

Poetry by Numbers

one of me has a sentimental longing for number

(Frank O'Hara, 'In Memory of My Feelings')

In *Rasselas*, Imlac explains that the poet remarks general properties, 'he does not number the streaks of the tulip'. Shelley claims in his *Defence of Poetry* that 'A poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not.' But Imlac isn't infallible, and Shelley is talking about conceptions, not practice (elsewhere he feels that reader-civilians should 'Rise like lions after slumber | In unvanquishable number'). From large-scale numerological structures in medieval poetry to minute dalliances with digits in modern syllabics, there's a time and a place for number. When, in a stanza that begins with five syllables and ends in seven, Marianne Moore revels in the sprightliness of the jerboa, 'By fifths and sevenths, in leaps of two lengths', she knows she is not the first to enjoy herself in this way. Number counts in poetry, even if it is sometimes hard to say how. It feels significant that there are four quartets, yet significantly different from the fact that there are thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird.

More significantly, perhaps, poems *are* numbers. The Latin *numerus* may refer to 'number' and also to 'rhythm, poetry, metre', and such numbers have been read both as a support and as a threat. W. S. Graham remarks that 'always somewhere under the live and speaking idiom of the Voice in poetry there is the count, the beats you can count on your fingers'. He is pleased to have that count there. In a poem that is enjoyably difficult to count on the fingers, though, Jorie Graham notes: 'A number is always hovering over something beneath it'. Two views, then: number as underlying utterance, or as superimposed on it; a foundation and precondition for voice (a sort of bass-note that helps to pick it out), or a departure and abstraction from voice (something that may drown it out). Disagreements notwithstanding, both Grahams speak of what is apparently 'always' the case; despite the fact that numbers have a history, something about number tempts us away from the historical. Gertrude Stein advises: 'think of all the lyrical poets, think what they say and what they have . . . all the things that just in enumeration make poetry, and

they can and do enumerate and they can and do make poetry, this enumeration.’ To think of *all* lyric poets seems needlessly heroic; one century—and one poet (Tennyson)—can provide enough enumeration for now.

According to the *OED*, several new uses of the verb ‘count’ come into being in the nineteenth century: to count as ‘to mark the time or rhythm’ (1848); to ‘count out’ (1833); to ‘count in’ (1857); to count as an intransitive, meaning ‘to admit of being counted’ (1845 – from *Blackwood’s Magazine*: ‘An unimpeachable verse, for it counts right’); ‘to count for’ (1857); and ‘to count out . . . in children’s games, with the words of a rhyme’ (1842). Counting in nineteenth-century poetry can often feel like a joke (sometimes light, sometimes dark). ‘How do I love thee? Let me count the ways’: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s question is *how*, not in how many ways, so no act of counting (thankfully) is going to arrive at an answer. At the beginning of his hunt for the snark, Lewis Carroll’s Bellman grandly intones, ‘I have said it thrice: | What I tell you three times is true’. He’s playing on faith in triads and trinities of different kinds, but when the speaker of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s ‘The Woodspurge’ tries to hunt down a shape in which to house and assuage his grief, he sounds oddly lost as well as found: ‘One thing then learnt remains to me,— | The woodspurge has a cup of three’. Numbers are not so much symbols here, but non sequiturs. Counting is something you might do when you have nothing better to do—or when you simply have nothing.

A poem like this—one that toys with fixation—reaches back to the century’s first and most audacious counter in poetry, the man who lets one of his speakers tell us the pond is three feet long, and two feet wide, and who will build another poem around a debate about whether we are seven. Beyond the main point of contention that everybody remembers in Wordsworth’s poem, the ballad also investigates number through subtle asides:

‘Their graves are green, they may be seen,’
 The little Maid replied,
 ‘Twelve steps or more from my mother’s door,
 And they are side by side.’

Twelve steps ‘or more’: the girl is an astute counter of people as well as paces. She has realised that her questioner is a stickler for facts, but she is also aware that the facts will be different depending on whose shoes you are standing in (‘Twelve steps for

you', she means, 'but more for me; my legs are shorter.')

In the Preface to his 1815 *Poems*, Wordsworth writes: 'the Imagination also shapes and *creates*; and how? By innumerable processes; and in none does it more delight than in that of consolidating numbers into unity, and dissolving and separating unity into number'. So the little girl is a poet of sorts, consolidating into unity by insisting that 'we are seven', separating unity into number with asides like 'twelve steps or more'.

