A COMPARISON OF

WORDSWORTH'S PRELUDE

AND

TENNYSON'S IN MEMORIAM

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The Prelude and In Memoriam are poems that stand unique among their author's works. The Prelude is Wordsworth's magnum opus and an indispensable introduction to the poet's work as a whole. Similarly, In Memoriam has a special claim as the fullest expression of Tennyson's genius. Each may be, indeed very likely is, the greatest poem of its age. More important, in the interests of profitable comparison, is the fact that the two poems share a categorical relationship. The Prelude and In Memoriam are great autobiographical poems, and both poets wrote in the belief that the personal experiences that motivated their poems were, while on a personal basis in fact, shared by all mankind. They are poems that embrace a number of perennial human concerns, and because of this they present at once many similarities. Each is a great reflective work and an indispensable record of the poet's genius; each is morally and philosophically representative of its day; each certainly must be read by anyone wishing to understand the nineteenth century. There appears to be, in fact, more reason for comparison than is usual in the often tenuous and abstract business of comparing two separate works of art that are related only in genus.

Wordsworth's Prelude is a better source of information on the poet's life than anything written about him by others. The poem throws a flood of light on Wordsworth's mental history and growth. It is not simply a history of events or doings; it is more vital as a record of thoughts, feelings, and experiences. The Prelude is valuable, however, not alone as biography—a study of the origin and progress
of Wordsworth's powers—but in a more general sense as a study of
man as Wordsworth knew him, in relation to man's whole environment
in nature and human nature. Accordingly, it may be usefully studied
in a literary-historical way and considered profitably with reference
to its sources in the life and literature of its time.

Tennyson's *In Memoriam* also deals with a very significant period
of the poet's growth. It is a record of Tennyson's mind during the
most trying years of his life—those many years of struggle that
culminated, with the publishing of *In Memoriam*, in full recognition
of Tennyson's genius and in material success. *In Memoriam* has been
called a great spiritual odyssey, a record of a long and bitter
personal contest with doubt and a final attainment to faith. Besides
being uniquely representative of the poet's formative years, the poem
also reflects much of the deep-seated uncertainty of Tennyson's time
in matters of spiritual faith and other pressing problems. It was,
like *The Prelude*, a poem of its age.

To compare the poems requires both looking at the poems as
poetry (which demands some critical estimates) and at the poets as
men (which demands biographical and historical insights). To the
former end it is impracticable, even were it possible, to recognize
all the environmental particulars while essaying comparative judgments
of the poetry. Yet estimates on specific points of comparison must
be made. The latter end can be realized, at best, only tentatively,
for the differences between these two very unlike personalities may
be seen only in relation to the differences of two periods of time.
Thus to make a comprehensive, or in any sense "complete," comparative study of the poets through their poems would involve too many complex imponderables. Yet certain literary-historical matters are worth notice, and it is well first to see Wordsworth and Tennyson in point of time and against the backdrop of the social and literary milieu of each.

Wordsworth was a Romantic poet. The word "Romantic" has been used variously and it is impossible to confine it to a single meaning. But the term generally is applied to the five major poets, Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats, and to the new poetry that appeared toward the close of the eighteenth century and continued to be written up to about 1825. The word further suggests a community of interests among the poets called Romantics. The foremost poetry of the period was written under the influence of the new liberal conception of man that mounted as an aftermath of the French Revolution and the eighteenth-century thought that had preceded it. The revolution itself brought about a skeptical reaction toward existing society that provoked the more imaginative minds toward a new communion with nature. There came also a renewed belief in the individual self that was manifest in the Romantics' views on imagination, views that vary greatly in details among the poets of the period, but serve to point up, nevertheless, the importance of the imagination to the English Romantics. In the eighteenth century the imagination was not an important matter in poetical theory. To Johnson and Pope, for example, imagination meant much less than it did
to the Romantics. Fancy, controlled by judgment, they approved of and admired. Truth of sentiment was to them, however, more important than what they took to be imagination. The Romantic emphasis on the imagination was partly a reaction against the previous century's philosophy, dominated by Lockian theory, that the mind was a mere passive recorder. The eighteenth-century views on poetry robbed the human mind, and especially the vital activity of the poet's mind, of its importance. There is yet another characteristic of the Romantics worth mentioning here: a tendency to philosophize, as distinct from the mid-century inclination to socialize (the distinction is analogous to "head" and "heart" poetry), that places the emphasis on the individual man when he is alone with his own heart or with nature. These, generally, are characteristics of Romantic poetry. They are also qualities that determine much of Wordsworth's work.

The Romantics worked under the urge, felt increasingly since the middle of the eighteenth century, toward the enlargement of the boundaries of poetry both in subject matter and in technical forms. This enlargement took place in many ways, under the influence of that spirit of individual freedom and impatience of restraint which is, perhaps, the essence of Romanticism. Wordsworth, whose views on the proper subject matter of poetry and its proper expression were in decided opposition to the limitations which had been accepted in the eighteenth century, was the most important figure in this movement.

Eighteenth-century poets had inclined, in their revival of classic tradition, to live together in London and to seek uniformity in their habits and interests as well as in their poetic style. To
escape from the conventions of society was a strong instinct among the early nineteenth-century poets. They did not congregate, as a matter of course, in London. Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey settled in the English Lake country and became known as the "Lake Poets." But the Romantics, and particularly Wordsworth, should not, of course, be viewed as hermits in voluntary exile from the cares of men. An appreciation of a characteristic attribute of Wordsworth, an attribute that may be called "aloneness," is important. It is something that marks him significantly apart from Tennyson. Wordsworth's aloneness lay not only in that he was best suited, in Coleridge's words, to be a spectator ab extra. Surely Wordsworth was better fitted temperamentally than Tennyson to relative isolation, but when Wordsworth lived and wrote is also important in seeing him in relation to Tennyson. It is a necessary perspective for comparing The Prelude and In Memoriam. In passing then, it might be noted that Wordsworth's aloneness manifests itself in another way that has less to do with temperament and location than with time. Wordsworth's singular position in English poetry has been marked by the fact that he was the most original poet of his time, and this is partly accountable by his having arrived on the literary scene when he did. As Basil Willey declares,

Wordsworth was the kind of poet who could only have appeared at the end of the eighteenth century, when mythologies were exploded, and a belief in the visible universe as the body of which God was the soul remained. In this sense his beliefs can be viewed as data furnished to him by a tradition; in this sense he, as well as Dante, may be said to have employed his sensibility
within a framework of received beliefs. But his debt to tradition, unlike Dante's, was a negative one; he owed to it his deprivation of mythology, his aloneness with the universe.¹

Had Wordsworth been born fifty years earlier it is unlikely that he would have been able to work a revolution in poetry. Accordingly Mr. Graham Hough suggests:

> The real poetical revolution could only be accomplished by one whose birth and education was within the eighteenth century cultural pattern, yet on the edge of it, within sight of other kinds of experience. This was Wordsworth's position.²

It would be omniscient indeed to say that Wordsworth would not have been a great poet had he been born at another time. No one, of course, accounts for his greatness only by appraising certain historical facts regarding his "place" in literature. Assuredly Wordsworth ranks as one of the very great English poets. Yet the above remarks of Willey and Hough are helpful for perceiving Wordsworth in his time.

The prose and poetry of the early nineteenth century does not, on the whole, suggest the era of industrial problems, social tension, and political struggle that was beginning. Of course the French Revolution was a matter of acute political concern to the Romantics, and it may be singled out as an event too earthshaking not to have distinctly and powerfully affected their generation. Moreover it is true that the Romantic and Victorian ages thrived when the political temperatures were feverish, and ever present human anxieties existed alike in kind for both ages. Their interests and problems were, in a
broad sense, the same. But literature in the early part of the century still was being written mainly for a select audience, and the poets, in general, did not take a great deal of notice of the Industrial Revolution that was beginning. It would be a mistake to think that the Romantics were aloof to the exigencies of the day, but the Victorian attitude was decidedly different in that they were more consistently taken up with social and political problems. The great prose writers of the middle and late nineteenth century displayed in their writings the growing seriousness of the age. Victorian writers departed from their Romantic inheritance to deal more with "realities" and to share in the social burden of the time. In so doing they often subordinated their individual interests to the social necessities of the time. The literary critic Carlyle became a critic and historian of society. Ruskin turned from art criticism to political economy. Arnold's early Romantic verse gave way to the prose of social criticism. And Tennyson, whose early poetry had been chiefly decorative, later tried to deal more with problems of the day.

Though In Memoriam was published in a time different in some respects from the beginning of the century, there is no really clear break between the earlier Romantic generation and those who began to write after 1830. But the year 1832 is a convenient date that is often used to note the passing of one age into the other. The Reform Bill of that year decisively marked England's progress toward democracy and industrialism. The rapidly growing population demanded education and entertainment; accordingly the function of literature became greatly
enlarged. The year 1832 also very nearly coincides with the passing of several great Romantic figures: Hazlitt (1830), Scott (1832), Coleridge (1834), and Lamb (1834). Byron, Shelley, and Keats had died during the previous decade. The men who were to contribute powerfully to the Victorian era were beginning their activity. But the influence of the Romantics did not fall off suddenly; on the contrary, it was felt well into the latter part of the century. The Romantic influence persisted partly because certain of the Romantics remained on the scene: Wordsworth, Landor, Leigh Hunt, Thomas Moore, DeQuincey, and a few others.

The personal contacts of the older generation with the younger counted, it seems, for something in determining the way, or part of it, that thoughts and letters were taking in the first part of our hundred years; it is not negligible that the young writers, if they, like Browning, did not see Shelley 'plain' were able ... to see Wordsworth demonstrably so.  

