

**“No one remembers you at all”:  
Mick Imlah and Alan Hollinghurst  
Ventriloquising Tennyson**

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**Abstract:**

Reflecting on recent new critical approaches to the act of ventriloquism in Victorian and neo-Victorian literature, this article will consider writings of Alan Hollinghurst and Mick Imlah, which both attempt, whether directly or indirectly, to ‘ventriloquise’ Tennyson, through allusion but also re-fashioning of the poet’s body in fictional works. Considering their re-appropriations of the Victorian poet’s work and biography, not least in terms of sexuality and the contemporary rethinking of ‘the Victorian’, this article will explore Tennyson’s wider significance in and for the early twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** afterlife, fiction, Mick Imlah, influence, Alan Hollinghurst, neo-Victorian, poetry, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, twenty-first century, Victorian.

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Alfred Tennyson is at once one of the most remembered poets, in terms of popular citation, and yet one of the most forgotten, in terms of a popular knowledge of his work that runs to more than the last few lines of ‘Ulysses’ (1842). In recent years these lines, seemingly the most enduring of Tennyson’s writings, have been on prominent display in popular culture, appearing in places as diverse as the wall of the London 2012 Olympic Village and the James Bond film *Skyfall* (2012). Rachel Cooke, who sat on the panel which chose the final lines of the poem for the Olympic Village, claims that “[j]udging by the looks on people’s faces, the name Tennyson struck doom into more than a few hearts around that particular table” (Cooke 2012). This is indicative of how quickly after his death, in fiction as well as wider literary and popular culture, ‘Tennyson’ became near-synonymous with the stereotyped excesses of the Victorian age, often at the expense of a genuine consideration of the merits of his poetry (see Morton 2010). The appropriation of these lines to add gravitas to sporting endeavours or popular film demonstrates the seepage of the power of the

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verse, moving simultaneously away from the control of the author yet reaffirming his cultural significance.

This echoes a common theme in neo-Victorian studies – the ventriloquising of the nineteenth century and its manifold voices. In *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction: Passionate Puppets*, Helen Davies notes that the “ventriloquial metaphor is generally used as an expression of absolute power (the ventriloquist) exercised over complete passivity (the dummy)” (Davies 2012: 29). Davies builds on the work of other neo-Victorian critics, such as Marie-Luise Kohlke who wrote of “the neo-Victorian’s preoccupation with liberating lost voices and repressed histories left out of the public record” (Kohlke 2008: 9); however, Davies moves towards a more permeable relationship between dummy and ventriloquist, believing that

‘ventriloquism’ can actually be a ‘talking back’ and ‘speaking through’ of *subjects* as opposed to objects, offering multiple possibilities for voice, agency and intention that cannot be simply reduced to a finite dichotomy of power. (Davies 2012: 7, original emphasis)

Despite the differences of her approach to that of Robert Douglas-Fairhurst in *Victorian Afterlives*, her observations on ventriloquism have much in common with his observations on Victorian thinking about influence, which “was too unstable and plural a concept, too prone to spillage and seepage, to be restrained by any one set of explanations” (Douglas-Fairhurst 2002: 4). This might explain some of the “anxiety” (Hollinghurst 2011: 550) – a word which, with its Bloomian echoes, was surely not idly chosen – suggested by a digitised version of Tennyson in Alan Hollinghurst’s 2011 novel *The Stranger’s Child*.

Near the end of the novel, we are introduced to the website of an antiques dealer, Raymond (we are not told his surname), who creates “eerie little videos of long-dead poets reading, authentic sound recordings emerging from the mouths of digitally animated photographs” (Hollinghurst 2011a: 549). Rob Salter, a book dealer friend of Raymond’s, thinks them “a bit spooky”, an uncanniness which arises, in part, from the fact that they are not “remotely convincing”, instead giving the same sensation as “the

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doctored photos of early séances” (Hollinghurst 2011a: 549). Raymond has “just done Tennyson”, and Rob watches the video:

The beard [...] completely covered the poet’s mouth, preventing any ghoulish working of the lips. [...] Rob felt the peculiar look in the older Tennyson’s eyes, the air of almost belligerent anxiety, appealing to him critically and directly through the shame that was being inflicted on his lower features. (Hollinghurst 2011a: 549)

This scene itself might be a coded reference to Hollinghurst’s own ventriloquism in the novel, where he produces a good pastiche of early twentieth-century, pre-Modernist verse and voices it through a fictional early twentieth-century poet, Cecil Valance. Modelled on Rupert Brooke, who is named as an acquaintance early in the novel, Valance goes on to die in the Great War, yet throughout the novel it feels as if there is a double ventriloquism going on. On the one hand, Hollinghurst voices his fictional poet with original work (like A. S. Byatt in *Possession* [1990]), which is nonetheless ‘inauthentic’, written long after the end of the Victorian period. On the other hand, it seems clear that Hollinghurst is also, on some levels, allowing his fictional Georgian poet to be inhabited by the memory – and at times the voice – of Alfred Tennyson.

