

## How is Evolution reflected upon in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's elegy *In Memoriam A.H.H.*?

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Alfred Lord Tennyson's elegy *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1849) grapples with the unprecedented challenge of scientific theory, particularly Evolution, to "religious orthodoxy" (Perry, 2005), poetic form and individual faith more explicitly than any other poetic work in British literary history. Yet, despite its unquestionable presence in the *Literary Canon*, *In Memoriam* also deserves a place in the *Scientific Canon* since it has managed to alter the world-view of its readers in a more astute and profoundly humane way than any traditionally scientific text. While defining scientific texts, such as Robert Chambers' *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* and Lyell's *Principles of Geology* were core literary influences (Bloom, 2011) on *In Memoriam*, Tennyson's elegy is the only text to resonate so deeply with the "average man" (Wiley, 1956). I will explore the ways in which this new evolutionary knowledge impacted on Tennyson's religion and faith, and will further look at how Tennyson's scientific unrest is echoed in the very form and structure of *In Memoriam*.

Although Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859) was not published until ten years after the completion of *In Memoriam*, there had been no shortage of scientific texts reminding humans that, organically speaking, they were merely prospective fossils (Mattes, 1951). The most influential texts were Lyell's *Geology* and Hutton's *Theory of the Earth*, as well as Chambers' *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*. When Tennyson was writing *In Memoriam*, therefore, the anxiety of human dislocation from the centre of the Universe, as well as the human race's prospective eventual extinction, were already amongst the concerns of the educated classes (Dixon, 2008). The average man, on the other hand, adopted a more fictionally fatalistic

image of human doom in light of new scientific theories. Despite this discrepancy, all classes were beginning to realise that their God was no longer the God of their fathers (Perry, 2005). Yet, the Victorian people were still hesitant to reject their faith despite the evidence that Nature, a creation of God, was shown to be “red in tooth and claw”. Tennyson, a Cambridge scholar and an elect member of Trinity’s Apostles group, was well equipped with the cognitive tools necessary to understand and evaluate the impact of Evolution on God. Yet even he had a soul “...prepared by a Christian upbringing and not unacquainted with flashes of mystical insight...” (Wiley, 1956) which prevented him from rejecting God’s benevolence in favour of a mechanistic, “careful” Nature. What Tennyson *does* manage to achieve however, which others did not, is an acceptance that he cannot continue to see a benevolent God as the acting agent in the creation and evolution of life, given the evidence in *Geology* that the Earth is much older than stated in scripture and the fact that empirical evidence regarding species extinction points to a Nature “so careless of the single life”. This is reflected where Tennyson says that he embraces the “Strong Son of God...by *faith* and *faith alone*,” and that he “faintly” trusts the “larger hope” (Italics mine). Knowledge of evolution has reduced Tennyson’s commitment to God to merely “believing” because he “cannot prove” His existence.

Throughout *In Memoriam*, the verses continuously fluctuate between an attempt at the restoration of faith in human immortality and the pessimistic belief that “all must go.” This pessimism is evident from the very beginning of *In Memoriam*, in the prologue, where Tennyson writes “Our little systems have their day/They have their day and cease to be.” Why then did Tennyson spend twenty years writing one hundred and thirty one stanzas simply to return to the Prologue, where he begun his spiritual journey? Critics suggest that writing *In Memoriam* was an attempt by Tennyson at spiritual catharsis following Hallam’s

death. On the other hand, Tennyson himself suggests that writing *In Memoriam* numbed his pain like a narcotic: “a use in measured language lies;/the sad mechanic exercise,/Like dull narcotics, numbing pain.” I agree with both statements, but I believe that part of Tennyson’s ‘aim’ in writing *In Memoriam* was to assess how his new knowledge of human transience affected himself and his poetic output. Writing *In Memoriam* could have even allowed Tennyson to assess how the very mechanics of his writing, his craft, were influenced by his knowledge of Evolution. Since Tennyson’s poem is called ‘*In Memoriam* A.H.H’ it is safe to assume that *In Memoriam* is indeed an elegy. But consider the function of an elegy, which is to, in a way, deny a loved one’s death by implying his ascension to a higher spiritual level, nearer to God. Remarkably, however, instead of explicitly denying Hallam’s death and so finding comfort in Hallam’s spiritual promotion, all we see in *In Memoriam* is a constant fluctuating doubt about the soul’s immortality. The poem transitions from outright grief in “for all is dark where thou art not,” the aimlessness of life in “man...shall...be blown away about the desert dust” to optimism and acceptance in “Tho’ mix’d with God and Nature thou,/I seem to love thee more and more.” It is knowledge of Evolution’s ruthlessness which casts doubts on Tennyson’s comfort in the immortality of the soul and which challenges the hopeful tone of a traditional elegy since, if Nature is so “careless of the *type*” what hope does the *individual* life, let alone the soul of the departed, have in being eternal?

So far, this essay has explored how Evolution has affected Tennyson’s faith in the immortality of the human “Type” and soul, as well as how it has transformed the once hopeful tone of elegy. Further aspects of poetic form that echo Tennyson’s unrest in light of Evolution are the rhyme scheme as well as the wider structure and organisation of *In Memoriam*. Each of the 131 verses in the poem adopts a distinct ABBA rhyme scheme



*Memoriam* never resolves anything (Armstrong, 1982). Indeed, if the pervading ABBA rhyme scheme is any indication, Tennyson struggles to break through religious constraint and accept a Natural view of the world as described by Evolution throughout *In Memoriam*. But he never quite manages as Tennyson always returns to where he began: he cannot dismiss God, perhaps because he needs his faith in order to accept the consolation that Hallam's soul continues to "live in thee [God]."

The ABBA rhyme scheme pervades *In Memoriam*. Reading from verse to verse, we retain an auditory consciousness (Willey, 1956) of the previous verse's intonation and rhythm, with only the words being different. Does the fact that rhythm and structure are carried through while the words change reflect Evolution and genetic inheritance? As species evolve, future generations inherit evolutionarily advantageous characteristics from their ancestors through DNA. Similarly, as Tennyson moves through his spiritual actualisation and as the poem organically develops, Tennyson's grief and doubt, as discussed in previous paragraphs, are inherited by succeeding verses via the rhythm and structure of the previous verses. Is the entire poem, then, an echo of the evolutionary process? It is possible that Tennyson felt the "strife" between God and Nature so deeply that the entire organic development and the very auditory echoes of the poem might, in the poet's mind, subconsciously parallel the process of evolution and inheritance. Importantly, however, and in addition to the earlier comments about Tennyson accepting Nature's ways while employing blind "faith" in order to embrace God, *In Memoriam* does not evolve like a species would because the evolution of a species is theologically aimless: the ultimate aim is survival. Yet Tennyson's *In Memoriam* moves with an aim to reach God rather than mere survival, a statement reflected in the very last line of the poem, which suggests that man and life (and by extension, *In*

*Memoriam*) are part of the tide which moves towards God, “to which the whole creation moves.”

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