

“The Sad Mechanic Exercise” of the *In Memoriam* Stanza

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What makes *In Memoriam* idiosyncratic is its stanza form. The so-called “*In Memoriam* stanza”, which consists of fairly consistent four iambic pentameter lines rhyming *abba*, is perhaps not Tennyson’s own creation, but nobody ever before had developed its potentiality as he did¹. The broad and intense use of it, covering the entire three thousand lines of the elegy, is unprecedented and its presence, all the more for its recurrent use, is undeniably prominent among the other characteristics of the poem. As we read on the text, we are getting absorbed into its intrinsic music until its melancholic and monotonous cadence begins working on us. Indeed, the stanza form of *In Memoriam* is no mere technical matter, but I would say “rather more” (VI) following a Tennysonian gesture in opposition to the commonplace way of thinking.

My main concern in this study is for the “mechanic exercise” of the *In Memoriam* stanza. The phrase, due to its scientific and impersonal overtones, may sound awkward in a discussion of Victorian lyrical poetry, but it is exactly the expression that Tennyson’s speaker brings out in section V. Here he talks about the merit of the poetic utterance and states that its “sad mechanic exercise” is useful for “numbing pain” caused by the loss of Arthur Hallam:

But, for the unquiet heart and brain,
A use in measured language lies;
The sad mechanic exercise,
Like dull narcotics, numbing pain. (V. 5-8)

Although he feels restless, he can somehow bring a little peace to his mind by means of adjusting his speech into a regular verse form². The poetic utterance has a therapeutic effect in this poem. It is “exercise” because he forces himself to do so. This reminds us of Tennyson’s obsessive intellectual “exercise” in the aftermath of Hallam’s premature death in autumn 1833. “As if to escape from the anarchy of his own moods”, Jerome Buckley tells us, “Tennyson sometime in 1834 drew up an elaborate day-by-day program of systematic study, reading, and review”. Subjects ranged impressively if somewhat haphazardly from Greek to mechanics, animal physiology to theology (68). Rather than satisfying his intellectual curiosity, the motivation of his study seems to be a diversion from the unforgettable loss. But this very diversion tells itself of the very reason of its necessity. The genesis of *In Memoriam* just coincided with this extraordinary fever of study. We can suppose from this episode what Tennyson expected from “the sad mechanic exercise” of composing *In Memoriam*. His friend Edward FitzGerald notices a lack of “impetus” in *In Memoriam* and tells that it has an “air of being evolved by a Poetical Machine of the highest order”(my underlining) (Campbell 158). His utterance goes on and on in

an involuntary manner. Like a patient injected with a tranquilizer, Tennyson's speaker seems to be benumbed by his own "mechanic" verse form.

According to Michael Spiller, some poetic forms, such as the sonnet, the limerick and the triolet, have a "prescribed form, or *closed form*" whose "duration and shape are determined before the poet begins to write" (2). He goes on to say that it not just determines the proportion of a poem but also it works as "constraints upon the sorts of thing one can think, or say, or be" (4). Among the fourteen-line sonnet forms, for instance, the Italian one, whose rhyme goes *abba-abba-cde-cde*, requires a *volta* or a "turn" between the *octave* and the *sestet* while the English one (*abab-cdcd-efef-gg*) calls for a final rhyming couplet which brings a witty conclusion to the content. Naturally, the treatment of the subject is different one from the other. Likewise, although the stanza form of *In Memoriam* is not as prescribed as that of the sonnet, there seems to be a certain "programme" which decides and restricts the development of the poem's argument and to which the poet's utterance is required to conform.