The five sections of *The Stranger’s Child* chart the progress of the memory (of varying kinds – literary, cultural, and personal) of Cecil Valance through the twentieth century. We meet him directly in the first part, as he visits his friend and sometime lover George Sawle at his family home, “Two Acres”. The house’s name will eventually be donated to one of Valance’s best-known poems, whose apparent patriotism leads to its being quoted at some point in the Great War by Churchill in *The Times*, while the title also hints at the possibilities for the literature of the future to plough and sow the poetical ‘acres’ of earlier writers (Hollinghurst 2011a: 172). The subsequent four parts of the novel follow chronologically through the generations. So in the second we find George’s sister, Daphne, who is kissed by Cecil in the first part, married to Cecil’s brother Dudley and hosting a party at Corley Court, the Valances’ ancestral home, where Sebastian Stokes, Cecil’s official biographer, conducts some unrevealing interviews. The third introduces an entirely new generation, as a young bank

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clerk, Paul Bryant, begins an affair with Peter Rowe, who is teaching at the school which now inhabits Corley, and in the fourth we follow Bryant’s efforts to research and write a ‘queered’ biography of Valance. Meanwhile the fifth acts as something of a coda, as the aforementioned book dealer, Rob, visits the part of Harrow where Two Acres, now demolished, was located. In his Keith Walker Memorial Lecture in October 2011, Hollinghurst claimed that he intended to write about the “shocks and ironies of time”, linking this to the “deficiencies of my own memory”; the overall point of the novel, he claimed, is that “no one person possesses the story” of Valance, and by extension, “no one person possesses the memory of the poet” (Hollinghurst 2011b). This is clearest in the various attempts at life writing which are charted in the novel: from Daphne Sawle’s near-intentionally unreliable memoirs, to a not-especially-successful authorised biography, to the overly sensational work of Paul Bryant, who takes all rumours as fact.

Hollinghurst has said of the last that he is “carried away” by the newfound possibility, in the 1970s, to write candidly about writers whose homosexuality was previously concealed (Hollinghurst 2011b). The idea of a ‘hidden life’ recurs in his writing. His first novel, *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988), contrasted the hedonism of early 1980s London with the experiences of homosexuals in the mid-twentieth century; the protagonist of his fourth, *The Line of Beauty* (2004), writes an apparently unfinished PhD thesis on “style at the turn of the century – [Joseph] Conrad, and [George] Meredith, and Henry James, of course”, which shifts into a consideration of “hidden sexuality” (Hollinghurst 2004: 54, 213). Hollinghurst’s own research as a postgraduate at Oxford was entitled *The creative uses of homosexuality in the novels of E. M. Forster, Ronald Firbank and L. P. Hartley*, and most of the writers considered in depth by Hollinghurst in his fiction prior to *The Stranger’s Child* (James, Christopher Isherwood, Ronald Firbank) are either explicitly homosexual, or have been ‘queered’ in recent times by literary critics or biographers. At the same time as demonstrating a reverence for literary history, Hollinghurst has consistently tried to radically overhaul it, and to expose through his novels what might have been concealed previously.

The presence of Tennyson in *The Stranger’s Child* as a character – albeit one who appears in (fictionalised, and thus arguably ventriloquised) anecdote as opposed to in the (fictional) flesh – seems to follow this pattern

