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Tennyson and the Nineteenth-Century Language Debate

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For if words are not THINGS, they are LIVING POWERS, by which the things of most importance to mankind are actuated, combined, and humanized.¹

Many expressions, once apt and emphatic, have been so rubbed and worn away by long usage, that they retain as little substance as the skeletons of wheels which have made the grand tour of the Continent. [. . .] Words gradually lose their character, and, from being the tokens and exponents of thoughts, become mere air-propelling sounds.²

Alfred Tennyson was one of the most philologically aware poets of his age, a fact that has only recently begun to receive the attention it deserves, with a ground-breaking study by Donald S. Hair, and illuminating work by Isobel Armstrong.³ The philological richness of Tennyson's poetry should not appear remarkable since he was a member of the undergraduate society the 'Apostles' at Trinity College, Cambridge, with men who were to become popular and influential philologists: John Mitchell Kemble, Richard Chenevix Trench, Frederick Denison Maurice. Added to which Julius Hare, co-author of *Guesses at Truth*, was his tutor, and William Whewell the master of Trinity.⁴ Tennyson's fellow 'Apostles', notably Kemble, were instrumental in encouraging the migration from the Continent in the 1830s of a radically new study of language. Grounded in the work of German grammarian Jacob Grimm, its method was rigorously empirically and above all 'scientific'. Yet for Tennyson, writing in the midst of exiting and often conflicting views of language, exposure to linguistic philosophy had a profoundly disorienting effect.

This essay will consider minor works by Tennyson which, although neglected, point out entrenched anxieties regarding language in the 1830s. Tennyson found himself caught intellectually between a Coleridgean view, in which language was

mystically 'living' and replete with significance, and more bleakly materialist views, in which words appeared as 'mere air-propelling sounds', as Julius Hare outlines in the second passage above.⁵ Before we look at Tennyson's negotiation of philological dilemmas, though, we should first look more closely at the powerful drives, epistemological and methodological, underpinning these two contradictory positions.

I

The Whited Sepulchre

In many ways and guises the early nineteenth century, now, and in a self-conscious fashion, then, is frequently invoked as an archetypal age of progress. Yet this notion of progress was predicated on a dualistic conception of history, in which positivistic advance was continually undermined by insidious eighteenth-century visions of general decay. Thomas Carlyle was alert to the fragility of modernity's claim upon progress, and starkly articulated the contradictory interiors of the age. In 1831 he declared: 'How much among us might be likened to a whited sepulchre; outwardly all pomp and strength; but inwardly full of horror and despair and dead-men's bones'.⁶

Whilst the period struggled to establish itself as an age of improvement, it was forced to negotiate the powerful and oppressive paradigm of an earlier 'golden age' of human civilization. Aside from the grandeur suggested by architectural fragments of antiquity, the towering *linguistic* achievements of classical Greece and Rome cast perhaps the longest shadows. The ostensible 'purity' of the classical languages taunted modernity's best efforts to negotiate unfavourable comparison, inspiring such pessimistic linguistic genealogies as that of James Burnet, Lord Monboddo in 1787:

For not only do we see this degeneracy from the antient Greek and Latin, in the modern Greek, the Italian, and the French; but in the Gothic languages there is the same falling off. For the English is not so good a language as the Saxon, nor the Saxon, or any other dialect of the Teutonick, so compleat [*sic*] a language as the original Gothic.⁷

By 1800 the perceived qualitative disparity between classical and modern was deeply etched across the national psyche, reinforcing suspicions that, far from embodying progress, modern society represented yet another stage in a protracted decline that had

begun with mankind's expulsion from Eden and had been dramatically and irrevocably confirmed in the fall of Rome. Most bleakly, the decay of language was feared to have prompted a general and concomitant mortification of culture, in which both hurtled inexorably through history towards some dark end in which a dwindled race mumbled inarticulately.

Indeed, by the end of the eighteenth century the relationship between the quality of language and culture was conceptualized as a virtual equation, one that was to be deeply internalized by the nineteenth century. Monboddo, for example, was convinced that the decline of literature necessarily implied wider decay: 'Is it possible, that there can be [. . .] a corruption of arts among a people, [. . .] without a degeneracy of the people?'.⁸ As the new century began, in the minds of many language had become both the gauge and guarantor of civilization itself – a projection greatly assisted by John Gibson Lockhart's purposefully chilling translation in 1812 of Friedrich Schlegel's lectures on ancient and modern literature:

A nation whose language becomes rude and barbarous, must be on the brink of barbarism in regard to everything else. A nation which allows her language to go to ruin, is parting with the last half of her intellectual independence, and testifies her willingness to cease to exist.⁹

