

# Making Meaning of the Anthropocene: An Analysis of Tennyson's Existential Crisis in "In Memoriam"

*Alexis Fladmark*

## **Abstract**

Jesse Oak Taylor describes Alfred Lord Tennyson's "In Memoriam" as "the poem of the Anthropocene" (230). Taylor suggests that this is in part due to the subject matter of the poem, which grapples with concepts of faith, afterlife, evolution, extinction, geologic time, and advancing technologies. The knowledge that ensued from the early Anthropocene complicates Tennyson's understanding of death and the afterlife. Tennyson writes at a moment when the Anthropocene had only just begun. Therefore he writes about a condition in which he is fully immersed. But, as Taylor suggests, Tennyson must address the Anthropocene prospectively because the concept had yet to fully emerge. In this paper, I argue that it is necessary for Tennyson to discuss death through the effects of the Anthropocene because the knowledge arising from this new geologic age changed his understanding forever, and ultimately confused his faith in the afterlife. His deep concern for Hallam's soul makes establishing a more concrete sense of the afterlife essential to the grieving process.

**Keywords:** Tennyson, In Memoriam, Darwin, Faith, Anthropocene

Jesse Oak Taylor describes Alfred Lord Tennyson's "In Memoriam A.H.H." as "the poem of the Anthropocene" (230). Taylor suggests that this is in part due to its subject matter, which grapples with concepts of faith, afterlife, evolution, extinction, geologic time, and advancing technologies. While these are the

quintessential concerns of both Victorians and the Anthropocene generally, Taylor highlights that “In Memoriam” is particularly relevant because it is written retrospectively about the Anthropocene, the concerns of which are ongoing, and “thus any formulation of the concept is prospective” (Taylor 230). Though an insightful idea, it is rather a stretch to infer that Tennyson wrote “In Memoriam” primarily as an attempt to formulate “how the age of humans will be legible within the geologic record for millennia to come” (Taylor 230). Rather, Tennyson wrote “In Memoriam” based on the shocking loss of his friend Arthur Hallam, and the effects of the Anthropocene addressed within the poem help make sense of that grief. The fact that Tennyson’s poem encapsulates the dominant concerns of what is now called the Anthropocene does not necessarily confirm that “In Memoriam” is an elegy “about the Anthropocene” (Taylor 230; emphasis mine); to infer it detracts from Tennyson’s memorialisation of Hallam. Consequently, this paper makes the case that “In Memoriam” is not an elegy to the Anthropocene, but rather an elegy to a deceased friend as a means to cope with loss. While it can certainly be agreed that Tennyson grapples with many of the concerns of the Anthropocene, it stands that the central focus of the poem is mourning for a loved one and concern for Hallam’s soul finding peace. The concepts in “In Memoriam” that resonate with anxieties of the Anthropocene exist only in the context of making sense of that grief in order to grieve appropriately and come to terms with Hallam’s death.

One of the key concepts of the Anthropocene represented in cantos fifty-four to fifty-six is the changing awareness of death and the afterlife which occurred during the Victorian period and which deeply troubled Tennyson following the death of Hallam. Within canto fifty-four lies a paradoxical struggle between “trust” and “dream” which emphasizes Tennyson’s efforts to find meaning in death. “Trust” appears four times within the three cantos, while “dream” is repeated three times. These terms provoke a paradox due to their incompatible definitions. To trust in something is to have “firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something; confidence or faith in a person or thing” (“trust”). A dream, on the other hand, is “a vision or hope for the future... a vain hope or idle fantasy... an ideal, goal, ambition, or aspiration” (“dream”). Thus while trust suggests a concrete sense of faith in something, a dream is much more abstract and therefore less tangible.