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of undermining historical assumptions, though not, at first, in the queered manner of Hollinghurst's earlier novels. Freda Sawle, the mother of George and Daphne, recounts an incident on her honeymoon on the Isle of Wight, when she and her husband bumped into Tennyson, whose "filthy-looking hair" led Freda to think him "a beggar or something! Imagine!" (Hollinghurst 2011a: 59). In spite of having heard this story many times, Hubert, the eldest of the three Sawle siblings, is still somewhat shocked that, in his words, "[t]he Poet Laureate of England!" could look like this (Hollinghurst 2011a: 59). Freda is reluctant to go further and narrate Tennyson's conversation outright, but a memorable saying is repeated by her daughter: "He said, 'We need more bloody, young man.'" (Hollinghurst 2011a: 60). Daphne also notes that Tennyson left "No occasional verse, just –' and here she tucked in her chin again – "More bloody, young man!"'" (Hollinghurst 2011a: 60). Her own brief brush with the rather less 'great' Cecil does, in fact, lead to a poem being written, or at least revised, in her autograph book. Hollinghurst's ventriloquised family memory of a meeting with the Laureate is not out of keeping with the image of Tennyson as recorded in memoirs and biographies, as the poet could, as Cecil notes, "be very blunt indeed" (Hollinghurst 2011a: 61). This confirmation stems from a discrete, but deliberate, revelation that Cecil's grandfather "knew [Tennyson] pretty well, of course" (Hollinghurst 2011a: 60). Freda's response ("almost a wail") to having her one brush with literary celebrity undermined in this way is compounded by Cecil's response, "Oh, Lord, yes", seemingly flippant but carrying with it a coded acknowledgment of the poet's elevated social status later in life, allied to Valance's own social superiority – the "Lord" could easily refer to his grandfather's position as a Lord of the realm (Hollinghurst 2011a: 60-61). This Lord Sawle, we are informed, was a member of the Cambridge Apostles, "back in the forties", and though this is some time after Tennyson had left Cambridge, it nonetheless might well be where Lord Sawle's acquaintance with Tennyson began (Hollinghurst 2011a: 61).

This reference to the *Conversazione Society* points towards an approach to literary history more characteristic of Hollinghurst – rethinking it, with the idea of concealed sexuality in mind. We are told early in the novel that George has been elected to the Society, and that "Cecil Valance got him into it" (Hollinghurst 2011a: 9), and this is compounded later by the revelation that Cecil knows Rupert Brooke, as well as Lytton Strachey (both

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members of the Society). In both cases, the information is teased out of Valance by Harry, a rich neighbour of the Sawles, who (it is strongly hinted) is infatuated with Hubert Sawle. There is a link in the novel (and, Hollinghurst seems to suggest, in the real world too) between membership of this “fearfully important ‘Conversazione Society’ [Daphne] wasn’t allowed to mention” and homosexuality (Hollinghurst 2011a: 55) – both exclusively involving men, both hidden from view yet tacitly acknowledged by many, the Society populated by men who would later turn out to have been homosexual (Strachey) or bisexual (Brooke).

With the shared elements of biography in mind, it seems clear that Hollinghurst is inviting the reader to make a connection between the fictional Apostles from the early twentieth century in his novel and their real-life Victorian antecedents. Perhaps unusually for an early twentieth-century, possibly Georgian poet, Valance professes his admiration for Tennyson early on. At the beginning of the novel, Daphne tells him she has been reading Tennyson, and Valance asks, “Do you find he still holds up?”, before professing his admiration for ‘The Lady of Shalott’ – surely somewhat passé by this point (Hollinghurst 2011a: 6). The fact that Daphne has been reading Tennyson outdoors provides her with a useful excuse to follow her elder brother and his friend outdoors after dinner, because “I’ve left Lord Tennyson out in the dew!” (Hollinghurst 2011a: 32) She finds the pair “both in the hammock!”, though her innocence does not lead her to see anything untoward in this, nor in George’s double entendre “I’m smoking Cecil’s cigar too” (Hollinghurst 2011a: 34). Her lack of understanding of the affair and of sexuality in general continues, up to the final night of Cecil’s stay at Two Acres where he kisses her, working “his tongue against her teeth in a quite idiotic and unpleasant way”; holding her tightly to him, she feels what she thinks is “the hard shape of the cigar case in his trouser pocket” (Hollinghurst 2011a: 94). Following a pattern Hollinghurst previously followed in *The Line of Beauty*, where a relationship so painstakingly described in the first section of the novel is barely mentioned in the second (though returned to in tragic fashion in the third), we quickly discover the ultimate inconsequentiality of this encounter in the second section of *The Stranger’s Child*. George, much like his real-life equivalent Rupert Brooke, died in the Great War, and Daphne has married his brother, Dudley, on whom the war has also had a profound effect, both physically and mentally.

