

## **‘A fit person to be Poet Laureate’: Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, and the Laureateship**

The events of 1850 occupy a central place in any examination of Alfred Tennyson's life. The publication and success of *In Memoriam*, together with Tennyson's marriage to Emily Sellwood and his appointment as Poet Laureate, give the year an irresistible narrative appeal to biographers and critics. Robert Bernard Martin states that, between the publication of the poem in May and his accession to the laureateship in November, 'Tennyson's reputation had totally changed', and that the success of *In Memoriam* 'made him easily the most famous poet in England' (Martin, 1980, 349-50). Martin's statement summarises the broad critical consensus which identifies the publication of *In Memoriam* as the turning-point in Tennyson's fortunes, transforming his reputation and leading directly to the other felicities of 1850. However, the exact nature of the critical and commercial success of the poem, and of its influence on Tennyson's appointment as laureate, remains difficult to determine. June Steffensen Hagen alludes to these problems when she comments that the 'events of that *annus mirabilis* formed a matrix, which makes it difficult to analyse cause-and-effect relationships between them'; but she then proceeds to describe just such causal relationships (Hagen, 1979, 80). In this article I will examine the responses of critics and of the book-buying public to *In Memoriam*, and consider to what extent the reception of the poem led to a transformation in Tennyson's standing and to his appointment as Poet Laureate.

*In Memoriam* was published, according to the *Publishers' Circular*, at some point between 14 and 29 May 1850, by Edward Moxon (*Publishers' Circular*, 1850, 190). It was published anonymously, but the identity of the poet was hardly a mystery because, as Hagen notes, Moxon 'took careful pains to insure that literary London knew who had authored the poem.' (Hagen, 1979, 84) Although one reviewer famously posited that the poem was written 'by a female hand,' the vast majority of

notices unhesitatingly identified Tennyson as the author (*Literary Gazette*, 1850, 407). For Franklin Lushington, reviewing *In Memoriam* in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, the situation was doubly advantageous to Tennyson's new poem, allowing it to benefit both from 'the *prestige* attaching to his established reputation' and from the decorum of 'the most unostentatious publication' (Lushington, 1850, 499; author's emphasis).

Lushington's review formed part of what Edgar F. Shannon, in his comprehensive study of reviews of Tennyson, calls the 'overwhelming tide of laudation' with which the periodical critics greeted *In Memoriam* (Shannon, 1952, 149). The critical reception of the poem was unquestionably very positive, but, as Lushington's comments suggest, Tennyson's critical standing was high, at least in some quarters, even before the appearance of *In Memoriam*. In his suggestively-entitled 1844 book *A New Spirit of the Age*, Richard H. Horne had lauded Tennyson as 'a true poet of the highest class of genius', indicating that the poet's work was already very well-respected in the years after the publication of his 1842 *Poems* (Horne, 1844, II, 4). Reviewing *In Memoriam* in the first issue of the *Palladium* in 1850, Coventry Patmore wrote that Tennyson 'occupied a position made solitary by its eminence' even before the publication of his latest poem (Patmore, 1850b, 94). Despite the extravagance of Patmore's praise, Tennyson's eminence in the 1840s was not yet pre-eminence, but the critical success of *In Memoriam* added to an already impressive reputation rather than transforming it.

Reviewers' approval of *In Memoriam* was rooted in the assumptions of a mid-nineteenth-century literary culture that, as Isobel Armstrong has described, framed its discussions of poetry 'in a broad cultural context': critics invariably ascribed a moral or social purpose to poetry beyond the purely literary, and this approach to criticism culminated in 'the idea of some exceedingly vaguely defined national poem.' (Armstrong, 1972, 5, 21) For many reviewers, *In Memoriam* met the criteria for such a representative poem and so earned great praise. Some went so far as to abandon

