

Life of Tennyson

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, was born in 1809 at Somersby, Lincolnshire, and died in 1892 at his summer home in Sussex. He was the fourth son of the Reverend George Clayton Tennyson and his wife Elizabeth, after George, who had died in infancy, Frederick (1807), and Charles (1808). The poet's grandfather, George Tennyson the elder, was a solicitor who established himself as a substantial landowner. He was an unstable man, subject to violent rages and self-pity, and something of a domestic tyrant. His first-born son, George Clayton, the father of Alfred Tennyson, inherited many of his failings, without his talent for business, and throughout his life remained turbulent and lonely, and always liable to fits of black depression. Disappointed in him, his father passed him over in favour of his younger son Charles, who inherited the bulk of the family fortune, on the death of George Tennyson in 1835. George Clayton Tennyson had died four years earlier; his son Alfred probably inherited at least £6,000, and although he consistently worried about money, and would speak of himself as a poor man, he was comfortably off for most of his life, despite his losses in the early 1840s as a result of bad investment, and indeed left £57,000, most of it from poetry. Charles Tennyson added the ancient name of d'Eyncourt to his own. The almost inevitable quarrel between the Tennysons of Somersby Rectory (eleven sons and daughters) and the crested and pedigreed Tennyson d'Eyncourts of Bayons Manor, extended and made spectacularly medieval in keeping with Charles Tennyson d'Eyncourt's ambitions, continued for many years. Although George Clayton and Charles Tennyson d'Eyncourt did not quarrel, the Somersby Tennysons mocked the pretensions of the Tennysons d'Eyncourts, who thought them uncouth, and some of whom were later angered by Tennyson's fame, and by his elevation to the peerage. The difficulties of life with his father were a formative experience for Alfred. His mother was sweet-tempered, but his father's depressions and nervous disorders strongly affected his large family. He drank heavily, and behaved violently. Tennyson's brother Frederick, who was as wayward and violent as his father, said that if they had not been living in a civilised country they would have murdered each other. His other brothers all had difficulty in coping with life. Charles (the Charles Tennyson Turner of the charming sonnet, 'Letty's Globe') was addicted for years to opium; Edward spent most of his life in an asylum; Arthur suffered from alcoholism, Septimus from nervous depression. To the end of his days Alfred was affected by shyness and morbid depressions, and for years believed that he had inherited epilepsy from his father.

His unpublished juvenilia include the visionary 'Armageddon', and the drama 'The Devil and the Lady', both unfinished. He published his first volume in 1827 (*Poems by Two Brothers*, mainly by Charles and Alfred, with a few pieces by Frederick), and in the same year entered Trinity College, Cambridge. At Cambridge he met Arthur Henry Hallam, the great friend of his youth. Cambridge itself meant little to him; in later life he said there was a lack of love in the place. Although he was a valued member of the Apostles, a brilliant undergraduate debating society, at whose meetings he rarely spoke, and although he won the Chancellor's Gold Medal with his poem 'Timbuctoo', he left Cambridge in 1831 without regrets, and without a degree. The year before he had carried money and secret messages with Arthur Hallam to the Spanish insurrectionary Constitutionalists, in whose cause the Apostles were interested. His 1830 volume, *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, had been severely handled by the critic John Wilson in Blackwood's Magazine; *Poems*, of 1832, was harshly reviewed by Croker in the no less influential *Quarterly Review*. The greatest sorrow Tennyson ever knew was the death of Hallam in 1833. Some of his finest poetry was written then, and the earliest of the one hundred and thirty-three lyric sections of 'In Memoriam' A.H.H. date from this period.

The two-volume *Poems* of 1842, which included revisions of some of the earlier work, established his reputation with the poetry-reading public. Five years later he published 'The Princess', a 'medley', as he called it, or playful satire on the contemporary question of women's rights and education. With 'In Memoriam' of 1850, which he had been writing at intervals since Hallam's death, his fame as the greatest living English poet was assured. In

the same year he succeeded Wordsworth as Poet Laureate, and married Emily Sellwood, by whom he had two sons, Hallam and Lionel. The brilliant monodrama 'Maud' was published in 1855, and four 'Idylls of the King' in 1859. Tennyson became a public figure, pestered by visiting admirers, though remaining shy and acutely sensitive to criticism. 'Enoch Arden' of 1864 helped to establish his fame in Europe. The 'Idylls of the King', in twelve books, was finally completed in 1874. In 1883 he became Baron Tennyson of Aldworth and Freshwater. The plays which he wrote in his later years have no particular interest other than their authorship. He died in 1892, and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

The friendship with Hallam

Hallam's death in 1833 was probably the greatest emotional experience of Tennyson's life. The two men had met at Cambridge in 1829. Hallam was two years younger than Tennyson. Although he wrote poetry both in English and Italian (he was an ardent admirer of Dante), his predilections were for metaphysics and philosophy. Unlike Tennyson he was a brilliant debater and public speaker. In section 87 (LXXXVII) of 'In Memoriam', Tennyson describes his intellectual authority at the meetings of the Apostles, when his friends 'hung to hear / The rapt oration flowing free,' and 'saw / The God within him light his face'. His father, the Whig historian Henry Hallam, had encouraged his precocity. The statesman Gladstone had been his intimate friend at Eton, and many years later said that Hallam was the most brilliant man he had ever known.