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With the novel's title in mind, it is hard not to find echoes in the narrative of Cecil and George – to even view it as a modernised retelling – of the earlier friendship of Alfred Tennyson and Arthur Hallam. Both were Apostles, though Hallam, the more outgoing, was the younger, as opposed to George being the retiring younger party in Hollinghurst's novel; Hallam likewise died abroad, tragically young (though not as a result of war), having been betrothed to Tennyson's sister following a wooing which included memorable encounters in the woods of Tennyson's home. The correspondence between George and Cecil is apparently destroyed by George's mother because of its contents; and Tennyson, too, destroyed most of his correspondence with Hallam. Valance's poetry – a good pastiche of Georgian verse on Hollinghurst's part – can also be said to have something in common with that of Tennyson. The fictional poet leaves a version of one of his most famous works, 'Two Acres', in Daphne's autograph book. This upsets George somewhat, because according to him, "[t]he poem's really nothing about Daphne" – we later learn, in a piece of internal monologue, that this is because "[t]here were parts of it unpublished, unpublishable, that Cecil had read to him – now lost for ever, probably. The English idyll had its secret paragraphs, priapic figures in the trees and bushes..." (Hollinghurst 2011a: 159, original ellipses). This leads to the most controversial aspect of the association between Tennyson and Valance: Hollinghurst seems to be implying, at least in part, that *In Memoriam* (1850) (a poem famously drafted and redrafted, and which took on a national significance in the Victorian period) too has its "secret paragraphs", themselves priapic, which will never be truly known. Most biographers of Tennyson (here represented by the most recent, John Batchelor) agree that while the friendship between Hallam and Tennyson was characterised by its "intensity", and while Hallam was "more aware of the alternative possibility" of their relationship than the poet, all the same the friendship was "never recognised by either of them as sexual" (Batchelor 2012: 127). However, in this novel Hollinghurst seems to imply that if one follows the logic of the link between the more recent, fictional couple and their Victorian antecedents, the friendship between Hallam and Tennyson might have prefigured that of Valance and Sawle in a physical sense also.

*The Stranger's Child* is organised with 'gaps' between its parts, which the reader has to work hard to 'fill in', and Hollinghurst has said that even he is not certain of events between those recounted directly in the

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novel (Hollinghurst 2011b). Certainly a preoccupation of the later parts of the book is the inconsistency of memory, with the biographer Paul Bryant including all the half-remembered, possibly malicious rumours he is told by his ageing interviewees as gospel truth; clearly we are meant to take the association between Valance and Tennyson with a fairly large pinch of salt. What endures from Hollinghurst’s engagement with Tennyson’s biography in the novel is (somewhat paradoxically given the intentional mediocrity of Valance’s ventriloquised poems) his verse, which Daphne says she will “always associate” with Cecil (Hollinghurst 2011a: 90). His “favourite section” of *In Memoriam* is CI (‘Unwatched, the garden bough shall sway’), which he reads aloud after dinner at Two Acres following some of his own poems (Hollinghurst 2011a: 66). It is beginning to rain heavily as Cecil approaches the final two stanzas, and Hollinghurst ends the last line with a hyphen, as opposed to a full stop, to emphasise the urgency with which Cecil tries to maintain the reading while “all of them were getting up to move the lamp and close the windows and his last words rose against the settling roar of the rain in a determined shout” (Hollinghurst 2011a: 68). The voice of Tennyson, manifested through Valance, struggles on in the same manner his actual voice struggles through the computerised act of ventriloquism.

*The Stranger’s Child* is not just interested in the idea of ventriloquism, but also commemoration. In its dedication, it celebrates the short life of Mick Imlah (1956-2009), a poet and editor who was one of Hollinghurst’s closest friends. Imlah and Hollinghurst met at Oxford in the early 1980s, where both studied and taught, and the two are linked on another professional level – both worked at the *Times Literary Supplement*, though not at the same time (Hollinghurst left in 1990, and Imlah arrived as Poetry Editor in 1992). The dedication is not just a matter of commemoration, but suggests that the novel may deal with similar themes to those present in Imlah’s poems. In an interview Hollinghurst said of the dedication:

I designed the book long before he got ill [...] and then the book was sort of about a poet dying – woven through with themes of shared interest, Tennyson and so forth. [...] Very extraordinary to find oneself in the situation that I was trying to give an account of in the book – how immediately after a



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writer dies there is already that determination about how he is going to be seen in the future. (Hollinghurst qtd. in Stokes 2011)

Tennyson is the first “shared interest” mentioned, and yet it is more than a simple case of their both happening to be Tennyson enthusiasts – in their work they are both interested in the idea of ventriloquising Tennyson, and the uncertainty of the provenance of literary voice that this implies. This allies both with A. S. Byatt, interested as she is (as observed by Andrew Williamson) in the “process of reading as mourning literary history, and of reading as resurrecting literary history” (Williamson 2008: 116).