This was a popular perspective: in 1827 Julius Hare's brother Augustus observed that languages were now widely regarded as 'the barometers of national thought and character'.¹⁰ It informs, for instance, William Empson's 1830 *Edinburgh Review* article on seemingly intractable problems of translation. Adopting a broadly Coleridgean stance, Empson asserts that language enters into an essential relationship with its speakers, and that whilst the bare concept of a word can generally be adequately conveyed by its equivalent in other languages, something 'undefinable' – 'national character' – clings to the native word, defying translation:

Because words seem but the clothes in which thoughts are dressed, it does not follow that thoughts may be put into a new language, and that it is only like a man putting on a new coat. [. . .] The secret power of a language is frequently as undefinable as it is intransmittible. We are speaking now of the general effect produced by a whole language – as the creation and representative of national character [. . .]. The language of a

nation becomes its atmosphere – its own breath is in it.¹¹

In 1839 John William Donaldson, who attended Trinity with Tennyson, presented the equation in bald terms: 'Language is the outward appearance of the intellect of nations: their language is their intellect and their intellect their language: we cannot sufficiently identify the two'.¹² In portrayals as these, language is infused with the qualities of its speakers, with 'national character', and vice versa. From there it is a small leap to the supposition that the 'ill health' of the national idiom might signal the decline of national culture.

As the classical paradigm demonstrated, excellent language underpinned the onward march of culture; but this implied that the converse was also possible. This disturbing vision of history fostered starkly contrasting attitudes towards things Latin and Greek, which were supremely worthy of study and inculcation, and, on the other hand, the Germanic languages and culture, hardly worthy of being defended against the charge of degeneracy. It placed an intolerable strain on an age of rapid colonial expansion, an age busily preparing for the challenge of empire. Clearly, if English did not measure up to Latin and Greek, how could English cultural ventures aspire to outlast those of Greece and Rome? Many desired a realignment of modernity's relationship with the classical 'golden age', and two broad camps can be discerned: those who remained resolutely pro classical, and those who, whilst animated by an admiration for the classical aesthetic, vigorously rejected the cultural hegemony exercised by the 'twin tyrants' (as George Webbe Dasent termed Latin and Greek). The latter received a boost from the Continental philology of Rasmus Rask, Franz Bopp, and in particular Jacob Grimm.

Grimm's *Deutsche Grammatik*, revised in 1822 to incorporate a theory of consonant shifting, prompted a sea-change in the study of language in Britain when its tenets began to filter into this country in the 1830s, largely through the enthusiastic efforts of a group of Cambridge students, Tennyson's friends. The 'new' elements in Grimm's method lay in the revised first volume of his *Grammatik*, where he propounded a theory of *Lautverschiebung* (literally, 'sound-shifting'), the corner-stone of the historical method. As others had done, if less extensively so, before him, Grimm discerned patterns governing the historical interchange of consonants between cognate words in different languages. For instance, the Latin *pes*, *pedis*, Greek *pous*, *podós*, Sanskrit *padas*, Gothic *fōtus*, and Old High German *vuoz*, could be seen as one and the same word, whose morphological structure had changed through the ages in accordance with uniform and predictable rules (here, initial consonants follow the series *p*, *f*, *b(v)*).¹³

Grimm's 'discovery' implied that the historical transition of letters was not a sign of decay, and furthermore was not regulated by the success or failure of particular cultures, but rather by inviolable laws of nature, thus removing agency from the human into a natural realm. Sound laws presented modern vocabulary not as degraded remnants of ancient tongues, but simply as *different* forms of older words; Latin and Greek were no longer austere and unforgiving patriarchs, but siblings of English. Previous notions of classically-oriented linguistic superiority were rendered nonsensical, in theory at least, as any notion of a qualitative dimension to language vanished in the face of impersonal laws that operated outside the realm of human history.

This methodology renewed interest in past conditions of English, hitherto considered little more than stages in protracted barbarity. The excitement of Charles Neaves in 1841 is scarcely contained by his narrative:

Through what countless channels must any one root have passed which the Teutonic nations possess in common with the Greek and Latin! At what period did the streams diverge? Through what regions of barbarism or corruption have the rivulets since flowed in their respective courses, before again meeting in a composite language like the English [. . .]? It is a remarkable circumstance, and must be intended for some momentous end, that we can now, by whatever process of enquiry, re-mount to the common fountain-head, through so many windings and obstructions. If the primitive affinity of language can thus be discovered, the study must be fitted to our nature, and must serve a noble and pious purpose.¹⁴

Even in this heady passage, however, it is apparent that whilst Continental philology implied that the history of languages was non qualitative, a dualistic conception is detectable that, in the act of appropriating positive elements of the new philology, was barely able to suppress the most pessimistic aspects of the old – namely, the idea of linguistic decay with its 'regions of barbarism or corruption'.¹⁵ In general, though, philologists in this country welcomed the opportunity to revise favourably opinions of English, and to engage on new terms with antiquity. Charles Neaves again:

Our native tongue is nearly, if not altogether, the noblest language that human wisdom, or let us rather say Divine

goodness, has ever instituted for the use of man. It is as nobly descended as it is happily composed. It is initiated by many links of connexion to the richest and fairest forms of speech in other ages and nations; and it ought to be a primary object of interest among us to study, in all their expressions, its affinities to those sources of copiousness and beauty which have made it what it is. Our social and political position, and our national history, lead to the same result. We are the mixed descendants of some of the most brave, virtuous, and cultivated of the Teutonic tribes.¹⁶

The scientific rigour of Continental philology was brought to bear on the problem of the elusive proto-idiom, hinted at by Sir William Jones decades earlier in his famous 'Third Anniversary Discourse, on the Hindus':

The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists.¹⁷

The wonderful new methodology seemed to offer a key to recovering ancient, purer idioms, perhaps even the primitive *Ursprache*, the first language, the archetypal embodiment of Coleridge's 'living' language, whose every syllable signified. Its reconstruction in the modern age would reinstate logocentric truth at the heart of an ever more alienating society. Grimm's method promised philologists that they might yet peep over the walls of Eden to observe Adam and Eve converse. As Joseph Bosworth stated in 1838, the task at hand was 'to pursue the signification now in use, through all changes, till we come to the radical signification' – the primitive essence of a word.¹⁸

If sound laws were totemistically invoked to de-emphasize unappealing aspects of the language/culture equation, then they were pushed aside with expedience when it came to extolling the virtues of English language, and hence culture. Despite certain inimical features, Continental philology, it seemed, would play its part in the

expansion of English culture, supported by the English language, into all corners of the globe – a world 'circled by the accents of Shakespeare and Milton', as Thomas Watts envisaged enthusiastically in 1850.¹⁹

To this point, I have attempted to establish the linguistic climate in Britain in the first half of the nineteenth century, and to sketch the broad epistemology and implications of a new study of language that entered this country in the 1830s. My discussion has indicated how in one important respect the ascendant method did not wholly dislodge eighteenth-century views of language as corruptible from its revised linguistic hierarchies: the claim of Latin and Greek to primacy was no longer tenable, but decay models were not eradicated from linguistic genealogies. Likewise, despite sound laws, the close relationship perceived to exist between language and culture remained largely intact, although in characteristic nineteenth-century fashion its 'sanctioned' incarnation – that English was as good as Latin and Greek, and hence English culture must be similarly capable of sustaining empire – was unable to banish fears that the possible decay of language might yet ramify dramatically in the cultural sphere.

The relevance of all this to Tennyson will now become clear: to this juncture, my sketch of early nineteenth-century philology, with all its contradictions, competing philosophies, and double vision, should be seen as one collective side of a coin that, broadly speaking, presented language as a living entity, inextricably bound up, albeit nebulously, with human existence. We might say that Coleridge's notion of 'living' and innately meaningful language, which comprised one half of Tennyson's conception of language, is represented by this portrait. The reverse side of the coin was the depiction of language as blindly autonomous, inherently meaningless, and utterly divorced from the human sphere.

Once Grimm's synchronically driven sound laws had inculcated the notion of language as a phenomenon following impersonal rules, divorced from teleological dimensions, then, pursued to a logical conclusion, the new philology began to bring its own problems, raising a 'spectre of autonomous language' as Linda Dowling has suggested.²⁰ Sound laws, which John William Donaldson counted among 'the most fruitful discoveries ever made in the province of language', served ultimately to reinforce a pervasive Victorian pessimism.²¹ It was Grimm's 'spectre' that injected disorienting doubt into the Victorian ideal of progress. If, as the *Deutsche Grammatik* seemed (though not wholly consistently) to indicate, there was no compelling connection between language and human history, then language possessed an element of capricious vicissitude that placed it firmly and worryingly beyond human

influence. Severed from any meaningful symbiosis with the history of human culture, language forfeited any claim to meaningfulness itself.

In 1838 Tennyson's friend Frederick Denison Maurice declared his horror of autonomous language. Like Tennyson, Maurice wished he could celebrate with Coleridge the 'living, germinating power' of individual words;²² but he was haunted by the thought that these were rather the 'arbitrary signs of ideas', and despaired that language was itself 'arbitrary, hollow, and insincere'. Tennyson's tutor Julius Hare suggested that in its pristine condition, language contains 'very little that is arbitrary in it', owing its origin to 'an instinct actuating a whole people' and expressing 'what is common to them all'.²³ Yet Hare's Coleridgean ideal is undercut by an anxiety that the decay of signification was detectable within even a brief period of history: in the course of the last century, Hare laments, 'a sort of English has been prevalent [. . .] in which the sentences have a meaning, but the words have little or none. [. . .] Hardly a word is used for which half a dozen synonyms might not have stood equally well'.²⁴

