

THE VOICE OF TENNYSON.



HIS article is written to record a memory, and to express a thought. It is not my intention to enter into trivial gossip about Tennyson, disliking that kind of valet-literature as sincerely as he did. Nor do I mean to speak even of the simple and beautiful life of his home. It is a debt that we owe to courtesy, as well as to reverence, to wait until all that needs to be said of that serene and steadfast life shall be uttered by the true son who was also his father's most intimate friend.

But the memory of which I speak is one which belongs to literature more than to biography. Tennyson's reading of his own poems was part of his poetry. It was illuminative and suggestive, the best of all commentaries. It revealed the significance of his work, the conception which he had formed of the poet's mission and the poet's art, and the methods by which he accomplished certain results. Most of all it revealed the man himself behind the poems. A voice is a real thing. It has spirit and life in it. This was especially true of Tennyson's voice, which was, as Milton says of the angels,

Vital in every part.

To hear him was to know the man; to feel how genuine, how sympathetic, how strong he was. To hear him was to think of him, not as a classic on the shelves of a library, but as a living force in the living world. Thus the voice that fell upon the outward ear became the symbol of the spiritual voice with which he has moved the heart, and expressed the ideals, of the English race in this nineteenth century.

I.

It was near the end of August in the year 1892. The full tide of summer had ebbed away; the days were shortened. Already the pale, silvery light of a rainy afternoon was waning over the terrace at Aldworth, and the falling roses of the garden, and the yellow fields from which the harvest had been gathered. Far away, through the broad southern window of the poet's study, one could see the drifting gleams upon the South Downs, which told that the sun had not set. But within, it was twilight. The dusk gathered in the corners and smoky shadows veiled the shelves of books, the high screen, the few pictures on the wall. At the west-

ern end of the room two tall candles were burning on the writing-table, and between their scintillating disks of light the face of Tennyson was outlined just as he describes the Lotos-Eaters—

Dark faces pale against that rosy flame.

It was a massive, noble, powerful head, such as Michelangelo might have given to one of his prophets; the forehead high, the countenance long, the chin square and slightly projecting. Age had wrought some changes in it since the days of manhood's prime, when the portrait was made which deserves to be established as the standard representation of the poet's face.¹ The physical charm was less: there were heavy lines about the mouth, and blue veins standing out on the sunken temples, and gray hairs in the thin beard. But youth had not wholly disappeared, even at eighty-three. The long, sparse locks that fell from beneath the velvet skull-cap, and

The knightly growth that fringed his lips.

were as dark as ever; the brown eyes, half-veiled by drooping lids, were full of dreamy light, and able still to flash with sudden fire.

But the voice was even more remarkable than the face for its suggestion of youth in age. Worn a little, as it must be after so many years, and breaking now and then when weary, it was yet deep-chested and resonant, thoroughly masculine, capable of expressing immense passion. Its most striking quality was its directness, its sincerity. There were no false accents or inflections in it, no affectations, no polite disguises. It kept a touch of its native Lincolnshire in the broadened vowels and rolling r's. It was a true and honest voice; a picture to the ear of the man from whom it came.

He held a volume of "Maud" in his hand, and was talking about it, as he loved to do:

"I want to read this to you because I want you to feel what the poem means. It is dramatic; it is the story of a man who has a morbid nature, with a touch of inherited insanity, and very selfish. The poem is to show what love does for him. The war is only an episode. You must remember that it is not I my-

¹ This is the portrait which accompanies this article. It is engraved from a photograph by Mayall, of which the poet, Lady Tennyson, and their son all said (Aug., 1892) that they preferred it to any other that had been made.

self speaking. It is this man with the strain of madness in his blood, and the memory of a great trouble and wrong that has put him out with the world."

Then he lifted the book close to his eyes, and began to read:

"I hate the dreadful hollow behind the little wood."