These innumerable processes gesture towards a political quandary, one that Jacques Derrida describes as 'the wound of democracy'. Democratic systems should respect irreducible singularity or alterity, but they also need to build a community of friends, to calculate majorities, 'stabilizable, representable subjects, all equal'. These two impulses, Derrida suggests, are 'irreducible to one another'. William Blake made a similar point in a letter written in the same month that Tennyson published his first poems:

For a Line or Lineament is not formed by Chance a Line is a Line in its
Minutest Subdivision[s] Strait or Crooked It is Itself & Not Intermeasurable
with or by any Thing Else . . . but since the French Revolution Englishmen are
all Intermeasurable One by Another Certainly a happy state of Agreement to
which I for One do not Agree.

'*I for One*' enjoys its non-intermeasurability. Tennyson, too, has vexed relationship with oneness. The first reference to 'one' in *In Memoriam* is a longing for 'one music' (oneness as wholeness), the second is 'grief for one removed' (oneness as separation); and the third is a conception of 'one clear harp in diverse tones' (a mediation between unity and variety). The poem's last stanza speaks dutifully of 'One God, one law, one element, | And one far-off divine event', but that concluding note isn't really supported by the feelings unleashed by the preceding lyrics: the real poetry comes earlier, when Tennyson speaks of the 'ruined chrysalis of one'.

Only one lyric in *In Memoriam* allows itself to begin with the word 'one':

One writes, that "Other friends remain,"
That "Loss is common to the race"—
And common is the commonplace,
And vacant chaff well meant for grain.

Both pronoun and count-noun, ‘one’ here marks an indecision about whether the poet colludes with or repudiates what is written, tells either of his own passing moods (‘Sometimes one writes this, but one doesn’t always believe oneself’) or of his resistance to those who presume to offer consolation via the intermeasurability of friends or via the ubiquity of loss. Tennyson can often be found weighing up different versions of singularity; speaking of the differences between himself and Gladstone, he confessed:

Before a crowd, which consists of many personalities, of which I know nothing, I am infinitely shy. The great orator cares nothing about all this. I think of the good man, and the bad man, and the mad man, that may be among them, and can say nothing. *He* takes them all as one man. *He* sways them as one man.

That the orator ‘cares nothing’ is enabling when placed against ‘I can say nothing’, but this lack of care may involve the cultivation of a spurious coherence. ‘*He* sways them as one man’ has more than one meaning: it also intimates that the orator sways them because he conceives *himself* ‘as one man’, as an undivided unity. Being at one with himself as he speaks, he cultivates this attribute in the crowd. The poet, though, is a fractious fraction, alert to the many because he’s haunted by his own self-division.

‘One’ marks the beginning of Tennyson’s perplexity at counting in *In Memoriam*, a perplexity driven by a need to count—and to work out what counting needs. Sometimes he appears to be flirting with numerological patterns that had been adopted by Arthur Hallam’s beloved Dante. The lyric marking the anniversary of Hallam’s death is number 99, and for Dante 9 betokens hope; the square of the trinity, it’s also associated with Beatrice, whom Dante met in his ninth year. When Tennyson said that *In Memoriam* was ‘a sort of Divine Comedy’, his approximation takes into account the fact that the *Commedia* ends on its hundredth canto. Tennyson’s poem is not minded to stick to such round numbers, yet the first lyric he wrote for *In Memoriam* would become the ninth in the series, and he told James Knowles that there were nine natural divisions in his poem. The ‘Epilogue’ recalls how long it’s been since Hallam died—‘I since then have numbered o’er | Some thrice three years’—before turning to the wedding festivities: ‘The crowning cup, the three-

times-three'. What he tells us three times is true, but, even as *In Memoriam* seeks out consoling figures for number, it remains a poem that simply, sorrowfully, counts the hours and the days. When the poet imagines light stealing over Hallam's gravestone, 'Along the letters of thy name, | And o'er the number of thy years', he is also imagining the reader's eyes alighting on the full, tombstone-like title of his poem: *In Memoriam* contains a number as well as a name—the roman numerals for the year of A. H. H.'s death, 1833.

