Tennyson’s “The May Queen” and “The Miller’s Daughter”, more enthusiastically received by Tennyson’s contemporaries than many of his more important works, have been almost consistently belittled and denigrated by twentieth century criticism. “The maudlin nature of this poem (“The May Queen”) is often cited as an example of sentiment turned into Victorian sentimentality. It was popular in its own day, but a change in taste has caused it to be scorned in ours” (Ryals 147). Bradley, writing in 1917, found that “…its pathos, besides being too obvious is mingled with a sickly and even false sentiment” (6). Paul F. Baum makes the devastating comment that this poem is an example of Tennyson’s “confusion” and of the fact that “it seems never to have occurred to him to inquire into aesthetic principles. With all his extraordinary gifts as a craftsman and his practical devotion to his art” (174).

No statement about Tennyson’s attitude toward the theory and practice of the poetic art could, I think, be further from the truth. It cannot be argued that “The May Queen” and “The Miller’s Daughter” have great artistic merit, because they do not. In them Tennyson is obviously working against a narrative and actualistic method which he never found congenial to his talent, but the fact remains that in these first two poems written as idylls in and around 1830 and with that pictorial attention to detail which characterizes his English idylls in the 1832 and in the 1842 volumes, he is experimenting with another mode of indirection. In the English idylls, as well as in other poems the first three volumes of 1830, 32, and 42, Tennyson is always working to develop a construct upon which to base his poetry.

Like so many poets who have lived since the beginning of the nineteenth-century, Tennyson had to formulate for himself, rather than receive, a cultural tradition. In doing so, he follows the classical pattern of the romantic artist: the period of the “Everlasting No”, or negative romanticism, preceded the period of the “Everlasting Yea”, or the positive romanticism. I hope to show that in these minor pieces Tennyson works along these same general lines of a dominant romantic pattern. The pattern in such a well-known poem...
as “The Two Voices”, of course, was built on the same structural pattern. Tennyson is working with themes, images, symbols and other devices which are to become standard vehicles for the expression of his serious, mature thought. For a thorough appreciation of the development of Tennyson’s thought and poetic practice, a better understanding of these minor poems is essential.

The main structural and thematic patterns of his *In Memoriam* are well known. The movement is from despair to hope, from doubt to faith, from the view of nature as purposeless, merely organic and mindless to sacramental view of nature which sees all created things as the outward garb of the indwelling spirit. The movement in this elegy, also an important movement of the poet’s mind, is from an initial stage being without will and without conscious self-control of his poetic powers to a time of the development of self-consciousness. His poetry, which at the beginning of the elegy is a personal lament, becomes at the end a consciously molded expression of an insight in transcendent reality, appreciated, meditated upon, and rendered articulate through a process of conscious intellection and control. All of these themes are interwoven throughout the elegy, one or the other being predominant in any given lyric; but the entire movement of the poem may be seen as movement from passivity to activity. The mind merely responds to physical stimulus, coming at it from outside in the opening lyrics. The power of will gradually reasserts itself and the active powers grow until both self-awareness and poetic power are consciously possessed and used by the mind, which at the end knows that it and it alone, through its own activity, produces a view of the world and of its own relation to it. The treatment of despair is, in this major poem, and in all of Tennyson as well, is the delineation of the mind’s passivity. The way of the soul as it is traced *In Memoriam* is the path of the soul upward from despair and passivity. Elements of these large patterns that are developed in such detail in *In Memoriam* are present form the earliest period of Tennyson’s work.

The dominant tone of the 1830 volume is a tension between two views of the world: the world seen as mutability, merely organic and purposeless, and the other view of the world seen as the outward manifestation of an indwelling, permanent spiritual reality, which the mind can perceive as the basis of order and purpose. This basic metaphysical tension is the basis of the dichotomized treatment of theme and image revealed from the earliest period of Tennyson’s work and is the source of the dichotomized treatment of theme and image which characterizes all his work. There is, for example, memory which is “bad” in that it serves the merely organic view of nature by presenting to the mind only sense impression; there is a “good” form