Compared with that of the sonnet form, the rule of "*In Memoriam* stanza" is very loose. There is no rhyme scheme that is applied beyond each separate four-line stanza. In other words, the rhyme pattern doesn't need to go like *abba-abba-abba*, but the succeeding stanzas can mutate their rhyme freely like *abba-cddc-effe*. Such mutating repetition can technically continue as long as the poet wishes since there is also no restriction in the length. Each separate stanza is self-contained and independent as a minimum "unit". So as to preserve its stableness, there is rarely an enjambment over the stanzas (in fact, there are only a few enjambments even within a stanza) and lines proceed with constant and serene tempo like a heart's beating. As Alan Sinfield notices, there are few deviations from the norm of the rhythm and the preference for monosyllables in the choice of vocabulary enables the lines to create the slow cadence, consistent throughout the entire poem (175). It is working as a stabilizer for the speaker's troubled heart. As the rhyming pattern is foreseeable, it seems to be possible to assume how the line goes and such anticipation creates a sense of *déjà-vu* when we face up with a new stanza.

When we look at the stanza form from a larger perspective, the foreseeable character of the *abba* rhyme seems to be somewhat obscured, at least, in our first reading of the poem. Despite its stable stanza form, the speaker's peculiar way of utterance causes an obstruction if we try to make a consistent picture of the poem. Tennyson himself is reported to have divided its 133 sections into groups in accordance with the subject matter, but yet the impression of confusion cannot be wiped out³. The speaker alters the subject of his speech from section to section and he quite often comes back to the older topic just to undo it. For instance, after describing his vacillating state of mind, he shows remorse for the utterance saying, "What words are these have fallen from me? / Can calm despair and wild unrest / Be tenants of a single breast, [...]?" (XVI. 1-3). Likewise, he undoes or adjusts his statement with habitual "but"s and "yet"s, markers for sudden fits of remorse. In Matthew Campbell's exact expression, they can be regarded just as a "drift" and not a decisive turning. This reflects, Campbell writes, Tennyson's disfavour of "the logically argued certainties of philosophy" (167). How can we come to terms with such irregularity and haphazardness hidden in the fairly regular *abba* rhyme scheme?

It is difficult for the reader to grasp an overall plan of the poem at the beginning. Gradually, each stanza comes to bear meanings and finally all the incongruous 133 stanzas are put into one

configuration. Dwight Culler makes an impressive comment on the course of the poem: “*In Memoriam* will end almost precisely where it began, in a Goethean faith in spiritual evolution to a higher and higher type” (161). The part he refers to is in section I:

I held it truth, with whom who sings
 To one clear harp in divers tones,
 That men may rise on stepping-stones
Of their dead selves to higher things.

But who shall so forecast the years
 And find in loss a gain to match? (I. 1-6)

Here Goethe’s last words—“ from changes to higher changes” (Tennyson[1913] 943)—are mentioned. The tone of the speaker’s utterance is powerful but there is a flaw in this statement. He speaks “I held” instead of “I hold” and implies a psychological distance from the “truth” in the very act of enunciating it. In the second stanza, he adds, “But who shall so forecast the years [...]?” and becomes overtly distrustful of the statement. This is the first instance of his vacillation in mind. The death of Arthur gives him a recognition that he can no longer simply and blindly believe in such an optimistic idea. He, however, eventually comes back to his original faith after all the confusions or “drifts”. The restless and haphazard utterance of the speaker shows his suspension while seeking to affirm the “truth”. In this respect, *abba* can be regarded as a “turning round” movement as Christopher Ricks notices (222). In fact, as if to confirm and celebrate his coming back, the outer rhyme of the first stanza and that of the very last stanza happily overlap—“Love”/“prove” (Prol) and “loves”/“moves” (Epil). Such parallelism ensures what Sarah Gates calls the “chiastic structure” of the *abba* rhyme pattern. However, it can be recognised only faintly as a marker of direction. As I have already explicated, the general plan is barely susceptible in each drifting stanza. What is the “programme” actually working locally within a section?

It can be noticed that in *In Memoriam* the act of observation has a significant role like in some of the other Victorian poems⁴. By means of fixing his eyes intensely on a particular object, which comes up to his mind by chance or which just happens to be there in front of him, he can speak out amid a troubled condition and, thanks to the therapeutic effect of “the sad mechanic exercise”, he can momentarily be refrained from his grief. An interchange of observation and enunciation can be recognised most impressively in section XIX. After absent-mindedly watching and listening to the movement of ebbing Wye flowing through his native Lincoln, the speaker “brim[s] with sorrow drowning song” (my underlining) and is able to “speak a little then” (my underlining) as if to be encouraged by its soothing and smoothing movement:

The salt sea-water passes by,
 And hushes half the babbling Wye,
And makes a silence in the hills.