The poem can't shake off this dark feeling for number, and the lyric that marks the anniversary of Hallam's death addresses the dawn like this:

Who wakenest with thy balmy breath
 To myriads on the genial earth,
 Memories of bridal, or of birth,
 And unto myriads more, of death.

O wheresoever those may be,
 Betwixt the slumber of the poles,
 Today they count as kindred souls;
 They know me not, but mourn with me.

In a first draft Tennyson wrote 'Today I count them kindred souls'. The revised line allows for the idea that the myriads are engaged in the process of counting, and it also allows the verb to be ghosted by an intransitive sense: these people count for something, they are valued. According to the *OED*, this moment is the first instance of the verb being used like this in the English language:

III. 'Count': intr. with passive sense (neuter-passive).

13. To be reckoned or accounted.

1850 TENNYSON *In Mem.* xcix, They count as kindred souls.

It's characteristic of Tennyson that the drive towards enumeration is twisted up with a sense of unknowing. While looking for safety in numbers, the poem keeps hoarding to itself a singular intractability. He doesn't write 'They know me not, and mourn with me'; the 'but' may contain a suppressed resistance to an unwitting imposition,

not simply a rallying-cry for a community of suffering. Another way of putting the line would be to say that ‘loss is common to the race’, and readers have already witnessed how that pearl of wisdom was received. Beneath this lyric—and beneath much of *In Memoriam*—lurks the spirit of Tennyson’s response when it was put to him by a friend that a heavenly union with God would mean the extinction of his own selfhood: ‘I should consider that a liberty had been taken with me if I were made simply a means of ushering in something higher than myself’.

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Liberties may be taken and conferred by rhythm too. Borges once referred to the ‘rich adventures’ of Tennyson’s prosody, and that prosody is a compound form of auditing—both a drawing up of accounts and a commitment to a strange kind of listening. ‘Every second dies a man, | Every second one is born’, Tennyson wrote in *The Vision of Sin*. Charles Babbage wasn’t convinced and wrote to the poet:

I need hardly point out to you that this calculation would tend to keep the sum total of the world’s population in equipoise, whereas it is a well-known fact that the said sum total is constantly on the increase. I would therefore take the liberty of suggesting that, in the next edition of your excellent poem, the erroneous calculation to which I refer should be corrected as follows:

Every moment dies a man,
And one and a sixteenth is born.

I may add that the exact figures are 1.167, but something must, of course, be conceded to the laws of metre.

Tennyson made a calculated response. Taking note of this issue without taking leave of the metre, he revised the lines: ‘Every moment dies a man | Every moment one is born’. Despite his Malthusian flourish, Babbage finds it difficult to give an ‘exact figure’ for what should be conceded to the laws of metre. What may be counted by and in a poem’s rhythms? And what should remain incalculable? Some of Tennyson’s earliest readers sound as though they know the answer. Coleridge lamented that ‘he has begun to write verses without very well understanding what metre is . . . I can scarcely scan his verses’; John Wilson Croker complained about this line from ‘The

Hesperides': 'The north wind fall'n, in the new-starrèd night'. (He was unimpressed by how the sound that falls from 'fallen' finds its way—with a slight revision—into 'starrèd'.) John Stuart Mill also suggested that Tennyson 'seems to take his metres almost at random'. That 'seems' is undecided, as is the word itself in *The Lotos-Eaters*; the mariners come to a land 'In which it seemèd always afternoon', but few lines later it's 'a land where all things always seemed the same'. All things, then, except the word 'seemed'.

The dual life of Tennyson's solid yet mercurial syllables can be approached through the word 'calculus' itself, from the Latin for 'small stone'. The *OED* elaborates: 'also, a stone or counter used in playing draughts . . . a stone used in reckoning on the abacus or counting board'. *The Vision of Sin* gleefully invites readers to 'tread a measure on the stones', and *In Memoriam* hopes that men might rise on 'stepping-stones' to 'higher things' with the aid of 'one clear harp in divers tones'. In 'The Brook', counting leads to pebbles:

By thirty hills I hurry down,
Or slip between the ridges,
By twenty thorps, a little town,
And half a hundred bridges . . .

I chatter over stony ways,
In little sharps and trebles,
I bubble into eddy bays,
I babble on the pebbles.