Through the fluctuations between trusting and dreaming in these cantos, readers get a sense that the speaker oscillates between believing in the afterlife and hoping for an afterlife. Canto fifty-four opens with “Oh, yet we trust that somehow good / Will be the final end of ill” (54 1-2). Although these lines indicate that the speaker trusts in the good and that the afterlife exists, that trust is questioned from the opening lines through the “yet” which indicates that he trusts despite better evidence. Further in the canto the speaker describes that he “can but trust that good shall fall / At last - far off - at last, to all” (54 14-15). Trust is still foundational here and, yet again, there is a sense of uncertainty. The speaker seemingly trusts in the good because any alternative is too frightening to consider. The line “I can but trust” (54 14) that follows from “we know not anything” (54 13) may also be interpreted as suggesting that the good to come is the only thing the speaker can trust. This second interpretation is undercut however when the speaker concludes that “so runs my dream” (54 17). The wavering trust established previously is further undermined by depiction of these beliefs as a dream, or an “idle fantasy” (“dream”). The speaker’s incongruent fluctuation between “trust” and “dream” accentuates the profound uncertainty he feels about the process of death and contributes to the meaning making he works through in an attempt to establish some semblance of comfort with this knowledge. According to Taylor, such an analysis is indicative of quintessential Anthropocentric concerns, and while that is true, it remains that the primary concern for the speaker is the safety of his friend’s soul. Tennyson writes at the onset of the Industrial Revolution, at a moment when the Anthropocene has only just begun; he thus writes about a concept in which he is fully immersed, and as Taylor suggests, must do so prospectively. It is necessary for Tennyson to discuss death through the effects of the Anthropocene because this circumstance fundamentally shaped his experience. The knowledge that emerged in this new geologic age ultimately confused his previous conceptions of the afterlife, and his concern for Hallam’s soul makes establishing a more concrete sense of the afterlife essential to the grieving process.

The dream/trust paradox is cemented in the final stanza of canto 54. The first line, “so runs my dream” (54 17) follows with “but what am I” (54 17)? As discussed above, the line “so runs my dream” (54 17) reduces the speaker’s desires to mere idle fantasy, and to follow that with “but what am I?” (54 17) further depreciates the speaker’s worth. Alternatively, these lines may indicate not only the speaker’s struggle to determine the fate of his friend’s soul but a personal existential

crisis as well. Regardless, it is clear that the speaker seeks answers and realizes that he cannot find them. He describes himself as “an infant crying in the night...for the light” (54 18-19). Night is a representation of darkness while light is often associated with the Light of God. Given the intense struggle depicted within these cantos, it is safe to argue that this darkness is a reflection of the inner turmoil experienced by the speaker. The speaker therefore attempts to sift through his own personal darkness to find God, but learns that he has “no language but a cry” (54 20) with which to communicate. Like an infant, the speaker feels that he has no way to express his meaning to God, or perhaps that he is unable to understand God’s messages. In “An Ambiguous Faith: Tennyson's Response to Victorian Science,” Matthew Hahn states that “science can uncover the physical world, but Tennyson’s question regarding immortality reveals to him its limitations”. Instead of science, he turns to “inner feelings and spiritual revelations as epistemological methods of embracing metaphysical truths” (Hahn 10-11). Hahn proposes that Tennyson accepts science for its powers of “discovering and explaining truths about the material world,” but “his interest and respect for science does not prevent him from questioning it” and to seek answers spiritually (Hahn 13). Despite the attempt to communicate with God and discern these metaphysical truths, the speaker finds that the answers cannot be found through science or spirituality. Thus with the irresolution of these issues, the speaker endeavours to make meaning of death through Anthropocentric emphases--namely, the division that has fissured between God and Nature as a result of evolving knowledge.

Throughout cantos fifty-four to fifty-six the speaker essentially endeavours to make sense of a senseless force. Canto fifty-five in particular develops a binary of light and darkness, or God and the personified force of Nature. The speaker pursues a division of good and bad ostensibly so that he can find something to blame. The speaker considers that “God and Nature [are] then at strife” (55 5) because it is frightening to imagine that death and mass extinction can occur randomly, with little or no predictable patterns or meaning; a vengeful force is much less complicated to conceptualize than a senseless one. Accordingly, the speaker designates Nature as an evil force that is “so careless of the single life” (55 7) while maintaining hope that he may “slope thro’ darkness up to God” (55 16). These lines establish the speaker’s sense of a ruthless Nature that does not consider, or is unaffected by, the value of an individual life. In response, the speaker must hold on to his love of God despite the darkness around him in order to maintain a

sense of hope. The possibility of a ruthless Nature has frightening implications for the speaker. The implications of careless deaths suggest that there was no spiritual justification for Hallam's sudden death at only twenty-two years of age. By dividing powers and labeling each as good or bad, the speaker creates both an enemy and an ally for himself. Such a construction provides not only an outlet for placing blame, but also an outlet for finding solace which functions to protect the speaker from hopelessness and despair.

