In Memoriam A.H.H. is one of the great elegies in English; rivaled perhaps only by John Milton's *Lycidas,* Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Adonais*, possibly Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," and some short poems by Milton and William Wordsworth. "A.H.H." is Arthur Henry Hallam—Alfred, Lord Tennyson's closest friend for about five years and almost certainly, whether as a presence or an absence, the most important figure in Tennyson's life. King Arthur in Tennyson's "MorteD'Arthur" and in *Idylls of the King* as a whole, as well as such characters as "Ulysses" in scores of his other poems, are based on or influenced by Tennyson's memory of the other Arthur, Arthur Hallam. They met at Cambridge when Hallam (who was a year and a half younger than Tennyson) matriculated, and they stayed friends until Hallam's death of cerebral hemorrhage in 1833 at the age of 22, shortly before he was to marry Tennyson's sister Emily.

This biographical background indicates something unique about *In Memoriam* as an elegy: Unlike the other great English elegies mentioned above, Tennyson's elegy comes out of extreme and desperate personal feeling. Milton hardly knew his Cambridge colleague, Edward King; Shelley knew John Keats, but they were never close. Algernon Charles Swinburne's elegy for Charles-Pierre Baudelaire, "Ave Atque Vale," is again addressed to someone important to Swinburne as a poet but not as a friend, a figure in the deepest core of his personal life. The biographical background therefore serves to underscore another feature of *In Memoriam:* the length of time that Tennyson spent writing it and the intermittences of heart (as Proust would famously call them) that mark its unfolding.

In Memoriam comprises poems that Tennyson wrote over a period of more than 15 years. They were not intended as a single elegy, a single sequence that would aim from the start to develop and change in the course of its unfolding (see, for example, George Meredith's *Modern Love*). Tennyson's laments are the laments of the moment, and the poem presents more a journal than a narrative of the experience of mourning and working one's way through grief. The poems certainly do not appear in the order that they were written, and it is interesting to note that section 59 was added in 1851 and section 39 in 1871. Both of these are odes to Sorrow, the personified grief that has replaced Hallam in Tennyson's life. He first addresses her in section 3, castigating her cruelty. But, of course, she is his own emotion and expresses his own fear about the meaninglessness of life. It will matter both to the poem and perhaps to the biography of the poet that he comes to a different relationship with sorrow from what he describes in section 3 as perhaps a vice in his blood, perhaps a "natural good," and takes her instead as friend and wife in 59. And yet in the last section added to the poem, 39, he accuses her "lying lips" of denying the possibilities of light. We can see this final addition as an expression both of late despair, nearly 40 years after Hallam's death, and of Tennyson's own mortality shadowing his life; and as part of the poem's architectonic arrangement, whereby he can feel sorrow late but place it early in a poem that ultimately has a saving movement—and in this way expositional time can overcome and offer solace for the depredations of real time.

In any case, what generally connects these poems is their subject and the poetic style, whose sound Tennyson felt harmonized with the grief he felt: They are all in the style he invented (or, as it happens, reinvented—since it had been used before), now called the "In Memoriam" stanza: tetrameter quatrains rhymed *abba*. The shortness of the lines and the strictness of the iambic rhythm makes the rhymes prominent. The stanzas have a marked tendency toward stasis, fixed on their inner, *b* rhymes and recurring to their opening a rhymes. Any movement forward takes labor, and this labor is the work that mourning must undertake in order to bear the heavy sorrows of loss.

One can see this from the start. The opening of *In Memoriam*, the section commonly called (in the critic A. C. Bradley's nomenclature) "The Prologue," Tennyson addresses Love, the son of God. Whether this son of God is to be identified with Jesus, whether this son of God *can* be identified with Jesus, is one of the poem's great mysteries. Love is immortal, but immortality turns out to designate a very long period of earthly time indeed. (For another example of a similar attitude toward immortality in Tennyson, see "Tithonus.") In 1830 Charles Lyell (1797–1875) published the first volume of his revolutionary book *Principles of Geology*, in which he attempted through "an earnest and patient endeavour to reconcile the former indications of change with the evidence of gradual mutations now in progress." I quote this passage because it shows how Lyell, no less than Tennyson, saw the process of thought as also proceeding with a kind of geological slowness, as the mind slowly and gradually and with great patience changes imperceptibly from what it was to its contrary. It is just such a gradual change that *In Memoriam* charts, and it does so partly under the influence of Lyell, who was the first scientist to argue for what later came to be called "deep time," the idea that the earth was not thousands but millions and millions of years old. Lyell came to this conclusion through a consideration of the fossil record to be found in the various strata of rocks, and in particular from the fact that fossils of so many extinct species were recorded there. They were dead and gone indeed, and gone a long enough time ago to become part of the bedrock itself. These discoveries, so central to Charles Darwin's thinking, were shocking and depressing to Tennyson, contrasting as they did with the Christian idea that the fallen world was a temporary aberration to be redeemed by the son of God. In effect, we can say that Tennyson was confronted almost simultaneously with the death of Hallam and with the discovery that death lasts a very long time.