Just as *In Memoriam*'s rhyme hears the 'tones' within 'stones', so 'trebles / pebbles' here accords a palpable solidity to sound, teasing out structure from apparent hurry and babble. When the narrator of the 'Morte D'Arthur' starts counting, so do the characters:

Then went Sir Bedivere the second time
Across the ridge, and paced beside the mere,
Counting the dewy pebbles, fixed in thought

For Bedivere, counting isn't just a way of killing time, but a way for him to bring his thoughts to order. He's thinking with rhythm, not simply thinking in it.

Pebbles and stones gesture towards a vision of sounds and syllables with clearly defined contours. But 'dewy' pebbles (or the drenched ones in 'The Brook') also touch upon Tennyson's peculiar feeling for counters that turn aqueous. In an early poem he confesses:

I seemed the only part of Time stood still,
And saw the motion of all other things;
While her words, syllable by syllable,
Like water, drop by drop, upon my ear
Fell;

As words become drops, syllables become a liquidity that doesn't quite tally. In *The Lotos-Eaters* the mariners sing hymns to 'A land of streams!', and the music they make there again involves stone becoming saturated. The music is softer than

night-dews on still waters between walls
Of shadowy granite, in a gleaming pass;
Music that gentlier on the spirit lies,
Than tired eyelids upon tired eyes

Leibniz observed that 'Music is the pleasure the human mind experiences from counting without being aware that it is counting'. The music of these lines, though, might be best approached via Freud's observation that the dreamer can't do arithmetic. Tennyson said that 'tired' was 'neither monosyllabic nor disyllabic, but a dreamy child of the two'. Enunciation resists numeration; the poetry lies somewhere between solid count and liquid flow, with amphibious syllables variously adapting to life in their strange surroundings.

The censure of the poet's first readers became the admiration of his later ones. When T. S. Eliot said that Tennyson had the finest ear of any poet since Milton, he offered up the poem that Croker and others had criticised—from 'The Song of the Three Sisters' in 'The Hesperides':

If ye sing not, if ye make false measure,
 We shall lose eternal pleasure . . .
 In a corner wisdom whispers. Five and three
 (Let it not be preached abroad) make an awful mystery.
 For the blossom unto threefold music bloweth;
 Evermore it is born anew . . .
 Hoarded wisdom brings delight.
 Number, tell them over and number
 How many the mystic fruittree holds

‘A young man who can write like this has not much to learn about metric’, Eliot remarked, ‘and the young man who wrote these lines somewhere between 1828 and 1830 was doing something new’. For Tennyson, that something was bound up with the mystery of what number would and would not reveal. The three sisters have faith in number, pledge themselves to the idea that to ‘tell’ number (to recount as well as to count) is to apprehend cosmic order. But although the lines are full of portent, they also feel (let it not be preached abroad) slightly tongue-in-cheek; they harbour a wry smile as well as hoard wisdom. You might say that the poet believes in the sisters without entirely believing in their belief.

Sir Bedivere counting pebbles or the Hesperides totting up the treasures of the fruittree was, for some, a long way from the more pressing concerns of the age. Another utterance published in the same month that Tennyson’s first poems appeared is representative of one position that still has many adherents; John Bowring—champion of Bentham and founder of the *Westminster Review*—had his sarcastic fun in a piece on ‘The Library of Useful Knowledge’:

We admit that . . . the moral and religious duties of a people must be inculcated by means of dactyls, anapaests, and iambics . . . nothing but a due intimacy with the deep profundities of longs and shorts can render ten thousand men in black coats the exclusively proper persons to teach the rising generation how to make laws, practice physic, govern colonies, and spin cotton . . . but who teaches men to make steam engines and dye scarlet cloth for the army? Does this knowledge come by scanning?

Bowring then calls for educational reform as a needful prelude to the production of more workmen who can make ‘mathematical instruments’ (his main example is watches). Rather than studying rhythmic timing, then, one should be manufacturing it. Early reviews of Tennyson also ask him to make himself useful; W. J. Fox informs him that ‘the machinery of a poem is not less susceptible of improvement than the machinery of a cotton-mill’, before protesting against his ‘irregularities of measure’. ‘Irregularity’, Fox notes, is ‘indolence’; what is needed is a steady ‘periodical movement’ that can contribute to the sum of ‘national happiness’.