all attempts at criticism: Patmore announced in his *Palladium* article that 'our safest course is to avoid detailed comment, and to make the new and crowning work of our first poet, as far as possible, explain itself' (Patmore, 1850b, 95). Similarly, Charles Kingsley in *Fraser's Magazine* proclaimed that to criticise his extracts from the poem would be 'an injustice' to Tennyson, whom he described as 'our only living great poet' (Kingsley, 1850, 252, 245). Patmore, in another notice of the poem in the *North British Review*, announced that it represented 'the high water-mark of almost everything that is admirable in modern poetry' (Patmore, 1850a, 547). *Sharpe's London Journal*, providing evidence for Armstrong's account of the preoccupations of Victorian criticism, celebrated the poem's importance in social rather than literary terms, arguing that its 'genuine sympathy with the influences which assist the cause of human progress' elevated it to 'the highest order of poetry' and placed Tennyson 'among the great and moving spirits of the age.' (*Sharpe's*, 1850, 121)

Yet there were dissenting voices, and even the most favourable reviews contained elements of disapprobation. While many contemporary reviewers identified *In Memoriam* as the definitive poetic work of its time, there has been a tendency among subsequent critics to endorse this interpretation of the poem rather too readily. Shannon asserts unequivocally that 'it was the consensus of the reviewers that *In Memoriam* was the great work which had been awaited from Tennyson's pen', and that the elegy 'was believed to embody all the qualities which the age expected of poetry.' (Shannon, 1952, 152) More broadly, Kirstie Blair, writing about the continuing cultural significance of the poem, states that '*In Memoriam* was the poem that made Tennyson "our" poet.' (Blair, 2001, 246) Considering the reception of the poem throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, there is some truth in this; but the argument that this change in Tennyson's reputation followed immediately and dramatically after the publication of *In Memoriam* fails to account sufficiently for the complexities of the early critical response to the poem, and for the uncertain

relationship between the work's critical standing and its reception outside the periodical press.

Tennyson's style was a particularly contentious issue among reviewers of *In Memoriam*. A significant number of them worried that it would impede the poem's capacity to stimulate the emotional sympathies of its readers, a key marker of artistic success in the post-Romantic affective conception of poetry that dominated Victorian criticism. Some journals praised the style of *In Memoriam*. The *Eclectic Review*, for example, welcomed the poem's 'entire simplicity, eloquent of a spirit of sympathy with humanity', and celebrated the efficacy of Tennyson's expression: 'Unerring is his speech, as opulent. It is ever *adequate* to the thought.' (*Eclectic Review*, 1850, 335-6; author's emphasis) But the suggestion of opulence left Tennyson open to charges of artificiality and obscurity that had dogged him ever since John Wilson, reviewing Tennyson's 1830 *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, had attacked what he saw as the poet's 'aversion from the straight-forward and strong simplicity of nature and truth' (Armstrong, 1972, 111).

Some reviewers levelled the same charges against *In Memoriam*; the writer in the *British Quarterly Review* bluntly censured its 'want of clearness' (*British Quarterly Review*, 1850, 292). J. Westland Marston's notice in the *Athenaeum*, although largely favourable, found fault with the intricacy of the poem's ideas and language:

we may remark that those graphic forms in which Mr. Tennyson conveys his emotions are sometimes wanting to his speculative moods. Thoughts in themselves subtle, particularly require sensuous utterance for their apprehension; but the language which the poet employs in these cases is sometimes almost as abstract as the idea which it involves.  
(Marston, 1850, 630)

Such comments demonstrate that there was no absolute critical consensus on *In Memoriam*. Indeed, the reservations of some reviewers went beyond the clarity of the poem's language. *Sharpe's London Journal*, while warmly praising both Tennyson and *In Memoriam*, suggested that it did not necessarily constitute an improvement on his previous work, and announced that only occasionally was the poem 'worthy in

fact of Alfred Tennyson!' (*Sharpe's*, 1850, 120) The review in the *Spectator*, one of the earliest notices of the poem, described it, using the expansive terminology typical of Victorian criticism, as being 'pervaded by a religious feeling, and an ardent aspiration for the advancement of society'; yet it held some reservations about the value of the poem's 'theological and metaphysical reflections', and concluded that it fell short, albeit only slightly, of the 'high and perfect excellence' characteristic of the greatest poetry (*Spectator*, 1850b, 546).

