian" and "Madeline" and "The Ballad of Oriana" and odes and songs.

Mention has been made, in speaking of the subject-matter of "In Memoriam," that it deals with the most vital and profound problems of the day, and, in doing this, it is necessarily a thoughtful and a philosophic poem. It could not be other and be successful. The seventeen years spent in its preparation would indicate this. The evident manner of the poet as sedate and serious indicates it. He had written snatches of song and lighter lyrics and playful verses on life and love—"Claribel" and Isabel," "Sea Fairies" and the "Mermaid," "The Miller's Daughter" and the "May Queen," "The Day Dream" and the "Beggar Maid"; but now every faculty was at its fullest, every sober purpose was in exercise, imagination stirred to its sublimest function, and the poet's whole nature was lifted in Miltonic manner "to the height of his great argument." As a result, we have a poem instinct with thought and life and lofty ideals, and developed with all the grace and charm of poetic art,—a philosophy of man in finished verse, —a presentation of idea and expression thoroughly unique and Tennysonian, and evincing to all less gifted souls what the possibilities of poetry are and how a genius in song may think aloud in verse. The relation of the poem to man is one of the additional features of "In Memoriam." This indeed is a characteristic of Tennyson's poetry as a whole, as clearly evinced in the first collection which he published with his brother in 1826, as in "Demeter and Other Poems," published in 1889.

This, apart, however, there are some of his poems that evince this personality more fully than others, such as, "The Idyls," "Enoch Arden," "Maud," "Dora," "A Dream of Fair Women," "Lady Godiva," and many of those Character-Pieces and Poems on Love and doubt and destiny to which attention has been called.

"In Memoriam" however, stands out, to our mind, conspicuously prominent over all others in this respect. It is the most representative poem of the author, as it is of the age, more Tennysonian than any other, and one which an unprejudiced reader would most naturally select as Tennyson's, rather than Browning's or Swinburne's or even Matthew Arnold's. Mr. Howells has spoken of a feature which he terms, Tennysonianism. It is this which is here so visible that no one can mistake it; seen, partly, in the external structure and character of the poem, in stanza and rhythm and artistic beauty, but, more manifestly, in the intrinsic qualities of it, in its underlying sentiments, thoughts and ideals, and what may be called the genius of the poem.

The progress of the poem from 1833 to 1850 may be said to record the progress of the poet's mind during these seventeen memorable years. The very continuousness of its preparation made it a part of his own being and literary life. It was in his heart and thought as a growing entity until the fullness of time came for its appearance. Hence, the attempt made by some critics to institute a comparison between "In Memoriam" and Shakespeare's Sonnets, on the basis of their common autobiographical element, not only because each is written in the memory of a loved and lost friend, but because of the intense beauty and tenderness of the poems.

However this may be, "In Memoriam" is a revelation of the author's personality as well as a memorial of his friend.

Not a few of its stanzas are so lifelike that we can almost hear the poet say, This is my experience and my trust; this, my joy and my hope; and this, my faith and doubt.

Thus as he writes in the use of the first personal pronoun—

> "I sometimes hold it half a sin
> To put in words the grief I feel;
> For words, like nature, half reveal
> And half conceal the soul within."

we see in characteristic connection the sorrow over the death of young Hallam; the enunciation of a general principle as to the relation of feeling to utterance, and, also, his own state of mind as he pens the quatrain. This frequent repetition of the I, so notable in the poem, is far from egoistic but thoroughly natural, as the expression of the author's own state of mind.

And this leads us to note, in closing, that the special feature of "In Memoriam," as of Tennyson's best poetry, is its latent meaning, ever alluring the literary student to new investigations, and ever promising as his reward new discoveries of truth and beauty. Next to Shakespeare's plays, this poem must be ranked, in its suggestiveness or undeveloped thought. No one can read it or enjoy it without a kind of Hebraic sobriety of mind, and no one can rise from its reading without being stronger in mental vigor and possibility.

It is not at all strange that Tennyson has written nothing better since, in that here he may be said to have surpassed himself in range and imagination, and, in later years, but reiterated and reflected the essential excellencies of this masterpiece.

No poem has so permeated and suffused modern English verse. Tennyson, it is said by the critics, has founded a school or method of verse, and this is true; but in such a superb production as this he has done something better—he has expressed, in artistic oneness, the literary and the mental; has shown that lyric verse may retain all its charm and yet be expressed with epic dignity and range, and that the profoundest problems of human life may be presented in poetic form. In the conscientious attempt worthily to commemorate the character of a departed friend, he has made the memory of his own name as lasting as earth and time and the life of man.