

Arthur Hallam's Fragments of Being

In his Preface to Arthur Hallam's *Remains*, Henry Hallam sums up in a single sentence the 'Essay on the Philosophical Writings of Cicero' that his son wrote in 1831: 'This essay is perhaps too excursive from the prescribed subject' (Hallam, 1834, xviii). This is the sort of tactful but pointed criticism that typifies Hallam senior's assessments of his son's writing, and, in this case, it would be hard to disagree with him. One of Arthur's many excursions in the essay involves the 'metaphysical analysis' which his friend James Spedding, in the same Preface, claims to have been 'his chief pleasure and strength' (Hallam, 1834, xxii). He comments:

Of that immense chain of mental successions, which extends from the cradle to the death-bed, how few links, comparatively speaking, are visible to any other person! Yet from these fragments of being (if the expression may be pardoned) you shall hear one decide as confidently about the unseen and unimagined whole, as a geologist from his chip of stone will explain the structure of the mass to which it belonged. (Hallam, 1943, 143)

Hallam's metaphysical analysis, his dissection of life and mind into a fragmented succession of mental states, is set against the sort of rationalist but speculative synthesis that a geologist might undertake, reconstructing a whole from a fragment. Such reconstruction, Hallam implies, is not possible when it comes to 'fragments of being': a person's psychology cannot be inferred from those 'few links' observable by others.

The questions raised here, about the fragmentation and mutability of personal identity and about the difficulty (perhaps the impossibility) of knowing other people, are addressed in many of Hallam's prose writings: the paper 'On Sympathy', his theological essay 'Theodicaea Novissima', and his review of Tennyson's *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*. In the essay on Cicero these questions are resolved into one of perspective, because, although the self appears plural and discontinuous to others, from the inside it feels very different. 'Could Cicero think of his own being,' Hallam asks, 'and not find it full of mysterious harmony?' This harmony is evident, he goes on to say, in the way in which 'mental successions' retain a sense of underlying cohesion:

Endless are the divers undulations of sentiment and idea, which pass through, if they do not compose, the sentient being: yet they fluctuate according to settled laws, and every faculty keeps it prescribed limits, without any variation, or the least disturbance. (Hallam, 1943, 174)

Hallam's terminology of sentiments and ideas points to his interest in the associationist psychology of David Hartley's 1749 *Observations on Man*, which he read in the autumn of 1830 (Hallam, 1981, 379). The influence of Hartleyan associationism, which defines the mind as a series of discrete ideas that have their origins in changing physical sensations and that are linked together through an involuntary process of association, is evident throughout Hallam's essays. His

response to associationism in the essay on Cicero is characteristic: while he concedes that 'the sentient being' might be composed of transient 'undulations', he also maintains that some principle of coherence guarantees the permanence of this being. Policed by 'settled laws' and 'prescribed limits', the potentially discordant fluctuations of the psyche are modulated into 'mysterious harmony'. The problem remains, however, that this inner harmony cannot be heard by others, and that the whole self is 'unseen and unimagined' as it collapses, in the eyes and ears of other people, into fragments of being.

The affective capacities of poetry offered one possible solution to this problem for Hallam. As well as being central to his philosophical and metaphysical thinking, the question of whether the mind is in essence successive or cohesive, fragmented or unified, also helped to shape his conception of poetry. In his essay on Cicero he states that

Poetry, indeed, is seductive by exciting in us that mood of feeling which conjoins all mental states that pass in review before it, according to congruity of sentiment, not agreement of conceptions. (Hallam, 1943, 150)

Hallam suggests that poetry seduces readers by giving them an assurance of the unity of their minds, as it conjoins their mental states into a singular 'mood of feeling' founded on 'congruity of sentiment'. Hallam uses the latter phrase again in 1831, in his review of *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, arguing that 'a man [...] who is accustomed to measure his ideas by their logical relations rather than the congruity of the sentiments to which they refer' cannot help but write verse which is 'good as philosophy, powerful as rhetoric, but false as poetry' (Hallam, 1943, 184-5). This claim feeds into the conceptual division, which forms the basis of Hallam's review, between 'sensation' and 'reflection', the unmediated feeling that is the proper concern of poetry and the conscious thought which belongs elsewhere, presumably in prose (Hallam, 1943, 186). In the essay on Cicero, then, Hallam asserts that poetry stimulates congruity of sentiment in the mind of the reader, and in his review of Tennyson he implies that it originates in 'the congruity of the sentiments' in the poet's mind. It seems that, in accordance with late-Romantic notions of poetic affect, the one is dependent on the other, as the congruity of sentiment inherent in poetry enables the poet to communicate his whole self to the reader, not as fragments of being but through the medium of a cohesive mood of feeling.