It was the strangest reading in the world; ignoring all the formal rules of elocution, going straight to the heart of the matter, yet unconsciously creating its own form and art, obedient to the inevitable law of all true passion, which always makes the sound fit the sense. The voice was raised a little higher than the speaking tone; sustained at the same level through line after line; almost monotonous in its measured chanting. It was not melodious, or flexible. It was something better. It was musical, as the voice of the ocean, or as the sound of the wind in the pine-trees, is musical. In the impassioned lines it rose and swelled like the roar of the tempest through the woods; in the passages which expressed grief and loneliness it broke and fell suddenly, like the sobbing of low waves on the beach.

Each canto had its own movement, a distinct, rhythmical flow, a separate and significant cadence, which the poet had surely heard in his own mind before he put it into words. The poem had been written to music, and it was read to music, lyrically, emotionally, metrically: in a word, it was intoned, not artificially, but naturally, just as we often find ourselves intoning when we walk on the sea-shore, or in the forest, and our thoughts sing themselves over and over to the sound of the wind or the waves. Intense feeling, whether of joy or sorrow, love or anger, rapture or despair, is almost always metrical. It comes in throbs and beats; it ebbs and flows in an involuntary rhythm. Tennyson's voice expressed this perfectly. He was absorbed in the passion of his poem; possessed by it, carried away with it.

The reading of the first canto forced me at once to feel, as never before, a profound sympathy with the hero. Here was a man noble at heart, sensitive, impulsive, whose whole nature was disordered, like "sweet bells jangled out of tune," by the tragedy of his youth. The pain and trouble of his soul burst out in a great cry of protest over his father's death,—

O father! O God! was it well?—

and the morbid shadow that had fallen even upon his vision of the natural world expressed itself with long-drawn sadness in the pathetic line,

And the flying gold of the ruin'd woodlands drove thro' the air.

He saw nothing clearly, nothing exactly as it was, nothing in the cold light of reason. His feeling colored everything with somber hues. But how intensely he felt! What an incredible force of passion throbbed in the condensed invective against the cruelties and falsehoods of the "age of peace!" Every epithet was like a blow.

Then came the reaction, when his passion had ebbed and left him cold and weak; and on this depression dawned the face of Maud. It troubled him. He struggled against it, and denied its beauty, but still it haunted him—

Luminous, gemlike, ghostlike, deathlike, half
the night long
Growing and fading and growing, till I could
bear it no more.

While he yet fought against its power, and tried to settle himself in the solitude of a bitter philosophy, the voice of Maud came into his life—

A voice by the cedar tree
In the meadow under the Hall.

How splendidly the poet gave the meaning of that voice, a song of life and love, a song of liberty and courage, a song of true manhood ready to die for the native land! And now the double spell of beautiful face and inspiring voice was complete. The man who had said, "I will bury myself in myself," belonged to himself no longer. He was under the power of love; and from this point onward the chief interest of the poem lay in the unconscious working of that power upon his character and life.

I marveled again and again, as the old poet's voice poured itself through the varying cantos, at the exquisite and unpremeditated art with which he brought out an expressive word, or emphasized a forcible line. I wondered at the exact truth of the descriptive phrases, like "the dry-tongued laurels' pattering talk," and at the felicity of the prophetic emblems—the weeping angel beside the urn above Maud's seat in the village church, the lion "claspt by a passion-flower" on the gate-post of her garden. I rejoiced in the changeful music which seemed to range through all possible moods.

But most of all I was amazed at the intensity with which the poet had felt, and the tenacity with which he pursued, the moral meaning of the poem. It was love, but not love in itself alone, as an emotion, an inward experience, a selfish possession, that he was revealing. It was love as a vital force, love as a part of life, love as an influence—nay, *the* influence which rescues the soul from the prison, or the madhouse, of self, and leads it into the larger, saner existence. This was the theme of "Maud." And the poet's voice brought it out, and rang the changes on it, so

that it was unmistakable and unforgettable—the history of a man saved from selfish despair by a pure love.