Wordsworth accepted and preferred his relative isolation from the everyday affairs of men, but he had not, in the early part of the century, relinquished the poet's right to be spokesman for his age. By the end of the nineteenth century, poets were fully aware of the breech between artist and public. The poet had relinquished his right, and art, finally, came to be spoken of as "art for art's sake" with the pre-Raphaelites. Tennyson may be said to occupy a point about midway in this gradual process of change in attitude; indeed the shift in attitude toward the artist's relation to society was becoming very conspicuous during Tennyson's middle years. Tennyson, more than any other important writer of his time, conformed quickly to the popular
idea of the poet. Of course it was more difficult in the middle part of the century for the poet, were he inclined, to maintain his artistic integrity. Tennyson wrote for a much larger audience than Wordsworth (Britain's population increased from nine million in 1800 to eighteen million in 1850), and society, then as now, inflicted on the artist a need for considerable compromise if he desired rapprochement with his audience. As a man Tennyson was a Victorian, as much as his dear friend the queen whose name graces that extraordinary era. How much he belonged to his age as a poet is a matter of importance, and one to be considered later with direct reference to his poetry.

 certain facts of Tennyson's age are worth observing, but to find a brief statement of the characteristic temper of the age seems impossible. The term Victorian can be quite as difficult to handle as the word Romantic. It has for us today many varied and usually vaguely apprehended connotations. Often we use it as a term of ridicule, signifying something dated, pompous, and foolish—yet not altogether distasteful.

The incidents and circumstances, too, of this life: its durable furniture and stated hours; its evening reading and weekly churchgoing; its long prepared and long remembered holidays; its appointed visits from and to the hierarchy of grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins gave to those who were within it a certain standing with themselves, and a cheerful confidence in the face of novelty, which is perhaps the key to the Victorian paradox—the rushing swiftness of its intellectual advance, and the tranquil revolution of its social and moral ideals.4

Doubtless it was an age of paradox, but not entirely pompous without
meaning nor dignified without ease. It was scarcely, in fact, one age at all, for the times changed rapidly and things were by no means the same in the forties, sixties, eighties, and nineties.

Between the Coronation and the Diamond Jubilee, Victorian life had passed from an agricultural to an industrial economy, from an aristocratic to a middle-class proletariat society, from an authoritarian to a relative theology, and, generally, from a dogmatic to an experimental spirit. 5

From a literary point of view, two things seem particularly interesting regarding Tennyson's time. First, it was not a dull era. It had its own discomforts but it was one of the great creative ages in history, and it provided a formidable array of writers and thinkers: Carlyle, Tennyson, Browning, Dickens, Eliot, Mill, Thackeray, Arnold, Ruskin, Huxley, Darwin, Spencer, Meredith, Rossetti, Swinburne, Hardy, Newman, Stevenson, Morris—the list is long and dazzling. Tennyson was a Victorian among these Victorians. It is a general way to describe a poet, but to consider only these names is in itself suggestive enough in trying to comprehend the larger concept of Victorianism. Second, we perceive from a distance that things moved forward with considerable rapidity in Victorian times; the world was too much with them in a bewildering degree. The literary man was less liable to withdraw to solitude to shore up his morale and to reflect on the advantages of the past. There was little time; the world stumbled forward at a rate that assured, we can say now, the paradoxes it entertained.
TWO POETICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Even had Wordsworth not announced, in the Preface to The
Excursion (1814), that The Prelude was "biographical" and a record
in verse of "the origin and progress of his own powers," there
could have been little difficulty in recognizing these facts. The
Prelude is not a complete record of Wordsworth's past (objections
have been raised against the omission of important facts) and not
biography in the customary sense, yet it obviously is biography.
Tennyson's In Memoriam is not clearly recognizable as such.
Tennyson, in fact, made it known that his poem was "not an actual
biography," and added that "the sections were written at many
different places, and as the phases of our [Tennyson's and Hallam's]
intercourse came to my memory and suggested them." He explains
further: "I did not write them with any view of weaving them into
a whole, or for publication, until I found that I had written so
many."\(^6\) This being the case, we might inquire why In Memoriam is
hailed as autobiography—a great spiritual odyssey.

In Memoriam had its beginnings, as anyone at all familiar with
Tennyson knows, under the weight of a severe personal grief caused
by the death of his beloved friend Arthur Hallam. During the seventeen
odd years of composition the poem came to embrace a variety of
concerns, but predominantly it remained elegiac in nature. Yet it is
a poem about Tennyson (much less about Hallam) and the poet's many
encounters with grief, and the accompanying sense of loss and
personal insecurity, make up a special type of biography, one that is
uniquely valuable for knowing Tennyson. Tennyson was right in saying
that *In Memoriam* is not "actual biography." The usual increments of full autobiographical treatment are absent. But the poem deals with Tennyson's life; the genesis of his verses was an actual event—Hallam's death—and the poem is the "story" of the poet's vital thoughts and emotions through seventeen years. We see Tennyson's mind at work in the poem amid the travails of those many years, and this provides us with the marrow of autobiography. The poem might be likened to an extraordinary diary: fragments of moods sustained by the chronology of the verse and developed into larger phases of emotion, from unrestrained grief through emotional numbness to the beginnings of hope and the final achievement of religious certainty. It is not "actual biography" only in the sense that it is a narrower form of a personal chronicle, but biography it certainly is. Moreover, the popular success of Tennyson's poem was due in no small part to this kind of poetry to which Tennyson did not intentionally give an autobiographical mode. The nineteenth-century critic, Walter Bagehot, describes this sort of poetry (biographical and yet not biography), and his description is suited to *In Memoriam*:

There is, undoubtedly, a sort of poetry which is produced as it were out of the author's mind. The description of the poet's own moods and feelings is a common sort of poetry—perhaps the commonest sort. But the peculiarity of such cases is, that the poet does not describe himself as himself: autobiography is not his object; he takes not himself, but a distillation of himself: he takes such of his moods as are most characteristic, as most typify certain moods of certain men, or certain moods of all men; he chooses preponderant feelings of special sorts of men, or occasional feelings of men of all sorts; but with whatever other difference and diversity, the essence is that such self-describing poets
describe what is in them, but not peculiar to them,—what is generic, not what is special and individual. 7

Tennyson would have agreed implicitly, for he announced that in In Memoriam the "'I' is not always the poet speaking of himself, but the voice of the human race speaking through him." 8

In the larger outlines of the two poems there is evident a parallel development. Wordsworth begins his autobiography with his earliest boyhood memories. He recalls his youthful ramblings and his happy school days at Hawkshead and less happy, though not strongly regretted, days at Cambridge. The Prelude gives us the intellectual and emotional struggles Wordsworth suffered through the French Revolution. The aftermath of those climactic days found him despairing and badly shaken. Then, he says, he was at his lowest ebb. He tells us how he recovered from that crisis with the aid of his sister, who helped him to be again what he was meant to be—a poet. Nature herself he thanks for leading him back to peaceful knowledge. Though the most severe struggle was past, Wordsworth's growth through greater self-realization does not end here. After the ninth, tenth, and eleventh books on France we have, in "Imagination and Taste, How Impaired and Restored," a final reassessment of the poet's past and a reaffirmation of his poetic faith: "In Nature's presence stood, as I stand now,/A sensitive, and a creative soul (Bk.XI.256–257) 9 Thus the narrative pattern of The Prelude contains a severe crisis followed by doubt and despair, and finally a redemption. The concluding books afford a philosophical estimation
in light of the whole narrative.

*In Memoriam* presents a structural similarity of sorts in that Tennyson begins in crisis: the severe despondency of paralyzing grief. He falls deeper into despair. He overcomes his original despondency—the real "crisis" of the poem—and rises to new vigor and optimistic certainty. In the latter passages of the poem he triumphs over additional difficulties: the materialism of his age and the threat of science. His initial victory over grief expands to a belief in spiritual union with the dead. Ultimately he embraces the assertion of faith over doubt as his complete philosophical victory. The pattern described does not, however, follow a straight line of progression; for example, among the laments for Hallam and the grief-inspired speculations of the poem's early sections are woven memories of happy Cambridge days with Hallam and Christmas scenes at Somersby. *In Memoriam*, in short, resembles *The Prelude* very little in narrative execution. There are, to be sure, these large conceptual similarities, but *The Prelude* is more a psychological autobiography and it manifests a schematic regularity appropriate to the tasks Wordsworth had set for himself. *In Memoriam*, on the other hand, is more emotionally inspired autobiography.

Wordsworth conceived and executed *The Prelude* as the history of a poet's mind not for the purpose of a purely subjective account of his own thinking as it developed from childhood to young manhood, but also to impart the lessons his experiences had given him. His purpose was to teach. His great subject was, as a matter of intent, himself, but he does not turn his eye inward to view exclusively his
own mind and emotions. His visionary power worked through nature, and he proclaims the discoveries he made in the light of his own experience with the realization that the gift of his experience was something more important than he. For Wordsworth, the poet's primary task was to observe, and by observing to comprehend imaginatively hitherto unapprehended relations. The description of external events is very necessary, not only because Wordsworth knew they were prominent forces in the development of his poetic power, but he wanted to give us the whole wonderful fabric of experience. The story of what a man is and what he thinks and feels can only be imperfectly told at best, and Wordsworth troubled himself to present those external events that serve to illuminate the growth of his powers. He exercised selectivity (any biographer must) as best he could to order events, feelings, thoughts, and experiences to that very difficult end.

But who shall parcel out
His intellect, by geometric rules,
Split, like a province, into round and square?
Who knows the individual hour in which
His habits were first sown, even as a seed,
Who shall point, as with a wand, and say,
'This portion of the river of my mind
Came from yon fountain?' (Bk.II208-215)

His intuitions of sense are, perhaps ultimately beyond the use of language, yet Wordsworth succeeded more nearly in communicating them than had ever been done before. Poetically he achieved human psychology in communicative terms far beyond the usual aims of biography.

