

The Poetic Life-Form: An Analysis on the Role of Elegy and Form in *In Memoriam*

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Abstract

What is the role of elegy? Can literary works preserve the memory of a person, moment, or time that has been lost? Or, is this simply a feeble attempt to console those suffering from grief and loss? Alfred Lord Tennyson explores these questions in his work *In Memoriam A.H.H.* The heart of the work, as in any elegy, is mourning a loss and preserving the memory of that loss. Jesse Oak Taylor works specifically with the idea of elegy and what it does for our ecologically conscious society through the Anthropocene. He argues that we cannot actually experience the concept of species; we only ever experience impressions of it. Thus in order to cope, society uses elegy as a form of expression to process extinction and preserve an image (228). In a similar fashion, cantos fifty-four to fifty-seven of *In Memoriam* exemplify Tennyson's use of elegy and evolutionary concepts, but instead of mourning a "species" the poet mourns the loss of his friend, Arthur Henry Hallam. More than that, these cantos represent Tennyson's desperate attempt to move beyond preservation of Hallam's memory. Through *In Memoriam*, Tennyson attempts to recreate and clone the memory of Hallam, using the elegiac form to perpetuate his friend's life and existence. His resulting work is not a sterile clone, but an act of cultural reproduction and the birth of a new life-form through literature.

Keywords: Elegy, Lifeform, Form, Evolution, Tennyson, Image, Impression, Abstraction, Species, Specimen, Memory, Mourning

What is the role of elegy? Can literary works preserve the memory of a person, moment, or time that has been lost? Or, is this simply a feeble attempt to console the minds of those suffering from the reality of grief and loss? Alfred Lord Tennyson explores these questions in his work *In Memoriam*. This one-hundred and thirty-two canto elegy traces “a three year journey through the grieving process” over the death of Tennyson’s close friend Arthur Henry Hallam, while discussing “matters as wide-ranging as the character of scientific inquiry, the origin of human life, and the nature of religious faith” (Black et al. 197). Although this work contains a “wide-[range]” of subject matter, the heart of the work, as in any elegy, is mourning a loss and preserving the memory of those lost (Black et al. 197). However, the evolutionary subject matter in this elegy has become a topic of ecological criticism in connection with the Anthropocene. Jesse Oak Taylor works specifically with this idea of elegy and what it does for our ecologically conscious, Anthropocentric society. He argues that we cannot actually experience the concept of species; we only ever experience impressions of it. In order to cope, society uses elegy as a form of expression to process extinction and preserve an image (228). In a similar fashion, cantos fifty-four to fifty-seven of *In Memoriam* exemplify Tennyson’s use of elegy and evolutionary concepts, but instead of mourning a “species,” he mourns the loss of his friend. Furthermore, these cantos represent his desperate attempt to move beyond preservation of his specific memory of Hallam. Through *In Memoriam*, Tennyson attempts to recreate and clone his memory of Hallam, using the elegiac form to perpetuate his friend’s life and existence. His resulting work is not a clone, but an act of reproduction and the birth of a new life-form through literature.

To establish the connection between life and literature, the meaning of *form* needs to be considered. To be a life-form, one must be living and have *form*, or a body. So how does this view of life and form connect with literature? Elegy is a literary form; it is a framework that writers use to give shape and body to the work. Like all bodies, *In Memoriam* has defining features, or markers that allow the reader to identify what type of poetry they are reading, such as iambic tetrameter with the rhyme scheme ‘abba’. However, these markers have a greater function than identification. According to Holly Ferneaux, the steadiness of these poetic tools throughout the work “echoes the involuntary biological processes of breath or heartbeat, the unwilling organic functions that keep [us] going” (“An Introduction”). Therefore, literary form does not just give the elegy a