At Cambridge Hallam had missed his Eton friends, who had gone to Oxford. Tennyson had also been lonely during his first year there, missing the society of his talented brothers and sisters, with whom he had lived happily at Somersby when his father's temper and health permitted. Partly as a result of this, they quickly became friends. They travelled together to the Pyrenees - Tennyson's 1861 poem, 'In the Valley of Caunteretz', describes his emotions at revisiting a place first seen so many years ago with Hallam -and to the Rhine. Although Tennyson was a poor correspondent, with Hallam as with anyone else, they saw each other frequently. Hallam often visited the Tennysons at Somersby, which he seems to have found a change from the rigorous mental discipline imposed on him by his father in London. At Somersby he fell in love with Tennyson's sister Emily, to whom he became engaged. It used to be said that Tennyson found in Hallam the emotional and mental stability that he badly needed. But though his grasp of philosophical abstractions and concepts was greater than his friend's, Hallam too had his fears of madness, and thoughts of suicide. It is likely that each found stability in the other. Tennyson said of him that he was as near perfection as mortal man could be, and in 'In Memoriam' he makes his dead friend a type or example of the greater human race to come. He also said that Hallam looked up to him as he looked up to Hallam. While travelling with his father on the continent in 1833, Hallam died suddenly at Vienna, of apoplexy. Tennyson broke the news to his sister Emily. Although 'In Memoriam' and, in a different way, 'Morte d'Arthur' testify to his great grief, and although he was later to say that his life then seemed shattered, and that he wanted to die, he bore up well before his friends and family. He did not attend Hallam's funeral. Several critics have thought it necessary to take up a stand on whether or not the friendship was homosexual. There is nothing to suggest that it was. Hallam had had one or two sentimental affairs with women before he fell in love with Emily Tennyson. Tennyson's deep mistrust of physical love, evident in his poetry, is of no great relevance. Of the line 'Oh, wast thou with me, dearest, then' in section 122 (CXXII) of 'In Memoriam' he remarked to James Knowles, 'If anybody thinks I ever called him "dearest" in his life they are much mistaken, for I never even called him "dear"'. The appeal to the spirit of the dead in section 93 (XCIII) to 'Descend, and touch, and enter' has been brought in evidence, but there is nothing in it, or in the draft reading 'touch me: wed me', to suggest anything more than what is sometimes hoped of spirits. That Shakespeare's sonnets are an important stylistic analogue to 'In Memoriam', and that Hallam's father had reservations about them, means very little. The question is, in any real sense, unimportant.

arms, but for a strong man who can rule, and save the country from such a despot as France's Louis Napoleon, or from the power of the mob. It should be remembered that although William Morris was a Communist, and Ruskin evolved for himself at one stage a peculiar kind of Tory communism, the greatest writers of the century, while condemning the exploitation of the labouring classes, did not adhere to any doctrine of egalitarianism. Nor had Britain experienced anything comparable to the widespread European revolts of 1848. The Chartist movement, which demanded honourable terms for the workers, lost its momentum and died. Its natural successor was the Trades Union movement. This too had had its martyrs; in 1834 several labourers, known as the Tolpuddle Martyrs, were transported for joining a trade union illegally. But on the whole the working classes were more concerned with the improvement of conditions, than with political theory, or the founding of a socialist state.

It should also be remembered that the collapse of the French Revolution into anarchy and despotism had profoundly affected many people's thinking about methods of change. William Wordsworth (1770-1850) and P.B. Shelley (1793-1822) rightly saw the reasons for these excesses in the outrages which had inspired the Revolution. In a striking image in 'The Prelude', Wordsworth describes the Terror as the deluge following the breaking of a huge reservoir of guilt, filled up from age to age, which now spread its loathsome charge through the land. Shelley looked forward to a new breed of enlightened men who could understand why these things had happened, and who would guide the people in the future. For many it was otherwise. In the Preface to 'The Revolt of Islam' of 1818, Shelley tells how the panic at the excesses of the Revolution is gradually giving place to sanity, and declares his awareness of 'a slow, gradual, silent change'. Just before this he has spoken of how 'many of the most ardent and tender-hearted of the worshippers of public good have been morally ruined' by the destruction of their hopes, by what he describes as 'a partial glimpse of the events they deplored'. Partial it may well have been, though beside the breadth of Shelley's vision many understandings seem partial. But the effects of such moral ruin were felt for a long time.