Like many of what Hallam called his 'psychological opinions' (Hallam, 1943, 200), the concept of the congruity of sentiment was adapted from Hartleyan associationism. In his *Observations on Man*, Hartley comments that 'Sensations may be said to be associated together, when their impressions are either made precisely at the same instant of time, or in the contiguous successive instants' (Hartley, 1998, I, 65). This notion that the associative process is not rational, that sensations and thoughts join together not through any intrinsic affinity but through synchronicity or contiguity, is also traceable in Hallam's poetic theory, which suggests, as Eric Griffiths has noted, that 'the poetic connection is made through remembered and particular experiences whose occurrence was merely contingent' (Griffiths, 1992, 41). Hallam suggests that the experiences represented in poetry should be organised

not through ‘their logical relations’ but through a sort of emotional correspondence. Yet this is not quite the same as Hartley’s model of accidental association, because while the association of sensations is based on ‘contiguity’, defined by the *OED* as ‘proximity’ or ‘the condition of touching or being in contact’, the fashioning of poetic sentiment demands ‘congruity’, meaning ‘self-accordance, harmony of the parts of a whole, coherence’. Hallam resists associationist psychology’s contingent model of the self by suggesting that poetry reveals an essential harmony or coherence which underpins the mere contiguity of sensations. This was not always a theoretical issue for Hallam; a similar concern informed his own poetic practice. Before he wrote his 1831 essays, he sought to capture and communicate the congruity of sentiment in his verse. This aim is apparent in his ‘Meditative Fragments’, written in 1829, but, as the title suggests, Hallam ultimately fails in these poems to integrate either the fragments of his being or of his writing.

In the second meditative fragment, a poem saturated with the influence of Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey’, Hallam looks on a rural landscape and ponders the workings of memory:

It is an English scene: and yet methinks
 Did not yon cottage dim with azure curls
 Of vapour the bright air, and that neat fence
 Gird in the comfort of its quiet walls,
 Or did not yon gay troop of carollers
 Press on the passing breeze a native rhyme,
 I might have deemed me in a foreign land.
 For, as I gaze, old visions of delight,
 That died with th’ hour their parent, are reflected
 From the mysterious mirror of the mind,
 Mingling their forms with these, which I behold.
 Nay, the old feelings in their several states
 Come up before me, and entwine with these
 Of younger birth in strangest unity.
 And yet who bade them forth? Who spake to Time,
 That he should strike the fetters from his slaves?
 Or hath he none? Is the drear prison-house
 To which, ’twould seem, our spiritual acts
 Pass one by one, a phantom—a dim mist
 Enveloping our sphere of agency?
 A guess, which we do hold for certainty?
 I do but mock me with these questionings. (II, 9-30)¹

The opening lines are united in their congruity of sentiment (or sentimentality) about the delights of rural Britain, but Hallam then abruptly suggests that what should be ‘native’ feels ‘foreign’ to him. It is not immediately clear why this should be the case, but it perhaps has something to do with what he says, in his essay ‘On Sympathy’, about the ‘mingled emotions’ which memory prompts. ‘To know a thing as past, and

¹ All line references to the second and sixth ‘Meditative Fragments’ are from *The Writings of Arthur Hallam*, ed. T.H. Vail Motter (New York: Modern Language Association, 1943), 44-45 and 70-74.

to know it as similar to something present,' Hallam argues, gives 'pleasure, in so far as it is a revelation of self; but there is pain, in so far that it is a divided self, a being at once our own and not our own' (Hallam, 1943, 138). For Hallam, it seems, the past is a foreign country, in which the self thinks and feels differently. In this poetic fragment, however, the painful self-division that is highlighted by the recollection of 'old feelings in their several states' is pleasurably resolved, as past and present sentiments 'entwine' in the Wordsworthian flow of his blank verse and in the 'strangest unity' of his mind.

This strangest unity, analogous to the mysterious harmony invoked in the essay on Cicero, would seem to be a good place to finish for Hallam, an end-stopped and definitive (if inexplicable) confirmation of his psychological cohesion. But, as Seamus Perry has commented, in Hallam's writing 'an interest in the mind's dynamics supercedes the attraction of credal certainty' (Perry, 2005, 9). Hallam cannot help but speculate about the workings of the psyche, and he starts asking questions that threaten to unpick the unity that his mind has fashioned. This self-analytic tendency has already been hinted at in the lines which describe his recollections being 'reflected / From the mysterious mirror of the mind, / Mingling'. The alliteration in these lines perhaps constitutes an effort to build some congruity into this poetic fragment, but their language of reflection and mirroring carries with it implications of psychological division and duality. Building on W. David Shaw's observation that, although Hallam identified Tennyson as a poet of sensation, 'Tennyson is a poet of reflection—not simply because he meditates and broods, but because like Henry James he "reflects" his world by means of mirrors', Jane Wright has argued that Tennyson often 'worries about his ability to reflect anything—or reflect upon anything—accurately' (Wright, 2007, 82). The same can be said of Hallam here: the 'mysterious mirror of the mind' melts into an opaque 'mist', and he is forced into a succession of vague conjectures which draw further attention to the divisions within the self. The final line ('I do but mock me with these questionings') constitutes a blunt acknowledgement of the intellectual and poetic difficulties involved in psychological speculation.