body; it acts as the lungs and heartbeat of the poem, the biological elements that sustain the poem's life. The literary tools used within cantos fifty-four to fifty-seven play a similar life-giving role within the poem's characters. Tennyson's "Nature," with a capital 'N,' is what Raymond Williams defines as "Nature the goddess" in his work *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (221). This definition portrays nature as an "absolute monarch" who capriciously exercises her powers over life and death "with inevitable, often destructive effects on men" (221). This parallels Tennyson's view of "Nature"; she is "[so] careless of the single life" (55 8), as the death of Hallam at the young age of twenty-two clearly illustrates. The frailty of an individual in opposition or subjugation to Nature reveals Tennyson's urgency to prevent the memory of Hallam from going extinct, for "the only form of permanence in this world of shifting values [is] the permanence of memory" (qtd. in Taylor 232).

Oak Taylor also explores similar ideas of species preservation through elegy, and notes that "[while] an individual is a life, a species is a form," and this form or "type" is "a category, an abstraction under which any number of individuals might be aggregated based on some shared characteristic or characteristics that ignores distinguishing particularities" (229, 231). If this is the case, then the life-giving properties of Tennyson's elegiac form in *In Memoriam* function in the same way as the literary tool of personification. Personification brings the elegy to life by giving the poem's characters' voices that are separate from the voice of the poet. Tennyson's "Nature" is an interesting example of this because she does not have a voice of her own. Instead, she cries out through the geological *formations* of "scarped cliff and quarried stone" (2). This cry from Nature is in reference to the documented geological discoveries of Charles Lyell in his book *Principles of Geology*, which explains that the "fossil record evident in exposed rocks and cliffs reveals that entire species have become extinct" (Black et al. 214). When Nature cries, "A thousand types are gone: / I care for nothing, all shall go," she admits to her active role in the geological and evolutionary process of species extinction. Her voice, like literary devices, acts as a marker and gives an account of species that are now extinct, while personification through geological *formations* gives a voice to nature through non-living rock forms, transforming the individual characterization of "the goddess" into an evolutionary and geological process. Personification as a literary tool gives the written account of Tennyson's mourning in a poetic voice, and the identifying features, or markers, of elegiac

form work with personification to simultaneously solidify the species type and bring the work itself to life. Through personification and form the written words function and exist separately from the writer, and each time they are read, the literary tools come together and breathe life into the nonliving words that form Tennyson's elegy.

Along with *form*, the definition of "type" also connects evolutionary and geological processes to the literary impact of Tennyson's words. "Type," according to Oak Taylor, "is also a printer's type: a material object by which an abstract sign becomes a legible trace imprinted on a page" (229). Oak Taylor draws a parallel between the physical act of typing, or imprinting letters onto paper, and a dinosaur that leaves an imprint on the sand which may one day be compacted to stone "such that it becomes a legible trace millions of years later" (229). This comparison refers to an individual dinosaur, and the fossil that the dinosaur leaves behind is only a single "trace" or imprint of a species, and not an entire species. This differentiation between the individual species-being and the species is important because Oak Taylor argues that "in order to become a species, an individual has to become an image," and for a species to take shape, living creatures need to become specimens (229). Oak Taylor continues this idea through an example of specimen collection, stating that "[the] 'type' had to be abstracted from the individual life as that life was converted physically and violently into a sign" (229).

A similar process takes place throughout canto fifty-six of *In Memoriam*. Lines seventeen and eighteen compare Hallam, the individual man, and Jesus through the description of his sufferings. In the next two lines Hallam, through his careless death and extinction at the hand of Nature understood as geological process, is reduced to "dust" being "blown about the desert," or a fossil that is to be compressed and "sealed within the iron hills" (19-20). The next stanza personifies Nature as "a monster," and her destructive tendency is expressed through the savagery of "dragons," or dinosaurs. "Monster" is Nature's type, and the image or specimen of that type is a dinosaur. All three of these cases showcase a transition from individual form into image, and therefore species form. Hallam as a living man has been transferred onto the image of Jesus, a man who, through his death, became the symbol and image of salvation and life for Christian believers. As it was with Jesus, the violent death of Hallam is a necessary evil that transforms his single life into an image of goodness and mourning for Victorians on a species scale. In the same way, dinosaurs and their fossilized footprints are imprints that

symbolize the “monster” evolutionary theory and discovery, and all three examples mark the presence of creatures that no longer exist in individual form. Through their death, each individual has transformed into an image that exists separately from the lives they represent and holds meaning that is greater than themselves.