Tennyson's dual conception of language as being, alternatively, 'living' in the Coleridgean sense, and comprised of 'mere air-propelling sounds' in Julius Hare's signal image, can thus be sited within the paradigmatic challenge to language theory represented by Grimm's philology in the 1830s. Tennyson's uncertainty reflects the character of language study at this time – which was a collocation of contradictions and illogicalities that barely managed to exist alongside each other, and, indeed, contributed heavily to the age's near-schizophrenic conception of itself as, alternatively, an epoch of glorious advance, or ignominious degeneration. Tennyson agonized over the spaghetti of linguistic ideas which he encountered at Cambridge, wrestling with rival ideas of words as dimly-conceived but profoundly meaningful elements, linked to a divine central signifier; or, as eroded, abbreviated remains of once-meaningful *Ur*-words, as hollow signs. Moreover, he attempted to reconcile such intellectual dilemmas in his poetry of this period. To my knowledge, these early works have not been examined with this focus of attention.

II

*'Mere words – words – words'*²⁵

Julius Hare's sense of words and phrases being ground down until they are barely able to signify anything at all, received an overtly geological formulation from Hensleigh Wedgwood (cousin of Charles Darwin) in his 1833 review of Grimm's *Grammatik* in the *Quarterly Review*. Wedgwood dismissed the notion that pronouns

were arbitrary assignments, and asserted instead that they were the abbreviated, eroded forms of longer sentences:

Like the organic remains of the material world, these particles were formed of the most striking portions of the sentences which they represent, whilst the more perishable parts have mouldered away. In some respects the fossil remains have met with a more fortunate destiny than these relics of the immaterial world, for, whilst the former have for the most part been preserved by the protecting soil in which they were embedded, so that a skilful anatomist has little difficulty in deciding to what portion of the skeleton of living animals they correspond, the latter, from their everyday and universal use, have been worn, until, like pebbles on the beach, they have lost every corner and distinctive mark, and hardly a vestige remains to indicate their original form.²⁶

The thought that words and phrases could be worn away disturbed Tennyson: words might lose not only their form, as Wedgwood outlined, but also their originally replete meaning. J. F. A. Pyre notes that from an early stage Tennyson obsessively constructed a self-consciously poetic vocabulary;²⁷ Hallam Tennyson's *Memoir* corroborates that in 1831 Arthur Hallam was busy 'culling for Alfred poetic words like "foréstill"'.²⁸ It would appear, then, that Tennyson accumulated unusual, archaic, and emphatically 'meaningful' words to deploy against historical erosion.

Tennyson's concern that words conveyed only a limited idea of things is evident in his attitude towards letter writing. Self-confessedly no great practitioner, he protested that letters were a poor medium of communication, that bare words often proved a 'bar of hindrance instead of a bond of union'.²⁹ Struck by the gulf between Emily Tennyson's physical presence and her shadowy presence in a letter, Tennyson's closest friend Arthur Hallam was even more emphatic:

Oh it is sad to think how little a letter gives one! Yours today is all precious sweetness; yet it tells but a few moments of your life, a few thoughts of your mind, and it contains no looks, no tones – that is the great, deplorable, alas irremediable loss.³⁰

Hallam's last phrase is resonant – 'the great, deplorable, alas irremediable loss'. It recalls his 1831 review of Tennyson's poems, where he lamented the loss of the 'first

raciness and juvenile vigour of literature' in the modern age, which he deemed 'gone, never to return'.³¹ This idea of irretrievable loss was deeply-embedded in Tennyson's linguistic consciousness.

A letter to Emily Sellwood in 1840 contains Tennyson's account of a deeply affecting visit to the room in which Shakespeare was reputed to have been born. Tennyson reports that the entire room had been covered with the names of countless visitors, and that he had added his own name to a table there as an act of 'homage'.³² The carving of his name into this hallowed site is simultaneously a strategy aimed at endowing physicality to Tennyson's experience there. Inscription was one way in which he hoped to counter, or at least delay, the erosion of meaning, and many of his poetic characters inscribe themselves, fetishistically, into their textual environments.

A compelling instance occurs in 'The Talking Oak' where a young man carves his lady's name into a tree.³³ Tennyson shores up the word's claim to substance in several ways: first, the word receives physical presence, cut three-dimensionally into the living bark of the oak. Its tangible nature is felt physically, communicated through the lady's lips as she kisses it. Moreover, the name *itself* feels, insofar as the sentient tree feels the lady's kiss through its carved contours. Finally, the name receives an aural presence as its syllables are whispered by the lady. Tennyson also brings the name into direct contact with its signified in the form of the young woman. In one respect, then, Tennyson overloads the word with significance in the hope of ensuring that meaning will be able to resist erosion. Perhaps his Coleridgean optimism is punningly signalled by naming the lady 'Olivia' – with its phonetic incorporation of 'live'. Nevertheless, this idealized instant is undercut by Hallam's complaint that a text 'contains no looks, no tones – that is the great, deplorable, alas irremediable loss'. In a crudely materialistic sense, Tennyson's poem is, irreducibly, no more than words on a page, and shares in the 'irremediable loss' suffered by modern words.