Neither Tennyson nor Wordsworth can justly be accused of vanity
in these poems. Each was aware, however, that such a charge was probable, and there are evidences in both works of an awareness of the poet's ever-present public. Tennyson, although he denied that he wrote with the intention of publishing, indicates that he was not free from a responsibility to an eventual reading public:

These mortal lullabies of pain
May bind a book, may line a box,
May serve to curl a maiden's locks (LXXVII.5-8)10

'Is this an hour
For private sorrow's barren song,
When more and more the people throng
The chairs and thrones of civil power? (XXX.13-16)

He also demonstrates an acute self-consciousness that he is the subject of his own verse, and he apologizes frequently for the futility of his self-interest:

Forgive these wild and wandering cries,
Confusions of a wasted youth (Introd.41-42)

I sometimes hold it half a sin
To put in words the grief I feel (V.12)

O me, what profits it to put
An idle case? (XXV.21-22)

Vague words! but oh, how hard to frame
In matter molded forms of speech (XCIV.45-46)

My words are only words, and moved
Upon the topmost froth of thought (LIII.3-4)

Wordsworth, very much aware of the autobiographical character of his poem, was unwilling to publish the long work. He had presumed to write about himself, to write the philosophy of his mind and to order the unfolding of this philosophy according to the facts of his personal experience. There are suggestions in The Prelude that Wordsworth was conscious of readers other than Coleridge, to whom
the poem was dedicated, but the poet makes no clear apology to future readers. Occasionally there appears a suggestion of self-consciousness in some of the flatter passages of the poem, deferential, almost folksy lines:

Why should I speak of what a thousand hearts
Have felt, and every man alive can guess? (Bk.IV.33-34)

Why call upon a few weak words to say
What is already written in the hearts
Of all that breathe? (Bk.V.185-188)

It might be told (but wherefore speak of things
Common to all?) (Bk.VIII.664-665)

In 1805, Wordsworth writes to Sir George Beaumont:

It (The Prelude) will not be much less than
9000 lines,—not hundred but thousand lines
long,—an alarming length! and a thing un-
precedented in literary history that a man
should talk so much about himself. It is not
self-conceit, as you will know well, that has
induced me to do this, but real humility....

These are reasons for the poem being withheld from public notice until
after Wordsworth's death, when his widow supplied the title and gave
the manuscript to the printers.

We recognize that the poet necessarily reveals himself in whatever he writes; he lays bare a part of his private self. All writing is then, if only in a remote sense, autobiographical. But in poetry such as this, that takes as its principal object the writer's own mind and emotions, there is evidently a more pronounced commitment, a delivering up of the author's own heart and mind as his own, not as revealed in fictional characters or events. Autobiography by its very nature imposes special demands on its author. Direct and absolute truth is its burden. This, of course, is not merely a modern estimate,
for the readers of 1850 were equally aware that biography may invoke a number of suspicions. Thus in that year Thackeray (who was probably not thinking of the two great poems lately come before English readers) prefaces his novel Pendennis:

And as we judge of a man's character after long frequenting his society, not by one speech, or by one mood or opinion, or by one day's talk, but by the tenor of his general bearing and conversation; so of a writer who delivers himself up to you perforce unreservedly, you say, Is he honest? Does he tell the truth in the main? Does he seem actuated by a desire to find out and speak it? Is he a quack, who shams sentiment, or mouths for effect? Does he seek popularity by claptraps or other arts?12

The main concern here is less with the poetic truth of the poems individually than a comparison of them in the knowledge that the poets were dealing candidly with their innermost selves. An assurance of this provides a basis for comparing the introspective elements of the poetry. Wordsworth and Tennyson were led into similar paths in their meditations, and may be compared in the light of a few subjective considerations common to each, common, perhaps, to any man reflecting on the events of his life.

There is in In Memoriam a pervasive element of fear underlying many of Tennyson's diverse inquiries; the reader is nearly always conscious of its presence, most plainly when the immediate subject is death. One feels that fear is everywhere in the poem a shaping force. It is not always a morbidly obsessive fear, nor does it inspire terror in Tennyson's verses, but it is a presence compatible with the groping, bewildered, and pain-stricken laments for the dead and the
gloomy train of mysteries and wonders occasioned by the fact of death: We are fools and slight; we mock thee \( \sqrt{\text{God}} \) when we do not fear (Intro. 29-30). The awfulness of death's mystery is a dread apprehension that Tennyson examines again and again and holds up for questioning from many angles. "How fares it with the happy dead" (XLI.1) he asks, and wonders what it would promise to hold "An hour's communion with the dead" (XCIV.4). He muses on the reception the resurrected dead person might receive from his family and loved ones: "They would but find in child and wife/ An iron welcome when they rise" (XC.7-8). He asks, "Do we indeed desire the dead?" (LI.1). And he can say with some authority: "Dare I say/ No spirit ever brake the band/ That stays him from his native land/ Where first he walked when claspt in clay?" (XIII.1-4). Yet, in spite of the many variations on the death theme, he proclaims rather unconvincingly: "For tho' my nature rarely yields/ To that vague fear implied in death ..." (XLI.13-14). Later he adds: "I count it crime to mourn for any overmuch" (LXXXIV.61-62). It is easy to believe that Tennyson's nature did yield many times to fear of death, and realizing this he was a little embarrassed.

Later the poet achieves a victory over his doubts and uncertainties concerning death and afterlife. He trusts "that those we call the dead/ Are breathers of an ampler day" (CXVIII.5-6), and "That life is not an idle ore" (CXVIII.20). His struggle, he says, has not been in vain: "I trust I have not wasted breath:/ I think we are not wholly brain,/ Magnetic mockeries; not in vain,/ Like Paul I
fought with beasts, I fought with death" (CXX.1-4).

We look in vain for any kind of explanation of the process whereby Tennyson was able to work out from under his burdens. He leads the reader down a long and winding path in the earlier section of the poem: we encounter despair, uncertainty, wonder, doubt, remorse—in brief, all the manifestations of a fearful mind embroiled in the many variations of the same basic mood of dejection. It is in the seventy-eighth section that fear recedes and a change to a more optimistic mood begins:

O last regret, regret can die!
No—mixt with all this mystic frame,
Her deep relations are the same,
But with long use her tears are dry. (LXXVIII.17-20)

Henceforth there is a slight change in tone, but the divisional passage would be unmarked by the reader unacquainted with the divisions pointed out by the author. It were far more satisfactory philosophically had we a detailing of the means by which Tennyson was able to recover his faith and optimism.

Wordsworth makes different use in *The Prelude* of his experience with fear. Just as fear is an important biographical element in Tennyson's poem—he struggles long with it before advancing to better things—so is it a part of Wordsworth's progress. It is not something assimilated into his makeup but forgotten with "long use," rather it is a valued discipline in his life and he acknowledges it as such. He assesses the experiences for us, not as something he has happily outlived, but as a part of his education and growth.
Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up
Foster'd alike by beauty and by fear (Bk.I.305-306)

Fear was not, as with Tennyson, a trial happily overcome:

There is a dark
Invisible workmanship that reconciles
Discordant elements, and makes them move
In one society. Ah me! that all
The terrors, all the early miseries
Regrets, vexations, lassitudes, that all
The thoughts and feelings which have been infus'd
Into my mind, should ever have made up
The calm existence that is mine when I
Am worthy of myself! (Bk.I.352-361)

It is worth observing also that death, and the fear of it, plays
little or no part in The Prelude. Wordsworth recalls his mother's
death (he was eight years old) as a "trouble that came into my
mind/ From unknown causes" (Bk.II.291). The props of his affections
were removed, he says, but the "building" stood. He was too young
at the time of her death to retain a clear memory of the woman to
whom he owed his infant happiness. Later in the poem he pays tribute
to her memory and expresses the deep gratitude he owes her. He was
thirteen and a half when his father died, and Wordsworth believed
then that the death was a punishment for his impatience of a few days
earlier when he had been at school and, very anxious for vacation
time, awaiting the horses sent by his father to take him and his
brothers home. The day and the details of the vantage point where he
waited impressed themselves strongly on his memory. It was a
"stormy, and rough" (Bk.II.357) day, and he remembers the solitary
sheep and a blasted hawthorn that were his only companions as he sat
in the shelter of a bare wall. Even in later days he summoned up
the details of the scene where he waited that he might "drink, as at a fountain" (Bk.XI.384-385) from the memory. In neither death is it the events themselves that are dwelt upon, but the meaningfullness of them to his own psychological makeup. There is nothing like Tennyson's morbid concern and fear over the fact of death itself, rather Wordsworth uses the incidents to illustrate mental phenomena, spots of time that exemplify the growth of his mind. There is, of course, a time difference in that Wordsworth is maturely assimilating factors of his past experience that went into his makeup. There is also a calmer and more positive evaluation of the emotion and his early encounters with it. More important, it is not a phenomenon he is encountering at the time of writing. In In Memoriam, fear comes and leaves almost as though the poem were the work of days, not of seventeen years.

Tennyson may have consciously avoided in In Memoriam the task of appraising his own past for the purpose of finding himself. Or it may be, as he says, that he had not intended biography. Again, it may not have occurred to him. He re-examines his happy school days spent with Hallam, but seldom traces far back into his life for beginnings. He reflects very little on childhood or infancy in the poem (in two sections only), and then he thinks less in terms of what he is at the moment than what the future holds. He thinks of infancy as a stage of an existence not circumscribed by life—that life wherein Wordsworth tells us we find our happiness or not at all. Tennyson's chief concern in the following passage seems to be the questions that
troubled him throughout his life: the problem of his own identity and the "why" of his existence.

The baby new to earth and sky,
What time his tender palm is prest
Against the circle of the breast,
Has never thought that 'this is I!'

But as he grows he gathers much,
And learns the use of 'I,' and 'me,'
And finds 'I am not what I see,
And other than the things I touch.'

So rounds he to a separate mind
From whence clear memory may begin,
As thro' the frame that binds him in
His isolation grows defined.

This use may lie in blood and breath,
Which else were fruitless of their due,
Had man to learn himself anew
Beyond the second birth of Death. (XLV.1-16)

The purpose of life, according to the last stanza, is to realize a personal consciousness, or else having lived would be of little account. The experience of the child trying to establish his identity is one that Wordsworth also remarked. While a Hawkshead schoolboy he suffered an acute sense of the unreality of the world around him, and in a prefatory note to the Immortality Ode he recalls the phenomenon:

I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own nature. Many times while going to school I grasped at a wall or tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to the reality.

There is reason to believe that Wordsworth eventually was assured of his identity and of his own irreducible individuality. In the Immortality Ode he celebrates the childhood experience:
... for those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Faintings from us, vanishings;
Blank misgivings of a Creature
Moving about in worlds not realized

This may not be so with Tennyson, for he was constantly beset
with anxiety and doubt. At the age of thirty he writes to Emily
Sellwood:

Annihilate within yourself these two
dreams of space and time. To me often the
far-off world seems nearer than the present,
for in the present is always something un-
real and indistinct, but the other seems a
good solid planet, rolling round its green
hills and paradies to the harmony of more
steadfast laws.\textsuperscript{13}

One could desire that Tennyson had made more of the phenomenon
of his own childhood, as did Wordsworth. We have Wordsworth's own
marvelous account of his earliest memories but we must rely on
biographical conjecture about Tennyson's youth. Were Tennyson given
to that kind of self-examination we might profitably compare the
states of ecstasy that both poets were subject to as children, or
we might compare Wordsworth's delight and Tennyson's unhappiness in
school days. W. H. Auden writes this of Tennyson:

In no other English poet of comparable rank
does the bulk of his work seem so clearly to be
inspired by some single and probably very early experience. Tennyson's own description of him-
self \textit{in In Memoriam} as

An infant crying in the night
An infant crying for the light.
With no other language but a cry

is extraordinarily acute. If Wordsworth is the
great English poet of nature, then Tennyson is the
great English poet of the nursery ...
Two admissions of Tennyson's, that the
first poetry which excited him was his own,
and that at the age of five he used to
walk about saying 'Alfred, Alfred' are
significant ... 14

There is clear sarcasm here directed to the man Tennyson, but the
relevance of the poet's childhood to his mature poetry may be
accurately observed. If Tennyson were indeed the "poet of the
nursery" he perhaps should have not neglected a scrutiny of his
youth in favor of a profusion of other musings during the seventeen
years of spiritual wanderings. On the other hand, there is no
reason to believe that Tennyson could have succeeded as did
Wordsworth in this type of biography.

We must be impressed by the lessons that Wordsworth gives us,
through a near miraculous gift of memory, in scenes and occasions
in their original freshness:

Upon the Eastern Shore of Windermere,
Above the crescent of a pleasant Bay,
There stood an Inn, no homely-featured Shed,
Brother of the surrounding Cottages,
But 'twas a splendid place, the door beset
With Chaises, Grooms, and Liveries, and within
Decanters, Glasses, and the blood-red Wine.
In ancient times, or are the Hall was built
On the large Island, had this Dwelling been
More worthy of a Poet's love, a Hut,
Proud of its one bright fire, and sycamore shade.
But though the rhymes were gone which once inscribed
The threshold, and large golden characters
On the blue-frosted Signboard had usurp'd
The place of the old Lion, in contempt
And mockery of the rustic painter's hand,
Yet to this hour the spot to me is dear
With all its foolish pomp. The garden lay
Upon a slope surmounted by the plain
Of a small Bowling-green; beneath us stood
A grove; with gleams of water through the trees
And over the tree-tops ... (Bk.II.145-166)
But emotions of early life are hard to express, for original events and associations are dimly or not at all remembered. Wordsworth knew this (We see but darkly/ Even when we look behind us (Bk.III. 492-493)), but he felt the need to probe far back into his own youth in order to trace significant periods of growth. He wished not to lose the essential conditions of childhood, for in his attempts to recall actual happenings, feelings, and moods he sought a self-unity. Accordingly the sensitive reflections on childhood comprise a large and important part of The Prelude, and do much to make it a beautiful accomplishment. Biographers do not usually dwell at length on childhood days; it is an unknowable time of life, and the effort of looking back to childhood is at once uncertain as to its advantages and uncomfortable as a seemingly idle, though fascinating, pre-occupation. Wordsworth attempted an even more difficult thing by probing back to his infancy.

Bless'd the infant Babe,
(For with my best conjectures I would trace
The progress of our Being) blest the Babe,
Nurs'd in his Mother's arms, the Babe who sleeps
Upon his Mother's breast, who, when his soul
Claims manifest kindred with an earthly soul,
Both gather passion from his Mother's eye!
Such feelings pass into his torpid life
Like an awakening breeze, and hence his mind
Even in the first trial of its powers/15
Is prompt and watchful, eager to combine
In one appearance, all the elements
And parts of the same object, else detach'd
And loth to coalesce. Thus, day by day,
Subjected to the discipline of love,
His organs and recipient faculties
Are quicken'd, are more vigorous, his mind spreads,
Tenacious of the forms which it receives.
In one beloved presence, may and more,
In that most apprehensive habitude
And those sensations which have been deriv'd
From this beloved Presence, there exists
A virtue which irradiates and exalts
All objects through all intercourse of sense,
No outcast he, bewilder'd and depress'd;
Along his infant veins are interfus'd
The gravitation and the filial bond
Of nature, that connect him with the world.
(Bk.II, 237-264)

One critic was moved to write:

Perhaps the way of recovery of spiritual
health lies in the preservation of every
man of a road back to childhood. The child
is father of the man not merely chronologically
but at every instant. For in the sensitiveness
and humanity of childhood and childlikeness is
the source of creative awareness and power. 16

Not all critics have been so felicitous. Wordsworth has been accused
many times of looking down and back for his illumination rather than
up and to the future. 17 Tennyson in not doing so at least avoided one
of the hazards of biography.

To compare the poets on another matter, it is interesting to
turn to the subject of grief. That Tennyson could sustain a profound
sense of grief and loss for so many years is an awesome thing. An
emotional desolation of nearly seventeen years occasioned by the loss
of a friend in youth, however dear and admired that friend, might
suggest to a psychologist considerably more than that Tennyson was a
man who received his shocks with uncommon gravity. There is reason
to believe that it did not take a great deal to dangerously depress
Tennyson.

In 1844 Tennyson entered a business venture with a Dr. Allen.
He invested heavily both his and his family's money in a plan to
manufacture wooden furniture by machine process, and had reposed much confidence both in his judgment of the financial risk and in Dr. Allen. The plan failed, and before Tennyson was able to recuperate his losses (Tennyson's friend, Edmund Lushington, insured Allen's life; the latter conveniently died in 1845 and Tennyson collected some of his money) Tennyson became alarmingly morose. His son Hallam describes the affair:

The confidence my father had placed in the 'earnest-frothy' Dr. Allen proved to be misplaced. The entire project collapsed: my father's worldly goods were all gone, and a portion of the property of his brothers and sisters. Then followed a season of real hardship, and many trials for my father and mother, since marriage seemed to be further off than ever. So severe a hypochondria set in upon him that his friends despaired of his life, 'I have,' he writes, 'drunk one of those most bitter draughts out of the cup of life, which go near to make men hate the world they move in.'

Altogether it would appear that Tennyson was a man whose life was remarkably free of hardships and tragedies for it was a life that was in many ways idyllic. Perhaps the proof of a good and happy life lies in the latter half of it. But before his life was half out, at any rate, he tood a decidedly dark view of his lot. In 1846 he writes to a woman who intends to name her child after him:

Call your child Alfred if you will; he was born in the same house, perhaps the same chamber, as myself, and I trust he is destined to a far happier life than mine has been, poor little fellow!

Five years later a very real tragedy struck the Tennysons: their
first child was stillborn. The poet was grief-stricken:

Dead as he was I felt proud of him ... 
dear little nameless one that has lived 
ths' hast never breathed, I, thy father, 
love thee and weep over thee, ths' thou 
hast no place in the universe. Who knows? 
It may be that thou hast ... God's will be 
done.20

Three years later the memory was still painfully vivid:

I nearly broke my heart with going to look 
at him. He lay like a little warrior, having 
fought the fight, and failed, with his hands 
clenched and a frown on his brow.21

It is possible that these lines might evoke more commiseration from 
most modern readers than the lines that grieve for Hallam. To lose 
a friend is in the order of things, and an event over which the world 
is less likely to share compassion. At any rate, there can be no 
doubt of the sincerity and profundity of Tennyson's grief for Hallam 
or of the sustained humility of his emotion in In Memoriam. He 
grieved sincerely, and grief commands respect. But it seems probable 
that Hallam's death provided either an adjunct to problems that would 
have existed for Tennyson anyway (the loss of his youthful sense of 
security, or simply the vexing problems of the grown man), or it may 
have been the impelling force that led him moribundly to meet his 
questioning and frightened self. A judgment like this can be tempered 
only by a full understanding of the circumstances surrounding Tennyson 
and an appreciation of the gulf between his day and our own. The 
remainder lies in the arcana of temperament. Yet the facts of his life 
and the testimony of In Memoriam suggest strongly that he knew a 
surprising lot about melancholia.
There is virtually no mention of the part that grief played in Wordsworth's life to be found in *The Prelude*. There is a passage wherein he tells of a London experience that later he chose not to ponder for the pain that it caused him. It is, to be sure, a lesser kind of grief, but the example demonstrates a healthy attitude. For the first time, Wordsworth tells us, he saw and heard fallen women and "Distress of mind ensued upon the sight."

... afterwards
A milder sadness on such spectacles
Attended; thought, commiseration, grief
For the individual, and the overthrow
Of her soul's beauty; farther at that time
Than this I was but seldom led; in truth
The sorrow of the passion stopp'd me here. (Bk. VIII.
393-399)

We must go elsewhere for biographical information that treats Wordsworth's reaction to grief. But the above passage from *The Prelude* is relevant to a significant point of difference between the two poets.

Wordsworth endured many shocks and disappointments in his life, more perhaps than Tennyson was capable of absorbing, but the most severe blows occurred later than the history given in *The Prelude*. In 1805 Wordsworth suffered a profound loss, one that severely tried the temper of the still young poet. On the day (February 11) Wordsworth received the news at Grasmere of his brother's death in a shipwreck, he wrote a shock-numbed letter to Sir George Beaumont:

My poor sister, and my wife who loved him
almost as we did (for he was one of the most amiable of men), are in miserable affliction, which I do all in my power to alleviate; but Heaven knows I want consolation myself.
A few days later he wrote to Southey:

We see nothing here that does not remind us of our dear brother; there is nothing about us (save the children, whom he had not seen) that he has not known and loved ... We weep much today, and that relieves us. As to fortitude, I hope I shall show that, and that all of us will show it in proper time, in keeping down many a silent pang hereafter.23

Fortitude Wordsworth did show, but he did not force the pain out of his mind. Nine days later he wrote the details of the ship's sinking, and praised his brother's good qualities. He finished the letter, much longer than the two above, by saying: "But, alas! what avails it? It is the will of God that he should be taken away."24 Later much of his sorrow he vented in his poetry, but he included many sober reflections on what his brother had been as a man and a loved one.