The very passion which begins to glow within him like a spark is tinged at first with selfishness. He thinks of the smile of Maud as the charm which is to make the world sweet to him; he says:

Then let come what come may
To a life that has been so sad,
I shall have had my day.

But unconsciously it purifies itself. He looks up at the stars, and says:

But now shine on, and what care I,
Who in this stormy gulf have found a pearl
The countercharm of space and hollow sky,
And do accept my madness, and would die
To save from some slight shame one simple girl?

When his own fault has destroyed his happiness, and divided him from her, his love does not perish, but triumphs over the selfishness of grief:

Comfort her, comfort her, all things good,
While I am over the sea!
Let me and my passionate love go by;
But speak to her all things holy and high,
Whatever happen to me!
Me and my harmful love go by,
But come to her waking, find her asleep,
Powers of the height, Powers of the deep,
And comfort her tho' I die.

And at last, when he knows that Maud is dead, the love that can never find an earthly close becomes the star of a heavenly hope, and leads him, not into selfish solitude, but into fellowship with his fellow-men in their conflicts and aspirations.

And myself have awaked, as it seems, to the
better mind;
It is better to fight for the good than to rail at
the ill;
I have felt with my native land, I am one with
my kind,
I embrace the purpose of God, and the doom
assign'd.

This is the significance of "Maud" as Tennyson's own voice interpreted it. Love is redemption from the insanity of selfishness. And it was in keeping with this lesson that, when I asked him a few days later to write me a couplet to go underneath his picture, the old poet turned back fifty years and wrote these two ringing lines from "Locksley Hall":

Love took up the harp of Life, and smote on all
the chords with might;
Smote the chord of Self, that, trembling, pass'd in
music out of sight.

II.

As I listen backward to the memory of Tennyson's voice, not only in this reading of "Maud," but in many others, the thought that comes to me and craves expression is very clear and distinct.

Tennyson is essentially and characteristically a poet with a message. His poetry does not exist merely for the sake of its own perfection of form. It is something more than the sound of one who hath a lovely voice, and can play skilfully upon an instrument. It is poetry with a meaning and a purpose. It is a voice which has something to say to us about life.

In his very earliest poems, written before he came of age, we do not feel this so clearly; although even the slender volume published in 1830 contains some pieces, like that profound complaint against the sorrow of skepticism called "Supposed Confessions of a Second-rate Sensitive Mind," and that sharp protest against hypocrisy called "A Character," which reveal the earnestness of a spirit that could never rest satisfied with the outward shows of things. But for the most part his youthful work is characterized by a subtle and supreme care for the effects of melody and color in words. As Mr. E. C. Stedman, whose criticism always illuminates, has well said: "He devoted himself, with the eager spirit of youth, to mastering this exquisite art, and wreaked his thoughts upon expression, for expression's sake." He was, in fact, like an ardent student who labors to learn all the secrets of his instrument before he begins to play for the larger audience.

But the same critic of insight has pointed out the fact that while the poets of the esthetic school stop at this mastery of art for art's sake, Tennyson did not stop there. He went forward to a higher stage of development. His second volume, published in 1832, bears witness to this growth, not only in its opening sonnet, which expresses the hope of an increasing influence over the minds of men, and in its closing verses, which were written to comfort his friend James Spedding on the death of his brother, but especially and most beautifully in its largest poem, "The Palace of Art," which is a confession of the impotence of selfish culture, and an avowal of the poet's faith that true art must be consecrated to the service of humanity. The fruits of this faith were brought forth in the volumes of 1842. The conclusion of "The May Queen," "Lady Clara Vere de Vere," "Dora," "Locksley Hall," "Lady Clare," "The Lord of Burleigh," "Break, break, break"—these were utterances that spoke directly to the heart, as "The Two Voices" and "The Vision of

Sin" spoke to the mind, of humanity. And from this time forward all his greater poems, and even all his most delicate and musical fragments, like "The Bugle Song" and "Crossing the Bar," have evidently come from a singer who has felt that he had a message of hope, of cheer, of courage, of comfort, for his fellow-men.

