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Author(s)	Ono, Keiko
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Dreams in *In Memoriam*

Keiko Ono

In Memoriam is a personal record of Tennyson's inner struggles, caused by the sudden death of his dearest friend A. H. Hallam. In reading this elegy we can trace how the poet finally won elated peacefulness, overcoming black despair. I want to focus my attention on sleep and dreams in following the progress of this elegy. Dreams seem to be a clue to his salvation from mental suffering, for the crucial revelation occurred first in a trance and then in a dream. For this reason, I want to certify how deeply dreams are concerned in the restoration of faith, by tracing the clue mentioned above.

Tennyson's first reaction to Hallam's death is to feel overwhelmed with the grievous feelings to that he has vainly led a wretched life. So even in sleep he can not get free from the unutterable woe.

To sleep I give my poweres away;
My will is bondsman to the dark;
I sit within a helmless bark. (*In Memoriam*, IV, 1-3)

While in sleep the will does not work. Tennyson compares the state of mind to a helmless bark. His mind sails in the dark like an unmanageable ship. There is no controlling the clouds of nameless trouble. He refers not only to the immediate sorrow following Hallam's unexpected death but also to the sense of loss that has taken hold of him since his early years. The heaviness of his heart did not just begin with the death of his dearest friend. It was long nourished in his heart, and manifests itself in the shape of his sorrow over Hallam's untimely death. When in sleep his heart cries out without any restriction of the will. His reason tries to exercise control over the depressed heart only after the waking of his will in the morning.

In the meantime Tennyson experiences, as he had often before in his boyhood, a trance which might be deemed as a daydream.¹⁾ His soul soars,

like a dove, up into the sky, leaving this world below (XII). He is so anxious about the ship, which is sailing for England with Hallam's corpse on it, that his nerves alone fly like a bird to see if it is in safety. It is not until his soul returns to the body after having perched on the mast that he realizes he has been in a trance for an hour. He cannot stay quietly, just waiting for the arrival. His visionary flight in this section reminds us of the unpublished fragmentary lines, which proved to be the germ of *In Memoriam*. There, too, Tennyson refers to his experience of visionary flight.²⁾ In just the same way his restless soul easily gets out of his body, seeking for the shadow of the man he loves.

At another time he compares himself to a widower (XIII). He beholds the dead person in his sleep, and in spite of himself moves his arms, feeling for the body. Then he is made to realize the loss anew. It is only as delusion that dreams can be any comfort. But at the same time he shows enough placidity to cry over the reality, and again his fancy makes a visionary flight. The unstable state of the poet's mind makes him stray between in and out of dreams.

In section XV, Tennyson describes his wild unrest on a stormy night, which forms a striking contrast with the calm despair he experienced in section XI. He wonders if the antipodal feelings (calm despair and wild unrest) can co-exist in one mind. Like a mad man he gives free rein to his fancy, so that he gets into greater embarrassment. There is yet very little hope of salvation from the suffering. The confused state of mind is likened to the "unhappy bark" that aimlessly wanders on the night sea only to sink. This simile recalls section IV: "I sit within a helmless bark". There he was on a helmless bark because he gave his power away to sleep and therefore lost control of his will. Here again he uses the image of a bark. He is so afflicted that even when he is awake he is thrown into the fusion brought about by his fancy.

There are three Christmas scenes in *In Memoriam*, which are thought to be the turning points. The beginning of the first Christmas scene is dreary. The world seems to be wrapped in deep silence. He hears the bells in the distance as if he were surrounded with thick mist, shut out from the outer world. In this solitude he looks back upon the passing year: "This year I

slept and woke with pain, I almost wish'd no more to wake" (XXVIII, 13-14). He has been suffering night and day so that he even wishes no more to live. So great has been his agony.

Nevertheless, by and by he comes to believe in the immortality of the soul. He makes a statement on the assumption that each human life is eternal. Presuming Hallam to be only asleep, Tennyson finds some compensatory solace.