There is everywhere in Wordsworth's writings of his brother a deep and human sense of grief, and he displays an attitude of resignation and courage along with a measure of the stoicism that was to carry him through many losses later in life. Between the years 1832-1837 occurred a series of shocks: his friend Scott died in 1832, Coleridge died in 1834, Sarah Hutchinson and Lamb in 1835. His sister Dorothy's mind gave way in 1835. The greatest loss, the one that broke his heart, was the death of his daughter Dora in 1847. From this he did not recover. But Wordsworth consistently kept hidden his feelings, particularly about Coleridge, the man to whom he had been closest in the best days of his life. To Coleridge's son-in-law he wrote in 1834:
I cannot give way to the expression of my feelings upon this mournful occasion. I have not strength of mind to do so. The last year has thinned off so many of my friends, young and old, and brought with it so much anxiety, private and public, that it would be no kindness to you were I to yield to the solemn and sad thoughts and remembrances which press upon me.

It was characteristic of Wordsworth not to give in to his yearnings for the days that are no more. Where he expresses yearning there is still evident an undercurrent of resistance to that yearning. We find this explicitly stated in the *Immortality Ode*:

What thought the radiance which was once so bright
Be now for ever taken from my sight,
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death
In years that bring the philosophic mind.

Tennyson demonstrates little of the philosophic mind as a result of his long bout with death, nor does he for the allied preoccupation with the transitoriness of all things good and beautiful.

In conjunction with Tennyson's grief for Hallam, that grief that must finally surpass our understanding, it is well to note that Wordsworth apparently was incapable of the type of hero worship that Tennyson felt for Hallam. Perhaps the only touch of it the older poet had (when he, like Tennyson, was in his early twenties) was for the
soldier Beauquis. He pays a considerable tribute in *The Prelude* to that man's memory, respectful and admiring, but scarcely impassioned.

Further comparisons of this sort might be made. It is plain, for example, that the assurance of immortality posited by both poets offers a typical contrast of the extent of the idea and the amount of thought implicit in a philosophic stand. In essence Tennyson's idea is the same as Wordsworth's:

> My own dim life should teach me this,
> That life shall live for evermore,
> Else earth is darkness at the core,
> And dust and ashes all that is (XXXIV.1-4)

He goes on in the remainder of the passage to state that if one cannot be sure of this it were better not to live. How life taught Tennyson that life shall live for evermore we are not clearly advised. And this is a question he burdens himself with in early sections of the poem. Wordsworth's life gives him the lesson:

> Oh! mystery of Man, from what a depth
> Proceed thy honours! I am lost, but see
> In simple childhood something of the base
> On which thy greatness stands ...(Bk.XI.329-332)

The full statement is found in the *Immortality Ode*.

Tennyson makes brief excursions into a number of speculations in *In Memoriam*, presumably they all are relevant to, at least suggested by, his siege of grief and forlornness. They are tentative efforts; he does not penetrate deeply. We find instead that the kind of introspection and examination of experience in Tennyson's poem consistently lacks the meditative and rational insights of *The Prelude*. *In Memoriam*
is obviously different in the respect that it is a fragmentary collection of verses written over a long period of time without a settled plan of writing or a narrative coherence. "Short swallow-flights of song, that dip/ Their wings in tears and skim away,"
(XLVIII.15-16) Tennyson describes them. To complaints on the obscurity of the message he espoused, Tennyson replied:

I am told that my young countrymen would like notes to my poems. Shall I write what dictionaries tell to save some of the idle folk trouble? or am I to try to fit a moral to each poem? or to add an analysis of passages? or give a history of my similes? I do not like the task.26

It can be argued that the quality of Tennyson's optimism is no less convincing than Wordsworth's, and that Tennyson equally merits Wordsworth's reputation as a healer of man's flagging morale. Again it may be argued that when the philosophic content of The Prelude and In Memoriam is reduced to simplices, Wordsworth no more demonstrated that love of nature leads to love of man than Tennyson proved his convictions of religious certainty. Tennyson's ability to say things in a fine poetic way allows him to reason more in verse than one is able to see at once, but it is plain that he does not draw love, the moral law, and the power of free will into a philosophy with a hand as strong as Wordsworth's.

On the evidence of In Memoriam it seems abundantly clear that it was probably not within Tennyson's ability to pierce deeply the mysteries he found himself alone with after the death of his friend. It would be presumptuous to insist on the testimony of In Memoriam
only that Tennyson was, as Mr. Auden believes, the "stupidest" of poets. But it should be acknowledged that, for lack of evidence to the contrary, Wordsworth was habitually the profounder. Again, with respect to a comparative appraisal of *In Memoriam* and *The Prelude*, it is plain that Wordsworth had his feet more firmly planted on the ground; his is the more deeply reflective work, and *The Prelude* conveys an assurance, however didactic, of a maturer mind. A realization of these differences does not, however, presuppose that *The Prelude* is the greater poem, nor that Wordsworth was the greater poet.

In the end it is profitless to propound argument over the relative autobiographical merits of the two poems in the way of ultimate evaluation as art. They are, demonstrably so, works of different kinds, and written by poets who were widely dissimilar in temperament. Since each poem has been recognized by many authoritative voices as great poetry, it is simpler to allow that matters of artistic preference lie mainly outside the province of literary-poetic dicta, and that whatever meaning the poems have for a given reader or critic will depend essentially on what he brings to the task of reading. But to further explore the differences apparent in the poems, it is necessary to consider their poetical form, again for reasons having less to do with general concepts of good and bad poetry than specific points of difference.
COMPARISON OF POETICS

Tennyson described his manner of writing the sections of *In Memoriam* as a "breaking into song by fits" (XXIII.2), and in the reading the over-all effect is indeed suggestive of desultory composition. The seeming irrelevancy of particular passages implies a random compilation of verses under the one title. Tennyson was aware of the poem's weaknesses, as were some of the applauding and sympathetic mid-century critics: "... high and perfect excellence, perhaps, *In Memoriam* has not reached, though omission and revision might lead very close to it." In spite of the advice of friends and the admonishment of critics, the poet would consider no changes.

There is, however, an internal chronology of the poem that provides organizational unity, a progression from grief to hope and final religious certainty. One is aware, too, even on a first reading, of another kind of unity that is manifest partly through a leitmotiv of certain lines repeated from one section to another: "Till all my widow'd race be run" (IX.22), (XVII.20); "Tis better to have loved and lost/ Than never to have loved at all" (XXVII.15-16), (LXXXV.3-4); and partly through a redundancy of idea: "We two communicate no more" (LXXXV.84). Whatever the structural difficulties of the poem and the seeming fitfulness of thematic treatment, there will be seen an over-all unity of the parts, and there is present too a complexity of meaning conveyed through structure and devices of texture, rather than by clear statement, that bespeaks the master poet. Tennyson had perhaps the finest ear of any English poet, and the poetic ingenuity that wove so expertly the fleeting harmonies of *In Memoriam* creates
for some readers a substantial aesthetic accomplishment:

Plain thoughts, vivid impressions, graphic effects, stern passions, all that is sane, clear, moderate, intellectual, is of course easily emphasized by the simplest processes of iteration. But to slightly suggest subtle feelings, vague apprehensions, delicate fancies, fleeting moods, fresh spontaneousness, underlying morality, or on the contrary to adequately render the utmost cries of misery or delight, frantic wrath or ecstatic love, raving madness or torpid melancholy, in short, to convey into human speech all such human emotions as, from very vagueness or wildness, seems essentially to be either above or below the reach of conscious thought, and therefore of distinct words, no music has ever proved better suited in lyrical verse ... than the wandering melody of refrains and the haunting harmony of parallelisms.28

Discounting for the moment that at times in In Memoriam Tennyson is distressingly distinct and unsubtle, it is clear that the above remarks apply well to that which is best in Tennyson's art. He was beyond doubt a great lyricist, and the wandering refrains of In Memoriam are characteristic of his lyric ability. Because the lyric strain was his best province and because there is a musical symmetry of the whole poem, it is perhaps not valid to say that his choice of verse form—quatrain within sections of varying length—contributes a patchy and fragmentary effect to the poem. This is a common enough judgment, one that derives, it would seem, from an inability to appreciate Tennyson's controlled, albeit subtle, harmonies. A more legitimate complaint is that Tennyson's stanza form does not allow room for powerful and sustained emotion; doubt, grief, despair, and exultation are not given full voice. On the other hand, the rising
and falling moods of the poem help avoid the emotional cramping
that sustained mood would be subject to in the slender verse plan.
Tennyson's lyrics adjust beautifully to a variety of impressions;
he does not range the middle air and avoid the thoughts that lie too
deep for tears at one extreme and the near hysterical at the other.
Thus the reverberating pitch of the familiar passage beginning "Ring
out wild bells" finds the poet nearly beside himself with exultation:

Ring out the old shapes of foul disease;
Ring out the narrowing lust for gold,
Ring out the thousand wars of old,
Ring in the thousand years of peace. (CVI.25-28)

The emotion represents the furthest removal in range from the earlier
passages of despair at its deepest, for example:

He is not here; but far away
The noise of life begins again,
And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain
On the bald street breaks the blank day. (VII.9-12)

The emotion of the latter passage is beyond the need of the subtilizing
intellect. The images convey the emotion and the passage requires no
more than it is. In the former passage we have lyric expression that
is more literally communicative: the message of joy is not grasped
intuitively as is the song of grief. Now either emotion is suitable
to Tennyson's lyric form, but the despairing lines are better adapted
to the pure simplicity of lyric form that prevails throughout In
Memoriam. When Tennyson injects into his verse more than his mood,
and becomes expository, in that he has a message to get through, the
sense of it makes us wonder what he is saying, literally, and how he
came to say it. The exulting lines are perhaps too exultant since they
are bound to ideas; the passage is less successful than the sombre passage. This need not be, since an able lyricist can express joy with his music, but Tennyson is not the master of the profoundest emotions. He expresses profound grief in the one passage (he need not state the emotion) but at the other extreme he sometimes makes one wonder if he is not trying very hard to say something in more concrete terms and relying too much on lyric magic. Passages like these are unimpressive:

Arise and fly
The reeling Faun, the sensual feast;
Move upward, working out the beast,
And let the ape and tiger die. (CXXVIII.25-28)

Proclaiming social truth shall spread,
And justice, ev'n tho' thrice again
The red fool-fury of the Seine
Should pile her barricades with dead (CXXVII.5-8)

Tennyson implies that messages of faith are to be comprehended, as with the songs of grief, intuitively:

And I—my harp would prelude woe—
I cannot all command the strings;
The glory of the sum of things
Will flash along the chords and go. (LXXXVIII.9-12)

The enigma of death and the many-sided fears and mysteries occasioned by the spectre is the fundamental theme among the variety of considerations Tennyson deals with in the course of his poem. He overcomes his uncertainties and fears but leaves the reader unsure whether the poet really achieved a spiritual and philosophical success or merely grew tired of his burdens. We do not see Tennyson striving to rise from despair to victory; rise he does, but apparently because
he has endured rather than struggled.