It is a poet's message, of course; not a moralist's lesson, not a preacher's sermon. It must be spoken in the language of poetry, which is suggestion, and clothed in its own proper garments of beauty and lucidity. A poem ought to be beautiful and clear, just as a flower ought to be sweet, and a spring crystalline. These are moral qualities, in the place where they belong, just as much as truth or goodness. Men do not love to dig for the meaning of a poem with mental pickaxes. They grow weary of following a song that is heavy, and lumbering, and full of discords. It is the duty of a poet to confer a pure and simple pleasure upon mankind by singing musically, so that they will listen, and clearly, so that they can understand. Tennyson did not neglect the gift that was in him. His poems are beautiful because

He gave the people of his best; —

His worst he kept, his best he gave;

and they are lucid, not because his thought is shallow, but because he took infinite pains to make his words transparent. Doubtless a great deal of their wide popularity is to be traced to these qualities.

But the real secret of Tennyson's influence is deeper than this. It comes from his true and intense human sympathy. Living as he did in seclusion, withdrawn from the inane vanities of that dull puppet-show which is ironically called "society," and guarded against the intrusions of that Philistine curiosity which robs a man of his power to serve the public by destroying his private life, the poet had, and kept, one of the largest, kindest, warmest human hearts that ever beat. The best proof of this is to be found in his poems. How wide is their range of thought and feeling, touching all characters from the peasant to the philosopher, and revealing the deepest sympathetic insight into the conditions of our infinitely varied, pathetic, glorious, mortal, and yet immortal life! I do not say that all of those ballads and pictures, stories and lyrics, are equally successful, equally valuable as poetry; but in all of them he has tried to express the changing hopes and fears of his fellow-men, and in all of them he has appealed to that vital element which is common to all humanity.

And, after all, what is that common ele-

ment? Is it not that moral sense which divides man from the brutes, and gives a divine significance to his strange career? Is it not that profound instinct which asserts the eternal shame of wrong and the eternal glory of right, and thus lifts the lowliest efforts and struggles of humanity out of the darkness of chance and the dust of death, into the very light of God? Yes; this is the instinct which waits to hear and hail the voice of the true poet. Those who neglect or deny it, those who sing to us as the serpent-charmers sing to their reptile brood, merely to soothe or to stir an animal sense, will never touch the heart of the world. The secret of the poet's influence must lie in his spontaneous witness to the reality and supremacy of the moral life. His music must thrill us with the conviction that the humblest child of man has a duty, an ideal, a destiny. He must sing of justice and of love, as a sure reward, a steadfast law, the safe port and haven of the soul. He must testify

How'er it be, it seems to me,

'T is only noble to be good;

Kind hearts are more than coronets,

And simple faith than Norman blood.

Now, there is hardly one of Tennyson's poems in which this testimony is not clearly and distinctly uttered. When we read them, we feel our hearts uplifted, we feel that: after all, it is worth while to struggle toward the light; it is worth while to try to be upright, and generous, and true, and loyal, and pure, for virtue is victory, and goodness is the only fadeless and immortal crown.

There are three points on which the message of the poet is especially clear, and most important for the present age.

1. The first is the question of the relation of man to woman. This is the corner-stone on which the whole structure of society is built. Man's attitude toward woman has varied in different lands and ages; but one thing it has always been—his unconscious, and therefore his keenest, criticism upon himself. Tell me how a man really thinks of woman, and I will tell you what manner of man he is. It has been an unspeakable blessing to the English race in this nineteenth century, that its greatest poet has taught us to reverence true womanhood, and to bring our best and highest and noblest thoughts to her who, if we degrade her, drags us downward with a fatal enchantment, but who, if we uplift her, draws us after her by the sacred charm of "the eternal womanly." Our poet has scorned the lust that defiles. He has hated the social lies that debase marriage to a bond of avarice or fashion. He has praised pure love as the bright con-

summate flower of life, and taught that it is the honor of all knightly men

To love one maiden only, cleave to her,
And worship her by years of noble deeds,
Until they win her; for indeed I know
Of no more subtle master under heaven
Than is the maiden passion for a maid,
Not only to keep down the base in man,
But teach high thought, and amiable words,
And courtliness, and the desire of fame,
And love of truth, *and all that makes a man.*