If Tennyson wishes to portray language optimistically in 'The Talking Oak', then he presents an inverse image in the early poem 'The Dell of E-'.³⁴ Here he examines the seemingly insurmountable threat to inscription presented by erosion. This poetic landscape, even the name of which has been eroded to a single letter, 'E', is marked initially by countless names carved into the trunks of 'each old hollow willow-tree' (line 20) – a perversely opulent pre-figurement of Tennyson's gambit in 'The Talking Oak'. (This image also lucidly foreshadows Tennyson's narration more than ten years later of his experience in Shakespeare's birth-room.) When the narrator revisits the dell after 'Long years have past' (line 29), he is faced with an eschatological scenario. The text-like willows have all been felled, and the names 'erased' from the single pine-tree that remains standing. If 'The Talking Oak'

represents an instance of permanent engraving, then 'The Dell of E-' is a forceful projection of literary erosion.

'Mariana in the South', sheds further light on Tennyson's ambivalent views of language. In a passage added by 1842, probably by 1835, Mariana discovers that the reality of her drab condition competes with the attempt to name her made by old letters carried about her person:

And, rising, from her bosom drew
 Old letters, breathing of her worth,
For 'Love,' they said, 'must needs be true,
 To what is loveliest upon earth.'
An image seemed to pass the door,
 To look at her with slight, and say
 'But now thy beauty flows away,
So be alone for evermore.' (lines 61-68)

The words spoken by the image as it passes Mariana's door contradict those traced across the 'Old letters', whose 'breathing' syllables are challenged as hollow by the shadowy image. It is tempting to read this as a theoretical overlapping, in which Coleridgean 'living' language and the spectre of autonomous language, both asserting conflicting realities, grapple with each other.

There is a further dimension to this dilemma. The correlation between the outdated inscriptions and Mariana's outward appearance has progressively deteriorated as the poem's eponymous heroine has aged, and, in terms of the text's internal aesthetics, has lost her youthful beauty. Meaning is thus eroded in the same way that Hallam believed language had lost its 'juvenile vigour'. The word no longer matches the thing – but due now to a change effecting the thing, rather than the word. Tennyson considers the possibility that this relationship can become corrupted, not only through a linguistic decay in which the word is eroded through history, but also through a slippage of the thing away from the word, in which words become progressively dissociated from things in a vassitudinous world. In both cases the end result is as identical as it is inevitable: words are exposed as air-propelling sounds, seductive, with a semblance of stability, but ultimately 'arbitrary, hollow, and insincere' as Maurice feared.

Tennyson's use of the word 'breathe' to describe the way in which words signify Mariana's worth is revealing. Coleridge had conceived of words as 'living powers', and it seems likely that Tennyson's view of language was, in its optimistic

incarnation at least, centred around the notion that words had a synecdochal relationship with a divine living Word; an outlook akin to Maurice's shaky belief that words were an echo of the divine voice.³⁵ Tennyson was rarely able to sustain this reassuring conception, as attested to by repeated avowals of his dissatisfaction with language, coupled with a growing sense that, in its present state, language had become inadequate to the purposes of poetry. It is to this point that this essay now turns.

III

'A hint of somewhat unexpress'

'Early Spring' and 'Whispers', both composed around 1833 but unpublished by the poet, contain passages that suggest that Tennyson was growing ever more sceptical of language's capacity to represent fully things real or imagined. After 1833 his struggle to comprehend poetically the death of his closest friend Arthur Hallam threw this problem into sharp relief. Increasingly, Tennyson's thoughts turn to a range of permutations, tones and shades which, he suspected, lay beyond the reach of present-day language – hidden between words, a poetical vocabulary of distinctions too fine to be marked by words in their eroded condition. He supposed that for daily use, language had had to evolve terms that were necessarily over-inclusive, terms that cast a wide net but permitted minute distinctions to slip through. In his blacker moments he considered even the most particular words 'gross' and incapable of discerning anything that did not stand out obviously from the innumerable but elusive 'hints of things' in nature. Tennyson articulates this dissatisfaction explicitly in 'Early Spring':³⁶

Ah! lightest words are lead,
Gross to make plain
Myriads of hints of things
That orb and wane,
Before a gnat's quick wings
Beat once again. (lines 31-36)

More and more, the 'Myriads of hints of things' become important in Tennyson's struggle to articulate his grief for Hallam, and in his efforts to negotiate the obstacles to writing great poetry imposed by the medium itself. As he puts it simply, in the modern age 'Words may not tell, / Faint, fragile sympathies / In sound

and smell!' (lines 40-42). The ladies of Tennyson's early portraits inhabit precisely this curious state of 'in-between' which exists between the quick beating of a gnat's wings; from this rich, sensuous, but ultimately shadowy world they acquire their appeal for the narrator. This half-state of being is the threshold into the erotic peripheries or margins of the portraits; it is the point of cross-over, inhabited by the more famous Mariana, Lady of Shalott, the Lotos-Eaters, and the dying Arthur.