The Wye is hushed nor moved along,
And hushed my deepest grief of all,
When filled with tears that cannot fall,
I brim with sorrow drowning song.

The tide flows down, the wave again
Is vocal in its wooded walls;
My deeper anguish also falls,
And I can speak a little then. (XIX. 9-16)

Language here is euphonic as the flow of the river. He can have a secret sympathy with the Wye; “And” his grief hushed as the river is hushed and his anguish “also” falls as the wave starts again. There is a curious correlation between the river’s movement and the speaker’s mind. As the markers for simile—“and” and “also”—notify us, the speaker’s troubled heart can become expressible only when it is compared to an actual landscape and not *vice versa*⁵. This description cannot be seen simply as an example of Ruskinian “pathetic fallacy” in which the landscape reflects the speaker’s mental state.

In other instances too, the speaker quite often initiates his utterance abruptly at the beginning of a section by paying attention to some particular objects. He tends to forget the topic of the previous sections and shifts to the new idea rather frivolously. A section is often started with a casual address to an object and he easily changes the addressee from time to time even within a section. He invokes randomly various objects—“Old Yew” (I), “Sorrow” (II), “heart” (IV), “father”, “mother”, “dove” (VI), “Fair ship”, “gentle heavens” and “gentle winds” (IX) just within the first ten sections. His reliance on the object as a cue to start his utterance may well be regarded as a crucial element in the genesis of the “*In Memoriam stanza*”. The first written section of the poem is section IX. It was composed, according to the so-called Heath Manuscript of the poem, on 6 October 1833, just a few days after the news of Arthur’s premature death was reported to Tennyson (Tennyson[1982] 8-9). He received a letter from Henry Elton, an uncle of the deceased, saying, “I believe his Remains come by sea from Trieste”. The image of the ship voyage seems to haunt him for days. In the end, he brought forth a lyric as if triggered by the ship in his mind:

Fair ship, that from the Italian shore
Sailest the placid ocean-plains
With my lost Arthur’s loved remains,
Spread thy full wings, and waft him o’er.

So draw him home to those that mourn
In vain; a favourable speed
Ruffle thy mirrored mast, and lead
Through prosperous floods his holy urn.

All night no ruder air perplex
Thy sliding keel, till Phosphor, bright
As our pure love, through early light
Shall glimmer on the dewy decks.

Sphere all your lights around, above;
Sleep, gentle heavens, before the prow;
Sleep, gentle winds, as he sleeps now,
My friend, the brother of my love;

My Arthur, whom I shall not see
Till all my widowed race be run;
Dear as the mother to the son,
More than my brothers are to me. (IX. 1-20)

Here the words are laid overlapping each other. At first, it is difficult to see what is happening, but gradually the surrounding situation is revealed to us. He sticks to a few images and the words are circulating around a limited range of meanings—the “ship”, the “loved remains”, and the “sliding keel”—and they are to be replaced by different words with the same meanings. The movement of the “ship” is recurrently underlined, but the verbs “waft”, “draw”, “ruffle” and “lead” are only variants on a single refrain and they fail to convey to us any dynamic image. Instead of their imperative tone, verbs appear to be suspended, giving no impulse of momentum to the voyage—probably, they are in optative mood. In the final stanza, he addresses Arthur and declares, “Dear as the mother to the son, / More than my brothers are to me” (my underlining) (19-20). The first address to the object ends up with asserting the presence of “me” in the back-stage of the utterance. As if to correspond with the foregrounding of the self, the ship instead is gradually disappearing from the scene. It becomes gradually divided into parts—“wing”, “mast”, “keel”, “decks” and “prow”. In the second stanza, the ship’s mast is reflected in the “placid ocean-plains” and the scene becomes merely two-dimensional. In the third stanza, as the morning light spreads, the ship’s “dewy” substance becomes indistinguishable from the surrounding light like the effect of Turner’s pictures. Then the speaker’s focus moves on to the “heavens” and “winds” and he no more addresses the ship in the fourth stanza. Instead, “I” is emerging from the back-stage and the section ends with the pronoun “me”. He finally elucidates why the address to the ship is necessary for him by declaring his passionate love for the dead Arthur, but still this very “I” is a creation of a chain of meanings and is no self-existent.