The comments in the *Spectator* encapsulate in one review the ambivalent critical response to the religious content of *In Memoriam*. The poem's theological stance, like its style, elicited strikingly divergent responses from different critics. Although Shannon states that the 'vast majority' of the reviewers of *In Memoriam* 'found the theology sound and the faith inspiring', he also quotes from the High Church *English Review*, which labelled the religious questionings of the poem as "simply and purely blasphemy." (Shannon, 1952, 149-50) Patmore, in the *Palladium*, gave qualified praise to the poem's religious openness when he commented that 'the expression of truth in dogmatic forms is carefully (perhaps too carefully) avoided.' (Patmore, 1850b, 98) Kingsley, however, was immensely enthusiastic about the poem's engagement with Christianity: Tennyson, 'hitherto regarded as belonging to a merely speculative and peirastic school', could now be considered 'the willing and deliberate champion of vital Christianity'. In fact, so convinced was Kingsley that *In Memoriam* was 'the noblest English Christian poem' for centuries, that he said it twice in the same review (Kingsley, 1850, 245, 252).

The broad spectrum of reactions to the theology of *In Memoriam* represents one aspect of a critical reception which, while being generally positive, was also qualified and uneven. Moreover, this positive reception was not without precedent, as Tennyson's reputation was substantial among literary critics even before 1850. In light of these facts, Martin's statement that *In Memoriam* 'was a triumph, both critical and popular, of a kind that is almost without parallel' cannot be allowed to stand

unchallenged (Martin, 1980, 341). The poem's status with reviewers was more ambiguous than this, and even if the critical acclaim had been as fervent as Martin and others suggest, it would have been no guarantee of the poem's wider popularity.

Literary criticism in the mid-nineteenth century was something of a closed world, and most of its output was produced by a relatively small number of writers. Although Joanne Shattock states that, by 1850, 'the days of "puffing", of deliberately orchestrating favourable notices in the press, were over,' she also comments that it was not uncommon for the friends of an author to publish favourable notices of his work (Shattock, 2002, 380). Tennyson's friends certainly provided such a service on occasion, and several of the reviewers of *In Memoriam* were personal acquaintances of the poet. Franklin Lushington's brother Edmund had married Tennyson's sister Cecilia in 1842, and their wedding day is described in the epilogue to *In Memoriam* (*Memoir*, 1897, I, 203). Martin notes that Tennyson had formed a close friendship with Patmore in 1846, and had met and become friendly with Kingsley just months before the publication of *In Memoriam* (Martin, 1980, 304, 332). It is important to take the insular nature of Victorian criticism into account in any attempt to determine the nature of the relationship between critical acclaim and popular appeal.

Some reviewers, despite their own admiration for *In Memoriam*, expressed doubts about the likelihood of Tennyson's elegy becoming more widely popular. Shannon notes that the *Atlas* predicted, on June 15, that the poem would not "find as large a circle of readers as other emanations of Tennyson's muse." (Shannon, 1952, 143) Similarly, Thomas R. Lounsbury, in his 1915 biography of Tennyson, quotes the *Examiner* of 08 June as saying that, due to its "weariness of sorrow", *In Memoriam* was "not a poem to become immediately popular" (Lounsbury, 1915, 621). In his review, however, Lushington claims that the poem's 'title has already become a household word among us', and predicts that the poem itself will soon be equally well-known. He also refers to 'that considerable portion of the public which is content to defer entirely to the influence of authority in matters of poetical opinion', thus

