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Poetic Devices in *In Memoriam*

Miho Nishimura

In Memoriam, which consists of about 2900 lines, is a unique poem. It contains 131 sections, besides Prologue and Epilogue, and all of them can be read independent of the whole poem enough, but each of them has a connection to the other sections. It is only when we read the whole poem thoroughly that we can find true beauty of each section.

Though *In Memoriam* was highly appreciated by his contemporaries, it is largely because Tennyson struggled with the religious and scientific problems and gave them much comfort. Critics still pay much attention on the poem's religious and representative qualities, but the structure of the poem has also been discussed more seriously since the beginning of this century. In this thesis, taking the modern representative criticisms on its structure into account, we shall examine the various devices in *In Memoriam*.

I. Form and Structure

Opinions have been divided on whether the structure of *In Memoriam* has some definite form or not. Some critics including Bradley, who thinks that there is 'a certain amount of definite and significant structure'¹⁾ in the poem, have endeavored to group the sections together. But the fact is that they do not seem to have discovered a decisive rule for arrangement of sections, though their examination was helpful for us to understand the poem better. Especially the result of Bradley's experiment tells us that the sections of the

poem are not always arranged chronologically, which implies that the poem is fictional rather than autobiographical.

Mays guesses that Bradley's approach to the poem is improper and he himself tries to vindicate his own argument that the structure of *In Memoriam* has no definite form by relating it to Tennyson's hesitated attitude toward form seen in the poem:

It is particularly important to recognize how closely it [Tennyson's divided attitude towards poetic form] bore on the difficulties facing him when he came to combine his many lyrics into a single poem.²⁾

Besides Mays, there are critics who think the structure of *In Memoriam* to be virtually formless but opinions have also been divided on whether they appreciate it or not. Baum regards it as a damaging deficiency of the poem:

The real charge . . . against *In Memoriam* is . . . that it does not satisfy what Arnold called "the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty" . . . it [*In Memoriam*] lacks form and coherence (what Arnold called, after Goethe, architectonics) and it lacks that clearness and sureness of treatment which its subject emphatically demands.³⁾

On the other hand, Basil Willey remarks that the poem succeeds 'largely because it lacks a more formal structure'⁴⁾. Moreover, Willey thinks it the merit of the formless structure that 'the various sections come straight from Tennyson's heart' and the poem is 'free from epic poem'. Jerome Buckley also appreciates the virtually formless structure of *In Memoriam*:

Diary-like, the virtually formless structure of *In Memoriam* gives it one particular advantage over other major elegies; the poet may explore at leisure the idea of death and all the contradictory emotions it engenders in

him; he may contemplate his grief in time and make due allowance for his slow psychological recovery.’⁵⁾

Some of deficiencies of *In Memoriam* pointed out by Baum are really convincing. We have to admit that ‘The poem includes more kinds of subject than can be successfully moulded into a real unity. . . . there are also many *excursus*, digression, footnotes, irrelevancies’⁶⁾ But this statement’s examples that he mentions are not necessarily convincing: ‘his brothers and sisters and their personal affairs, details about Arthur Hallam which he fails to make interesting to us though they interest him closely, details about the family’s moving from Somersby and the Christmas celebrations’ do not seem so irrelevant to the main theme of the poem as Baum points out. Indeed we must admit that the poem does not have such a strong unity as he desires, but the unity he demands of *In Memoriam* is that of a short lyric, so his criticism is out of place.

We cannot say that *In Memoriam* is a collection of fragments because it does not have a decisive rule for the arrangement of the sections. As we read it, we never fail to feel Tennyson’s intention to make us find the inter-relationship of the sections. Undoubtedly, the poem is designed to be comprehended as a whole. As Bradley remarks, *In Memoriam* is indeed ‘more than mere “Fragments of an Elegy” (the title once thought of by the author, *Memoir*, I. 293) and justifies the name by which he sometimes referred to it, “The Way of the Soul” (*ib.* 393).’⁷⁾ *In Memoriam* does not have a strict unity of the structure; it has ‘only the unity and continuity of a diary’⁸⁾, as Eliot says. But it is not like a diary; *In Memoriam* actually has elements of a diary, but it is not so simple as a diary; it is surely an elaborately designed work of art. *In Memoriam* does not have the unity of a short lyric but it does the unity of its own. Tennyson

uses various techniques to give the poem the unity of its own and attain a high level of artistic perfection in *In Memoriam*.