The speaker’s encounter with the “other”, whether it is an animate or inanimate object, is something to do with the situation of the self. While there are a number of poems starting with an address to a particular object, what is characteristic of *In Memoriam* is that neither subject nor object aren’t given no such independent status. According to the “programme” of the “*In Memoriam* stanza”, the speaker needs to observe the other, thus enabling himself to speak out, and then his subjectivity receives some influence from the object and *vice versa*. Naturally, the borderline of the self and the other is blurred. In section II, he offers the following apostrophe to

the companion of his speech:

Old Yew, which graspest at the stones
That name the under-lying dead,
Thy fibres net the dreamless head,
Thy roots are wrapt about the bones.

The seasons bring the flower again,
And bring the firstling to the flock;
And in the dusk of thee, the clock
Beats out the little lives of men.

O not for thee the glow, the bloom,
Who changest not in any gale,
Nor branding summer suns avail
To touch thy thousand years of gloom:

And gazing on thee, sullen tree,
Sick for thy stubborn hardihood,
I seem to fail from out my blood
And grow incorporate into thee. (II. 1-16)

As a matter of course, addressing the “Old Yew” is a symbolical act to express his grief in front of the second person “you/yew”. The scene is set in the graveyard with rather stereotyped symbols of death—“Yew”, “stones”, “under-lying dead”, and “bones”. It can be noticed that the twofold relative clauses marked by “which” and “that” have a structure like a Chinese box; one box contains the other. It corresponds with the speaker’s willingness to go deeply into the tree. His gaze gradually moves downwards towards what is “under-lying”, and an imaginative vision of the “fibres” and “roots” at the bottom of the tree, intertwined with the corpses. Eventually, in the final stanza, he goes on to utter his hope of “grow[ing] incorporate into thee”. He understands that the similarity of their situation ties them up tightly. The auxiliary verb “seem” (“I seem to fail from out my blood”) suggests that his act of incorporation is involuntary as if forced by the “sad mechanic exercise” and incomplete, thus he needs to search for another object to continue his utterance. Therefore, the local *abba* movement is repeated from time to time in a way somewhat similar to an addiction to a drug. And little by little it will be contained by the larger *abba* “chiastic” movement.

As the “programme” of *In Memoriam* stanza is things-oriented, the speaker usually leaves the profound spiritual argument out from his utterance. In section XLVIII, “Sorrow”, which is evidently a personification of the speaker’s own sorrow, “holds it sin and shame to draw / The deepest measure from the chord” (XLVIII). The impressive words “sin and shame” convey to us how much he tries to avoid bringing out serious talks. In occasion of its rare occurrence, eloquence of his utterance which can be recognized when he talks about mundane things is

disappeared. In XCV, a “pivotal” section of *In Memoriam*, the speaker recollects his mystical experience where he felt himself to be “touched” by the “Living Soul”, which seems to represent both God and Arthur Hallam. The section starts with a scene on the lawn in the summer night and a process before the event is redundant as if to postpone his utterance on the crucial matters. Even the condition of the lawn, which is evidently nothing to do with the event, is mentioned. After singing songs, people gathered on the lawn gradually retreats indoor and the speaker is left alone. Then he starts to read Arthur’s “noble letter”, whose content is not revealed to us, and his mystical experience begins:

So word by word, and line by line,
The dead man touched me from the past,
And all at once it seemed at last
The living soul was flashed on mine,

And mine in this was wound, and whirled
About empyreal heights of thought,
And came on that which is, and caught
The deep pulsations of the world,

Aeonian music measuring out
The steps of Time—the shocks of Chance—
The blows of Death. At length my trance
Was cancelled, stricken through with doubt.