2. But there is another question hardly less important—the relation of man to his country. For if true patriotism has been the main-spring of the progress of modern nations, blind patriotism which cries, “My country right or wrong,” sham patriotism which is only a cloak for the spoilsman’s greed, have been, and are to-day, the great obstacles to further advance. Tennyson has protested against “the falsehood of extremes,” the ruinous influence of party rivalry, the mockery of freedom under the tyranny of the mob. He has cried

Love thou thy land, with love far-brought,

True love, turn’d round on fixed poles,
Love, that endures not sordid ends,
For English natures, freemen, friends,
Thy brothers and immortal souls.

In such poems as “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” “The Relief of Lucknow,” “The Revenge,” he has woven a garland of deathless praise for this same unselfish love of country as it is crystallized in supreme acts of devotion to duty, which shine like jewels in a nation’s crown. Patriotism of this type will never divide England and America in jealous enmity. It will unite them in the common service of that true liberty which is the ideal of the Anglo-Saxon race, and in the common memory of those heroic deeds which are its heritage of glory, and in common reverence for the patriotic poets like Lowell, Whittier, and Tennyson, who have contributed so much to the national life of England and America. Statesmen and soldiers render no greater service than theirs:

The song that moves a Nation’s heart
Is in itself a deed.

3. The third question in which the voice of Tennyson has a clear message for us is the relation of man to humanity. This is the burning question of the age. What is the first duty which each man owes to his fellows? How are the cruelties, and strifes, and miseries of humanity to be mitigated at once, and cured at last?

Our poet does not deny them, nor pass them

by in silence. He does not teach the gospel of hate, which is nihilism, nor the gospel of envy, which is communism, nor the gospel of despair, which is pessimism. He teaches the old gospel of personal love and help, which is Christianity. The ideal which shines through all his poetry is simply the example of Him who wrought

With human hands, the creed of creeds
In loveliness of perfect deeds,
More strong than all poetic thought.

Nowhere has it been more beautifully expressed than in the closing lines of that much misunderstood poem, the sequel to “Locksley Hall.” The hero praises the example of his old rival who

Strove for sixty widow’d years to help his home-
lier brother men,
Served the poor, and built the cottage, raised
the school, and drain’d the fen.

Then he turns to his grandson, the young enthusiast for progress, and bids him not despair, but

Follow you the Star that lights a desert pathway,
yours or mine,
Forward, till you see the highest Human Nature
is divine.

Follow Light, and do the Right—for man can
half-control his doom—
Till you find the deathless Angel seated in the
vacant tomb.

This, surely, is the plain word of moral prophecy whereunto we shall do well to take heed. Amid all the confusion and uncertainties of our age, the dark fears, the vague hopes, the wild dreams, the one thing that we must remember is the unchanged and unchanging value of personal goodness. To feel that each one of us has a place in the divine order; to find it and keep it; to obey the highest law of our being; to live up to the duty that lies nearest to our own souls—that is the talisman to keep us in safety, that is the clue to guide us through the labyrinth.

And if we ask, as indeed we must ask again and again, What is that duty? the poet’s voice answers, Love—a pure and reverent love of manhood for womanhood, a sane and unselfish love of country, a sincere and practical love of humanity; love is the fulfilling of the law; love is God.