suggesting that the popular success or otherwise of a poem was directly dependent on the judgement of the critics (Lushington, 1850, 504, 499). However, such a confident belief in the pervasive influence of critical opinion is not borne out by studies of the Victorian market for poetry. Lee Erickson, while maintaining that ‘the general public’s awareness of poets was formed through periodical reviews’, argues that the actual content of the reviews had little impact on the popular reception of a book, ‘since what really mattered was being reviewed at all.’ (Erickson, 2002, 351, 359) If this is the case, then the supposed popular success of *In Memoriam* may be explicable in terms of the wide notice of the poem in periodicals; Shannon lists 39 reviews that appeared between its publication and Tennyson’s appointment as Poet Laureate (Shannon, 1952, 173-4).

Whether popular opinion was in thrall to that of the critics or not, the most concrete standard by which to gauge the popular success of a publication would seem to be the number of copies that were printed and sold, and by this criterion *In Memoriam* appears to have been very successful; Erickson describes it as ‘the mid-century’s poetic bestseller.’ (Erickson, 2002, 350) This claim is based on the work of Richard D. Altick, who, in an appendix to *The English Common Reader*, states that *In Memoriam* sold 25,000 copies in its first year and a half of publication (Altick, 1998, 387). Altick in turn bases his figures on Shannon’s statement that the first edition of May 1850 and the fifth edition of November 1851 were both 5000 copies strong, and on his unsupported assumption that ‘the intervening editions were at least as large.’ (Shannon, 1952, 146, 156) However, Hagen, working from Edward Moxon’s accounts held at the Tennyson Research Centre in Lincoln, states that the first edition comprised 1500 copies (Hagen, 1979, 84). While it seems reasonable to trust Hagen’s numbers, based as they are on primary evidence, the figure of 5000 is disconcertingly ubiquitous throughout biographical and critical works on Tennyson. It seems to have been originated by Lounsbury, who proclaims: ‘It shows how well recognized had now become Tennyson’s position that the first edition of the poem

consisted of five thousand copies.’ (Lounsbury, 1915, 623) Although Lounsbury provides no evidence to support this assertion, it was subsequently taken up by Harold Nicolson (Nicolson, 1925, 163), by Tennyson’s grandson Charles Tennyson (Tennyson, 1968, 247), and by Shannon.

Shannon’s source for his claim that the fifth edition had a print run of 5000 copies is Henry Taylor, one of the contenders for the laureateship in 1850. Taylor wrote in November 1851 that ‘a new edition of [Tennyson’s] “In Memoriam” is just out, 5,000 strong’, a fact which leads him to comment of Tennyson: ‘I should think he is the only really popular poet since Byron.’ (Taylor, 1888, 194) But there remains great uncertainty about the printing and sales figures for *In Memoriam* after its first edition and about their value as evidence for Tennyson’s popularity. Using Moxon’s accounts, Hagen asserts that the second edition of *In Memoriam*, numbering 1500 copies, appeared in July 1850, followed by a third edition of 2000 copies in August, and another of 3000 in November (Hagen, 1979, 84). In this she is supported by Martin, who writes that ‘only four months after publication, there were already plans for the fourth edition’. Martin also comments that 5000 copies of *In Memoriam* had been sold by November 1850, a figure which matches Hagen’s description of the number of copies produced up to that date (Martin, 1980, 341, 353). Lounsbury, however, while confirming that a second edition appeared in July, claims that the third edition was not produced until November (Lounsbury, 1915, 623), and Charles Tennyson repeats this claim (Tennyson, 1968, 248). Christopher Ricks agrees with Hagen about the timing of the second and third editions, but states that the fourth edition did not appear until January 1851 (Ricks, 1987, II, 309). Susan Shatto and Marion Shaw, in their edition of *In Memoriam*, present the same account as Ricks, dating the second and third editions to July and August 1850 and claiming that the fourth did not appear until 1851 (Shatto and Shaw, 1982, 324-6).