Somewhat unusually for a poet who spent his childhood in the 1970s, Imlah exhibited a devotion to Victorian poetry from a young age. His schooldays saw him focusing on “unfashionable” poetry, such as that of Robert Burns, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Algernon Charles Swinburne (Piggott 2009: 40-41), and this was maintained while an undergraduate at Oxford. He also undertook doctoral work at Oxford, ultimately unfinished, on ‘King Arthur in Victorian poetry’ (Hollinghurst 2009: 5). In an early interview, Imlah took issue with critics who focus on influence as it “suggests that [poets’] main inspiration is a literary one. Critics will often try to find your poems like someone else’s because it makes their job easier – that’s lazy and frequently false” (Imlah qtd. in Jenkins 1983: 57). Yet despite this apparent distaste for the presumed inevitability of influence, Imlah nonetheless specifically named Tennyson in the discussion, saying “I’ve always liked Tennyson more than most people seem to”, but added, “I don’t think I write like him” (Imlah qtd. in Jenkins 1983: 57).

In 1992 when Imlah joined the *Times Literary Supplement*, an issue appeared dedicated in large part to the centenary of the death of Tennyson, and a poem about Tennyson by Imlah featured on its back cover. This elegy was somewhat ahead of its time – the vogue for neo-Victorian literature was still in its infancy, though in his focus on Tennyson, Imlah was allied with A. S. Byatt, whose *Angels and Insects* was published the same year. In ‘The Conjugal Angel’ therein, Byatt focuses on Tennyson’s sister once affianced to Hallam, Emilia (or ‘Emily’) Jesse, who takes part in séances in an attempt to communicate with her late first fiancé. Underlying this is Byatt’s interest in Tennyson’s having appropriated the memory of Hallam, via *In*

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*Memoriam*, for posterity – even in the communications at the séances, which are littered with scraps of Tennyson’s verse. Saverio Tomaiuolo notes Byatt’s interest in the gendering of the mourning processes of the siblings:

while for Emily her mourning left her undefended and alone (at least until she met the pragmatic and unpoetic Captain Jesse), Tennyson on the contrary turned his personal ‘mourning’ into a ‘melancholy’ poetical subject. (Tomaiuolo 2010: 19)

The dominant influence of Victorian literature on not just that of the present, but of the present itself, is a topic of interest in other neo-Victorian fiction, including Jane Urquhart’s *The Whirlpool* (1986), wherein the ageing Robert Browning finds himself unable to overcome the sudden resurfacing of Shelley’s influence – standing near a fountain in Venice, he hears it murmuring “*Bysshe, Bysshe, Bysshe* until the sound finally became soothing to Browning and he dozed, on and off, while fragments of Shelley’s poetry moved in and out of his consciousness” (Urquhart 1997: 17).

Elodie Rousselot has argued via the example of Urquhart’s novel that neo-Victorian literature’s “derisive [...] return to canonical texts, figures and events of the past is not motivated by a wish to re-establish their cultural superiority, but rather to work against their grain” (Rousselot 2010: 362). Imlah in a sense visits such derision on Tennyson, in near-gloating fashion, as his ‘elegy’ for the poet, ‘In Memoriam Alfred Lord Tennyson’, begins:

No one remembers you at all.  
 Even that shower of Cockney shrimps  
 Whose fathers hoisted them to glimpse  
 Your corpse’s progress down Whitehall

Have soiled the till and lain beneath  
 While the last maid you kissed with feeling  
 Is staring at the eternal ceiling  
 And has no tongue between her teeth. (Imlah 2008: 111, l. 1-8)

One might note here the relevance of Helen Davies's theories on ventriloquism with regards to the uncertainty of where the power of voice resides. Imlah literally chooses a Tennysonian model to begin his elegy, using the *In Memoriam* stanzaic form as so many newspaper elegists did on the death of the Laureate in 1892. While demonstrating the continuing presence, and power, of Tennyson's verse, the title – even the premise – of his poem being 'In Memoriam' is immediately undercut by the first line, "No one remembers you at all", followed by a definitive full stop. This also undercuts the poetical form. "Strong Son of God, immortal Love" (Tennyson 1987: 315, II, l. 1), the line which opens Tennyson's elegy, ends with a comma which leads the reader on, as opposed to Imlah's deliberate, and literal, end-stop, in the very first line of his poem. It perhaps goes without saying that the tone of this section of the poem, almost gloating about the evanescence of literary fame and prestige, is also at odds with the idea of being "in memoriam" in the way Tennyson commemorated his friend Arthur Henry Hallam.