The division of good and bad described by the speaker is highlighted when contrasted with Timothy Morton's description from "The Mesh". In this piece, Morton describes life as "a flowing, shifting, entangled mess of ambiguous entities" (Morton 22). While Tennyson's speaker seeks meaning by placing blame and dividing powers, Morton maintains that these binaries simply do not exist and that "everything is connected to everything else" (Morton 26). Morton draws the basis of his ideas from Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin writes that "complex and unexpected are the checks and relations between organic beings" (Darwin 268), and analyzes how the introduction to or removal of a single species from an ecosystem can have enormous impacts on that system. Darwin describes an example of enclosing a field from cattle which led to the Scotch fir suddenly flourished in that enclosed region, despite no other changes. The slight modification within an ecosystem changed the entire chain of beings and subsequently led to a diversification of birds and insects living in the region (Darwin). Both Darwin and Morton emphasize that there is no predictability or pattern to evolution of species, or to their demise, and that with any slight change to the mesh, life as we know it could exist in completely different forms: including the loss of human life altogether.

These ideas indicate that the concepts Tennyson's speaker grapples with are immense and difficult to comprehend even with a modern understanding, let alone the traditional conceptualizations that lingered in his time. Furthermore, the notion of a senseless force is emphasized in that there is truly neither rhyme nor reason to the processes of nature—humans among them. Thus while the speaker seeks answers and solace, there are none to be found. The speaker describes Nature as "considering everywhere/ Her secret meaning in her deed, / And finding that of fifty seeds/ She often brings but one to bear" (55 9-12). Despite preceding Darwin by several years, this stanza coincides very well with another section from *Origin of Species* in which Darwin describes man's foolish perceptions of Nature:

We behold the face of nature bright with gladness, we often see superabundance of food; we do not see, or we forget, that the birds which are idly singing round us mostly live on insects or seeds, and are thus constantly destroying life; or we forget how largely these songsters, or their eggs, or their nestlings are destroyed by birds and beasts of prey; we do not always bear in mind, that though food may be now superabundant, it is not so at all seasons of each recurring year. (Darwin 266)

Here Darwin seemingly criticizes humankind's limited understanding and romantic portrayal of Nature. While Tennyson's speaker condemns Nature for her careless treatment of life, Darwin points out that this apparent ruthlessness is required by each species to survive. While the birds may seem like sweet songbirds for human enjoyment, they are a single aspect of a vast system, competing to be the one that survives. Devin Griffiths suggests that through his "language of intent, Darwin effectively flattened the natural world, diffusing intentionality as an emergent property shared throughout nature" (Griffiths 432). In doing so, Griffiths asserts that Darwin "understood such natural purposes as the distributed result of natural selection's incessant adaptation rather than evidence of a divine plan and the *scala naturae*" (Griffiths 432). Thus, rather than perpetuating notions of nature as a hierarchy, with Nature controlling everything below it on "the chain of being" ("*scala naturae*"), Darwin presents an environment akin to that depicted in Morton's mesh. With that in mind, the surprise Tennyson's speaker describes regarding the harsh "secret meaning in [Nature's] deeds" (55 10) perpetuates romantic and unrealistic views of the natural world for human enjoyment. Darwin, who gained popularity shortly after Tennyson, was capable of viewing nature much more objectively and recognized these random functions. Darwin's understanding was ground breaking and at odds with traditional assumptions, still around during the Victorian period, that nature existed for human pleasure. The traditional interpretation is also at odds with Darwin's more realistic understanding of each species as interconnected biological agents trying to fulfil their survivalist destiny. It is from the former perspective that Tennyson's speaker creates the binaries of Nature and God as a means to an end, a way to make sense of an unpredictable force when there is no sense to be made. However, the Nature-God dichotomy does not encapsulate a comprehensive understanding of the natural world's complexity and leads the speaker further astray from the answers he seeks. Through these explorations, the speaker does not attempt to uncover the

secret meanings of the Anthropocene. Rather, the speaker seeks to understand the functions of nature to make meaning of Hallam's death and come to terms with his own grief.

