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In memoriam

Tennyson, Alfred

London, 1900

Introduction

INTRODUCTION

THE poem of *In Memoriam* was written to commemorate Arthur Henry Hallam, the eldest son of the historian, whose friendship Tennyson had made when he went up to Trinity in 1828, and who until his premature death in 1833 remained the poet's constant companion. Or perhaps it would be truer to say that the fact of his friend's early death furnished the occasion of the poem, by directing the poet's thoughts to the subject of bereavement. The poet indeed speaks in his own person, and reference is made to various incidents in the short career of their friendship—such as the debates of the “Apostles’” Club at Trinity (lxxxvi.), the journey to the Pyrenees (lxx.), the engagement to Emily Tennyson (lxxxiii.); and the events concerning the bringing home of the body and its burial at Clevedon happened as they are described. But still these more personal matters are subordinated to such as are more broadly human and general; and so there is reason in the impersonalness of the poem's title. It is less a monody upon the death of Hallam than

a monody upon the fact of death. As Tennyson himself put it, "‘I’ is not always the author speaking of himself, but the voice of the human race speaking through him."¹ This being so, it would seem beside the point to enter here into particulars concerning Arthur Hallam’s short life. It may suffice to say that he made upon many others among his contemporaries the same impression of commanding genius that the poet here records.

The Prologue is dated 1849, and the constituent sections of the poem may belong to any date in the preceding sixteen years. We are informed in Tennyson’s *Life* that the idea of weaving the various elegies into one connected whole did not come to him until many had been written; and he told a friend² "that the general way of its being written was so queer that if there were a blank space [in the MS. book] he would put in a poem." These facts will help to account for the agreeable variety of the whole, and also for the occasional lapses of continuity. There is nevertheless a clearly recognisable progress in thought and feeling, perhaps most clearly marked to the casual reader by the three poems upon Christmas (xxx., lxxvii., civ.), but of which more careful notice must be taken if the poem is to be understood as a whole. The divisions marked in this edition were furnished by the author to the editor of the *Nineteenth Century*.³

¹ *Life*, i. 305.

² *Life*, i. 304.

³ *Nineteenth Century*, Jan. 1893.

The poem opens with the question, How may grief for the dead be so borne as to secure that spiritual profit which such teachers as Goethe ascribe to it? and it is the slow working out of the answer to this question that constitutes the unity of the poem. The opening sections paint the mourner's grief, which is at first a mere stupefaction of thought and feeling, broken by moments of vague appreciation or by flights of fancy that ignore altogether the grim reality; then as this reality of loss is borne in upon him by the circumstances of the burial, the sorrow deepens. Presently thought awakens again, and looking before and after contrasts the dreariness of the solitary life to come with the pleasant years of companionship that are past, and this prompts the resolution that at any rate the lost friend shall never be forgotten. The third section of the poem closes with the recognition—which is the first article of the poet's creed—that the highest function of human life is love, and that therefore for any individual

“ 'Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all.”

The approaching festival of Christmas brings forcibly before the poet's mind the great Christian doctrine of the life beyond death; and the doctrine, now become of pressing interest, is examined. *How* can it be? Revelation—for which we cannot but be grateful (xxxvi.)—states nothing but the bare fact;

yet this revelation is found to be in harmony with man's deepest hopes, and, still more, it seems to be postulated by the very fact of man's existence as a spiritual being with spiritual activities. How, for instance, would love be possible at all unless it could regard itself as eternal? (xxxv.). On this thought the poet's mind pauses, and his imagination speculates upon the possible relations of the dead with the living (xxxix.—xlvi.), deepening at last into a longing for communion as the facts that make belief in any life after death difficult press upon him. These facts—truths laid bare by natural science—are now stated in all their force, and in face of them the poet reiterates his passionate conviction that the human race is immortal (liv.)

Here the poem, as at first designed, seems to have ended. The 57th elegy represents the Muse as urging the poet to a new beginning; and the 58th was added in the fourth edition, as though to account for the difference in tone between the earlier and later elegies. The first elegies of this second part, those comprised in section six, correspond to the early elegies of the first part in being poems rather of fancy than thought. The seventh section handles various disconnected topics, such as the perishableness of earthly fame, the relation of new to old friendship, and narrates past happy experiences, but reverts presently to the longing for communion with the dead, which is treated in six admirable poems, concluding with the

description of a trance in which communion was at last realised (lxxxix.—xciv.). The eighth section opens with the poet's leaving his old home; the first Christmas and New Year in the new home suggest the Christian thought of the "new life"—constantly renewed—both for the individual and for the race as it advances in civilisation; and so the appeal is made to all to "move upward, working out the beast." Finally, the poet once more rehearses his belief in the existence of God, and in the free will of man which springs from Him, can hold communion with Him, and like Him must be immortal.