But would this be possible; could the poet bring such a clear and steadfast message; could men and women have the heart or the hope to accept it and live by it, without faith? Tennyson says distinctly that for himself it would

be impossible. He confesses again and again that unless he had believed he could not have spoken. Through all doubts and questionings he holds fast to

The truths that never can be proved
Until we close with all we loved,
And all we flow from, soul in soul.

It is this faith alone that makes him sure that

'T is better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all.

It is this faith that makes him bear witness to the need and power of prayer in every human life—

For so the whole round earth is every way
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.

It is this faith that speaks in the little poem called "Wages"—a poem which he always valued with special affection—of the reward of virtue as immortality, and in the rolling lines of "Vastness" of the emptiness of life if death were the end of all. It is this faith which expresses itself in his last words:

When the dumb Hour, clothed in black,
Brings the Dreams about my bed,
Call me not so often back,
Silent Voices of the dead,
Toward the lowland ways behind me,
And the sunlight that is gone!
Call me rather, silent Voices,
Forward to the starry track
Glimmering up the heights beyond me,
On, and always on!

III.

THE memory to which I have been listening
has now become

The sound of a voice that is still.

But the thought of which it is the symbol is the thought of one who being dead yet speaketh.

For this generation, at least, the poetry of Tennyson, which has interpreted so faithfully our aspirations and hopes and ideals, which has responded so directly and so strongly to the unspoken questions of men and women born into an age of transition and doubt, must continue to be a vital influence. It has woven itself into the dreams of our youth. It has helped us in the conflicts of our days of storm and stress. Our closest bonds of friendship and love have been formed to the music of "Enoch Arden" and "The Princess,"

"Maud" and the "Idylls of the King." And when those bonds have been broken by death, we have turned to the pages of "In Memoriam" for that human consolation which is only less than the divine. I suppose that there is only one Book which, for these last forty years, has done more to comfort sorrow. Men do not forget such a debt as that. They cannot. It has become a part of life, and the evidence of it is written on all the things that are seen and heard. As we walk onward through the closing years of the century, many of us will have the same experience that the poet had in the valley of Caunteretz—

And all along the valley, by rock and cave and tree,
The voice of the dead was a living voice to me.

But what of the future? How will it be in the next century, and with the generations that are to follow? Will there be a new standard of poetic excellence to reverse all our judgments? Will a new king arise that knows not Joseph? Prediction is impossible. For my own part, I give but little credence to those gloomy vaticinations which foretell a speedy revolution in the realm of literature, the overthrow of the ideal, the supremacy of the sensual, and the reign of absolute materialism. I am one of those who think that the age of poetry with a spiritual message for the soul of man has not passed; it has only just begun. But if this confidence is mistaken, and this hope is doomed to disappointment; if the days of the Babylonish captivity are at hand; if poetry herself must go into bondage, and the daughters of music must be brought low; if the singers must forget the songs of faith and hope and immortal love, and please a degenerate race with the short-lived melodies of earthly delight and the wild chants of withering passion—if those evil days shall come, they shall also go. They shall not endure. After the revolution there shall be a counter-revolution, and after the exile a return. Then shall the great poet who dared to link his influence to faith in God, and the soul, and the future life, appear to men as the Hebrew prophet who redeemed his ancestral fields in Judæa at their full value in silver, in the very hour when the Babylonian armies encompassed the walls of Jerusalem. Then shall the interval of decadent and trivial song seem like a brief space lost out of the history of English poetry; it will be forgotten as though it had never been; and out of a new age of belief, a new race of men and women, a new race of true poets, will listen with delight to the voice of Tennyson, as he listened to the voices of Wordsworth, of Milton, of Shakspeare.

Henry Van Dyke.