Evidence from contemporary publications seems to support the version of the timeline put forward by Ricks and by Shatto and Shaw. An advertisement for a



second edition of *In Memoriam* appeared in the *Athenaeum* on 13 July, and the *Catalogue of Books Published in the United Kingdom during the Year 1850* states that the third edition of the poem appeared in August and makes no mention of any November edition (*Catalogue*, 1851, 23). The imprecision with which the term 'edition' was used in the nineteenth century may have added to the confusion. Hagen notes that although Edward Moxon referred to the various printings of *In Memoriam* as "editions", he also commented "that they were "reprinted from standing type", meaning that they were technically separate impressions of a single edition. The vagueness of the 'nineteenth-century terminology' used by Moxon and his contemporaries, and the uncertainty that it perhaps bred about what exactly constituted a new edition of a text, might explain the discrepancy between the information given in the *Catalogue* and that provided by Moxon's accounts (Hagen, 1979, 203n). It is a mark of the difficulties involved in tracing the commercial fortunes of a nineteenth-century text that the secondary sources yield three wildly divergent sales figures for *In Memoriam*: 25,000 copies in eighteen months; 60,000 in 'a few months', given by Charles Tennyson without supporting evidence (Tennyson, 1968, 248); and 16,000 in six years, given by Hagen and based on Moxon's accounts (Hagen, 1979, 203n).

Yet even the most conservative of those figures suggests that *In Memoriam* was a very successful book of poetry. Erickson asserts that, despite the growth of the publishing industry during the nineteenth century, 'most new poetry books continued to be printed in editions of 500 copies', and that a typical volume would, if priced at five shillings, sell only 300 of those copies (Erickson, 2002, 345-6). According to Hagen, *In Memoriam* cost six shillings a copy when first published, and the fact that the first edition of 1500 copies sold within less than two months, and that the second edition was also quickly exhausted, amply demonstrates the poem's relative popularity (Hagen, 1979, 84). However, the cost of the poem would have put it beyond the means of a large segment of the population at a time when, in Altick's

words, 'the book-buying capacity of the worker was still to be reckoned in pennies, not shillings.' Altick also notes that *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the literary text with 'probably the greatest short-term sale of any book published in nineteenth-century England', sold 150,000 copies during its first six months on sale in 1852 (Altick, 1998, 287, 384). While the accuracy of this figure cannot be guaranteed, at the very least it indicates that the likely readership of a volume of poetry was significantly smaller than that of a novel. Hagen's figures suggest that up to 8000 copies of *In Memoriam* had been sold by the end of 1850, which was an impressive number for a volume of poetry, but which in itself is insufficient evidence for asserting that the poem immediately turned Tennyson into a national figure, or for Hagen's claim that 'it was now the whole nation, or so it seemed, that proclaimed Tennyson's genius' (Hagen, 1979, 85).

The qualification in Hagen's statement is important, demonstrating that any attempt to define the popular reputation of an author after the fact must always prove to some extent inconclusive. However, those responsible for filling the post of Poet Laureate, left vacant by the death of Wordsworth on 23 April 1850, appear to have considered Tennyson a popular poet. In the letter, dated 05 November, offering Tennyson the laureateship, Charles Phipps, Keeper of the Privy Purse, states that Queen Victoria believed that Tennyson's accession to the post would simultaneously constitute a just recognition of his 'literary distinction' and be 'in harmony with public opinion' (*Letters*, 1982, 342). This seems to offer support for the view, succinctly put by Shannon, that Tennyson's appointment as laureate was a direct consequence of the critical and popular success of *In Memoriam*: 'Tennyson was the obvious, and actually the only, choice. *In Memoriam* had elevated him to an unassailable pinnacle.' (Shannon, 1952, 154) This is an attractive interpretation of the events of 1850, but the available evidence suggests that things were not so straightforward. While the publicity surrounding *In Memoriam* unquestionably influenced the appointment of the

new laureate, the exact relationship between the reception of the poem and the subsequent royal recognition of Tennyson is less clear.

