

# ARTHUR HALLAM'S REVIEW OF TENNYSON'S EARLY POEMS

By TAIJI YAMADA

*Lecturer of English*

## I

In *The Englishman's Magazine* for August, 1831, two years before his early death, Arthur Henry Hallam published a review entitled 'On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry and on the Lyrical Poems of Alfred Tennyson'—a critique of Tennyson's first volume of verse, *Poems chiefly Lyrical* (1830). This review of Hallam's is intent on writing up the merits of the poet's early work with the dash and daring of youth, so that it is natural in a way for Harold Nicolson, who, more than any other, has helped to orientate modern view of Tennyson, to damn the whole tone of the article as 'one of almost hysterical panegyric.' Close study of its text reveals, however, that, in spite of its occasional extravagance, not only does it show a very clear perception of Tennyson's genius, but it also adumbrates much of the emergent Victorian and twentieth-century poetics. In fact, W. B. Yeats, in his essay 'Art and Ideas' and his *Autobiography*, remarks that when he began to write he avowed for his principles those of Arthur Hallam in his essay on Tennyson and that he found it invaluable as a key to the French symbolists who were puzzling his friends. Viewed in this light, Hallam's essay acquires a uniquely modern tone and demands close scrutiny among the mass of Victorian literary criticism that now lies buried in the reviews.

Also, to a dependent and uncertain temper such as Tennyson's the intense aesthetic interests of his vigorous and clear-headed friend must have been so great a stay that the essay amounts, in effect, to a statement of the poet's own view of his early work. And there is every reason to believe that Tennyson retained Hallam's insights exclusively until 1842.

## II

Hallam begins with a refutation of the Wordsworthian precept that the highest species of poetry is the reflective. According to him, the expression of acute or even profound opinions by the imagination cannot necessarily be beautiful, and he takes an extremely aesthetic view of art:

Whenever the mind of the artist suffers itself to be occupied, during its periods of creation, by any other predominant motive than the desire of beauty, the result is false in art.

This extreme aestheticism he qualifies by adding that there may be states of mind in which thought and reflection are themselves unified by intellectual emotion:

But though possible, it is hardly probable: for a man whose reveries take a reasoning

turn, and who is accustomed to measure his ideas by their logical relations rather than the congruity of the sentiments to which they refer, will be apt to mistake the pleasure in knowing a thing to be true, for the pleasure he would have in knowing it to be beautiful, and so will pile his thoughts in a rhetorical battery, that they may convince, instead of letting them flow in a natural course of contemplation, that they may enrapture.

The above passage implies a bold renunciation of thoughts and ideas as such in poetry. Ideas must not intrude themselves into poetry in order to convince, but must be so contemplated as to enrapture by their beauty. That is, their place in poetry is not to be that of logical enunciation as in prose, but of immediate sensation or experience; they must be so manipulated as to be felt on our senses. From this idea of poetry it is not a long way to the Symbolist and Imagist doctrine.

As a natural consequence, Hallam professes his sincere admiration for the Cockney School at the expense of the Lake School:

We shall not hesitate to express our conviction, that the cockney school (as it was termed in derision from a cursory view of its accidental circumstances) contained more genuine inspiration, and adhered more steadily to that portion of truth which it embraced, than any *form* of art that has existed in this country since the days of Milton...Shelley and Keats were indeed of opposite genius; the one was vast, impetuous, and sublime, the other...does not generalize or allegorize nature; his imagination works with few symbols, and reposes willingly on what is freely given...They are both poets of sensation rather than reflection...Rich and clear were their preceptions of visible forms; full and deep their feelings of music. So vivid was the delight attending the simple exertions of eye and ear, that it became mingled more and more with their trains of active thought, and tended to absorb their whole being into the energy of sense. Other poets seek for images to illustrate their conceptions; these men had no need to seek; they lived in a world of images; for the most important and extensive portion of their life consisted in those emotions which were immediately conversant with sensation...Hence they are not descriptive, they are picturesque.

This is the crucial passage in the whole essay. Whether or not it is perfectly correct to classify Shelley and Keats as poets of sensation and Wordsworth as one of reflection, we can infer, from what is said here concerning the intermingling of the vivid delight of sense and active thought in Shelley and Keats, that Hallam was already aware, in the 1830's, of what we now call the 'unification of sensibility' in poetry. He refused to accept the magnificent rhetoric of Wordsworth as a substitute for such an integral poetry. Tennyson himself, who felt Wordsworth 'at his best on the whole the greatest English poet since Milton,' lamented: 'He is often too diffuse and didactic for me.' The antithesis in the last sentence 'they are not descriptive, they are picturesque,' suggests Hallam's knowledge of the development of landscape art in the eighteenth century, the word 'picturesque' being a technical term then. Intense interest in the picturesque in nature produced Turner and Constable, while it was paralleled in poetry by Thomson's *Seasons*. The early Romantics sought aesthetic emotion in natural scenes; nature in its thousand moods and aspects was a reflection of their feelings. The later Romantics, on the other hand, evoked art-emotion from art-situations, culminating in Rimbaud's metaphysical landscapes—*Les Illuminations*. Whether Hallam foresaw the future of the exploration of the picturesque or not, we do not know; but his perception that

Shelley and Keats had no need to seek for images to illustrate their thoughts and ideas since they lived in a world of images shows his clear understanding of one important aspect of Romantic art. Further, the tenor of the above passage suggests Hallam's awareness of the necessity, the inevitability even, of what T. S. Eliot calls the 'objective correlative for a state of mind—or 'a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.'

Hallam, then, mentions the tendency of poets of sensation to moral temptations and urges them to remember that their mission as men, which they share with their fellow-beings, is of infinitely higher moment than their mission as artists, which they possess by rare and exclusive privilege—a typical Victorian moral lecture. But in the same breath he belittles such temptations as if in sympathy with the "escapist" Tennyson.

Hallam's essay goes on to explain the reason why the poetry of private sensibility is difficult to approach. He compares art to a lofty tree which may shoot up far beyond our grasp, but whose roots are daily life and experience. Therefore, every bosom, he says, contains the elements of those complex emotions which the artist feels, and every head can, to a certain extent, go over in itself the process of their combination, so as to understand and sympathize with his state. But this, he frankly admits, requires exertion :

Since then this demand on the reader for activity, when he wants to peruse his author in a luxurious passiveness, is the very thing that moves his bile, it is obvious that those writers will be always most popular who require the least degree of exertion. Hence, whatever is mixed up with with art, and appears under its semblance, is always more favourably regarded than art free and unalloyed. Hence half the fashionable poems in the world are, mere rhetoric and half the remainder are, perhaps, not liked by the generality for their substantial merits. Hence, likewise, of the really pure compositions, those are most universally agreeable which take for their primary subject the usual passions of the heart, and deal with them in a simple state, without applying the transforming powers of high imagination. Love, friendship, ambition, religion, etc., are matters of daily experience even amongst unimaginative tempers. The forces of association, therefore, are ready to work in these directions, and little effort of will is necessary to follow the artist. For the same reason, such subjects often excite a partial power of composition, which is no sign of a truly poetic organization. We are far from wishing to depreciate this class of poems, whose influence is so extensive, and communicates so refined a pleasure. We contend only that the facility with which its impressions are communicated is no proof of its elevation as a form of art, but rather the contrary.

Here, to put it another way, Hallam is advocating 'pure poetry' one characteristic of which is that it excludes much which has for centuries proved the staple fare of great verse—intelligent argument, didactic teaching, comment upon widely shared problems, the illumination of humdrum, workaday experience. Such poetry is so rarefied an art that our ordinary powers of association do not work readily in following it, with the result that communication of its impressions are made difficult. It is the poetry of suggestion rather than of statement and demands subjective activity of the reader; for this class of poetry to be effective the reader himself must actively *create*. And, since the effect depends on the reader's precision of response, he must also proceed very carefully in following the emotions of the poet; the

reader, indeed, is co-creator with the poet.

If Shakespeare, Dante, and Homer are really masters of their art, Hallam then asks himself, must not the energy required of the ordinary intelligences that come in contact with their mighty genius, be the greatest possible? How comes it, then, that they are popular? Hallam answers these questions thus: geniuses of the most universal kind, and born in the most propitious era of a nation's literary development, have a clearer and a larger access to the minds of their fellow-countrymen than can ever open to those who are born in less fortunate times; that is, in the youthful periods of any literature there is an expansive and communicative tendency in mind which produces unreservedness of communion, and reciprocity of vigour between different orders of intelligence. Shakespeare, Dante and Homer lived in those happier times, which explains why they were popular. What about the age in which Hallam lived?

Since those happier times, Hallam says, the world has undergone a period of degradation. That first raciness and juvenile vigour of literature is gone, never to return. With the close of the eighteenth century came an era of Romantic reaction, which is a painful struggle to bring the over-civilized condition of thought into union with the fresh productive spirit that brightened the morning of English literature. But repentance is unlike innocence. Hallam says that the whole system of the powers of poetic disposition, the energies of Sensuous, of Reflective, of Passionate Emotion, which in former times were intermingled, no longer worked harmoniously, each energy striving to reproduce the regular power which the whole once enjoyed. What Hallam seems to mean is the fact that what T. S. Eliot calls the 'dissociation of sensibility' had begun.

In the old times the poetic impulse went along with the general impulse of the nation: now the former reacts against the latter, seeking relief in idiosyncracies rather than community of interest. Modern poetry, Hallam says, in proportion to its depth and truth, is likely to have little immediate authority over public opinion. It has lost its power to appeal to the common people. The intense preoccupation of the major Victorian poets with the problem of isolation is thus viewed as a natural result of the insecurity of their cultural status. Hence the melancholy which so evidently characterizes the spirit of modern (Victorian) poetry.

Indeed, *ennui* and doubt were to be the maladies of the age. In his opening lecture as professor of poetry at Oxford (1856) Matthew Arnold spoke of 'depression and ennui' as 'characteristics stamped on how many of the representative works of modern times!' They were symptoms, he said, 'of the disease of most modern societies, the most advanced civilizations!' They were what Pater was to call 'that inexhaustible discontent, languor, and home-sickness, that endless regret, the chords of which ring all through our modern literature.' They appear in many of Tennyson's earlier poems, from the 'Confessions of a Second-rate Sensitive Mind' to *In Memoriam* and *Maud*. It is to the credit of Hallam's critical insight that he detected the signs of the times as early as 1831.

### III

When Hallam finally turns to introduce Tennyson, he, of course, identifies Tennyson as a poet of sensation and enumerates five qualities of excellence in his work:

First, his luxuriance of imagination, and at the same time, his control over it.

Secondly, his power of embodying himself in ideal characters or rather moods of character, with such extreme accuracy of adjustment, that the circumstances of the narration seem to have a natural correspondence with the predominant feeling, and, as it were, to be evolved from it by assimilative force. Thirdly, his vivid, picturesque delineation of object, and the peculiar skill with which all of them are *fused*, to borrow a metaphor from science, in a medium of strong emotion. Fourthly, the variety of his lyrical measures, and exquisite modulation of harmonious words and cadences to the swell and flow of the feelings expressed. Fifthly, the elevated habits of thought, implied in these compositions, and imparting a mellow soberness of tone, more impressive to our minds, than if the author had drawn up a set of opinions in verse, and sought to instruct the understanding rather than communicate the love of beauty to the heart.

Here are Tennyson's gifts analysed with remarkable penetration, though in highly complimentary terms.

Hallam, then, goes on to criticize several individual poems, sometimes quoting them entire. Though there is not much worth special notice in his practical criticism, two or three points which have not been elaborated before stand out. In introducing 'The Ballad of Oriana' he describes a poetry of moods and impressions too complex and subtle for the understanding to grasp, but capable of definition by sound and image. The class of poems which in point of harmonious combination 'Oriana' most resembles, is, he says, the Italian, represented by Dante and Petrarch, who produce two-thirds of their effect by sound. He continues:

Not that they sacrifice sense to sound, but that sound conveys their meaning where words would not. There are innumerable shades of fine emotion in the human heart, especially when the senses are keen and vigilant, which are too subtle and too rapid to admit of corresponding phrases. The understanding takes no definite note of them; how then can they leave signatures in language? Yet they exist; in plentitude of being and beauty they exist; and in music they find a medium through which they pass from heart to heart. The tone becomes the sign of the feeling; and they reciprocally suggest each other.

Along with this suggestive use of sound goes that of imagery in Tennyson's poetry. The effects of Tennyson's imagery Hallam compares to Venetian colouring: 'Titian *explains* by tints, as Petrarch by tones.'

This particular form of 'Romantic' verse is not seen in Shelley and Keats. It is first seen in Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan,' but mainly developed by Tennyson in such poems as 'Claribel,' 'Mariana,' and 'A Spirit Haunts the Year's Last Hours,' followed by Morris, Swinburne, and the early Yeats. When the mind of the poet is deeply moved, it tends to transmute itself into musical pictures, especially in the form of natural scenery. More conscious use of this technique leads to the poetry of *le paysage intérieur* or the psychological landscape, to *The Waste Land*. In this sense Tennyson was doing something wholly new, as Eliot said in this century.

Another point not to be overlooked in the second half of the article is that for all his bold rejection of any creative motive except 'the desire of beauty' Hallam can sometimes praise poetry that is reflective or didactic. Even in the first half of the essay he pays a compliment to the poetry of reflection and statement in several places. While setting Shelley,

Keats, and the young Tennyson higher than Wordsworth, he seems to be always conscious of Wordsworth's reflective and didactic power. He agreed with Tennyson that the poet 'ought to be lord of the five senses,' but he insisted that human values ultimately transcended the seductions of art. He warns his friend that such an elevated position of intellect as forever stands all aloof from the bewildering impulses of hope and fear would not be the most elevated, nor the most conducive to the perfection of art. Indeed, every major Victorian poet expresses the tension between devotion to individual sensibility and commitment to the social and moral needs of the age. Such a conflict can never be philosophically resolved: Tennyson, as well as Browning and Arnold, was in two minds about this question, and their state of mind produced a continuing dialectic, with ever stronger assertions of the autonomy of poetry on the one hand, and the poet's public duty on the other.

As the above commentary reveals, Hallam's essay serves as a bridge between Victorian and the twentieth-century poetics. Not only does it give a clear exposition of Tennyson's earlier work, but it defines the two major schools of Victorian poetics: the Romantic taste for a subjective poetry of personal experience and sensibility, centering on fervent emotions and sensuous beauty in content (primarily natural scenery); and the Classical taste for an objective poetry dealing with the 'palpable intersets of ordinary life' and emphasizing religious, moral and political ideas. Hallam clearly set the former class of poetry above the latter, but could not dismiss the claims of the latter, as Tennyson increasingly could not as the Victorian age advanced. In the 1830's they must have been both uncertain of their critical principles and tended to oscillate between 'Romantic' and 'Classical' poetics. Be that as it may, one merit of Hallam's essay is that it suggests a real continuity between Romantic, Victorian, and Modern poetry.