II. Recurrent Images

Among the various elements which combine to make us feel the unity of the poem, the most outstanding one is recurrent images. Tennyson repeatedly uses the same or similar images in the poem. Among the recurring images, most striking is the image of darkness and light. The darkness of the 'yew' in the graveyard (ii) and that of the 'house' where his friend lived (vii) suggest the poet's gloom of sorrow. 'The dark' to which 'My [the poet's] will is bondsman' (iv) refers to the darkness of night and the dark world of sleep. 'The jaws/ of vacant darkness' in which the poet thinks it best 'to drop head-foremost' unless 'life shall live for evermore' (xxxiv) is the entrance of death. On the other hand, 'light' suggests hope (xxx), calm of the world (xi), the poet's vigour (1), Hallam's angelic figure after death (xci), etc. The poet's gloomy mood and the outside world or his heart laden with sorrow and his lighter mood are contrastively depicted again and again: the spot where he is standing in the graveyard is darkened by yew and other trees and it is isolated from the noisy outside world (ii); he comes to his friend's house before dawn and the day breaks irrelevantly to his still dark heart (vii); he is compared to a blind person who is genial to his relatives and behaves happily before them but 'His night of loss is always there' (lxvi).

In several sections, the poet's acts or state of mind from night till dawn are depicted. His inside voice on the dawn of Christmas, 'Rise, happy morn . . . Draw forth the cheerful day from night: / O Father; touch the east, and light / The light that shone when Hope was born' shows his wish to

overcome sorrow and to depend on hopeful thought (xxx). On the dawn after the night when the poet goes through the spiritual intercourse with the soul of his dead friend, he hears a breeze say 'The dawn, the dawn' and he sees East and West mix their dim lights. The scenery of the daybreak depicted in the section suggests the dawn of the poet's heart (xcv). Sometimes 'light' is also that which stimulates the poet's imagination. One night, the moonlight falls on his bed to make him imagine the graveyard under which his friend rests (lxvii). In Epilogue, the moonlight lights the house where the married couple stays and makes us imagine their future child who will become 'a closer link' between 'us and the crowning race'. The moonlight, here, is the important link between the epithalamium and the conclusion of the poem, in other words, it helps the poet draw a conclusion of the problems which have been treated in the poem from the speculation on the married couple.

It is the section-sequence structure that helps the recurrence of an imagery to have a cumulative effect. Though we just imaging limited things from a word in a section, various images of the same word used in the earlier sections invite us to associate the word with various thing. Take the imagery of 'water' or 'sea' in the poem for instance. 'The seas' of section xi are 'clam' but in the previous section the poet fears that the ship bearing the remains of his friend has a rough crossing; the poet associates sea with death:

... if with thee the roaring wells
 Should gulf him fathom-deep in brine;
 And hands so often clasped in mine,
 Should toss with tangle and with shells.⁹ (x)

The image of death that the sea thus brings up in section x makes us feel the seas described in section xi not only peaceful but also ominous.

Hands are used as a synecdoche in several sections. The hand for which the poet used to wait at the doors of his friend's house is that which makes him feel the friend's existence when he imagines it; The hand is symbolic of the friend's body which once contained the living soul. The poet repeatedly refers to the hand of his friend. It is the hand which used to please and will comfort him, and the one by which he could or can feel the existence of the friend strongly. In addition, as Buckley also remarks, 'elsewhere the hand is the symbol of aspiration — "I reach lame hands of faith" — or of agency — "the dark hand [death] struck down thro' time," or "Out of darkness came the hands / That reach thro' nature, moulding men"',¹⁰⁾.