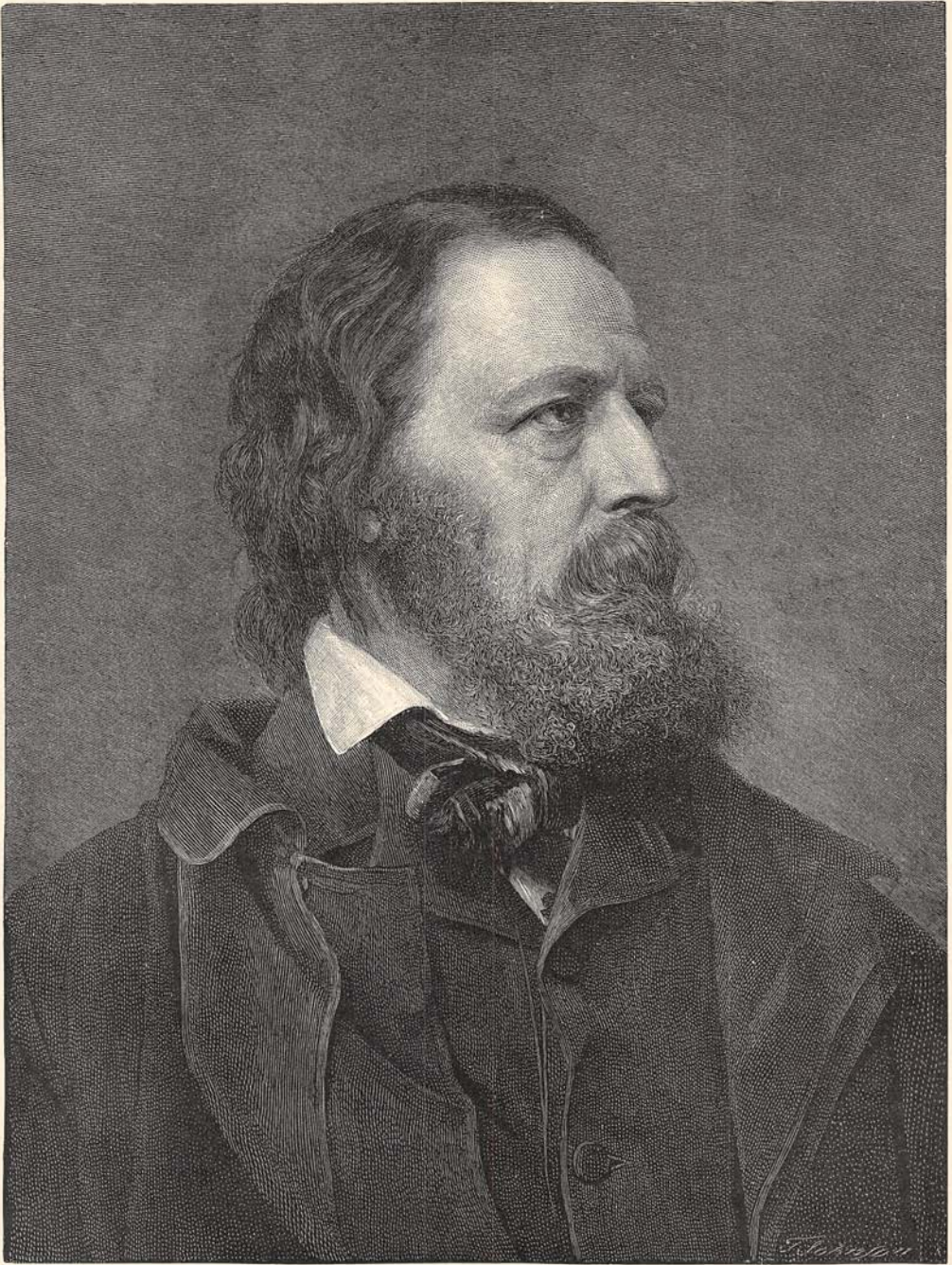
Love took up the Harp of Life, & smote on all the Chords
with might,

Smote the Chord of Self that, trembling, part in music
out of sight.

Tennyson

Augth 24th.

1892



ENGRAVED BY T. JOHNSON.

FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY MAYALL.

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON.