Grief’s Journey in Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*

*In Memoriam* is a poet’s attempt to order emotions into neat divisions of line, stanza, and lyric, made all the more difficult by a notably inflexible rhyme scheme. What prevents this method of organization from causing the poem to seem cold or untrue is the freedom that the poet is afforded by its length and many divisions – Tennyson can, within his orderly forms, speak to every facet of the grief he experiences. In striking a balance between freedom of content and restraint in form, Tennyson, through his multiplicity of emotions and shifts in tone, guards against the monotony and coldness that could come with formal inflexibility. And at the same time, his rhyme and meter ground the poem and lend it the steadiness that prevents it from being too overwhelming in its scope. However, due to Tennyson’s variety of moods throughout the poem, it is also the case that everything I write here could be anticipated or even contradicted in a later lyric. It is counterproductive, then, to attempt to collapse *In Memoriam* into any one main point to be made. Instead, I will simply attempt to follow Tennyson’s “wild and wandering cries” through his process of grieving mostly in the earlier lyrics, with the second being my starting and ending point.

After a religious prologue and a philosophical discussion in the first lyric, Tennyson moves away from death and mourning as abstract concepts. His speaker stands in a graveyard by a yew tree, and imagines the tree acting upon his dead friend, and through these descriptions of physical immediacy Tennyson also communicates the situation’s emotional immediacy, a strategy helpful in bringing the reader directly into the situation after reading two lyrics that are certainly not grounded in any particular place. Furthermore, this physical location provides an
anchor for the speaker’s rapidly shifting emotions in his response to his surroundings – for instance, an early description of the tree’s imagined actions, “Thy fibers net the dreamless head,” is a surprisingly soft line, especially in comparison to the lines it sits between. “Old Yew, which graspest at the stones” and “Thy roots are wrapt about the bones” bring to mind evil intentions on the part of the tree, as “graspest” and “wrapt” imply active malevolence and “stones” and “bones” are much harsher than the phrase “dreamless head.” By bringing to mind a dreamless sleep even as death remains the primary meaning, Tennyson describes a calmer, more peaceful death, closer to rest than to torment. And in conjunction with this surprising moment of gentleness, “net” becomes slightly passive, more like the net in our modern phrase “safety net” than a net to be trapped or tangled in. Tennyson uses his ABBA rhyme scheme to emphasize this contrast, with the A lines bracketing “Thy fibers…” and referring back to each other through tone and rhyme both.

The yew tree, then, serves two almost contradictory functions – as time and death, it is malicious and nearly violent, grasping at and wrapping itself around that which the speaker wishes to keep. At the same time, however, the “Thy fibers...” line is proof that the speaker is still able find comfort in the yew tree and its ability to remain constant even as time passes, a quality now shared by his friend, and, in fact, a quality he believes he should share, with his desire for constancy in grief. This inability to change in a way protects Hallam’s “dreamless head” and also protects the speaker himself from future upheavals – nothing so terrible could possibly happen now, and that is a solace in its own way. So even while the speaker in his grief points out the malice of the tree, he recognizes its power to protect, if not to console. Tennyson therefore conceives of a way to move towards peace even if this is too early in the poem to actually begin such a movement, and in doing so is still able to maintain his objection to any
strategy of consolation that would require him to “forecast the years” and become “overworn” as he worried about in the first lyric.

The rapid shifts in tone in this first stanza serve as another explicit rejection of the “stepping-stones” hypothesis of the first lyric, in which every subsequent line would bring the poem just a little bit closer to the “higher things” that come as a result of a loved one’s death. This hopeful theory about death may yet be correct – after all, Tennyson himself once “held it truth,” and it is not unthinkable that he still does to some degree – but it is not, he shows, a model one can bring oneself to follow while in mourning, and therefore it ought not be used as a means of consolation that cannot help but be empty, unable to “catch the far-off interest of tears.” In this first stanza of the second lyric, then, Tennyson presents a rebuttal not so dramatic as that of the first lyric, as no one here will “dance with death” or “beat the ground.” However, coexisting with the speaker’s desire for steadfastness in grief, the shifts in tone in this first stanza speak to the fact that he need not maintain exactly the same type of steady emotion at all times and can experience mourning in whatever form it comes, whether that is anguish or a quieter recognition of his friend’s death, while still not betraying his friend or himself as he would if he forgot his grief entirely.

Tennyson presents a model of grieving that is conducive to shifts in tone – if he were, instead, fully committed to the “stepping-stones” model discussed previously, there would also be no room for the second stanza of the second lyric. The lines “The seasons bring the flower again, / And bring the firstling to the flock” could not be more different in subject matter from the lines that precede and follow them. Here, Tennyson consciously calls upon conventional poetic images of seasonal change in order to comment upon their relevance to the grieving process. He does not mean them to be attempts at consolation, exactly, although they cannot help
but be lighter than “And in the dusk of thee, the clock / Beats out the little lives of men.” But through this contrast, Tennyson remarks upon the lack of meaningful comfort provided by such images (in fact, he says that change, seasonal or otherwise, is not desirable to a mourner) and by bringing them up in the first place notes how far they are from the mind of his speaker. This last effect sounds rather contradictory, but it is important to note that neither the flowers nor the lambs are actually there, making these lines a sort of reverse pathetic fallacy – the speaker neither sees nor connects to his own emotions these parts of nature, and therefore the lines are beautiful but in a way numb, lacking the emotion readers of poetry have come to expect when reading about the blossoming of flowers in the spring.

This reads differently from the presentation of similar sentiments in “Break, Break, Break”: both poems contrast inherently cheerier images with the sorrow of the speaker, but the lines “O, well for the fisherman's boy, / That he shouts with his sister at play! / O, well for the sailor lad, / That he sings in his boat on the bay!” describe something the speaker is presumably actually seeing, making the emotion attached more immediate. Tennyson is therefore more willing to speak bitterly – it might be “well” for others, but is certainly not for him, and while the lightheartedness of the “sailor lad” and “fisherman’s boy” are of course not an intentional affront to the speaker, it is difficult not to feel that way when one is so detached from the happiness in one’s environment. The anger in *In Memoriam* is not apparent as it is in “Break, Break, Break,” with its abundance of exclamation points and the violence inherent even in the word “break” itself. However, both are similar in that they are laments for a dead friend and, to different degrees, discussions of the irrelevance of cloying and, ultimately, unhelpful attempts at consolation.

Again in *In Memoriam*, in Lyric VI, Tennyson takes on such false sentiments, but more
explicitly: “One writes, that 'Other friends remain,' / That ‘Loss is common to the race’?... / That loss is common would not make / My own less bitter, rather more.” Tennyson frequently returns to the idea of words or images that might console but emphatically do not as a means of clarifying the process of grieving, not yet to explain to the reader exactly what that process is, but to show what has no use in it. These first few lyrics are, in comparison to what comes later, almost detached – a religious meditation, abstract theories regarding the nature of mourning, dismissal of platitudes, even a kind of defense, in Section V, for the very writing of this poem. Tennyson corrects and refines and justifies, telling his readers about the nature of grief not exactly in an abstract manner – the emotion in throughout is too unmistakably present for true abstraction to win out – but he is surely explaining more than he is demonstrating. These first few sections, then, set up the shift that occurs from the more abstract to the immediate and freely described emotions that make up the lyrics regarding the journey of Hallam’s body, and especially the seventh lyric that serves as a bridge between these two sections of the poem. Both its description of the speaker “creep[ing] / At earliest morning to the door” and the line “On the bald street breaks the blank day” in particular speak to such sorrow and devastation that it would be difficult to begin a poem with such a line – this is too personal, too revealing, it could almost make one want to look away. Better, then, to in a way ease the reader into such deeply felt emotions through a more detached discussion of the philosophy behind the poem. Tennyson, after telling the reader about what grief is not (logical, easily dismissible, etc.) is then able to show what grief is.

"Detached," however, is not the most precise or best word. Tennyson does not ever uncouple his head and his heart – rather the opposite. The speaker cannot simply feel without thinking about the morality or precision or correctness of his feelings, and cannot think without
feeling grief that, as he has already stated, will not be banished by philosophy. It is this quality of *In Memoriam* that allows for the success of the last two stanzas of the second lyric. After all, they describe familiar poetic conventions just as the beginning of the second stanza does, only working in the opposite direction, describing natural features that invite consideration of gloominess instead of cheer. However, the presentation in the last two stanzas is more conventional – unlike the second stanza, these are descriptions of what the speaker actually sees and the emotions actually prompted as a result. Primarily, this reads as true and natural because it describes an emotion that it would be reasonable to feel at such a moment – it makes sense to contemplate the tree’s “sullen” nature while at that moment mourning a friend, but no real person would completely seriously and organically be moved to contemplate lambs and flowers with any measure of cheerfulness, so Tennyson writes the tree but not the flowers or lambs as directly analogous to his speaker’s mental state.

This is not, however, enough – there are plenty of pathetic fallacies in literature that are both deeply felt and deeply terrible. Tennyson’s, on the other hand, is particularly successful because of this lack of separation between thinking and feeling. His speaker does not only consider his emotions exactly as they first present themselves, but is always processing and improving upon them not only over the course of the poem, but within single lyrics or stanzas. In this case, the speaker sees his own sadness in the tree, but also admires it for something that is not within himself and therefore is not the most natural subject of a pathetic fallacy – the speaker is “sick for [the tree’s] stubborn hardihood,” a hardihood that he lacks. This is a reasonable progression, and the emotions described are true, but it is too refined a thought to be absolutely organic. This, however, is exactly what poetry is for. It is in fact more beautiful than a real mourner’s real thought not just because it has been put into rhyme and meter, but also because
the actual content has been given space to become all that it has the potential to be. Everything becomes better with revision, and the speaker is self-revising as he goes, clarifying and refining the function the yew tree serves for him and for the readers of this poem.

Of course, this function is not constant, as there is very little constancy in the whole of *In Memoriam*. When the yew tree is mentioned again in Lyric 39, it is still “dark,” but coming, eventually, to its “golden hour / When flower is feeling after flower,” still unable to console the speaker, but not again admired for its “hardihood.” In fact, its changing nature is now the primary focus. And in Lyric 76, the yew is “mouldering,” no longer beyond the reach of time. I seek out these contradictory points not to catch Tennyson in a lie – quite the opposite. It is a strength of *In Memoriam* that it can contain such fluidity within its rigid rhyme and meter, and that neither quality calls into question or weakens the other. That this is true for the single lyric that was the main focus of this essay, and for the poem as a whole, is an indication of the poem’s success as both a truthful record of a grieving process and, of course, as a work of art.