Of the advances in scientific knowledge in Tennyson's age, few were more important than those of the geologist Charles Lyell (1797-1875). The discovery that the earth was immeasurably older than the few thousand years generally thought to have elapsed since Creation, left man desolate before the vast reaches of time. It is not surprising that the Victorians were obsessed by time, whether as 'the secular abyss to come' of 'In Memoriam' 76 (LXXVI), or such an image of time past as the 'Dark bulks that tumble half alive, / And lazy lengths on boundless shores' of 70 (LXX). (The evolutionary sections of 'In Memoriam', such as 70, or the despairing 66 (LVI) ('"So careful of the type?" but no. . .'), were directly influenced by Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, which Tennyson read in 1837.) Probably the greatest shock to their sensibilities was Charles Darwin's (1801, 1882) *On the Origin of Species* (1859), and the theory of Natural Selection which Darwin applied to man in *The Descent of Man* (1871). Lyell's conclusions about the mortality of species, and so of man, and the feeling that the indifference of nature might mean the indifference of God, were deeply troubling concepts. The reaction was no less troubling to many: opinion swung towards a soulless materialism which rejected purpose and design, the effects of which are only too much with us today. It was not possible for Tennyson to accommodate to his classic evolutionary beliefs, which meant an ultimate good appearing out of ill, and a crowning and godlike human race, the atomic and materialist beliefs of the age. Three years before his death, in 'Parnassus', he spoke of 'Astronomy and Geology, terrible Muses' towering with their 'deep double shadow' over the sacred fountain. Before this threat of space and time as interpreted by modern science, the reassurance of 'other songs for other worlds' seems weak. His insistence on individuality, and personal immortality, sometimes sounds like despair before the mental and physical abysses of the nineteenth-century universe.

Tennyson's work

Apart from the indifferent plays he composed late in life, Tennyson wrote only poetry. There are no treatises, and no fascinating records of thought, of the sort Coleridge left in his

notebooks. He lived for poetry, although there is evidence that he doubted its authority. During his life he gained a large public in England and abroad, but long before he died some people were willing to believe that his day was over. Some critics, then and later, found a paradox in the spectacle of a man haunted by regret and loss who yet became the voice of the Victorian age. (It is, of course, much less of a paradox than it might appear.) In 1923 Harold Nicolson published an influential study, *Tennyson: Aspects of His Life, Character, and Poetry*, in which he argued that the public Tennyson flourished at the expense of the private man, who was the greater poet. The truth is more complex. Nevertheless the idea of the two Tennysons still lingers. His authority is in his extraordinary power over language, the subtleties of word and form by which he is heir to more than twenty centuries of European poetry. Anyone who thinks that this shows only a minor talent for language should reconsider the function of language. Critics of the second half of the twentieth century have often stressed his use of tradition, and his modernity. He is sometimes called either a Symbolist, or a precursor of the French Symbolist poets, such as Charles Baudelaire (1821-67) and Stephane Mallarme (1842-98). Ideally the Symbolist poem becomes a separate world or system, both the product and the instrument of vision. But although Tennyson's early poem 'Mariana', in which the woman's desolate state is objectified in a desolate house and landscape, may resemble Symbolism, it is hardly a closed system, in that we know exactly what is happening, and why. Neither is the late poem 'The Voice and the Peak' Symbolist, however it exalts the symbol itself.

Tennyson's greatest successes are in the idyll, the lyric, the monologue, and the short epistolary poem. His achievement in the longer poem is variable. 'The Princess' of 1847 is a delightful but unequal narrative comedy, in the form of the mouth-to-mouth tale, by which a fantastic story is passed from narrator to narrator. The language has great charm, but the action strays into melodrama towards the end. 'In Memoriam', with 'Maud' his major long work, is a single poem only by courtesy: a sequence of one hundred and thirty-three lyric elegies, of different length but in the same abba quatrain, in which a great grief is examined, and understood. The action is that of an exploration of possibilities, a continual movement of supposition, until faith in God's purposes is reaffirmed. 'Maud' was a new form: a monodrama, in which the single speaker moves through twenty-six scenes of despair and loathing of a corrupt commercial society, of love, the death of the beloved, madness, and the strangely vulgar conclusion in which he recovers his sanity by going to fight, and probably to die, in the Crimea. It is a bold experiment, a representation of that distorted single vision of reality which we often regard as characteristic of modern art. In the 'Idylls of the King', composed at intervals over a period of forty years, he makes an extended use of the idyll form of which he was a master - comparable with the use Browning made of the monologue in 'The Ring and the Book' - and with great skill depicts the ruin of man's kingdom, in the decline and fall of King Arthur's Camelot. Such loss is perhaps nearer to his heart than the triumph of the spirit in 'In Memoriam'. But in considering the full effect of the Idylls, we have to take into account the frequent weaknesses of the archaising language, and its occasional air of earnest translation.

The problem of the nature and purpose of the long poem had haunted other poets besides Tennyson. Wordsworth struggled for years with the idea of a long poem, and the inferiority of 'The Excursion' to the earlier poem 'The Prelude' is a measure of his difficulties. Tennyson's long attachment to the Arthurian story (which Wordsworth, as well as Milton, had at one time considered as a subject), and the mingling of hesitation with a determination to make something of it, is roughly comparable. Nor is he among the most intellectual of poets. In reading Shelley we are always aware of Shelley's thinking about the mystery of being. In reading Tennyson, we are aware rather of his characteristic fears of meaninglessness. If the human will is often strong in him, the sense of darkness is even stronger. The tension between them is the source of some of his greatest effects. But the broadest and greatest effects, which we naturally and rightly associate with the long poem, are only intermittently present.