The speaker's internal conflict reaches a climax in canto fifty-six where the romantic conception of the environment continues and the speaker's sense of a malevolent Nature reaches a pinnacle. The speaker backtracks on his original conclusions of Nature as "so careful of the type" (55 7) and instead concludes that she "care[s] for nothing, all shall go" (56 4). The speaker grants Nature an omnipotent status when Nature proclaims: "I bring to life, I bring to death" (56 6). The speaker assigns the role of both life giver and taker to Nature. In the following stanza, Man is described as "her last work / ... Who roll'd the psalm to wintry skies, / Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer" (56 9, 11-12), suggesting an anti-theological creationism where it was Nature as opposed to God who created man. Initially these lines seem to imply that humankind was created by Nature but worships God. However, the "fruitless prayer" complicates this understanding. To be fruitless is indicative of "producing no effect or result" ("fruitless") and declares prayer as an aimless pursuit. While the preceding canto ended with the speaker trying to "faintly trust the larger hope" (55 20), canto fifty-six appears to have lost all sense of that trust. These lines assert an anti-theological reading by discarding God completely from the processes of life. Instead, the "trust" discussed in canto fifty-four has moved into the past tense, with the speaker, "Who trusted God was love" (56 13), moving into a kind of existential despair. Rather than God, "Nature, red in tooth and claw" (56 15) is juxtaposed with the human, "who suffer'd countless ills, / Who battled for the True, the Just" (56 17-18). Compared with cruel Nature, man is suddenly depicted as "a dream, / a discord" (56 21-22), and the speaker suggests that mankind does not fit into the animal realm because they do not act in accordance with Nature's ruthless ways. The conclusion to these cantos is unsatisfying in that the speaker declares "life as futile, then, as frail" (56 25) and does not find the answers he seeks in either God or Nature, but rather "behind the veil" (56 28), insinuating that the answers exist somewhere the speaker does not have access to: the afterlife.

Although written with passionate, existential angst, canto fifty-six becomes remarkably ironic when examined from an ecocritical perspective. According to Taylor, "In Memoriam" is supposedly a poem born out of the rising Anthropocene, and yet the assertions made in this canto propose ideas in exact

opposition to those of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene represents “the era of geological time during which human activity is considered to be the dominant influence on the environment, climate, and ecology of the earth” (“Anthropocene”), thus the period in which humans exert control over the environment. Despite the speaker’s claims regarding Nature as an all-powerful force, the Victorian period was a time of intense ecological destruction and mass extinction of species for economic progress. Dipesh Chakrabarty’s “The Climate of History: Four Theses” highlights the irony of canto fifty-six. In his text, Chakrabarty cites Oreskes to describe how humans have shifted from being biological agents to becoming geological ones, “changing the most basic physical processes of the earth” (206). Oreskes argues that nature and the earth’s processes were once thought to be “so large and powerful that nothing we could do could change them” (206) and that humans were “insignificant compared with the vastness of geological time” (206). Oreskes asserts that this belief is no more and that the overwhelming consequences of human influence upon the earth are becoming increasingly evident. Chakrabarty concludes this section by describing that “it is no longer a question simply of man having an interactive relation with nature”; rather man has become “a force of nature in the geological sense” (207). While the lines, “Dragons of the prime, / That tare each other in their slime, / Were mellow music match’d with him” (56 25-28), are supposed to act as a sardonic depiction of humankind, it is ultimately an uncanny depiction of reality. Despite the speaker framing Nature and the dinosaurs as ferocious killers, humankind is worse. The dinosaurs act in accordance with Darwin’s depiction of survival of the fittest, mentioned above, doing what they must to survive. Man, on the other hand, did not create the Anthropocene in an attempt to survive, but rather out of greed. Thus, while these cantos of “In Memoriam” lament the harsh ways of Nature and the extreme effects she has upon the world, the other side of the story, where man affects Nature, is completely ignored.

The intensely complex struggle within “In Memoriam” provides a sense of the immense shift in understanding and knowledge that occurred during the Victorian era. The speaker must contend with rapidly changing ideas that combat with his belief system as a function of facilitating the grieving process. Furthermore, while Taylor’s argument is relevant to the content of “In Memoriam”, it is ultimately the knowledge that ensued from the early Anthropocene which complicates Tennyson’s understanding of death and his sense



of place within time and space. The concepts within “In Memoriam” that resonate with concerns of the Anthropocene exist only in the context of making sense of that grief and the speaker’s own sense of place within time and space. Interestingly, while Tennyson’s speaker places much of the blame upon Nature for the death of Hallam, each has ultimately experienced immense loss. Thus, despite the speaker framing Nature as his enemy and root of his despair, they are each a cog in the evolutionary machine. Nature is helpless to stop the onslaught of the Anthropocene in the same way that Hallam was helpless to stop the stroke which killed him. Rather than existing at odds, as the speaker depicts them, each is victim to the mesh. As modern readers, we can legitimately take a retrospective analysis of the issues put forth within “In Memoriam,” which facilitates recognition of the flawed understanding while also revealing the deep, existential crisis that is explored and ultimately unresolved in cantos fifty-four to fifty-six. While Tennyson dealt with concepts that were unresolved and prospective as he wrote “In Memoriam”, he did so with remarkable clairvoyance.

*Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change.*  
-Alfred Lord Tennyson, “Locksley Hall”

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