The poem continues in this form for only three further stanzas, the last of which runs:

You are not here; you cannot fall.  
 So let the mighty organ blare!  
 While we, who plainly were not there  
 Construct this fake memorial. (Imlah 2008: 111, l. 17-20)

The punctuation and rhythm here echo the first line of the final stanza of *In Memoriam* VII, perhaps underlining again the presence and continuing power of Tennyson's verse – despite "no one" remembering Tennyson the man, he is 'here', 'embodied' in his spectrally-present verse:

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.  
 (Tennyson 1987: II. 326. l. 9-12)

These lines resonate not just in Imlah's own work but in poetry about him too. Andrew Motion's elegy on his friend Imlah ends with: "a view of the

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bald street, / The blank day, and black traffic grinding through” (Motion 2009: 69, l. 29-30). His elegy also contains an account of typical pub discussions with Imlah, in the 1980s:

Six pints in, when it was no longer clear  
Whether our real subject was exactly how

London Scottish would catch Harlequins, or whether  
Tennyson in fact might not be  
Tennysonian at all, according to James [...].  
(Motion 2009: 69, l. 9-13)

This famous saying of Henry James’s from *The Middle Years* (1917) is included as part of Imlah’s poem on Tennyson: “...the full, the monstrous demonstration that Tennyson was not Tennysonian” (Imlah 2008: 113, l. 61-62, original ellipses). Motion and Imlah focus on this anecdote not simply to amuse, though that must be part of the reason for its inclusion; it is also concerned with the idea of embodiment. Tennyson, for James, does not match his self-consciously crafted media image, and is, as such, difficult to mimic, or to voice, avoiding the fate of the ventriloquist’s dummy. To underline Imlah’s interest in the potential insubstantiality of identity, as well as the Tennysonian roots of his interest in the afterlife, in another anecdote which he includes we are provided with Tennyson’s response to seeing “a portrait of the dead Dickens” (in fact a pencil drawing by Millais): “It is exactly like myself” (Imlah 2008: 113, l. 68-9). Tennyson’s seeing himself in images of his dead acquaintances demonstrates his own awareness of the potential loss of his ‘true’ identity once dead – and of his potential amalgamation into a ‘corpus’ of dead, bearded Great Victorians, a fate literally visited on him by Imlah.

The quotation also provides a historical anecdote for Imlah to tether his own invention to. Imlah encounters “a student, or out-of-work actor, or worse”, a “bloke whose Kraken had woken for years twice a night” – an unconvincing Tennyson impersonator (after all, he is “at least seven inches too short”). He might not be in proportion, but Imlah’s impersonator attempts mimicry all the same and having pulled out a book, “affected / A cartoon myopia, cribbed from its cover (the Penguin Selected)” – presumably the Penguin Classics 1991 *Selected Poems*, edited by Aidan

Day, which bears a Dante Gabriel Rossetti sketch of Tennyson reading 'Maud' on its cover (Imlah 2008: 113-5, l. 49, 53, 52, 97-8). In spite of his *un*-likeness, Imlah's impersonator here *is* nonetheless Tennysonian, copying not just the poet's looks but also his predilection for reading 'Maud'.

At the same time as Tennyson appears literally impersonated and ventriloquised, the formal qualities of the verse in this section have radically altered. Following a prose account of the start of the visit to Aldworth, the poem still bears a semi-Tennysonian flavour, arranged in long lines, and in couplets, reminding one of 'Locksley Hall' (1842); but on closer inspection, Imlah's rather less metrically precise lines almost universally overflow from Tennyson's tightly-controlled 15 syllables to 17, or occasionally 18. This leads the poem towards Tennyson's 'Vastness' (1885), with its 21- and 22-syllable lines, which is directly cited by the Tennyson impersonator later on. The final four lines of 'Vastness' run:

XVII

What is it all, if we all of us end but in being our  
own corpse-coffins at last,  
Swallowed in Vastness, lost in Silence, drowned  
in the deeps of a meaningless Past?