Although elegy creates a framework for mourning and species preservation, it does not have the capacity to clone the individual that was lost. For example, the dinosaur that has left traces of his life through footprints on the earth cannot be rematerialized from those footprints. Like the dinosaur, Hallam has left behind traces of his life in Tennyson’s memories. Through written mourning, he is only capable of fossilizing the image of Hallam that exists in those memories, and not the actual man. Oak Taylor argues that Tennyson’s writing in elegiac form allows “a once living body,” or memory of that body, to be converted into a physical “artifact,” preserving it in a “non-living” “[imprint] of form” (229, 231). Oak Taylor specifies that the literary form elegy creates is “non-living,” but in the article “The Mesh,” Timothy Morton blurs the lines between living and nonliving, giving us a world where literary life-forms have the ability, like all life forms, to reproduce. Morton describes life and the process of evolution as “the mesh.” This *mesh* is “a very curious radically open form without center or edge,” which, in turn “does away with the boundaries between living and nonliving things” (22). The Oxford English Dictionary defines *mesh* as “a complex situation or series of events in which a person is entangled; a concatenation of constraining or restricting forces or circumstances; a snare.” These two definitions of *mesh* describe the complex nature of the evolutionary content found in cantos fifty-four to fifty-seven of *In Memoriam* and begins to bridge the gap between what Jesse Oak Taylor would call the non-living literary form and ecology. Language, like life, is a *mesh* where “the meaning of a word is another word” and understanding is dependent on a string of individual words in a sentence being processed in relation to the other words that make up the whole (Morton 23). Language, like ecology, can be viewed and expressed through the theory of symbiosis and evolution. Words, like life-forms, are made up of other words, or life-forms, and these words derive from other words (Morton 23). This application of symbiosis to literature and literary form remove the “rigid and thin” boundaries between life-forms and create a “wide and permeable” mesh-like system of meaning exchange (22).

Another way to bridge the gap between language and ecology is to consider structural linguistics relationship with the Interdependence Theorem. Morton uses

Interdependence Theorem to summarize structural linguistics and describe life-forms. He argues that “no life-form exists that did not arise from another life-form” (23). DNA, the language that is expressed through life-forms, works in the same way. Like language, understanding (or expression) is based on the interdependence of each individual word and the form, or structure, that it follows. Just as poetic structure and literary tools act as signs of meaning when identifying poetic form, each word acts as a sign, signifying meaning in relation to other words in the sentence. Morton concludes that, “[since] life-forms depend upon each other the same way signs depend upon each other, the system of life-forms is isometric with the system of language,” meaning that language, and therefore, literary works are indeed a type of living form (23).

Like any other life-form, the language or DNA of elegy can reproduce and evolve beyond the original memory of the writer. Morton’s Interdependence Theorem and its two axioms help gain a clearer picture of this connection. Axiom 1 states that “things are only what they are in relation to other things” (23). As established earlier, language is like an interconnected ecological system, with each life-form being made up of strings of DNA, or words. Words act as signs that gain meaning in relation to other words, and are dependent on interconnection for expression of meaning. Just as “life-forms are expressions of DNA,” elegiac form is an expression of interconnected words, and it is the act of expression that makes this poetic form equivalent to a living form. Axiom 2 focuses on the relationship between biological forms, stating “[nothing] exists by itself and nothing comes from nothing” (23). This means that literary meaning can only exist through the expression of language, and expression is a product of individual words, or signs, working in connection with one another, but only as a part of a greater whole because the meaning of the individual word is based on the words to which it is linked. This is the paradox of language and meaning; “[because] language is an arbitrary system of negative difference, there is no sign that stands outside the system to guarantee the meaning and stability of the other signs” (23).