At least some of the reviewers of *In Memoriam* appear to have had the laureateship in mind when discussing the poem. Shattock has commented on ‘the ubiquity of Wordsworth in reviews of Victorian poetry, and his position as a universally accepted touchstone of poetic achievement’, but in light of his recent death, and the vacancy it created, the references to Wordsworth in reviews of *In Memoriam* are particularly significant (Shattock, 2002, 383). The *Eclectic Review* praised the poem for adhering to a Wordsworthian model in its concentration on ‘personal feelings and sympathies’ (*Eclectic Review*, 1850, 331). Kingsley gave the benefit of the comparison to Tennyson, who had, in the style and language of his poetry, ‘escaped the snares which proved too subtle both for Keats and Wordsworth.’ (Kingsley, 1850, 246) Patmore in the *North British Review* asserted that *In Memoriam* was ‘the first poem of historical importance which has appeared since the “Excursion”’ (Patmore, 1850a, 532). In the *Palladium* he made a direct claim that the poem constituted proof of Tennyson’s perfect suitability for the laureateship. The ‘brief interregnum’ opened by Wordsworth’s death had, he stated, ‘been closed by the appearance of a volume of verse, as remarkable for its excellence as for its peculiarities’ (Patmore, 1850b, 94).

However, critical opinion was by no means unanimous in the belief that the laureateship would constitute a just reward for Tennyson’s poetic achievement. Instead, some periodicals were vociferous in their condemnation of the post of Poet Laureate. Just four days after Wordsworth’s death, Thomas Kibble Hervey, the editor of the *Athenaeum*, demanded the abolition of ‘a merely nominal office, whose duties belong to the time of Court jesters, and were of even less dignity and value than theirs.’ (Hervey, 1850, 451) Two days prior to this, the *Times* had described the office as ‘no longer an honour, but a mere badge of ridicule, which can bring no credit to its wearer.’ (*Times*, 1850, 5) The impassioned language of these invectives shows that

the reputation of the laureateship within literary circles was precarious, but there is no evidence to support Hervey's claim that he was articulating the majority opinion: 'Our contemporaries for the most part seem to agree with us as to the propriety of taking the present opportunity for getting rid of the mummeries of the Laureateship' (Hervey, 1850, 584). These articles nevertheless represent a challenge to the view that the laureateship constituted the logical reward for Tennyson's newfound pre-eminence. Twentieth-century critics and biographers of Tennyson frequently propound this view, and in so doing retrospectively grant the post an importance it arguably did not possess in 1850. Edmund Kemper Broadus, in one of the few studies focusing on the office of Poet Laureate, provides a corrective to the widespread tendency of critics to overemphasise the laureateship's cultural importance in the mid-nineteenth century by claiming that 'it was Tennyson himself who gave the title its ampler significance during the forty years of his laureateship.' (Broadus, 1921, 186)

The uncertain status of the post in 1850 complicates any attempt to argue that the success of *In Memoriam* made Tennyson the only possible choice for the laureateship, but he was always going to be among the contenders for the role. While Charles Tennyson says that 'there does not seem to have been any strong party in his favour' prior to the publication of *In Memoriam*, this is not strictly true (Tennyson, 1968, 253). The periodical press, when it could set aside its disdain for the office long enough to speculate on the identity of Wordsworth's successor, frequently mentioned Tennyson's name. Hervey, in a series of articles that appeared in the *Athenaeum* between 27 April and 22 June (both before and after the publication of *In Memoriam*), predicted that the post was 'likely to fall to the lot of Mr. Tennyson'. While accepting 'the pre-eminence of his desert', Hervey disapproved of Tennyson's succeeding Wordsworth on a matter of principle, because he had already received official recognition through his annual Civil List pension (Hervey, 1850, 451). The *Spectator* of 27 April opined that there were two candidates under consideration, 'both reposing under the sun of Royal favour' (*Spectator*, 1850a, 385). In a letter to John Forster,

Tennyson speculated that this phrase referred to himself and Leigh Hunt, both recipients of government pensions, and declared: 'I sincerely hope Hunt will get it rather than myself.' (*Letters*, 1982, 324)

It seems very likely that the previous recognition of Tennyson by the government would have made him a potential candidate for the laureateship at the time of Wordsworth's death. Charles Tennyson states that attempts were made by some of Tennyson's friends to have him appointed Poet Laureate after the death of Southey in 1843 and, although their efforts proved fruitless, the correspondents in the matter included the then Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel (Tennyson, 1968, 199). In 1845, Peel wrote to Queen Victoria to advise that he had granted Tennyson a permanent pension of £200 a year after the poet had been 'brought under the notice of Sir Robert Peel by Mr Hallam', Arthur Hallam's father (Benson and Esher, 1907, II, 53). Furthermore, Martin describes a notice in the *Times* on 09 August 1847 which claimed that the Queen and the Prince Consort had 'paid their respects' to Tennyson when all three were at Esher earlier that year. While the details of this incident are unclear, Martin concludes that 'in the absence of contrary evidence it is probable that Victoria and Albert took some kind of informal notice of Tennyson' (Martin, 1980, 309-10). At the very least these episodes show that the people who had influence over the appointment of the laureate were familiar with Tennyson even before the publication of *In Memoriam*.

However, Tennyson was not the first person invited to take up the post in 1850. It was initially offered, on 08 May, to the 87-year-old Samuel Rogers in a personal letter from Prince Albert, who stated that the Queen wished to foster 'a more personal connection with the Poets of their country through one of their chiefs.' Rogers was arguably chosen for his longevity rather than for his recent poetic endeavours, and he declined the offer on the grounds of infirmity (Clayden, 1889, II, 352-3). The available evidence indicates that the first mention of Tennyson in official correspondence about the laureateship was in September, after the publication of *In*

*Memoriam*. On 07 September the Prime Minister Lord John Russell, writing to the Queen in response to a letter that he had received from Prince Albert, stated that he ‘agrees that the office of Poet Laureate ought to be filled up. There are three or four authors of nearly equal merit, such as Henry Taylor, Sheridan Knowles, Professor Wilson, and Mr Tennyson, who are qualified for the office.’ (Benson and Esher, 1907, II, 318) Although it is evident that Tennyson was not the only candidate even at this point, most sources claim that it was *In Memoriam* that ultimately shifted the balance in his favour, although not necessarily because of its critical or popular success. Stanley Weintraub, in his biography of Prince Albert, states that Albert had, in his letter to the Prime Minister, ‘exhorted Russell to name Tennyson for the Poet Laureate’s chair’ (Weintraub, 1997, 241). Weintraub does not print Albert’s letter, but Hallam Tennyson asserts that his ‘father was appointed Poet Laureate, owing chiefly to Prince Albert’s admiration for “In Memoriam”’ (*Memoir*, 1897, I, 334).

Later writers have typically accepted Hallam Tennyson’s version of events, and, given the claim, made by Hope Dyson and Charles Tennyson, that ‘there is no evidence that Queen Victoria took any special interest in the appointment of her Poet Laureate’, and given Albert’s influence with the Queen, it seems reasonable to assume that his opinion of *In Memoriam* was indeed the deciding factor (Dyson and Tennyson, 1969, 28). The poem was therefore critically important in securing the laureateship for Tennyson, although the fact that this importance stemmed from the approbation of a single individual makes Phipps’s invocation of popular opinion seem rather disingenuous. But it was not solely the Prince Consort’s admiration for the poem that led Russell to proclaim on 21 October that ‘Mr Tennyson is a fit person to be Poet Laureate.’ (Benson and Esher, 1907, II, 325) There was no institutional analogue to the conviction of the *Eclectic Review* that *In Memoriam* proved Tennyson to be ‘an eminently elevated, pure nature, sympathizing, genuine, refined’ (*Eclectic Review*, 1850, 331); or to Emily Sellwood’s belief, often cited by biographers, that, in

Hagen's words, the 'religious affirmation' of the poem proved Tennyson's religious 'orthodoxy' and therefore his suitability as a husband (Hagen, 1979, 80).

Instead, the authorities displayed a pragmatism which further undermines the argument that *In Memoriam* had effectively guaranteed Tennyson the laureateship. Russell wrote to Samuel Rogers on 03 October, asking the poet's opinion of Tennyson's 'character and position': 'I should wish, before the offer is made, to know something of his character, as well as his literary merits' (Clayden, 1889, II, 354-5). Rogers had by this time known Tennyson for almost a decade, and had been involved in securing the Civil List pension for the younger poet in 1845. In October of that year Tennyson wrote to Rogers telling him that 'Peel says that the favourable impression which the perusal of my books produced upon him was confirmed by the "very highest authorities" yourself and Hallam.' Tennyson signs off by declaring that 'I have only thanks, my dear Sir, to return you for your practical kindness: but my thanks mean more than most men's' (*Letters*, 1982, 244; author's emphasis). After 1850 Tennyson had even more to thank Rogers for: he evidently vouched for Tennyson's personal respectability, opening the way for Phipps to offer the laureateship to Tennyson in early November.

The correspondence dealing with Tennyson's appointment as Poet Laureate shows that his candidacy was not unassailable even after the publication of *In Memoriam*. The fact that Russell had to write to Rogers for information about Tennyson's 'character and position', and that Tennyson, unlike Rogers, was offered the post in a letter from a royal official rather than from Prince Albert himself, implies a certain wariness towards Tennyson on the part of those responsible for appointing the laureate. Perhaps Tennyson's marginal social position, and the reputation that his poetry had early acquired, mainly through the attacks of conservative critics like Wilson, for obscurity and sensual extravagance, made the authorities somewhat nervous. And perhaps the critical response to *In Memoriam*, with its intermittent references to the poem's 'blasphemy' and 'want of clearness', had on some level

intensified rather than soothed the official concerns about Tennyson's character that were finally assuaged by Rogers.

Those concerns help to explain why Tennyson was only appointed Poet Laureate on 19 November, seven months after the death of Wordsworth and six after the publication of *In Memoriam*. Commenting on the delay, Broadus states that the individuals in charge of filling the post could not at the time 'have detected in Tennyson the national poet that he was to be.' (Broadus, 1921, 187) The idea of a 'national poet' is of course problematic, as is the assumption that Tennyson ever acquired such status, but the argument that the events of 1850 were in themselves sufficient to transform him into a figure emblematic of his epoch, that, in the words of Charles Tennyson, 'the recluse of Somersby had become a National Institution', is particularly in need of qualification (Tennyson, 1968, 256). *In Memoriam* was without doubt a critical success, but its success was not unqualified and had in any case been anticipated by the increasingly positive response to Tennyson's work prior to 1850. Similarly, the poem's relatively strong sales figures must be seen in the context of the limited market for poetry in the mid-nineteenth century. The publication of the poem certainly improved Tennyson's reputation and raised his profile, but it did not instantly transform him into a representative national figure. However, the claims of some contemporary reviewers that it did just that have been too eagerly embraced by later critics. Tennyson's appointment as Poet Laureate, supposedly the confirmation of his status as national icon, was more a matter of contingency and personal preference than of an inevitable yielding to cultural forces and popular opinion. The complexities of these issues need to be recognised in any account of the reception of *In Memoriam* and its effect on Tennyson's reputation during the year that arguably remains his *annus mirabilis*.

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