Despite these difficulties, though, Hallam persevered in looking for a poetic means of resolving his psychological self-questionings. In his sixth meditative fragment he seems to have hit on the answer, delivering an impassioned eulogy on the glories of poetry:

Oh! there is union, and a tie of blood
 With those who speak unto the general mind,
 Poets and sages! Their high privilege
 Bids them eschew succession's changefulness,
 And, like eternal, equal influence
 Shed on all times and places. I would be
 A poet, were't but for this linked delight,
 This consciousness of noble brotherhood,
 Whose joy no heaps of earth can bury up,
 No worldly venture 'minish or destroy,
 For it is higher, than to be personal! (VI, 105-15)

According to Hallam, writing poetry, or, more precisely, being a poet, enables the fragments of being to be absorbed into cohesion. Poets 'eschew succession' and partake in a 'linked delight' which binds the fluctuations of their personal identity into a coherent whole, while also, importantly, tying them to other poets in a majestic 'union' that surpasses personality.

This union is founded on the timelessness of poetry. The psychological consequences of existing in time, as a changing self that is simultaneously united and divided through memory, preoccupy Hallam throughout his writings, but here he claims that poets are exempt from the restrictions of temporal being, as they transcend 'changefulness' to become 'like eternal', influencing 'all times and places.' Elsewhere, Hallam examines another way in which the self can realise this eternal unity. In his 'Theodicaea Novissima' he considers the moral and psychological implications of viewing human personality from a divine standpoint:

In the Eternal Idea of God a created spirit is perhaps not seen, as a series of successive states, of which some that are evil might be compensated by others that are good, but as one indivisible object of these almost infinitely divisible modes, and that either in accordance with His own nature, or in opposition to it. (Hallam, 1943, 210)

There is an echo of Hartley in this suggestion. In the *Observations on Man* Hartley asserts that 'all sensations and vibrations are infinitely divisible, in respect of time and place' (Hartley, 1998, I, 70), and Hallam's borrowing of 'infinitely divisible' again shows the pull that the associationist model of a fragmented and mutable mind had on his imagination. God, however, sees the mind not as divisible and successive but as indivisible and eternal, comprehending the whole self rather than its fragments.

Hallam was not always so strict in his separation of earthly and divine perspectives on the psyche. In a note on 'prayer', for example, he asserts that 'the philosophy of mind' and 'the field of practical religion' have each been led into 'infinite confusion' by 'the mistake of setting value on a thing's *origin* rather than on its character, of assuming that *composite* must be less excellent than simple' (Tennyson, 1897, I, 44; Hallam's emphases). This note suggests that theology and religious practice, as well as the philosophy of mind, must take account of the composite and fluctuating character of the psyche. For the most part, however, Hallam himself assumes 'that composite must be less excellent than simple,' and he persistently searches in his writings for a psychological or spiritual unity that can integrate the fragments of being. In the 'Theodicaea Novissima' he finds this unity in God, whose point of view binds the 'successive states' of the self in time into an eternal whole. In the sixth meditative fragment he finds it in poetry, which is presented as a medium through which poets can bind together these successive states and in which they can communicate the timeless unity that is otherwise hidden from other people.

There is, though, one problem: Hallam cannot sustain his rapturous glimpse of poetic delight in the sixth fragment. Immediately after extolling the eternal joy of poetic communion, which is 'higher, than to be personal', he is dragged back down to earth in lines that foreground both the unresolved confusions of his personal identity and his inescapable status as a self in time: 'Some minutes passed me by in

dubious maze / Of meditation lingering painfully' (VI, 116-17). This strikes the same note of bathos as was sounded in the second fragment, when Hallam's perception of his mind's strangest unity collapsed under the pressure of self-interrogation. Here, again, he struggles to maintain the congruity of sentiment that he saw as essential to poetry, and he slips instead into reflective (and painful) meditation. Poets might be capable of uniting the fragments of their being, but it seems that Hallam, by his own definition, might not be a poet, and at the end of the sixth fragment he implies that he cannot count himself among the poetic brotherhood which he celebrates. He describes a state of mental anguish which might well be his own:

But when our feelings coil upon themselves
At time's rude pressure; when the heart grows dry,
And burning with immedicable thirst
As though a plague-spot seared it, while the brain
Fevered with cogitations void of love, (VI, 128-32)

'When this change comes, as come it will to most,' Hallam continues, the only remedy for the suffering is to 'strive to build the philosophic mind' (VI, 133, 127). The allusion to 'the philosophic mind' of Wordsworth's 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality' suggests that Hallam has stoically resigned himself to the psychological adversities which he claims elsewhere that poetry can mitigate: the closing up of feeling; the mind's tendency to drift into self-involved cogitation; the pressure of time; the mutability of the self. The embodied mind is not indivisible but composite, and the painful feelings of the dry heart and the fevered brain are evidently not the sort of sensations that Hallam saw as conducive to poetry. This poem might help to explain why Hallam wrote very little verse in the last two years of his life, and instead concentrated on building the contemplative and philosophic mind that emerges in his prose. While his prose writings still cling to the belief that poetry's congruity of sentiment can repair the fragments of being, his meditative and fragmented poems told him otherwise.

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