From this viewpoint, it is hard to view language as anything but “infinite,” which means that “we can never fully account for its meanings or effects,” and this adds to Tennyson’s mourning (23). In canto fifty-four, he compares himself to a wordless “infant crying in the night, . . . with no language but a cry” (6,8). All his efforts to “richly [shrine]” (57 7) the life and memory of his friend in elegy are reduced to nothing but a meaningless cry because they can never recreate the

person or even preserve his memories of Hallam. In a society full of shifting values that render the life and death of his friend as “dust” or merely a product of evolutionary and geological process, poetic form and the act of writing give Tennyson the ability to fossilize, and therefore, preserve an image of Hallam. However, the problem with preservation through the poetic form is that in order to extend the image beyond the writer, the image must be read, and therefore, subjected to interpretation. This is the trouble with language; meaning is unstable and never guaranteed, and interpretation only makes this worse. Canto fifty-seven expresses Tennyson’s anxiety regarding the interpretation of his image. Although he has worked hard to ensure that the memory of his friend is “richly shrined” within the elegiac form, it is through that same form that he loses authority and autonomy over the meaning or image that is being extracted by the reader. At least while he is living, there is opportunity to clarify or explain himself, but he knows that one day he “shall pass; [his] work will fail” (7-8). However, through Tennyson’s failure in cloning and preservation, he unintentionally creates a new literary life-form that is separate from and lives beyond himself through the act of interpretation. Robert Pogue Harrison refers to this phenomenon as “the afterlife of the image” in his book *The Dominion of the Dead*. Harrison explains that in the event of a death, a living person retains a connection with a corpse through the image or memory of the deceased person, and that connection will remain until the living can detach the image from the body. This detachment is a key step in the mourning process. According to Harrison,

If the corpse embodies or holds on to the [deceased] person’s image at the moment of demise, funeral rites serve to detangle the nexus and separate them into discrete entities with independent fates—the corpse consigned to earth or air, and the image assigned to its afterlife [in] whatever form that imaginary afterlife may take in this or that altered framework. (148)

The function of the elegiac form is twofold. The act of writing serves as Tennyson’s “nexus” of separation, but the written image is the agent of reproduction. Through the processes of image making and image reading the words on the paper are revitalized in the minds of each new reader who interprets the written words on the page. This interpretation is the after-life of the image.

The nature of language under interpretation does not allow this elegiac image to maintain Tennyson’s originally intended meaning; each new reading promotes an evolution of meaning and a reproduction of the image. Each new

image is its own being, and “[every] reader or listener who reactivates the semantic content of the literary work performs ... a revitalization of the text through a transfer of his or her own voice to an otherwise dead letter” (153). This is more than a mere “after-life of the image,” this is evolutionary process and reproduction birthed out of the memory of a man named Hallam and the writing of Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Each birth is a new image, a specimen that tells the tale of the literary species’ evolutionary process. This is the mesh, a group of life-forms that, like language, is “infinite and beyond concept” (Morton 24). Like Charles Darwin’s “entangled bank,” the relationship between the reader, the writer, and the work reflect an “elaborately constructed form, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in a complex manner” (272). With each new reader, this literary life-form grows, evolves and reproduces new meaning through interpretation, but it is the fluidity and the instability of words through each reader’s interpretation that transforms this fossilized image into a living organism. As Morton says, “[there] is no ‘outside’ of the system of life-forms” (24); we are all connected through a giant mesh and “retain deep within our being the remains,” and words, of those who have gone before us (Oak Taylor, 226). Through reading and interpretation, Tennyson’s work lives on and reproduces meaning not only in the text, but also in the lives of those who read it.

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