Vague words! but ah, how hard to frame
In matter-moulded forms of speech,
Or even for intellect to reach
Through memory that which I became: (XCV. 33-48)

The language becomes periphrastic here. Instead of his emphasis on the abruptness and the simultaneousness of the experience—“the living soul was flashed on mine” (my underlining)—his utterance fails to be direct. It requires eight words just to describe its suddenness: “And all at once it seemed at last”. The form contradicts the content. The repetition of “and” shows that the language cannot help but become fragmentary before the mystical event. Alan Sinfield comments that the “totality of the vision can be conveyed in earthly language only by means of a series of images” (106-07). And these images relate to each other only to make their meanings elusive. The speaker evokes the image of “knot” (“mine in this was wound” (my underlining)) to us. Indeed, the images are entangled and the language cannot follow the speed of the event. In the last stanza of my quotation, he almost abandons his effort to describe accurately the event and he speaks in an abstract language. *In Memoriam*’s intrinsic tempo created by its regular rhythm is disturbed by the juxtaposition of nouns with rigid sounds [t], [ch], [b], [d] and recurrence of caesuras: “The steps of Time—the shocks of Chance—/ The blows of Death”.

Finally, as he announces the invalidity of his own speech before the epiphanic event, his vision too is finished or “collapsed”.

It can be noticed that even in section XCV the particular “object” has a significant role. Without the help of the dead man’s letter, the speaker would not have been able to become absorbed into the mystical experience. Even the familiar conjunction, which helps to connect the speaker with the object, is looked at again: “So word by word” (my underlining). The “programme” for the stanza form, according to which the argument develops, is strictly preserved in this section too. The only but big difference is that he can neither dissolve the literal meaning nor bring the soothing effect to his mind by his own utterance. He can never become “one” with the letter; the physical property of the letter is just an entrance through which he can have a glimpse of the other world. And the mystical experience, in which he felt himself to be touched by the dead, is in itself a mean by which he may “heal” himself. The *abba* stanza form, which is programmed for the speaker to utter freely so as to bring a little comfort to him, cannot deal with such an absolute experience. Naturally, his language becomes awkward here. On the other hand, the things-oriented “the sad mechanic exercise” is a mundane and quotidian need. It took almost fourteen years before Tennyson published the first edition of *In Memoriam* in 1850 and even afterwards he kept on revising the work until 1884⁶. Writing one sequence of lyrics in such a pace can be seen as a daily “exercise” for “unforgetting” his dead friend while seeking to give a relative comfort to his mind. Without getting bored or becoming too much ambitious in his motif, he kept on employing the one and same verse form. The speaker of *In Memoriam* is no Lady of Shalott who dies in exchange of escaping from her confined situation; he entraps himself in the willing confinement of the “*In Memoriam* stanza” dreaming for the other realm he cannot attain at hand.

Notes

¹ Tennyson was not the originator of the rhyme. According to A. C. Bradley, it can be seen in Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella*, Psalm xxxvii, Shakespeare’s *The Phoenix and Turtle*, Jonson’s *Underwoods* and George Herbert’s *The Temper*, Marvell’s *Daphnis and Chloe* etc. but only “two or three of these poems faintly recall Tennyson’s cadence to the ear” (68).

² David Shaw notes, “Formal features of the verse, including a movement of expansion and contraction in its stanza form, help stabilize his grief” (138-39)

³ Tennyson told to James Knowles that there are nine groups in *In Memoriam*—that is, I-VIII, IX-XX, XX-XXVII, XXVIII-XLIX, L-LVIII, LIX-LXXI, LXXII-XCVIII, XCIX-CIII and CIV-CXXXI (Page 96).

⁴ Carol Christ writes that “an extraordinary consciousness of particulars” (23) is significant in the poems of Tennyson and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

⁵ Tennyson boasts of the fidelity to nature of this description. He explains that it is “[t]aken from my own observation—the rapids of the Wye are stilled by the incoming sea” (Tennyson[1969], 881)

⁶ Tennyson did not add sections after 1870, but made minor corrections until 1884 (Tennyson [1982] 24).

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