This book offers a careful and comprehensive discussion of the formative influences of William Wordsworth's work on that of Alfred, Lord Tennyson. I use "formative" quite deliberately and even literally here because it calls attention to the stress that Thomas--following Christopher Ricks--places on the poetry itself. Not inclined to producing his own criticism, Tennyson sees poetry as the medium through which he can articulate his connection to a precursor. According to Thomas, then, Wordsworth stands to Tennyson less as an anxious rival than as a partner who helps him to re-appropriate a particular form such as the pastoral elegy, or invent a new one like the dramatic monologue, both of which, of course, become trademarks of the latter poet's work. Not surprisingly, Thomas distinguishes her approach from Harold Bloom's agonistic view of poetic influence, stressing that Wordsworth's "language and cadence" moved Tennyson more deeply than any alleged "psychic fear" of the earlier poet's power (22). Perhaps more surprising is where this argument leads. Tennyson winds up strangely distant from the "poetry of sensation" and from Arthur Henry Hallam as the critic who linked him to such poetry.

This perspective may dictate where Thomas begins her close readings. Even though "The Lady of Shalott" has reinforced the view of Tennyson as the "poet of sensation," Chapter One foregrounds it. Reading it beside Wordsworth's "Pelee Castle," she rightly notices that Wordsworth's poem grapples at least as much with "questions surrounding the reproducible image" as with the images themselves. Similarly, Tennyson's Lady, as she weaves what she sees in the mirror, embodies not only emotions "immediately conversant with a sensation" but also images drawn from "literary memory," and the latter, Thomas argues, come not merely from "sensation" but from "deep thought" (25-26). This analysis would seem to sideline Hallam, who, caught up in Tennyson's access to the sensory, does not consider his friend as equally interested in what poetry can mediate and in the meditation it might elicit.

At stake in this self-consciousness, as Thomas recognizes, is the shift in Tennyson's form as he moves beyond the interiority of the "romantic lyric" to the performative and rhetorical language of the dramatic monologue (52). Taking up this shift, chapter 2 highlights "Ulysses," first written in the immediate aftermath of Hallam's death. Here Thomas re-considers the consequences of Tennyson's re-affiliation with--as opposed to defensive protection against--Wordsworth. Ultimately, Thomas contends, Tennyson's Ulysses is beckoned to his doom by the image of the "arch," a symbol of Wordsworthian imaginative transcendence. For one thing, she writes, the "arch" of "experience . . . wherethro' / Gleams that untravell'd world" (19-20) evokes the rainbow in "My heart leaps Up" and the "Intimations Ode." More generally, Thomas finds it symbolizing a sense of "imaginative loss" that correlates with Tennyson's emphasis on the "setting sun" and "eternal silence" toward which his speaker is propelled (59-60). Such a defeat of transcendence means that, despite the speaker's rhetorical posture of moving forward, the author's desire is to preserve "Wordsworth's imaginative processes" rather than replace them (65). Ultimately, Thomas concludes, Ulysses embodies this sense of loss because his dimness of sight points not only to "the eye's absence" (67) in the poem but also to the missing "I" or subject. Ulysses thus comes to personify the emptiness of grief cloaked in the rhetoric of moving on. Seconding Robert Langbaum, Thomas sees Tennyson as inviting the reader to sympathize with this predicament at least for the duration of the poem (52).

Just as Tennyson's long elegy for Hallam occupies the center of Tennyson's career, Thomas's reading of In Memoriam occupies the center of her book. On one hand, she argues, In Memoriam sustains the absence prefigured by Ulysses' failed transcendence--and the desire to make it present (80). Inasmuch as Hallam now directly embodies this absence, the disappointment intensifies. On the other hand, Tennyson's gravitation toward the elegy includes the desire for consolation--even if only ostensible--and the reconciliation of faith, science, and religion it implies. Shrewdly, Thomas finds these tensions played out in a Wordsworthian key in section 95 of the poem, where the spirit of Hallam touches Tennyson "from the past," and where the gap between mind and nature leads to the abrupt cancellation of the trance as well as to the strange revival of the vision vis-a-vis the reversal of the living and the dead. Tracing this reversal to Wordsworth's "The Tuft of Primroses," Thomas finds Tennyson "revisiting a loss or absence" but possibly never managing to reclaim the dead (91). The pastoral elegy, it would appear, represents a tenuous way out. As in the "Elegiac Stanzas," which Thomas again cites, Nature proves both kindly and alien. For better and for worse, it represents Hallam's resting place.

Like "Ulysses" and In Memoriam, Tennyson's Maud, the subject of chapter five, also owes its beginnings to the period immediately following Hallam's death (121). While Wordsworthian borrowings help Tennyson make important strides in developing the monologue form, the "monodrama," as he would come to classify Maud, proves much more problematic.
Though Thomas does not say so, Tennyson's commitment to reflective poetry at a distance from Hallam's "sensation" may disable this work. What Thomas does claim is prescient: "Maud," she writes, "is a display of the history and science of feelings, of different phases, or fits, of passion, even though these phases have loosened their connection to tranquil emotion, sympathy or the grandeur of the heart" (130). In echoing Wordsworth's "Strange Fits of Passion," the poem situates Lucy as a prototype for Maud—as she is, in Thomas's view, for some of Tennyson's other women. Maud thereby competes with the speaker's bid for the reader's sympathy, and thereby undercuts the coherence of the work as a whole.

In her final chapter, Thomas links the 1860 version of "Tithonus" (developed from the 1833 "Tithon") to "Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey." More explicitly than in her chapter on "Ulysses," Thomas shows how much Tennyson undercuts Wordsworthian notions of the "universal Romantic self" and the belief that the self can "grow" through "loss" (165) even as he mines Wordsworthian language to make this dramatic monologue cohere. In what struck me as the most engaging of her chapters, Thomas explains how each poet treats the figure of the woman. On one hand, even though Wordsworth embraces Nature as "The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul/ of all my moral being" (lines 111-112; 169), Dorothy's potential "wildness," which Thomas rightly links to Nature's inconstancy, undercuts the poet's claims for its guidance. Tennyson's Aurora, Thomas argues, takes this project further. Mediated via "Tithon," she symbolizes a nature both erotic and deceptive (169). In this way Thomas reveals a continuity between the Nature represented in "Tithonus" and the Nature portrayed in the poems discussed above.

At this juncture, however, I wanted to learn more from Thomas, especially about how her analysis accommodates sexuality and gender. In critiquing the Bloomian paradigm as a means of interpreting the relationship between Wordsworth and Tennyson, she supports the more communitarian readings that she finds in scholars like Ricks (4-5). Yet in a book that seems so consistently—and perceptively—engaged with ideas such as absence, lack, retrospection, and regression as components of what Tennyson inherited from Wordsworth, would not more attention to the psychoanalytic dimensions of Tennyson's poetry bring his characters more to life?

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