XVIII

What but a murmur of gnats in the gloom, or a  
moment's anger of bees in their hive?—

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Peace, let it be! for I loved him, and love him for  
ever: the dead are not dead but alive.  
(Tennyson 1987: 137, III, l. 33-36)

Imlah takes inspiration from the last line in literal fashion. The main part of his poem takes place in a kind of surreal afterlife – to stretch things somewhat, this might possibly be inspired by the fevered imaginings of the narrator of 'Maud'. The Tennyson impersonator seems literally "drowned in the deeps of a meaningless Past"; according to him, "there isn't a future in heaven; no nightclub or pool with jacuzzi" (Imlah 2008: 114, l. 76). Part of

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the Tithonus-treatment of this Tennyson, be he impersonator or otherwise, is being stuck forever in the nineteenth century:

Ours is a sepia parlour, a club without pipes or the  
port,  
Half-full of identical males, where Her Majesty  
still holds court. (Imlah 2008: 114, l. 72-73)

This Tennyson is deeply concerned by others falling from view – those “lost” include Manning, Macaulay, Archer and Lytton – all of them “cast over the margin and into the beggarly throng / Who bray for biography, down in the darkness” (Imlah 2008: 114, l. 82-83). There is, perhaps, a hint at the true and uncomfortable power of literature, in a painful passage concerning Arthur Henry Hallam:

My Arthur – poor angel, I did what I could – I see  
in fits:  
His wings gone limp with disuse, and the plumage  
in ribbons where bits  
Of his carcass stick out like the spokes of a  
battered and bandaged umbrella.  
His features appear where he gnaws at the grille  
of his terrible cellar,  
Fading and growing and fading again with never a  
sound,  
And but for my friendship his luminous half-life  
would choke underground. (Imlah 2008: 114, l. 84-89).

For all the earlier vanishing of once-prominent Victorian figures, literature here is something of substantial power. “But for [Tennyson’s] friendship” Hallam would, too, be cast into the beggarly throng, baying for resurrection through biography. Yet though Hallam is spared this fate, his does not seem a particularly enjoyable afterlife, afforded him solely through his appearance in a poem by Tennyson. This has left Hallam confined to a “terrible cellar”, his angelic status mutilated, with the “battered umbrella” of his all-too-human “wings” made even more vivid by the rush generated by the enjambment from the previous line. This might, again, be an

awkward by-product of the desire to create and voice others in literature, since the memory is controlled (and, one might argue, voiced) by the author, and can be as painful, potentially, as being ‘forgotten’.

Like Hallam’s ‘half-life’, Tennyson’s continuing existence in Imlah’s poem seems to depend on his poetry, and yet once the actual *voice* of his poetry comes into view (as opposed to its forms being ‘ventriloquised’), that is, when the impersonator begins the recital of ‘Maud’, starting “I Hate –”, Imlah (or his narrator) runs away, yelling, “You’re not Lord Tennyson!”. The reply is telling – “well, neither’s Lord Tennyson” (Imlah 2008: 115, l. 100-104). The implication here is that there is no stable, coherent ‘self’, be it poetical or otherwise, which forms the ‘essence’ of the poet, and as such the younger poet, in semi-Bloomian fashion, has to mis-present the earlier artists in order to avoid the power of the ventriloquised words overtaking his own. This leads to the final passage of Imlah’s poem, which runs:

Tennyson at a seance [sic] –  
 A great poet, lest we forget,  
 And certainly one of the most haunted –  
 Before all the others had settled,  
 Cried out in a cracked voice,  
 ‘Are you my boy Lionel?’  
 And got  
 Not  
 The reply that he wanted. (Imlah 2008: 116, l.105-113)

This Tennyson, like Imlah himself, finds it ultimately impossible to fully communicate with the dead. The phrase “A great poet, lest we forget”, a direct allusion to Kipling’s ‘Recessional’ (1897), allied with the potential allusion in the focus on the word “Not” to “not / Not the six hundred”, from ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’ (1854) (Tennyson 1987: 512, II, l. 37-8), hints back to Henry James’s apparently monstrous realisation that “Tennyson was not Tennysonian”. James’s anecdote, however, does not finish there but continues: “My critical reaction hadn’t in the least invalidated our great man’s being a Bard – in fact it had made him and left him more a Bard than ever” (James 1956: 543). There is, here, the possibility of further mockery owing to the capitalisation of “Bard”, but the

anecdote nonetheless demonstrates that Tennyson in real life, and in verse, was (and is) an odd and unsettling presence – undefinable and aloof from the day-to-day world and its expectations of him. Thus only at the end of Imlah’s elegy, in this touching, sad scene, do we really get a sense of the actual Laureate, but the clarity and moving nature of this portrait comes with the realisation that it is just as much an act of poetic imposture as that of the earlier unconvincing impersonator.