O life as futile, then, as frail!
O for thy voice to soothe and bless!
What hope of answer, or redress?
Behind the veil, behind the veil. (LVI.25-28)

When finally he has ascended from gloom he provides answers in plenty, both for his own problems and the vexations of the day, and these help remove the poem from the tedium of an endless chant of personal woe. In a way there is something for everyone—comforts not alone for the Victorian readers.

There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds. (XCVI.11-12)

AND all is well, tho’ faith and form
Be sunder’d in the night of fear;
Well roars the storm to those that hear
A deeper voice across the storm (CXXVII.1-4)

There is a plethora of this type of sentiment, and more directed with particular effect to the poet’s own immediate public:

Who loves not knowledge? Who shall rail
Against her beauty? May she mix
With man and prosper! Who shall mix
Her pillars? Let her work prevail. (CXIV.1-4)

Let Science prove we are, and then
What matters Science unto men,
At least to me? (CXX.6-8)

There is no doubt that part of Tennyson’s success in In Memoriam was due to his lines that have a tagline appeal, pithy and epigrammatic. It should be owned that Wordsworth also has contributed much to the common stock of familiar English, that he too can be aphoristic:

The Child is father of the Man (The Rainbow)

The world is too much with us; late and soon (Sonnet)
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing boy (Immortality Ode)

Many poets own the faculty, happy or otherwise, of creating phrases that find their way into common modes of language. The point to be made is that this is not a prominent characteristic of The Prelude. Wordsworth does not rely on a sententious propensity for this kind of line or this kind of idea. It is, on the other hand, something Tennyson not only does very well but does very often in In Memoriam. And this is evident not so much in the frequency of occurrence of lines that have the ring of a proverb, but rather in the characteristic mode Tennyson gives to positive statements. There is usually a readily assimilative character in his optimistic pronouncements and his declarations of faith. But his views go unsupported by induction. The meditative lyrics of the early part of In Memoriam would require little foundation in reason; their very simplicity heightens the impression of sincere and poignant feeling. But the later pleasant-rises, successful as they were, cannot rely on simplicity to convey real conviction.

It is evident that Wordsworth's poetry was not accorded the popular acclaim that awaited Tennyson's genius; the time was distinctly ripe in the young Victorian age for poetry that could make man's leisure hours pleasant. Tennyson struck the correct notes for his age, and part of the reason lies in the music itself, in the kind of poetry rather than in the implicit message. As Professor Grierson points out, "... one may be in quest of a 'message' and complain with Carlyle of Tennyson's lollipops—yet lollipops are a relief to the
strain and tedium of sermons ... This has no little to do with the popularity of *In Memoriam* with the Victorian reading public.

Wordsworth, although certainly capable of the dazzling line, was not Tennyson's equal as a lyricist. His was a more profound and sustained type of music, as Professor Legouis writes:

... if the wilder flights and more 'liquid' tones of lyrical song were denied him, within him rang music appropriate to his intense meditation, the measured and stately march of epic strains.

This is appropriate to Wordsworth's poetry generally, and it points up an obvious difference between *The Prelude* and *In Memoriam*. Wordsworth's masterpiece is essentially lacking, by comparison, in what is called lyrical quality; it is calmly meditative in large part, and where it is spontaneously joyous and fresh it is nevertheless controlled. He does not give himself in abandonment in the way that Tennyson's passages are sometimes chords struck in pain and bewilderment: "I do sing because I must" (XXI.23). We are not always obliged to give Tennyson's verses careful attention with our minds, but rather we hear them and pass on to hear them again. They do not require all our mind's attention; we may, in fact, avoid the trouble of intellectual effort often. They lack Wordsworth's message in the didactic sense, for Tennyson was no teacher, something of a prophet it turned out, but no teacher. Wordsworth customarily asks more of us. For some he asks too much.

Salvador De Madariaga's objection to Wordsworth's poetry indicates a response that is fairly typical of many readers, for it represents
the crux of an antipathy many feel toward his work.

There is in Wordsworth too much composure, too much respectability, he is too much like a British gentleman in his Sunday clothes to admit of any other gait than the steady sure-footed walker. It is the dominant rhythm of his mind, that mind of his which will not spare the reader one single step in reasoning, description or narrative.31

There is a germ of truth here, but whether Wordsworth was too much these things is a matter for considerable argument. Few poets ever gave the attention and labor to style that Wordsworth did. He was anything but careless or lacking in awareness of duty. But his laborious care in writing was not a neurosis that prevented him from sparing the dullest detailing. Much is left out of The Prelude, of course.

Yet much hath been ommitted, as need was;
Of books how much! and even of the other wealth
That is collected among woods and fields,
Far more (Bk.XIII.279-282)

The Prelude is a long poem, but a work is only too long, in one sense, when it says more than it sets out to say. Wordsworth intended no random diary, and he believed everything of great importance had "faithfully been pictured." It is a venerable theory that no poem of appreciable length can be without its low points; a high poetic strain can not be maintained in a poem the length of only one book of The Prelude. The ordered narrative of The Prelude is, of course, suited to blank verse, and blank verse does not often surprise with its brilliance. The Prelude is not all good poetry; indeed it is larded with passages that are far short of poetic. But flat passages,
transitional passages needed to sustain the narration, need not offend. A complete symphony includes many an uninspiring note.

We find many lines like these:

Onward we drove beneath the Castle, down
By Magdalen Bridge we went and cross'd the Cam,
And at the Hoop we landed, famous Inn.

My spirit was up, my thoughts were full of hope;
Some Friends I had, acquaintances who there
Seem'd Friends, poor simple Schoolboys, now hung round
With honour and importance; in a world
Of welcome faces up and down I rov'd;
Questions, directions, counsel and advice
Flow'd in upon me from all sides (Bk.III.13–22)

Through Paris lay my readiest path, and there
I sojourn'd a few days, and visited
In haste each spot of old and recent fame
The latter chiefly, from the field of Mars
Down to the suburbs of St. Anthony,
And from Mont Martyr southward, to the Dome
Of Genevieve. (Bk.IX.40–46)

It is curious how almost the same literal prosaicness can find its way into the heart and memory:

O pleasant exercise of hope and joy!
For great were the auxiliars which then stood
Upon our side, we who were strong in love;
Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven (Bk.I.690–694)

It is not that Wordsworth's purpose is too sombre ever to allow his fancy to soar; the joy of the memory and the vivid retention of the experience give us a higher key:

All shod with steel,
We hiss'd along the polish'd ice, in games
Confederate, imitative of the chase
And woodland pleasures, the resounding horn,
The Pack loud bellowing, and the hunted hare.
So through the darkness and the cold we flew,
And not a voice was idle; with the din,
Meanwhile, the precipices rang aloud,
The leafless trees, and every icy crag
Tinkled like iron, while the distant hills
Into the tumult sent an alien sound
Of melancholy, not unnoticed, while the stars,
Eastward, were sparkling clear, and in the west
The orange sky of evening died away. (Bk.I.433-446)

For instantly a Light upon the turf
Fell like a flash; I looked about, and lo!
The Moon stood naked in the Heavens, at height
Immense above my head, and on the shore
I found myself of a huge sea of mist,
Which, meek and silent, rested at my feet:
A hundred hills their dusky backs upheaved
All over this still Ocean, and beyond,
Far, far beyond, the vapours shot themselves,
In headlands, tongues, and promontory shapes,
Into the Sea, the real Sea, that seem'd
To dwindle, and give up its majesty (Bk.XIII.39-50)

De Madariaga's primary reason for distaste for the poet stems from
his dislike for the kind of music found in Wordsworth, music that in
his view is scarcely music at all:

Wordsworth is the poorest in rhythm of all
great English poets ... It is doubtful whether
Wordsworth had even a clear idea of what
rhythm is. [he was] deaf to rhythm and saw
nothing in poetry but metre and rhyme ... 32

This is a striking thing to say of anyone worthy of the name poet.
It is possible to build an argument on these premises by pointing to
statements Wordsworth makes on the nature of poetry in the Preface
to the Lyrical Ballads and by singling out unsuccessful poetry that
shows Wordsworth out of his natural element. Hence his detractors
commonly hold up his poem To A Skylark to Shelley's more successful
treatment to prove a point. It is also quite true that Wordsworth
does not frolic gracefully, and for this reason his Idiot Boy was not
received in the same spirit of delight in which it was written. In
brief, Wordsworth had his faults and his limitations, but to say that he does not sing and accordingly he is less a poet or no poet at all is much too sweeping a statement. Better to recognize that his singing is of a particular kind, that there is lyrical and less lyrical poetry and there is little profit in attempting too accurate distinctions between these kinds of poetry. Professor Grierson speaks of lyric poetry in these terms:

... the original union of song with music and with dance is not to be forgotten and is not forgotten by the poet. Mr. Drinkwater has argued with considerable force that all poetry is lyric, 'That what distinguishes other forms of poetry from lyrical is something other than the poetry,' that 'the characteristic of the lyric is that it is the product of the pure poetic energies, and that lyric and poetry are synononous terms.' Metaphysically this is doubtless true. All poetry is poetry. 33

He goes on to say that there is a recognizable difference between lyrical and non-lyrical (or less lyrical) poetry, and it is found in the metre:

What I am after is this, that a scrutiny of the raison d'être of the metres we call lyrical bears out what I have said; one feels—if one has the feeling for poetry at all—that some poems sing more than others, that we read them as knowing these things are sung, not said. 34

Wordsworth knew of the original union of song, music, and dance, and he knew well the limitations of the epic style of narrative. He writes in his 1815 Preface:

Epic poets, in order that their mode of composition may accord with the elevation of their subject, represent themselves as singing from the inspiration of the Muse, 'Arma virumque cano;' but this is a fiction,
in modern times, of slight value: the 'Iliad' or the 'Paradise Lost' would gain little in our estimation by being chanted. The other poets who belong to this class are commonly content to tell their tale;—so that of the whole it may be affirmed that they neither require nor reject the accompaniment of music.

