The Religious Question

While certain aspects of Carlyle's social views seemed objectionable to Tennyson, it was the religious sphere that gave him more trouble. To the younger poet, and to others, Carlyle, especially as he got older, seemed ultimately to view all in terms of self; he became more and more Ulyssean. The result was that his writings, as DeLaura and others have pointed out, tended to be autobiographical or biographical. Carlyle's constant reduction of all the ills of society to his own personal state had a significant effect on his relationship with Tennyson.

This concern with the self is evident in the contrast between *In Memoriam* and *Sartor*; indeed, it gives an added dimension to Carlyle's praise of Ulysses. In *In Memoriam* Tennyson 'manipulates' the poem to deal with the typical rather than the individual. Carl Dawson, for instance, makes much of Tennyson's calling the poem 'a kind of *Divina Commedia*, ending with happiness'. Dawson reminds us of the poet's own words: 'It is . . . the cry of the whole human race. . . . In the poem . . . private grief swells out into thought of, and hope for, the whole world.' 'Did Tennyson', Dawson asks, 'who struggled for answers and certitudes that were assumptions to Dante, invoke *The Divine Comedy* to move beyond the merely autobiographical or elegaic, to avoid what Carlyle called "self-consciousness"?' E. D. H. Johnson has also deplored the tendency 'to regard *In Memoriam* exclusively as spiritual autobiography'. Like Dawson, he wants the work read in a much wider context:

No longer will [Tennyson] make the mistake of seeking the meaning of his experience in the cloudlands of subjective consciousness amidst the delusions of 'vacant yearning' . . . For in the wisdom sprung from associating his loss with the common lot, he can now perceive that all along 'a human face' had shone on him from the 'depths of death within a landscape of sorrow overarched by human skies'.

M. Timko, *Carlyle and Tennyson* © Michael Timko 1988
Carlyle’s ‘skyey tent’ is here transformed into ‘human skies’; Telemachus’s vision is much different from Ulysses’s. *Sartor* remains, as Campbell implies, solely Carlyle’s personal story, while *In Memoriam* emerges, despite its private nature, as a very public poem.

One other difference between *In Memoriam* and *Sartor* serves to demonstrate the basic difference in their views, in spite of their agreement on many issues. Despite his insistence on ‘faith, and faith alone’, Tennyson never lost his pragmatic approach to problems, spiritual, political, personal. His thoughts and ideas reflect his ‘practical’ solutions to the problems prevalent in his society. Indeed, he is a gradualist rather than one who believes, as did Carlyle, in some apocalyptic event that will instantly cure the ills of the world; his concern is with phenomena rather than with noumena, with heroes who can help in this world rather than the next. Tennyson’s concern for workable solutions is far greater than Carlyle’s, whose ‘dilemma’ prevented him from considering any compromises. It is this difference that accounts for the conclusion of *In Memoriam*, one that is not a *Sartorian* cry for ‘natural supernaturalism’, but is, instead, a plea for waiting (that ‘one far-off divine event’) and an ‘exultant proclamation of progress toward the earthly paradise’ (Johnson, p. 145). Again, Tennyson clearly emerges as Telemachus to Carlyle’s Ulysses. Carlyle is a Jeremiah, denouncing his age, a ‘heaver of rocks’; Tennyson is one whose outstanding trait is his ‘extraordinary sensitiveness to the moral and intellectual climate of the period and his capacity to communicate it’.

Tennyson’s relationship to Carlyle, then, is an ambivalent one. While demonstrating the Sage’s influence on Arnold, Dickens, and others, for instance, Tillotson says almost nothing at all about Tennyson in this connection. I have already suggested some reasons for this, not the least of which is Tennyson’s fierce independence of spirit and intellect. He must have been impressed by the earnestness of the older writer, but, inevitably, Tennyson must have found his dogmatism and narrowness difficult to take and impossible to follow.

Carlyle’s ‘Calvinism without the theology’ must have been both exhilarating and disappointing. Tennyson had enough scepticism in him to be impressed by Carlyle’s ideas about what constituted true religious belief, especially those concerning the ‘Eternal Verities’ or the ‘Divine laws’ of the universe, and those which