If Sleep and Death be truly one,
And every spirit's folded bloom
Thro' all its interval groom
In some long trance should slumber on. (XLIII, 1-4)

If it be true, he can expect Hallam to awaken in the days to come. Sleep is regarded as a link between this world and the other. The flower of the soul slumbers, dreaming of the traces of the past. The conception that identifies death with sleep is, for instance, found in Hamlet's soliloquy.³⁾ Death can be easily associated with sleep, for the will ceases to function in both states. Tennyson, however, is beginning to speculate about death in a wider field of vision. He images a picture of the afterworld, which makes us imagine the transmigration of the souls.

Subsequently he compares the relation between this world and the other to that between mature life and the months of infancy (XLIV). Just as man forgets the life of infancy when grown up, so the dead will slip the memory of this life in the netherworld. Yet the deceased may at times remember the days on the earth for some reason or other, in much the same way as man occasionally recollects the infant days. Tennyson heartily wishes that "a dreamy touch" will remind Hallam of the days before he passed away. In this case, dream is deemed as something mystic which has the power to awaken the dead.

The comparison between the life on the earth and that up in the heaven is continued (XLVI). Time will exert no more influence in the heavenly world, hence we will be free to review our conduct in the past. In a poem named "Memory", Tennyson says, "Hope is born of Memory/Nightly in the house of dreams." (lines 21-23) Heaven seems to have something

common with the world of dream. The bond of time being loosened, we can freely go back to the past. It is possible to assume, he is gradually coming to equate the celestial world with that of dream.

In the next section (XLVII) he takes greatest delight in dreaming of the days when he will meet with Hallam in the world to come, both of them sitting at an endless feast. To that reverie, he thinks, no other dreams can be comparable. He makes efforts to believe that everything goes by the divine providence and that everything, even though it may be under severe conditions at the moment, will result in good in the end. The only thing he can do is to have firm faith in it.

But at the same time he is seized with a terrible feeling of restlessness.

So runs my dream: but what am I?
An infant crying in the night:
An infant crying for the light:
And with no language but a cry. (LIV, 17-20)

He is made to realize that he is merely a helpless baby crying in utter darkness. His dreams cannot be of any help in relieving him of greater doubt. Even nature, which troubles us by bringing such nightmares, seems to be in conflict with God: "Are God and Nature then at strife, / That Nature lends such evil dreams?" (LV, 5-6) Pierced with such anxieties, he still gropes for the larger hope in a feeble voice.

I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,
And gather dust and chaff, and call
To what I feel is Lord of all,
And faintly trust the larger hope. (LV, 17-20)

If a man is only to fall back to dust by the strong will of nature, then he will be no more than a monster.

Who loved, who suffer'd countless ills,
Who battled for the True, the Just,
Be blown about the desert dust,
Or seal'd within the iron hills?
No more? A monster then, a dream,
A discord. (LVI, 17-22)

The dream here, used in apposition with monster or discord, is indicative of a nightmare. The answer to his calling is behind the veil, which is the next world: "What hope of answer, or redress?/Behind the veil, behind the veil." (LVI, 27-28)

The main theme of the following five sections (LXVII-LXXI) is night, sleep and dream. One night, in his room he indulges in reverie under the moonlight, picturing to himself the church where Hallam is buried. He vividly imagines that the walls there will be also moonlit with silver light. But as the moonlight fades away, he falls into sleep, closing weary eyes. And when he wakes up in the morning, "the mist", like a veil, has already covered the church which was so clearly seen in the dream (LXVII, 9-16). With morning coming on, the vision vanishes to be concealed in a veil. Night is preferred here because it affords him a chance to fall into reveries. Also in his early days (1827), he praised the superiority of the night, touched with the moonlight ("The Walk at Midnight"). The poet's imagination, he says, grows vivid at night, especially under the serene moonlight. So in this section, too, Tennyson spreads the wings of his imagination, animated by the charm which night and moonlight bring about together.

In the dream of the succeeding section, he sees a plaintive image of his friend.