The lyric quality has further manifestations than in the metre or sound of verse, and to speak of Tennyson as characteristically lyric implies more. He was possessed of a lyric imagination, and the subject matter upon which he imposed his lyric strains is in itself appropriate lyric material. This is responsible for much of his poetry that is singularly beautiful while, compared to Wordsworth's measures, light and fanciful:

And bats went round in fragrant skies,
And wheel'd or lit the filmy shapes
That haunt the dusk, with ermine capes
And woolly breasts and beaded eyes. (XCV,9-12)

This is rich and fascinating lyric imagination, the sort of thing Tennyson does supremely well. Better than to compare the passage to anything similar in Wordsworth is to find the essence of the sounding line, the measured beauty that is so characteristic of Wordsworth, and thus atypical of Tennyson. We think at once of:

The still, sad music of humanity (Immortality Ode)

One great society alone on earth,
The noble Living and the noble Dead (Bk.I,969-970)

even then I felt
Gleams like the flashing of a shield; the earth
And common face of Nature spake to me
Rememberable things (Bk.I,613-616)

It is possible to discuss at length Tennyson's lyrics, his use of
metaphor and image—all the parts of poetic diction. But the
stylistics of Wordsworth's poetry is less easily approached; his
poetic technique and poetic matter are inextricably bound together.
The critic is hard put to separate the matter from the art: what
Wordsworth says is very closely allied to the way he says it. To
explore adequately the matter of lyric imagination, of which Tennyson
was possessed in a way very dissimilar to Wordsworth, requires an
elaboration of Wordsworth's views on the fit language for poetry, but
it is both too large a study and unnecessary here to press into service
those views. Wordsworth often was inconsistent in practice regarding
his views on poetic diction. But the very literalness of his poetry,
the literalness that is the signature of his genius, gives to his
poetry its unique stamp. He usually succeeded in being literal in a
way that requires much of the reader (and is the despair of critics)
to know whether his seeming prosaicness—of a given visual image, say—
is mere photographic representation or whether the words embody a
compactness of thought, lying unadorned and quiet within the image.

In the sixth book of The Prelude, Wordsworth describes the change-
less change of the Alpine forests as "... woods decaying, never to be
decayed," and follows with the line: "The stationary blasts of water-
falls ..." (Bk.VI.558). Here, if anywhere, is Wordsworth's eye on the
object; here also is the embodiment of an idea—an extension of the
familiar immortality theme. This must be called a pregnant line; it is
meaningful in the context of Wordsworth's Weltanschauung. The careful
reader of Wordsworth does not see only the accurate visual rendering of
a waterfall but the additional import of the idea. Let us see how Tennyson concerns himself with looking at the object. In a letter to Mr. Dawson, Tennyson writes:

When I was about twenty or twenty-one I went on a tour of the Pyrenees. Lying among those mountains before a waterfall that comes down one thousand or twelve hundred feet I sketched it (according to my custom then) in these words:

Slow dropping veils of thinnest lawn.

When I printed this, a critic informed me that 'lawn' was the material used in theatres to imitate a waterfall, and graciously added, 'Mr. Tennyson should not go to the boards of a theatre but to Nature herself for his suggestions.' And I had gone to Nature herself. I think it is a moot point whether, if I had known how that effect was produced on the stage, I should have ventured to publish the line.'

The comparison suggests more than that Wordsworth would have had little concern for the critic's observation. Tennyson's image would be to Wordsworth fanciful rather than imaginative.

Frederick A. Potter, who maintains that Wordsworth is not a "descriptive poet," describes the poet's method of looking at the object in this way:

Wordsworth in his best poetry does not start with an abstraction or a generalization, a divine commonplace which he wishes to illustrate. He starts with the mental image of a concrete object. He feels this subject to be very urgent, but at first he does not know why. As he looks steadily at it, he sees what it means. He usually continues to simplify and interpret until the object becomes the correlative of a single emotion.

Tennyson would have had an impatience of this sort of poetic creation.

It seems plain that Tennyson was concerned primarily with the visual
attractiveness of his waterfall image. Probably his line was a thing of the moment and without any further levels of meaning. Imaginative perception was for him a much simpler matter than it was for Wordsworth, if we may judge by Tennyson's report on the infelicity of a discussion with Wordsworth at Mr. Hoare's house near London:

As we walked back to London through grassy fields not then built over, Tennyson complained of the old poet's coldness. He had endeavored to stimulate some latent ardours by telling him of a tropical island where the trees, when they first came into leaf, were a vivid scarlet;--'everyone of them, I told him, one flush all over the island, the colour of blood! It would not do. I could not inflame his imagination in the least!' 37

There was not, as Wordsworth realized, a rapport between the poets on the matter of poetic imagination that one could hope for.

In spite of Wordsworth's admonition that words are too powerful an instrument to be used carelessly, and in spite of his rejection of the notion that poets first think a thought and then seek a way to present it attractively, it should be allowed that all language is a manipulation of words. The thinking and the articulation are separate processes; spontaneous utterance, a rarer thing, is closer to lyric inspiration and lyric imagination. Wordsworth's waterfall line was not spontaneous, and no happy accident. The charming line divest of inner and deeper meanings is scarcely typical of him. A too great facility for poetic diction is not one of his faults.

In 1845 Wordsworth wrote to Henry Reed:

I saw Tennyson several times when I was in London. He is decidedly the first of our
living poets, and I hope will live to give
the world still better things. You will be
pleased to hear that he expressed in the
strongest terms his gratitude to my writings.
To this I was far from indifferent, though
persuaded that he is not much in sympathy with
what I should myself most value in my attempts,
viz. the spirituality with which I have
endeavoured to invest the material Universe,
and the moral relations under which I have
wished to exhibit its most ordinary appearances. 38

Tennyson had little understanding of Wordsworth's efforts, and
no real veneration for his poetry. He, like many of his friends,
lamented the old poet's lack of art. Wordsworth, on the other hand,
admired and approved only of Tennyson's art and craft. He enter-
tained a high regard for the younger poet, but he felt Tennyson's
spirituality and morality were negligible. But the response of
contemporary taste was very different from Wordsworth's feelings.
RECEPTION OF CRITICS AND PUBLIC

**In Memoriam** was well received by the critics, generally, and wide-spread public applause followed the poem's publication. The sale volume was enormous (sixty thousand copies within a few months) and Tennyson's prestige took an immediate and decisive upward turn. Fame that had been uncertain before was now assured, and Tennyson was welcomed as a champion. Charles Kingsley, writing for *Fraser's Magazine*, hails the poem as "the noblest Christian poem which England has produced for two centuries." A good many people concurred in this view.

Beyond doubt the quick popularity of **In Memoriam** was due in large part to the fact that the poem administered to emotions experienced by all men. It had pathos for all to share in: a newly married daughter leaving her parents amid "tears" and "doubtful joys" (XL); a mother praying for the safety of her sailor son at the very moment he is being buried at sea (VI); a widower who encounters a vision of his dead spouse (XIII). Of course the long elegy for Hallam, in all its sustained humility of grief, was sympathetically received by an age that loved to cry. In addition there were the incidental appeals that Tennyson made by embracing controversial questions of the day: future existence, theological doubts, the dream of a reformed society, and scientific wonders. But paramount to the poem's success was the assertion of religious faith that the poet made. This, perhaps, was the most urgent need of the day, and Tennyson appeared to have met that need. **In Memoriam** was greeted as an authoritative rebuttal to the prevailing spirit of skepticism and doubt. Thus, to quote Kingsley
further, Tennyson was hailed for his victory:

It /In Memoriam/ enables us to claim one who has been hitherto regarded as belonging to a merely speculative and paëristic school as the willing and deliberate champion of vital Christianity, and of an orthodoxy the more sincere because it has worked upward through the abyss of doubt; the more mighty for good because it justifies and consecrates the aesthetics and the philosophy of the present age. 40

As to the religious efficacy of the poem there was considerable unanimity:

How precious this experience of wisdom and true piety! Only from such men can come the solution of these subtle questions. They are appointed teachers, to reveal the laws that relate to the human soul ...41

A fact that is vividly suggested by this book is, that the great elementary truths of life, which have constituted the A B C of Christian philosophy in all ages ...42

The Guardian and the Spectator said the poem was "full of religious feeling." Taits proclaimed the book's "true religion." The Prospective Review admired the poet's victory of faith over science.

Tennyson's pious disquisitions, though not dealt with discursively, were balm to his readers. Very few of those readers would have agreed with T. S. Eliot's more recent opinion that the poem is really a striking demonstration of profound doubt rather than an expression of spiritual faith. It seems fairly evident nowadays that the lines "There lives more faith in honest doubt,/ Believe me, than in half the creeds" (XCVI.11-12) contain more personal truth for Tennyson than his assertions of belief. But Mr. Eliot makes another observation that is
even more interesting:

It happens now and then that a poet by some strange accident expresses the mood of his generation, at the same time that he is expressing a mood of his own which is quite remote from that of his generation. This is not a question of insincerity: there is an amalgam of yielding and opposition below the level of consciousness.\(^3\)

That Tennyson did express the mood of his generation to the public's satisfaction is certain; whether he did so accidentally is another matter. Somewhere in the process of writing the poem he saw fit to relate artificially his private grief to other problems of life and death. He appears to have made a few deliberate concessions to practicality. Yet even in this regard he may have expressed the mood of his generation because it was his mood. Possibly he was perfectly honest, yet privately, or even subconsciously, he was at odds with his generation and with himself. In this event, Tennyson was sincere.