In this way, the images of darkness and light, water, hand recur in the poem. The prosperous condition and the unsuccessful one of life, man's personal grief and the indifference of the nature, one's mood buried in grief and his lighter mood, are contrastively and often symbolically described; the sea is almost always associated with death; 'Hand' is used as a synecdoche for the dead friend's physicality and it is also the symbol of aspiration in the poem. These recurrent images, obtaining a cumulative effect by section-sequence structure of the poem, cause us to feel the harmony and the consistency of the poem.

III. Reflection and Redefinition

Though many critics have offered various opinions on the structure of *In Memoriam*, they have not paid much attention to the movement of the poem. Alan Sinfield, however, attaches greater importance to it:

The typical movement of the poem does not follow a pattern of logic, or even of simple thought association.

The governing factor is the rise and fall in the poet's feelings; the poem moves in waves from one high point of emotional intensity to the next, with the passages in between building up to and leading away from these points.¹¹⁾

Indeed Tennyson on several occasions uses the very metaphor of 'waves' for his changing emotions — in section xix, for example, he compares the movement of his grief to the tide of the river Wye.

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. (xix)

While thus *In Memoriam* proceeds like waves, to grasp the essential qualities of his emotion, the poet uses the way, what Sinfield calls, 'redefinition'¹²⁾, seeing an event or his sentiment from another angle and restating it in other terms. In section xiii and section xiv, the main message seems much the same at first glance. The two sections try to express the feeling of the poet who cannot regard his friend's death as the fact, in different ways. In section xiii the poet tells of his tears which fall because of sorrow and then he asks 'Time' to teach him that he does not suffer in a dream — for the poet thinks it because he feels himself in a dream that he can afford to shed tears over the loss of his friend. In section xiv he states that if he saw the dead friend return alive by ship and he touched the friend's hand in his illusion, he would not feel it strange. The main thoughts underlying both sections are almost the same, but the common idea has a subtle aspect which is difficult for the poet to express in one section. Therefore, it seems better to think that in section xiv, the poet tried to convey some sentiments he failed to imply in the previous section. In section-sequence

structure the poet consumes the whole passion in his heart by writing a part of it in one section and the rest in another.

In some cases the poet gradually develops his first idea into the completed one which is closer to truth than before, as the section proceeds. In section xxiii, looking back upon the days he spent with his friend, he states that all things were beautiful and good while his friend was alive. But in the next section he becomes skeptical about this statement. Feeling his statement wrong, he tries to find an answer to the question why men want to glorify their past. In section xxv the poet affirms the answer he found in the previous section: The life he spent with his friend was not necessarily 'pure and perfect'. But he finally concludes the argument by saying that there was a right reason to make him think the life spent with his friend brilliant. Compared with the first idea in section xxiii, the idea the poet gained in section xxv is more correct one. In these succeeding sections, the poet develops the view of his life which he spent with his friend and comes to a satisfactory conclusion.

The relation between the poet and his dead friend in past is also repeatedly defined with various comparisons. In section lx, the relation of the poet to his dead friend is compared to that of some poor girl to her lover whose rank exceeds her own.

He past; a soul of nobler tone:
 My sprit loved and loves him yet,
 Like some poor girl whose heart is set
 On one whose rank exceeds her own.

Here the poor girl to whom the poet is compared excessively worries about the difference of their social positions between herself and her lover. She comes to have a pessimistic view of his love and grieves about her miserable state. In section

lxiv the relation of the poet to his friend is compared to that of a farmer who still lives in his native land to his old friend who rises to a higher position and lives far away from the land. In section lx only the girl's emotion is treated but in section lxiv both sentiments of the farmer and his friend are expressed. In the latter case, it is emphasized that they think of each other but they live too far apart to know mutual friendship: it is their being spatially separated rather than the social and intellectual difference that causes us sadness in this situation. In section xcvi the relation between the poet and his friend is compared to that between a wife who is not able to understand, but sure of the greatness of her husband and of his love, and the husband who does not pay so much attention to her as before but still loves her. Interested in different matters, they live in spiritually different world, but it does not make her feel humiliated or doubt love of her husband. These three sections visualize the poet's changing interpretation of the relation between himself and his dead friend. Section lx expresses the poet's strong inferiority to his friend, section lxiv the sad reality that they live in the distant world where they can have no communication in spite of that they think of each other, and section xcvi the poet's having confidence that he is still loved by his dead friend. We can see the poet recovering his confidence in these sections. In this way, Tennyson redefines his interpretation of the relation between himself and his friend, as he feels it, by visualizing them with different comparisons, in different contexts, which as a result helps us to know the change of his sentiments.

The poet's state of mind is repeatedly defined not only by the different comparisons but by the changed attitudes toward the same object. In this case, the poet alludes after a period of time to an earlier event so that the readers may

notice the change of his sentiments soon. Besides, he uses the same or almost the same phrase or word in the present section as were used in the earlier sections. Section vii and section cxix are the lyrics composed on the assumption that the poet revisits the house where his friend used to live:

Dark house, by which once more I stand
 Here in the long unlovely street,
Doors, where my heart was used to beat
So quickly, waiting for a hand, (vii)

Doors, where my heart was used to beat
So quickly, not as one that weeps
 I come once more; the city sleeps;
 I smell the meadow in the street; (cxix)
 (emphasis, added)

In this way, section ii and section cxix have the arrangement of the same words, to suggest that the poet is standing in front of the same house again. Each description of the scenery around the house reflects the poet's sentiments. The poet comes before the house in section vii soon after his friend died. The epithet 'dark' refers not only to the external appearance of the house but also to his heart darkened by the absence of his friend. The street where he is standing seems to him 'unlovely' and 'bald', and the doors call to his mind one of his bygone happy days when he waited for the friend's hand that can be clasped no more' and make him feel keenly the absence of the friend. The description of the dawn assumes an ironic tone:

He is not here; but far away
 The noise of life begins again,
 And ghastly through the drizzling rain
 On the bald street breaks the blank day. (vii)

' "The noise of life" contrasts with Hallam's deadness and

suggests that human existence is just a confused din; the dawn is not beautiful (as we expect dawns to be) but ghastly; the weather is horrible'¹³⁾ The poet feels it unpleasant that the day breaks as usual independently of him. In section cxix, the poet recovers from the depressed state. He revisits there neither 'as one that weeps' nor 'like a guilty thing'. Here we find him to accept the nature toward which he seemed to have even a hostile feeling in the previous visit:

I smell the meadow in the street;

I hear a chirp of birds; I see

Betwixt the black fronts long-withdrawn

A light-blue lane of early dawn,

And think of early days and thee, (cxix)

He smells 'the meadow' in the street which he felt 'unlovely' before and the day now breaks not 'ghastly' but refreshingly. The morning is far from 'blank': the poet sees its various aspects. He remembers his friend again, feeling not his absence but his presence, as is suggested by his being addressed as 'thee' not referred to as 'He'. Both of section ii and section xxxix are written on the same assumption that the poet is looking at the yew in the graveyard under which his friend is lying. The yew and the dead friend are described in the same words in section xxxix that are used of them in section ii:

Dark yew, that *graspest at the stones*

And dippest toward *the dreamless head,*

To thee too comes the golden hour

When flower is feeling after flower;

(xxxix)

Old Yew, which *graspest at the stones*

That name the under-lying dead,

Thy fibres net *the dreamless head,*

The roots are wrapt about the bones. (ii)

Though the yew 'whose fibres net the dreamless head' does not bear flowers and indeed looks dark in section ii, it looks much darker to the poet who is buried in grief. His assertion that the yew remains gloomy forever reflects his desire to 'let darkness keep her raven gloss' (i). Gazing on the yew, he finally seems to 'grow incorporate into' it, which also suggests his wish to make a contact with his dead friend. In section xxxix, seeing the same yew answering his random stroke 'with fruitful cloud and living smoke', he is obliged to accept the reality of the yew: 'To thee too comes the golden hour / When flower is feeling after flower'. But the poet, who still feels depressed, is inclined to think that the yew 'passes into gloom again'. Though the yew is traditionally said to be a simple emblem in graveyard laments, in these sections, the poet thinks the yew the symbol of perdurable grief and tries to identify the yew with himself. He wants the yew to keep its gloomy at any time as he does. Section xxxix is thus related to section ii in that they are about the poet's views on the yew in different seasons, but as the expressions 'What whispered from her[Sorrow's] lying lips?' (xxxix), 'What whispers from the lying lip?' (iii) suggest, these lyrics are not only about his unchangeable sorrow but also about the nature of sorrow in general.