Tennyson has himself summed up the drift of his poem in the line, "A grief, then changed to something else" (lxxvi.). What is this "something else"? The first part of the poem is, as we have seen, lucid enough. It clearly expresses that the poet holds firmly to the Christian faith in immortality, notwithstanding all the recently discovered facts that make the faith difficult; he believes that his friend, though his life here was cut short, is living it with applause in some other world. Grief, then, we may say, has been exchanged for the hope of immortality. At the end, however, of this first part of the poem we are promised a nobler leave-taking (lvii.). In what does this consist? In what qualities does the later part differ from the first? It shows a decrease in the poignancy of sorrow, but this

is as much the fruit of time as of reflection ; it spends a good deal of fancy on the possible relations of the dead with the living, but such speculation the poet himself admits to be idle (cvii.) ; for the rest it is taken up with various reminiscences obviously rather accessory than integral to the main purpose of the poem. But besides these, there are a few scattered poems, such as the Vision (cii.), the Song of the New Year (cv.), the appeal to "move upward" in civilisation (cxvii.), and the assertion that there is some end to which the world is moving (cxxvii.), which connect with the main thought of the first part of the poem, and it is these which must constitute the "nobler leave-taking" of which the poet speaks. We may sum them in a word and say that regret for his friend has become hope not only for his friend but for the whole race ; and although, of course, this hope is really implicit in the simple assertion of immortality with which the first part closes, no one can blame the poet for having decided to draw it out into clearer emphasis. It must at the same time be admitted that with the exception of the series of poems upon the Communion of Spirits (lxxxix.-xciv.) and one or two single elegies like lxxiii., lxxx., and cv., and a few passages of inimitable description such as lxix., lxxi., lxxxv., cxiv., and cxx., the later sections fall below the earlier in interest and poetic force ; and it must be a grief to all lovers of poetry that,

for the sake of a happy ending, the poet should have added the Epilogue, which falls far below what many lesser men have achieved in the way of epithalamium.

It has been said, and it is often repeated, that style is the great antiseptic of letters. If that were true, the *In Memoriam* should be, for the most part, imperishable, since Tennyson in the decade preceding 1850 had brought his style to its perfection. But style is an untrustworthy antiseptic apart from passion; and so we find that the passages of the poem which, after the lapse of half a century, still live on the lips of this generation are those in which some fundamental truth of human nature finds perfect and passionate utterance. Probably most people, when the *In Memoriam* is mentioned, think at once of those wonderful stanzas in which the poet expresses man's conviction that he is immortal. Into a discussion of the thesis of immortality this is no place to enter. The belief has certainly its philosophical justification, to which Tennyson has not been blind. He replies in cxix. to the scientific materialist with the argument that except to a spiritual principle science itself would be useless. Also, while acknowledging all the facts collected by natural science which make the belief in immortality difficult to hold, he points to the equally plain fact that the belief is necessary to make life worth living (xxxiv.). That is to say, he shows that the

hypothesis works. But happily he has rested his case neither upon philosophy nor upon science, but upon the profound conviction of the unsophisticated human heart. In other words, he has been content to speak as a poet. Matthew Arnold was fond of urging that poetry was the soundest philosophy; and we may allow his dictum to be true, for a poet. In the same way, just as Tennyson has left on one side formal philosophy, so he has left Christian dogmatics; and perhaps for the same reason, that their appeal is less than universal. He has, however, made very beautiful use of one of the Gospel stories, to show that the power of loving, which represents in his eyes the highest function of human nature, necessarily implies not only this and that individual object, but one supreme object as well, "the Life indeed," in whom they all have their being, and who is in His nature, as they are in their degree, "immortal Love."

But apart from the great deliverances upon Immortality there are others equally splendid, where the heart of some simple human emotion is plucked out and presented in impassioned phrases, which we at present cannot but think imperishable. The supreme example I take to be the concluding lines of lxxxii. :

“ For this alone on Death I wreak
 The wrath that garners in my heart :
He put our lives so far apart,
We cannot hear each other speak ;”

but hardly less poignant are the concluding lines of lxxxix. :

“ Ah dear, but come thou back to me :
 Whatever change the years have wrought,
 I find not yet one lonely thought
 That cries against my wish for thee.”

And there are still others which those who have “loved and lost” have deep in memory, and which after many years they cannot trust themselves to read aloud.

There are other passages, again, and these by some may be considered more poetical, in which the passion is translated through some sensuous image. As a rule these are successful in proportion to their simplicity; and the *In Memoriam* presents some very happy examples of Tennyson’s use of such simple figures. Thus we have in lxxii. :

“ We pass: the path that each man trod
 Is dim, or will be dim, with weeds ;”

in lxxiv. :

“ I care not in these fading days
 To raise a cry that lasts not long ;
 And round thee with the breeze of song
 To stir a little dust of praise.”

But where to such simplicity passion is added, we have the highest power of lyrical poetry. As examples I would instance the 19th poem, perfect from the first line to the last, which

has given the Wye a place and character among poetic rivers; the picture of the blind man in lxxv.; cxx., a descant on the old theme of Hesper-Phosphor, as simple and beautiful as Plato's, but inspired also with Christian hope; and not least the last quatrain of xlviiii.:

“ Beneath all fancied hopes and fears
 Ay me, the sorrow deepens down,
Whose muffled motions blindly drown
The bases of my life in tears.”