The implications offered by Lyell's geological insight are vivid from the opening of the prologue, where Tennyson invokes "immortal Love" as the maker of all things. That invocation is an echo of the 17th-century poet George Herbert's great "Love" (III), but here the nature of Love is highly ambiguous. The Greek philosopher Plato called love the offspring of plenty and poverty, and Love here may be divine fullness or human desperation to find something that will live when nothing does except for the Darwinian drive to reproduce. The sheerly biological features of this Love are to be seen in Tennyson's ascription to him of biological drives: "Thou madest Life in man and brute" (l. 6), where humans and animals are assimilated together.

This Love has also made Death, a chilling idea that should not be discounted too quickly. What does that mean? It means that life inevitably leads to death. To be born is to be fated to die. As in a famous line of Dante, love (*amore*) conducts always to death (*una morte*). The whole ambiguous and ambivalent anxiety of *In Memoriam* can then be felt in the lines that follow: "Thou madest Death, and lo, thy foot / Is on the skull which thou hast made" (ll. 7–8). It is too easy to read this as prophesying or celebrating the time when Death, too, shall die. For Love's foot is not on Death but on a skull—not on Death but on the dead, on the fossils buried in the accretions of time and life. Take the image as one of geological stratification, and it can seem very grim indeed: We all turn into skulls, left in the biblical dust which turns into real sandstone.

From the start, Tennyson attempts to use some of the geological perspective as a metaphor. The opening lines of the first section has him agreeing with the German poet and dramatist Johann M. Wolfgang von Goethe that people rise on "stepping-stones / Of their dead selves to higher things." The idea is given a geological twist in Tennyson: The death of the past stands for the rise of the living, as previous and lesser versions of the self are left to fossilize in the dust. Yet immediately (again in conformity with the antithetical style of the "In Memoriam" stanza, which can be thought of here as one step forward, two steps back, and then one step forward again), the speaker hesitates to forecast the future, which may be as dizzyingly empty as the past has become. Nature, as he will complain in poem 55, is “careful of the type . . . / careless of the single life;” and in the next poem, he must give up even that empty comfort (as geology shows) since even species come to an end, as Nature proclaims, “A thousand types are gone: / I care for nothing, all shall go.” Love here turns out to be only this Nature, “red in tooth and claw” in the phrase this poem makes famous; for now it is Nature whom Tennyson makes say, “I bring to life, I bring to death.” Spirit means only breath, she says, and breath ends. We live only in the present, and (as in “Tithonus”) the emptied-out, mournful, vacant experience of the present here threatens to last forever. It is in this first poem that he feels how the empty hours scorn him as “the man that loved and lost,” a phrase that will cadence and measure the trajectory of the whole work (so that in poem 27 he says, famously, that “’Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all,” and he confirms this idea (when he gets engaged) in poem 85

The elegy, or set of elegies, does what Sigmund Freud called “the painful work of mourning.” Tennyson sees the world as a world of absence where once it was a world of presence—the presence of Hallam. Every incident—but most particularly the three Christmas celebration sequences (beginning respectively at poems 28 in 1833, 51 in 1841, and 104 in 1837) that the poem describes—reminds him of an earlier incident in which Hallam was present. But sometimes he is reminded of the fact that he is taking some pleasure in the world, the kind of pleasure he used to take when Hallam was alive. The association of such pleasure with Hallam is both devastating and perhaps saving.

We can describe the process more or less like this: Tennyson feels the utter oppressiveness of the emptiness and vacuity of time that Lyell has so devastatingly demonstrated. Within all that, he feels the pain of his mourning for Hallam, a pain that may be sometimes intermittent but is always at the core of his being. The vastness of the emptiness he struggles against shows the vastness of the spirit of love, which can "whisper to the worlds of space / In the deep night, that all is well" (poem 126). The unimaginable hugeness of the worlds of nature, and the fact that love survives that unimaginability, becomes for Tennyson a sign, or hope, for transcendence and salvation—a transcendence and salvation by which he and Hallam will eventually be reunited.

The psychic movement of loss to its reversal as gain within human imagination is one that Tennyson learned from the romantics, particularly from Shelley in "Mont Blanc." But Tennyson knew, as they did not, just how much emptiness there is in the universe and how long it takes the mind to cope with it. His imaginative response and transcendence is one that he achieved through a lifetime of mourning—and this is what makes the poem so significant as an elegy.

In his review of Tennyson's poetry, Hallam had talked of the "fairy fineness" of Tennyson's ear and his strange "worship of beauty," but his death brings to Tennyson a vision "deeplier, darklier understood" (poem 129) It is that vision that he credits Hallam with teaching him, both by his presence and by his absence. In this way, Hallam's absence is part of the world itself—not the physical world but the world in all its dimensions and therefore, in the end, a sign of his presence or the hope of his presence.