In addition to these sections, the sections about Christmas, spring, and about the anniversaries of Hallam's death also show the poet's changing sentiments by the process of 'redefinition'. The examples which we have examined can be divided into the two kinds of 'redefinition' — by which the poet can 1. express his subtle and complicated feeling completely or examine a problem and draw its conclusion in the succeeding sections, 2. represent the gradual recovery from the depressed mood, using different comparison or by showing

his different attitudes to the same objects. Moreover, the latter way of 'redefinition' may be said to promote the development of the main story in the poem: the lyrics composed by this way are on the whole movement of the poem and help the poem's movement proceed, but the former way of 'redefinition' does not serve to develop the main story of the poem. The arguments of the lyrics composed in this way of 'redefinition' go round and round in circles and they tend to deviate from the main stream of the story. Such digression seems to interrupt the straight progress of the poem as a whole.

We have examined various elements of *In Memoriam* to make its nature clear, and we found that the poem has not only an artistic aspect but also an artificial one. Tennyson uses various devices to compose such a long poem and make it artistic — recurrent images, repetition of words, 'redefinition' process, rhetoric, etc. And such devices also make the poem a little artificial.

Paul F. Baum mentions the lyrics on the poet's brothers and sisters, on the family's moving, on the Christmas celebrations, etc. as one of the causes of the poem's disunity, because he thinks that such lyrics are irrelevant to the main theme of the poem. But actually they are not so irrelevant to the main theme. Each of them teaches us a lapse of time in the poem and the poet's occasional sentiments as the other lyrics do. Baum also seems to regard the sections of reflection as superfluties that bring about disunity. But can we say that we would have seen more ideal unity in the poem, if it had not contained such lyrics as he thinks superfluties? Without the lyrics of reflection, we would have found in the poem more obvious breaks between the sections far from perfect unity. Of course we must admit that *In Memoriam*

does not have, as it were, a strong cable, as a link between the sections. But we can say that the sections of the poem are tied up with a long weak string. *In Memoriam* has the continuity and the unity of its own. The sections of reflection may be felt digressions, but they are at least a part of the long weak string which ties the sections up. In addition, one cannot recover from deep grief suddenly but only gradually. To express such gradual recovery faithfully, the lyrics of reflection are necessary for the poem as a whole.

Notes

- 1) A.C. Bradley, *A Commentary of Tennyson's In Memoriam*, p. 19.
- 2) J.C.C. Mays, '*In Memoriam: An Aspect of Form*', p. 263.
- 3) Paull F. Baum, "Some Deficiencies of *In Memoriam*", see Robert H. Ross, p. 201.
- 4) Basil Willey, *More Nineteenth Century Studies: A Group of Honest Doubters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 80.
- 5) Jerome Buckley, "*In Memoriam: The Way of the Soul*" in *The Growth of a Poet*, quoted in Robert H. Ross, *In Memoriam: An Authoritative Text, Background and Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1973), p. 228.
- 6) Baum, "Some Deficiencies of *In Memoriam*", see Robert H. Ross, p. 202.
- 7) Bradley, *A Commentary of Tennyson's In Memoriam*, p. 19.
- 8) T. S. Eliot, "*In Memoriam*" in *Essays Ancient and Modern*, quoted in Robert H. Ross, *In Memoriam: An Authoritative Text, Background and Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1973), p. 175.
- 9) All quotations from *In Memoriam* are from *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (Burnt Mill: Longman, 1987).
- 10) Buckley, "*In Memoriam: The Way of the Soul*", see Robert H. Ross, p. 230.
- 11) Alan Sinfield, *The Language of Tennyson's In Memoriam* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), p. 28.
- 12) *ibid.*, p. 29. Sinfield relates the process of 'redefinition' to the principal aspect of the Romantic side of the poem.

13) *ibid.*, p. 126.

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