When in the down I sink my head,
Sleep, Death's twin-brother, times my breath;
Sleep, Death's twin-brother, knows not Death,
No can I dream of three as dead. (LXVIII, 1-4)

The idea that sleep is death's twin-brother has its origin in *The Iliad*.⁴⁾ It is also interesting to take into account the fact that Shelley considers death as night's brother and sleep as night's child.⁵⁾ In case of Tennyson, a kind of paradox is perceived in his idea. Sleep does not know death because of the very fact that the one is the twin-brother of the other, so that the poet cannot dream of his friend as dead in his sleep. But Tennyson cannot make out the reason that Hallam's eyes look so mournful in his dream. Then he wakes up to find that his dream was affected with the sorrow of the previous afternoon. Tennyson's experience

foreshadows Jung's theory that one's emotions prior to sleeping cast their shadows on one's dreams.

The dreary vision continues to the next section. He dreams of the noisy streets black with smoke and frost. There will be no more spring because the nature's ancient power is lost. He meets with scoffs and scorns from young and old. They call him a fool that wears a crown of thorns. But then he finds an angel of the night who smiles at him and reaches out a glorious hand.

He reach'd the glory of a hand,
That seem'd to touch it into leaf:
The voice was not the voice of grief,
The words were hard to understand. (LXIX, 17-20)

According to A. C. Bradley, we are expected not so much to interpret the details of the dream as to understand that "the main idea evidently is that the poet's acceptance of sorrow, which seems folly to the world, is approved by higher knowledge."⁶ The voice Tennyson heard was coming from the other world, and he could not understand its language because his faith was not steadfast enough to let him know the meaning.

On another occasion, he tries to picture the face of the dead in the dark, but the image becomes fainter no matter how hard he may try.

I cannot see the features right,
When on the gloom I strive to paint
The face I know; the hues are faint
And mix with hollow masks of night;

Cloud-towers by ghostly masons wrought,
A gulf that ever shuts and gapes,
A hand that points, and palled shapes
In shadowy thoroughfares of thought;

And crowds that stream from yawning doors,
And shoals of pucker'd faces drive;
Dark bulks that tumble half alive,
And lazy length on boundless shores. (LXX, 1-12)

When his mind is not truly at peace, he is still haunted by terrible visions.

It is not until he falls asleep that enchanting music comes from nowhere to calm his unrestfulness.

The next section begins with his placing sleep in the same category as death, trance and madness.

Sleep, kinsman thou to death and trance
And madness, thou hast forged at last
A night-long Present of the Past
In which we went thro' summer France.

Hadst thou such credit with the soul?
Then bring an opiate trebly strong,
Drug down the blindfold sense of wrong
That so my pleasure may be whole. (LXXI, 1-8)

Sleep can be associated even with madness, for our will loses its power in both states. Dream, as we have seen in "Memory", is capable of reproducing the past. Tennyson, however, has to rely on an opiate, which was used likewise by the sailors in "The Lotos-Eaters", in order to take supreme pleasure in his dream. For even in a dream, he cannot sweep away the shadow of his sorrow.

One morning, on the west coast of Wales, Tennyson sings of the newly-born friendship with nature, which brings peace to his mind (LXXXVI). For the first time in this elegy can he utter the word "peace" in close intimacy with nature. His fancy makes flight over the ocean, seeking for peace in the far distance. Now he comes to wish earnestly for the communion with Hallam, not so much in dream or fancy as in the actual world. He hopes Hallam will appear in a distinct form (XCI, 13-16), but at the same time he does not forget to take precautions against some bewildering vision.

If any vision should reveal
Thy likeness, I might count it vain
As but the canker of the brain. (XCII, 1-3)

Above anything else he fears the deluding image forged by the confused brain. He tries to regard it merely as "a wind of memory murmuring the past." Also in the second Christmas scene (LXXXIV) he found that

"backward fancy" had turned out harmful to the mind. He seems to be separated, by and by, from the world full of sweet memories that dream and fancy recreate in the mind.

Then finally the time has come when the long wished hope is realized. While reading the letters from Hallam after a walk one silent night, he hears "the silent speaking words", which breaks the silence. Owing to the intercourse with the living soul, he comes to believe that life and death are fused into one just as east and west look blended at dawn (XLV).

Meanwhile the Tennyson family has to leave their hometown Somersby for pecuniary reasons. In the town are so many happy memories of Hallam, that Tennyson feels as if the dead were dying once more. On the night before leaving the place, Hallam appears to him in a dream. The dream, which is rather long, is thus. At first he thinks he lives in a hall with maidens that signify the Muses, poetry and arts. The hall is filled with songs and music, and in the center stands "a statue veiled". He knows it is of Hallam, though covered with a veil at the present moment. Then a dove flies in with a summons from the sea that is eternity. Weeping and wailing on realizing that he must go, the maidens lead him to where a little ship lies. They set on a voyage down the river.

And on by many a level mead,
And shadowing bluff that made the banks,
We glided winding under ranks
Of iris, and the golden reed;
And still as vaster grew the shore
And roll'd the floods in grander space. (CIII, 21-26)

The iris and the golden reed are thought to be the symbols of art and literature. The expanding scenery indicates the extensivity of his consciousness. Watching art and literature on both shore, his mind streams down toward the wider space. With the maidens grown stronger and bolder, he, too, experiences the expanse of his body. In course of time they come near to the sea, where they see a greater ship waiting for them. There on the deck he finds Hallam, who has grown thrice as large, greeting them. And in the end, Tennyson, together with Hallam and the maidens, puts

out to the open sea. This section ends with the following stanza:

And while the wind began to sweep
A music out of sheet and shroud,
We steer'd her toward a crimson cloud
That landlike slept along the deep. (CIII, 53-56)

As the scenery grows grander, so does his spirit extend, and he is tended all the way with the intimation of eternity. The sea, with its vastness, is used to symbolize eternity. The reference to the sea also appears in "St. Agnes' Eve" (1833):

The sabbaths of Eternity,
One sabbath deep and wide —
A light upon the shining sea —
The Bridegroom with his bride! (lines 33-36)

This shining sea is adopted from the Bible.⁷⁾ Therefore it is associated with religious feelings. It is possible to surmise here a definite association in dream, sea and faith. Tennyson dreamed of the sea, and through the dream did he receive unshaken faith. The revelation, to be sure, took place in the dream. Confirmed belief in the eternity of the souls assuaged his agony and thereafter the tone of the elegy is raised higher.

The song on New Year's Eve (CVI) is a distinct illustration of his enhanced spirit. In its last stanza he advocates the enlightenment of religion. And the sections which follow this are written in a profoundly religious tone. Though all things are in a state of flux and are to melt like mist, his resolution cannot be influenced by the fact: "But in my spirit will I dwell, / And dream my dream, and hold it true." (CXXIII, 9-10) If his faith in immortality is stable enough, there is nothing to depress him in parting from the dead. In his earlier poem the idea of holding dreams as true is demonstrated ("All thoughts, all creeds, all dreams are true"). Afterwards, in the view opposite to that opinion, again he talks about dreams:

The sun, the moon, the star, the seas, the hills and plains —
Are not these, O Soul, the Vision of Him who reigns?
Is not the Vision He? though He be not that which He seems?

Dreams are true while they last, and do we not live in dreams?
 ("The Higher Pantheism", 1-4)

Tennyson supposes everything in the world is only a vision that God created. So that he dare say we live in dreams, if the whole world is the vision of the Lord. Contrary to the days when he wrote "All thoughts, all creeds, all dreams are true" based on absolutism, he is beginning to grasp everything on the basis of God's absoluteness. To return to *In Memoriam*, Tennyson describes the calm state of his heart guarded by the Lord.

Love is and was my King and Lord,
 And will be, tho' as yet I keep
 Within his court on earth, and sleep
 Encompass'd by his faithful guard,

 And hear at times a sentinel
 Who moves about from place to place,
 And whispers to the worlds of space,
 In the deep night, that all is well. (CXXVI, 5-12)

In the confession few months before his death, he exclaimed: "Yet God is love, transcendent, all-pervading!"⁸⁾ Owing to the deep-seated faith, he is authorized to enjoy sleeping under the wings of the Lord. He is able to feel Hallam's presence in every place around him, to say nothing of the world of dream.

Strange friend, past, present, and to be;
 Loved deeplier, darklier understood;
 Behold, I dream a dream of good,
 And mingle all the world with thee. (CXXIX, 9-12)

Supported by the steadfast faith, he draws this elegy to a close. Thus dreams play a conclusive part in the transition of his soul. There is no denying the fact that in the course of the change dreams became inseparable from the fixed faith he gradually acquired.

Concerning the poet's deliverance from the "honest doubt", there is a split of opinion. D. G. James, for example, concludes that Tennyson, unlike Wordsworth, was not altogether relieved of his agonies. He states "*In Memoriam* is a poetical treatment of a state of affairs in which the

poet seeks to persuade himself to believe something.”⁹⁾ His opinion is that Tennyson failed to be released from the nation-wide doubt, in the sense that he was unable to find the ultimate peace of mind in nature as Wordsworth did. I believe, however, that Tennyson, though nature was not spiritual or sacred enough to him, found relief in the firm faith in God.

The sudden death of his friend Hallam caused Tennyson to be captured by the skepticism common to the people of that age. As the result, he was confronted with a crisis of his faith and his personal afflictions became representative of the common affairs of the age. He made an all-out-of effort to win a steadfast faith in God. The clue to his final deliverance from the “honest doubt” is, as we have seen, found in the dream. In the first place he faintly heard in a trance “the silent speaking words” from the darkness, which meant a great deal to him. Afterwards he was thoroughly convinced of the deliveration from the skepticism by the reunion with Hallam in a dream. At that time it occurred to him that he would surely meet with his friend in the kingdom of God. In this way the poet was personally relieved, though unfortunately his society as a whole was never to see salvation from its affliction.¹⁰⁾

As is amply shown, reference to dream is found here and there in *In Memoriam* and one thing we must notice is that in Tennyson trance is regarded almost in the same light with dream (LXXI). As I mentioned, he was subject to a trance-like state of mind all through his life. The visionary flight in section XII is suggestive of a dream, for while in trance, as in a dream, his will does not work until he comes to his senses. The long expected reunion with Hallam came true as a divine revelation in the interplay of trance and dream (XLV&CIII). And at times fancy or idle musing acts as the prelude to a dream (LXVII) so that the boundary between fancy and dream becomes indistinct. Also in other poems, Tennyson displays much interest in the state between fancy and dream. “A Dream of Fair Women” affords a good example of the description of the transition from idle musing to the world of dream. Accordingly it can be concluded that in Tennyson trance and fancy are almost equivalent to dreams. And in addition, even the heavenly world is identified with that of dreams (XLVI).

As for the dreams in Tennyson's poetry, there is a former example in E. D. H. Johnson's essay.¹¹⁾ Dreams are placed in the same category as trance and insanity in his argument, for consciousness is released from the actual world and enlargement of experience is possible there. His manner of classification meets my purpose in a sense, for in my argument I regard trances in the same light as dreams. The difference between us is that I treated the dreams in *In Memoriam*, putting madness or insanity aside.

By scrutinizing *In Memoriam*, we can derive deeper significance from the dreams. Tennyson's attachment for dreams is also found here and there in his early poems. But in the course of getting over the loss of his best friend Hallam, his dreams turned into something mystic and hence divine.

NOTES

All the quotations of Tennyson's works are from the text edited by Christopher Ricks (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd. 1969).

- 1) Hallam Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by his Son* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), Vol. I, 320.
- 2) Hark! the dogs howl! the sleetwinds blow,
The church clocks knoll: the hours haste,
I leave the dreaming world below.
Blown o'er frozen heads of hills I go,
Long narrowing friths and stripes of snow
Time bears my soul into the waste.
("Hark! the dogs howl!", 1-6).
- 3) *Hamlet* (Kenkyūsha, 1963), Act III, Sc.I, 60-69.
- 4) *The Iliad* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1950), II, xiv, 231.
- 5) "To Night", lines 22-26.
- 6) A. C. Bradley, *A Commentary on Tennyson's "In Memoriam"* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1901), p.162.
- 7) "Revelation", xv.2.
- 8) *A Memoir*, I, 314
- 9) D. G. James, *Wordsworth and Tennyson* (Folcroft Library Editions, 1974), p.13.
- 10) For example, loss of faith is sung by Matthew Arnold in "Dover Beach" (1851).
- 11) E. D. H. Johnson, *The Allien Vision of Victorian Poetry* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1963) pp.21-59.