Despite the elegy almost arriving too late for inclusion in the special Tennyson issue of the *Times Literary Supplement*, Imlah was clearly thinking in detail about the idea of a poetical afterlife in the early 1990s. In 1995 he was included (alongside Glyn Maxwell and Peter Reading) in *Penguin Modern Poets 3*, which he populated mainly with poems from *Birthmarks*. The new poems he added were ‘Past Caring’ and a sequence entitled ‘Afterlives of the Poets’, which comprises the Tennyson elegy, in slightly adapted form, along with another long elegy for ‘B.V.’, or James Thomson, which carries an initial biographical sketch (unlike the Tennyson elegy). Imlah’s interest in the longevity of poetical fame (or the lack thereof) can be seen in his elegising one ostentatiously famous Victorian poet, and one who has rather declined from view. In ‘B.V.’, the poet, who is an alcoholic, is extended “An Invitation” in verse form, from J. W. Barrs, to come to stay for some time to recover from his addiction in the Leicestershire countryside (Imlah 1995: 102, l. 43).

In a grimly ironic passage from this “Invitation”, Imlah’s interest in the idea of an afterlife in verse, and indeed *of* verse, is very clear, envisioning a future when ‘*Thomson’s* star [will] be twinned with *Tennyson’s* / A hundred years from now’ (Imlah 1995: 102, l. 77-78). These lines reverberate with the poignancy of poetical temporality, as well, perhaps, as biographical inevitability – we soon learn that, having accepted the invitation, Thomson is subsequently ejected from the farm in no small state of drink-related disgrace, leaving the narrative to tail off with the words “and was nothing” (Imlah 1995: 108, l. 217). The line does not even end with a full stop, gesturing towards the idea of the unfinished, the semi-remembered or even the beginning of disremembering. The implicit comparison with the almost immediate appearance of a full stop at the start of Imlah’s Tennyson elegy is clear.

Imlah clearly felt these poems were among his most significant, as he placed them (albeit in reconfigured form) at the very end of *The Lost Leader*



when it was published in 2008 (a practice continued by Mark Ford in his editing of Imlah's 2010 *Selected Poems*, though they are followed therein by a few unpublished works). The changes to 'B.V.' are significant – Imlah tones down the ostentatiously postmodern typographical features (the original carried a reproduction of an 'advertisement' for a writer-in-residence, supposedly taken from *The Guardian*), and the poem now ends with a full stop. The biographical note is also shifted from the beginning of the poem to its conclusion, possibly to avoid the appearance of a presumption that the reader will be unacquainted with Thomson's work and life story, but this also suggests the idea that commemoration in verse is more important than biography. Imlah seems to be suggesting that commemoration in art, not least verse, is potentially more important than in non-fictional writing, as it suggests both a continuing cultural relevance and a potentially ahistorical significance.

Imlah made fewer large-scale changes to the Tennyson elegy, and the majority are rhythmic, but he also gets to the point of the 'afterlife' section of the poem rather more quickly, replacing "This isn't the Hilton on high, there's no night-club or pool-with-jacuzzi" (Imlah 1995: 97, l. 80) with "There isn't a future in Heaven; no nightclub, or pool with jacuzzi", (Imlah 2008: 114, l. 76) and omitting a few other lines about 'great Victorians', such as "And Darwin reminds us, you've got to look after your name to survive" (Imlah 1995: 98, l. 85). Making the poem more esoteric seems odd given its internal logic, with many of the names semi-comically falling from view almost totally unheard of outside academic circles today; yet this is in keeping with the at times uncompromising expectations Imlah seems to have of readers of *The Lost Leader* – poems such as 'Sweetheart' and 'Flower of Scotland' therein require a fairly detailed knowledge of not only Scottish history but also the intellectual traditions of particular Oxford colleges, even as Imlah subjects much of his subject matter to semi-ironic mockery.

Akin to the memory of Cecil Valance slowly fading as *The Stranger's Child* progresses, the potential loss of any substantial memory of Tennyson, let alone the 'lesser' Victorians mentioned, leads one to the last section of Imlah's 'Afterlives of the Poets' series. Therein poets, "rejects – [...] busts with broken noses", find themselves situated in a "free-for-all" where "Vandals have shattered the Sistine ceiling", but nonetheless "through the void they hurtle their wattage, / powered with the purpose of

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having been – being, after all, stars” (Imlah 2008: 125-126, l. 24, l. 29). The hyphen here implies a correction which suggests genuine immortality, and also, given the ‘shattering’ of physical works of art, that the ‘power’ which the poets retain lies as much in their commitment to the ‘purpose’ of creating art than in its physical existence. Yet the enduring *power* of Tennyson’s work is at the heart of both Imlah and Hollinghurst’s engagement with his work; a result these two ventriloquists might not have been unhappy about.

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