In 'Early Spring' the world is 'termless' (line 44); it is unnamed, not merely 'boundless' as Ricks glosses this word.³⁷ 'O termless field' – the 'O' further emphasizes an emptiness that extends endlessly as far as words are concerned. Worldly experience is a plethora of sensations and timbres, only 'in part revealed' (line 48) to mankind; only a portion of this experience can be distinguished and discerned linguistically. 'Early Spring' concludes with nothing but 'tears of wonder' to fill the 'void of speech'.³⁸

'Whispers', composed in 1833 but again not printed in Tennyson's lifetime, addresses a related theme: that much of Nature cannot be vocalized but remains resolutely incommunicable:

Like some wise artist, Nature gives,
Through all her works, to each that lives
A hint of somewhat unexpressed. (lines 6-8)

The narrator of this poem discerns marginal whispers which rise and fall 'where'er I move'; similarly Ulysses discovers that the margin of his 'untravell'd' world 'fades for ever and for ever when I move' (lines 20-21). Both narrators occupy a position relative to the margin, and hence the whispers that promise to articulate the richness of Nature are correspondingly elusive.³⁹ The threshold of the margin is attainable, but infrangible. Positioned or rather marooned between centre and margin, the narrator detects whispers, but is unable to distinguish individual words. This discourse is comprised of breathy exhalations, signifying 'Something of pain – of bliss – of Love, / But what, were hard to say' (lines 11-12). Despite gleaning an abundance of meaning at the threshold, the impossibility of conveying this richness in everyday language preserves the margin's essential opacity; again, the poet is left frustrated with 'mere air-propelling sounds'.

Tennyson's sense of the inadequacy of modern language underpins a number of phrases which, although seemingly formulaic, in fact point out more inveterate anxieties. Such conventional statements as 'She was more fair than words can say' and 'Who may express thee Eleānore?' have a particular resonance for Tennyson, as is

supremely apparent in 'Break, Break, Break':⁴⁰

And I would that my tongue could utter
The thoughts that arise in me. (lines 3-4)

These lines, ruminating upon the death of Arthur Hallam, generate a significance that far exceeds the formulaic, creating a forceful contrast with earlier lines written while Hallam was still alive, and when Tennyson proclaimed that 'either lived in either's mind and speech'.⁴¹ Now that Hallam lives solely in Tennyson's thoughts, he discovers that words fail him. The poem is preoccupied with a breakdown of signification, with a frustrating inability to give expression to thought. Most bleakly of all, in 'To J[ames]. S[pedding].', Tennyson abandons his attempt to console his friend on the death of a brother, concluding that, confronted with hollow words, only silence will do: 'Words weaker than your grief would make / Grief more' (lines 65-66).

This broadly materialist perspective on Tennyson's early work is intended to point ways in which neglected works might throw important light on linguistic debates underpinning more substantial works as *In Memoriam*. Such an approach would represent a departure from recent studies, notably Sinfield's, that apply, perhaps inappropriately, a post-Saussurean hermeneutical apparatus to poems that rehearse debates centred on contemporary philological theory of the 1830s. Language study of this period is often presented in positivistic histories as being merely 'on the way towards' modern linguistics – a complaint made three decades ago by Hans Aarsleff in his pioneering work *The Study of Language in England, 1780-1860*.⁴² Early nineteenth-century philology has ceased to have relevance both in modern criticism and, perversely, in its own historical juncture. Through a form of backward revision, historical texts such as Tennyson's are severed from their native environments, and thus cease to speak to us in their original tones. If the discrete historicity of Tennysonian texts is to be redeemed, then attention needs to be directed towards recuperating their contemporary dialogues with an age in which the nascent Victorian progress ideal was at its most vulnerable from fears of linguistically-driven cultural decay.

NOTES

¹ *Aids to Reflection in the Formation of a Manly Character on the Several Grounds of Prudence, Morality, and Religion* (1825); 2nd edn (1831), ed. by John Beer, in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Kathleen Coburn and others, 16 vols (Princeton, NJ, 1969-), IX, 10. See also Coleridge's often-quoted letter to William Godwin of September 1800: 'Is thinking impossible without arbitrary signs? & – how far is the word "arbitrary" a misnomer? Are not words parts & germinations of the Plant? [. . .] I would endeavor to destroy the old antithesis of Words & Things, elevating, as it were, words into Things, & living Things too', *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Earl L. Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford, 1956-71), I, 625-26.

² Augustus William Hare and Julius Charles Hare, *Guesses at Truth by Two Brothers*, 2 vols (1827); 1st series, 3rd edn; 2nd series, 2nd edn (London, 1847-48), II, 282.

³ See Donald S. Hair, *Tennyson's Language* (Toronto, 1991), and Isobel Armstrong, *Language as Living Form in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (Brighton, 1982).

⁴ See the section 'Aphorisms Concerning the Language of Science' in Whewell's popular *The Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences Founded upon their History*, 2 vols (1840), 2nd edn repr. in *The Sources of Science*, 41 (1847; London, 1967), II, 479-569.

⁵ A. Dwight Culler comments that 'it is not certain that Tennyson ever read *Guesses at Truth*, but as Julius Hare was his tutor at Trinity College in the years immediately following its publication, it is very likely that he was acquainted with it', *The Poetry of Tennyson* (New Haven and London, 1977), p. 158. The influence of *Aids to Reflection* on Tennyson is less easily ascertained as Hallam Tennyson records that his father did not admire Coleridge's prose, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by his Son*, 2 vols (London, 1897), I, 50. See also Culler, p. 265, note 15. James C. McKusick, however, asserts that 'Alfred Tennyson, who attended Trinity College at the height of Coleridge's reputation there, was deeply committed to a Coleridgean aesthetic': see his "'Living Words!": Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Genesis of the *OED*', *Modern Philology*, 90 (1992-93), 1-45 (p. 21). Similarly, Peter Allen suggests that Coleridge was chief among the Apostles' 'idols', *The Cambridge Apostles: The Early Years* (Cambridge, 1978), p. 81.

⁶ 'Characteristics', *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, 30 vols (London, 1899), XXVIII, 1-43 (p. 20).

⁷ James Burnet, *Of the Origin and Progress of Language*, 6 vols (1773-92), repr. in *English Linguistics 1500-1800*, no. 48, ed. by R. C. Alston (Menston, 1967), IV, 166.

⁸ *Of the Origin and Progress of Language*, IV, 174. Monboddo's use of 'progress' in his title owes much to the sense simply of movement through history, rather than 'improvement', as the above quotation shows.

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⁹ *Lectures on the History of Literature, Ancient and Modern*, trans. by J. G. Lockhart, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1818), II, 58.

¹⁰ *Guesses at Truth*, I, 216.

¹¹ 'Lord Leveson Gower's *Poems and Translations*', *Edinburgh Review*, 52 (October, 1830), 231-61 (pp. 247-48). James Browne expressed a comparable opinion three months earlier in the same journal, proposing that language was the 'reflected image [. . .] of the thoughts and feelings of those who use it', coloured by the 'influence of local position, physical constitution, mode of life, laws, manners, usages, religion, and foreign intercourse', *Edinburgh Review*, 51 (July, 1830), p. 535. This was a popular view: Francis Cohen and William Gifford offered an inverted model, confirming the inextricable nature of the relationship in the popular imagination: 'the cast of our thoughts, notions, and ideas, is [. . .] dependent on the character of the language in which they are presented', 'Dunlop's *History of Fiction*', *Quarterly Review*, 13 (July, 1815), 384-408 (p. 392).

¹² *The New Cratylus; or, Contributions Towards a More Accurate Knowledge of the Greek Language* (Cambridge, 1839), p. 43.

¹³ *Deutsche Grammatik*, 2nd rev. edn, 4 vols (Göttingen, 1822-37), I, 588.

¹⁴ *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 49 (February, 1841), 199-213 (p. 213).

¹⁵ The effort to reconcile disturbing contradictions entailed presenting Grimm's less serviceable statements in a more optimistic light – such as Hensleigh Wedgwood's (cousin and philological instructor of Charles Darwin) unsubtle mistranslation in 1833 of the German *gesunken* ('sunk') as 'advanced', in the sense of languages advancing through history; see my note 'Misrepresentation in Hensleigh Wedgwood's Review of Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Grammatik*', in *Notes and Queries*, n.s. 41 (September, 1994), 310-12.

¹⁶ 'Grimm's Teutonic Grammar', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 47 (February, 1840), 200-16 (p. 216).

¹⁷ Winfred P. Lehmann (ed.), *A Reader in Nineteenth-Century Historical Indo-European Linguistics* (Bloomington, 1967), p. 15.

¹⁸ *A Dictionary of the Anglo-Saxon Language* (London, 1838), p. clxxi.

¹⁹ 'On the Probable Future Position of the English Language', *Proceedings of the Philological Society*, 4 (1848-50), 207-14 (p. 212).

²⁰ *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton, NJ, 1986), p. xii.

²¹ *The New Cratylus*, p. 132.

²² 'On Words', in *The Friendship of Books and Other Lectures*, ed. by Thomas Hughes (London, 1874), pp. 33-60 (p. 53).

²³ *Guesses At Truth*, I, 308.

²⁴ *Guesses At Truth*, I, 315. In similar vein, Tennyson's Cambridge friend R. C. Trench declared in a letter of 1834 to W. B. Donne that: 'I am becoming every day more conscious of

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the imperfect machinery of words, more weary of word-fighting, more willing to say, with the clown, that words are become so false I am loth to prove reasons by them', Maria Trench, *Richard Chenevix Trench, Archbishop: Letters and Memorials*, 2 vols (London, 1888), I, 160.

²⁵ From Christopher North's [John Wilson] devastating review of *Poems* (1832); 'Tennyson's *Poems*', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 31 (May, 1832), p. 730.

²⁶ Wedgwood, Hensleigh, 'Grimm on the Indo-European Languages', *Quarterly Review*, 50 (October, 1833), 169-89, (p. 175).

²⁷ *The Formation of Tennyson's Style: A Study, Primarily, of the Versification of the Early Poems* (Madison, 1921), p. 225.

²⁸ *Memoir*, I, 82. Hallam Tennyson comments that his father 'revived many fine old words which had fallen into disuse: and I heard him regret that he had never employed the word "yarely"', *Memoir*, II, 133.

²⁹ Letter to Emily Sellwood [July 1839?], *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, ed. by Cecil Y. Lang and Edgar F. Shannon, 3 vols (Oxford, 1982-90), I, 173.

³⁰ Letter to Emily Tennyson, 7 April 1832, in *The Letters of Arthur Henry Hallam*, ed. by Jack Kolb (Columbus, 1981), p. 546. See also Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford, 1989), p. 101.

³¹ 'On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry', first published in the *Englishman's Magazine*, I (August, 1831), 616-28; repr. in *The Writings of Arthur Hallam*, ed. by T. H. Vail Motter, Modern Language Association of America, General Series, 15 (New York and London, 1943), p. 189.

³² Letter to Emily Sellwood, c. 8 June 1840; *Letters*, I, 182.

³³ Published 1842; written 1837 or early 1838; see *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Christopher Ricks, 2nd edn, 3 vols (Harlow, 1987), II, 105.

³⁴ Published 1827 but not reprinted by Tennyson (see *Poems*, I, 100).

³⁵ 'On Words', p. 60. See also Hair's discussion of Tennyson's 'logocentric view' of language, (*Tennyson's Language*, p. 173), a view that did not, as Hair points out, exclude for Tennyson the possibility of language possessing an autonomous dimension.

³⁶ This poem was not published in its 1833 MS form. A greatly revised version was however printed in 1883. 'A Dream of Fair Women', written 1831-32, published 1832, also addresses the failure of even the most artfully selected words to represent the perceived world faithfully:

[. . .] all words, though cull'd with choicest art,
Failing to give the bitter of the sweet,
Wither beneath the palate. (lines 285-86)

³⁷ *Poems*, I, 539n.

³⁸ It is significant that none of the lines quoted above from the unpublished 'Early Spring'

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of 1833 was permitted to remain in the greatly altered version of 1883 (*Poems*, III, 103).

³⁹ Alan Sinfield discusses this point with regard to 'Ulysses': 'Every time he arrives he brings the centre with him, and the margin has thus to move on', *Alfred Tennyson* (Oxford, 1986), p. 53. He concludes that Ulysses 'must always be seeking that which is just beyond reach' (p. 40).

⁴⁰ 'The Beggar Maid' (line 2), written in 1833 and published in 1842; 'Eleänore' (line 68), published in 1832. In the latter poem Tennyson expanded this motif:

How may full-sail'd verse express,
How may measured words adore
The full flowing harmony
Of thy swan-like stateliness,
Eleänore ? (lines 44-48)

⁴¹ 'As when with downcast eyes' (line 14), written in 1832.

⁴² *The Study of Language in England, 1780-1860*, 2nd rev. edn (Minneapolis, MN, 1983), p. vi. Elsewhere Aarsleff suggests that historical linguistics has perpetuated the idea that before the second decade of the nineteenth century 'all language study [. . .] was irrelevant or prescientific, to be treated, if at all, only in annalistic fashion as a series of fumbling anticipations of what progress had at last bought into the light of day', *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (Minneapolis, MN, 1982), p. 5. See also Tony Crowley, *The Politics of Discourse: The Standard Language Question in British Cultural Debates* (Basingstoke, 1989), p. 14.