Verses like these must be held supreme successes in the use of imagery. There are some, however, which, although brilliant, may be thought not simple enough for success, such as the famous chemical metaphor in iv., and perhaps the agricultural metaphor in lxxx. Again, there are not a few metaphors which seem used merely as a piece of style, or to heighten a commonplace, such as the odd phrase “chains regret to his decease” in xxix., and the “kiss of toothed wheels” in cxvi., which is disagreeable if dwelt upon, and there are some that, on the other hand, fall below the dignity of the subject, like the “current coin” of xxxvi., and the “broken lights” of the Prologue, which occurs in a verse so often quoted that a critic hesitates to ask in what its merit is supposed to consist.

Another group of beauties will be found in the passages of natural description. Perhaps quite enough praise has been lavished upon Tennyson's

accurate study of detail since the day when Mr. Holbrook was astonished by the revelation that ash buds are black. For though accuracy is well, it is not in itself poetry; and—to keep to the instance quoted—ash buds are so small in size, and in shape so little suggestive of a girl's hair, that the line in *The Gardener's Daughter* which roused his enthusiasm, might just as well have been marked for censure. But *In Memoriam* is rich in passages of the most admirable landscape painting, where not only are the details accurately studied, but the whole is suffused with the light of a definite mood. There is a spring picture in cxiv., full of joy and sunlight, that a single reading fixes in the memory for ever; and there is another (lxxxv.) of an April evening with a west wind blowing after rain, which is as excellent. There are several autumn landscapes, too; one calm (xi.), one wild (xv.), and one wet (lxxi.); there is a winter landscape (cvi.), and one of a still summer night with the wind rising at dawn (xciv.). But the pictures are not limited to landscape. The vision of the ship in the third verse of ix. and the first of x. is surely a masterpiece; so are the dream pictures of lxix.; and again there is that miracle of organ music, the audible vision of Nature's secret processes, in xxxv.:

“ But I should turn mine ears and hear

The moanings of the homeless sea,
The sound of streams that swift or slow

Draw down Æonian hills, and sow
The dust of continents to be."

Besides these, again, the reader will not omit to remark the two sketches of daybreak in London (vii., cxviii.), and such single imaginative phrases as that of Autumn in xcvi. :

" Laying here and there
A fiery finger on the leaves."

A word may be added about the metre. Tennyson has told us that he believed himself to have invented it. It was, of course, a fairly common form in Elizabethan times, being of obvious rhetorical value; a good proof of which is the fact that Whewell once fell into it, when he believed himself to be writing a very emphatic and balanced sentence in prose.

" And so no force, however great,
Can strain a cord, however fine.
Into a horizontal line
That shall be absolutely straight."

It is more interesting to notice that while Tennyson now and then puts the metre to do this, its most obvious, work,—as in the last quatrain of vi., in lxxv., c., cv., cxxvii.,—he also succeeds in constructing out of it an instrument of considerable variety. Take, for example, such a poem as xiv. Here there is no emphasis; eleven lines out of the

twenty begin with *and*; the last line is, if anything, the least weighty of the whole poem. The same device of emptying the most emphatic line of its emphasis is seen in the conclusion of xiii., xix., liv., lxviii. Or again, look at such a descriptive poem as cvi. Here the rhymes, instead of beating the measure, are almost unnoticed because the pause is skilfully shifted from the ends of the lines. Or again, consider how in the 15th poem the rhythm all through sings an accompaniment to the sense. And that leads one to notice the marvellous skill of Tennyson in suggesting sound and motion, of which the *In Memoriam* affords many fine instances, the most famous being the description of the Christmas bells in xxviii. I will quote but one example, and that shall be of his skill in reproducing the effect of wind. The two following passages, though they both describe wind, give quite distinct impressions; we know in each case what the wind is, and what it is doing. Here is one picture:

“ To-night the winds began to rise
 And roar from yonder dropping day;
 The last red leaf is whirl'd away,
The rooks are blown about the skies;

“ The forest crack'd, the waters curl'd,
 The cattle huddled on the lea;
 And wildly dash'd on tower and tree
The sunbeam strikes along the world.” (xv.)

And here is the other :

“ O sound to rout the brood of cares,
The sweep of scythe in morning dew,
The gust that round the garden flew,
And tumbled half the mellowing pears ! ”

(lxxxviii.)

But an end must be made of this showman's task. It is hoped that the analyses prefixed to the several elegies may be of use. They have been written without reference to any of the handbooks already before the public ; but I have read the few remarks contributed by the poet himself to Dr. Gatty's *Key*, and those published in the *Nineteenth Century* (Jan. 1893) by Mr. Knowles.

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YATTENDON RECTORY,
Michaelmas 1899.