There is another way of speculating on Tennyson's sincerity. Tennyson knowingly may have submitted his personal insights without materially falsifying his original perceptions: while he may not have been dishonest exactly, he may have resorted to artifice to avoid censure and yet maintain his artistic integrity. Thus Professor Johnson explains:

The hallmark of the literary personalities of Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold alike is a certain aristocratic aloofness, a stubborn intractability which is likely to manifest itself at just those points where the contemporary social order assumed automatic conformity with its dictates. Thus, their
refusal to be restricted by current suppositions is less often a subterfuge to cover a fear of failure than a forthright avowal of the artist's independence from social pressures whenever these threaten to inhibit the free play of his imaginative powers ... there is a fundamental error in the prevalent notion that they uncritically share most of the foibles that, rightly or wrongly, are attributed to the Victorians.44

He speaks further of Tennyson's "uneasy conviction that the age with its obsessive materialism could not really supply him the materials with which to work ..." and of "his recognition of the subterfuges that were necessary in order to get Victorian society to listen to his message."45 This view has Tennyson at odds with his compatriots and undeceived of his own variance in spirit. Mr. Eliot's idea is that Tennyson was one with his age, yet subconsciously out of tune with contemporary views.

Beyond its particular interest, the question of Tennyson's conformity or independence is worth noting for the fact that we must keep in mind the pressures and responsibilities that bore upon Tennyson. The poet who would be heard had problems in the Victorian climate that were not present in Wordsworth's golden decade. It seems, at least, that in the middle of the century writers were much less inclined to avoid the demands of contemporary problems. Wordsworth, the solitary observer, was denounced by many for seeming to be outside of the human struggle.

The appearance of The Prelude did not effect any immediate changes in the current appraisal of Wordsworth. It was received with some
approval but not widely hailed. The *Spectator* of July, 1850, comments on the poem as one of Wordsworth's most perfect compositions, and says that it is likely "to strengthen the claim of Wordsworth to endure with his land's language." No remarkable insights are present in the criticism, only a smattering of respectful praise and a reiteration of current attitudes toward the poet. The writer finds:

The great defect of Wordsworth, in our judgment, was want of sympathy with, and knowledge of, men ... He is always the prominent, often the exclusive, object of his own song.⁴⁶

He complains further that the stirring events of his time made but transient impressions on the old poet.

The mid-century critical estimate of Wordsworth was neither conspicuously warm nor cold. Eventually *The Prelude* became better known and unexpected depths were revealed; Wordsworth's intellectual power and complexity were more fully realized, and he came to be thought of as more than the simple poet of nature. But it was to be more than a decade after the poet's death that anything like a comprehensive study of his works was attempted. The noted critic David Masson (who had not read *The Prelude*) voices the prevailing opinion in 1850 toward the sage of Rydal Mount—lately passed away—when he allows that Wordsworth was a poet, but of high, not great, stature. He assigns him place on the English Parnassus, by no means near the top, but on the "upper slope of the mountain ... where various other poets hold perhaps as just, if not so fixed, a footing." His complaints are the usual complaints against Wordsworth: a lack of humour, passion, and intellect; and he frowns on
the fact that "the lyric madness does not seize him." He sees, as
did most of his colleagues, greater fame for Tennyson:

... should our noble Tennyson survive as
a constant writer till his black locks
have grown gray, one sees qualities in
him that predict for him more than a
Wordsworth's fame.47

The Victorians made it clear that they regarded the patriarch of
the Lakes with benevolence, but there was more than a touch of con-
descension toward Wordsworth apparent late in the poet's life and in
the year of his death. A letter written by Tennyson's friend Devere
in 1842 suggests that Tennyson had a share in this tolerance:

Alfred Tennyson's largeness of mind and of
heart was touchingly illustrated by his
reverence for Wordsworth's poetry, notwith-
standing that the immense merits he recognized
in it were not, in his opinion, supplemented
by a proportionate amount of artistic skill.
He was always glad to show reverence to the
'old Poet'...48

There seemed to be little reason to take Wordsworth seriously, and
for many years after his death his popularity declined. It was in
1864 that Edward Shairp suggested in his essay, "Wordsworth, the Man
and the Poet," that the time was ripe for a summary of Wordsworth and
his work. He asks the readers to search below the surface to find
what is best in him; there are lessons in Wordsworth that the Victorians
have overlooked.

... perhaps the largest portion of Wordsworth's
peculiar wisdom [remains] unabsorbed, nor
likely to be soon absorbed, by this excitement
craving, unmeditative age.49

By 1869 the evolution of a more modern appraisal of Wordsworth was
evident in Arthur Hough Clough's criticism. He retains the objection that Wordsworth's sphere was a small one and that the poet was too remote from practical concerns, yet he sees something in Wordsworth of permanent greatness.

As writers for their age, as orators, so to say, as addressing themselves personally to their contemporaries, Byron and Scott, one cannot hesitate to say, were far more influential men, are far greater names. They had more, it may be, to say to their fellows; they entered deeper, perhaps, into the feelings and life of their times; they received a larger and livelier recognition, and a more immediate and tangible reward of popular enthusiasm and praise. It may be, too, that they had something not for their generation only, but for all ages, which quite as well deserved a permanent record as anything in the mind of Wordsworth. But that permanent beauty of expression, that harmony between thought and word which is the condition of 'immortal verse,' they did not, I think—and Wordsworth did—take pains to attain.50

In 1876, Leslie Stephen was able to say with assurance what would have been startling two decades previously:

I gladly take for granted what is generally acknowledged—that Wordsworth in his best moods reaches a greater height than any other modern Englishman ... with defects too obvious to be mentioned, he can yet pierce further beyond the veil ...51

Today, of course, Wordsworth's "fit audience ... though few" has expanded immeasurably, and Wordsworth clearly has ascended to a place of honor above Tennyson. He belongs to the small and select group of English poets that includes Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton. Tennyson's fame waned in the last decade of the nineteenth century and
the first decade of the twentieth, when it was the fashion to look back on the Victorian age with scorn. The tendency to use the term Victorian as an epithet for everything that was complacent and narrow-minded has not altogether disappeared in our day, and we, perhaps, are still too little removed from the Victorian era to see it clearly. The history of the nineteenth century is yet to be written; it was a giant century and the culmination of the vital changes it brought we have not yet seen. Surely we have advantages that give us a more comprehensive and a clearer view of Tennyson than was possible in the nineteenth century. Just as surely are we liable, for lack of comprehensive and unbiased truth, to dismiss Tennyson for those attributes of Victorianism that are so obviously his. He was Victorian; he was also a great poet, and when we view his poetry we should defer to the belief that a timelessness belongs to great art that insists we view it in relative isolation.

It is a temptation always to associate Tennyson and the concept "Victorianism," in its unfortunate connotations, and to be amused and a little scornful. We should perhaps imitate Thomas Carlyle's rule of setting a portrait of the man whom he was describing in front of him on his writing table. It might reduce our human urge to impertinence. Tennyson can be laughed at, and his detractors cannot resist episodes like the one told of him at Cornwall in 1848. "At one place," the report goes, "where he arrived in the evening, he cried, 'Where is the sea? Show me the sea.' So after the sea he went stumbling in the dark, and fell down and hurt his leg so much that he had to be nursed six weeks ..."
Tennyson’s own account lends no dignity to the adventure: "Arrived at Bude in dark, asked girl way to sea, she opens the back door ... I go out and in a moment go sheer down, upward of six feet ..."52 Wordsworth, by contrast, does not invite laughter, and the fact of his impenetrable dignity helps give to his poetry that Beethoven-like quality that prompts us to ignore rather than assail the sizeable portion of it that is commonplace.

To disassociate biographical facts from an artist’s work, a practice recommended by new schools of criticism, is no easy matter any time. In the reading of poetical autobiography it is not to be recommended entirely. The real man, the poet, is less apparent in what we call his life—in biographical fact—than in his poetry. We do not shut out the vision of the poet when reading In Memoriam and The Prelude; often we find the greatest poetry gives us the clearest image of the mind and heart of the poet himself. There is truth in Yeat’s statement that "we make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry." We should not, however, allow our awareness of biographical content to interfere with our appreciation and understanding of great poetry. To do so is to defeat ourselves.
FOOTNOTES


6 Alfred, Lord Tennyson, A Memoir by His Son, ed. Hallam Tennyson (New York, 1898), I, 304.--hereafter cited as Memoir.


8 Memoir, I, 305.

9 Citations from The Prelude in my text are to the The Prelude ... by William Wordsworth, ed. Ernest De Selincourt (Oxford, 1947). This edition is the 1805 text of The Prelude.

10 Citations from In Memoriam in my text are to In Memoriam, ed. Hallam, Lord Tennyson (New York, 1906).

11 Letters of the Wordsworth Family from 1787 to 1855, ed. William Knight (Boston, 1907), I, 185-186.


13 Memoir, I, 171-172.


15 The italics are the editor's.


18 Memoir, I, 221.
19 Memoir, I, 236.
20 Memoir, I, 340.
21 Memoir, I, 375.
23 De Selincourt, Letters, p. 448.
24 De Selincourt, Letters, p. 452.
25 Letters of the Wordsworth Family, ed. William Knight (Boston, 1907), III, p. 58.
26 In Memoriam (above, note 10), p. 238.
27 "In Memoriam" (anon.rev.), Littell’s Living Age, XXVI(July, 1850), 170-171.
32 De Madariaga, p. 139.
34 Grierson, p. 16.
35 Memoir, I, 259.
37 Memoir, I, 209.

40 Kingsley, p. 245.


42 "In Memoriam" (anon.rev.), *North British Review*, XIII (1850), pp. 532-555.


45 Johnson, pp. 65-66.

46 "Wordsworth's Prelude" (anon.rev.), *Littel's Living Age*, September 14, 1850, pp. 506-511.


48 *Memoir*, I, 208-209.

49 Edward Shairp, "Wordsworth, the Man and the Poet," *North British Review*, XLI (1864), pp. 1-54.


52 *Memoir*, I, 274.
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