Happiness—like many other things in Tennyson’s world—was becoming increasingly subject to the utilitarian calculus. Saul Steinberg offers a wry take on where modern man is headed as he rises on stepping-stones:



Tennyson’s *Poems* of 1832 came out in the year that the statistical office was instituted at the Board of Trade, and The Royal Statistical Society was set up by Babbage, Malthus and others in 1834. The observed regularity of statistical aggregates became a key part of the rise of the social sciences, and by the end of the decade the *Edinburgh Review* proclaimed that statistics had become ‘the favourite study of the present age’. A year earlier, the Statistical Society announced: ‘the spirit of the present age has an evident tendency to confront the figures of speech with the figures of arithmetic’. But not all numerical tendencies need be conceived as confrontational. Tennyson was fascinated by recent developments in the physical sciences: Dalton’s development of atomic theory lent itself to a numerable yet infinite understanding of space; Lyell and Hutton’s geological explorations exercised a

/ / / /
 Who will riddle me the *how* and the *why*?

The play of metre and accent may prompt us to wonder how can two and two make four in a universe where one of the twos doesn't have the same weight as the other. Tennyson's mathematics tutor at Cambridge, William Whewell, took a Kantian line to argue against developments in political economy; in his copy of Whewell's *Philosophy of The Inductive Sciences*, Tennyson would have read that 'we cannot see one object without the idea of space', and that 'we cannot see two without the idea of resemblance or difference'. This sense that number is both an invention and a discovery leads Whewell to insist that computation is not to be dissociated from imputation in other realms:

If the apprehension of number be accompanied by an act of mind, the apprehension of *rhythm* is so still more clearly. All the forms of versification and the *measures* of melodies are the creations of man, who thus realizes in sounds and words the forms of recurrence which rise within his own mind.

Whewell gave the clock as an example of such realization—the relentless tick-ticking of which is shaped into tick-tock by the mind's acoustic imaginings—and both clocks and rhythms play up frequently in Tennyson:

The sparrow's chirrup on the roof,
 The slow clock ticking, and the sound
 Which to the wooing wind aloof
 The poplar made, did all confound
 Her sense;

Our sense is confounded too: we cannot be sure whether the clock is actually slow, or whether it just feels that way for Mariana; nor can we decide just how much time or stress to expend on the word 'clock' from its position in relation to other stressed beats in the line. Coventry Patmore would later note that metre 'has no material or external existence at all, but it has a place in the mind, which craves measure in everything'. Tennyson was interested in what that craving could lead to—and what it

might miss out on. In one poem he speaks of ‘the innumerable ear’ and his most famously Tennysonian line tells of the ‘murmuring of innumerable bees’. For him, murmuring is usually a herald for the uncountable; another early poem turns liquid once more as he hears a noise ‘Like the rush of countless waters, | Like the murmur of a host!’ It’s perhaps foolhardy to appeal to statistics in a discussion about the potential limitations of counting, but, according to *Literature Online*, Tennyson uses the word ‘murmur’ more often than any other Victorian poet. He’s certainly fascinated by the non-identity of seemingly identical instances: ‘mur-mur’—repeated syllables with a stress-pattern that is not quite a repetition. He cherishes the word for its ability to be not quite equal to itself.

Tennyson attends religiously to number. Listening to music while on her sick-bed, his May Queen says ‘And if it come three times . . . I take it for a sign’. Taking numbers for signs is Simeon Stylites’ realm of expertise. ‘Teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom’, the Psalms advise; Simeon certainly applies himself:

Three years I lived upon a pillar, high
Six cubits, and three years on one of twelve;
And twice three years I crouched on one that rose
Twenty by measure; last of all, I grew
Twice ten long weary weary years to this,
That numbers forty cubits from the soil.

One senses the gruesome glee Tennyson took in writing this—keeping his own count going (each line sticking to its base of ten), yet varying pauses and pulses to allow the wayward, long-suffering voice of Simeon to speak from within the verse’s own numerical order. The passage may hint that Simeon’s poetic creator has something in common with him—a reaching for number that spurs him on to new heights—or it may be Tennyson’s way of parodying such impulses by mimicking them. Enumeration here feels like an act of stock-taking, yet also like a last resort. In his *History of English Prosody*, having praised Tennyson’s early volumes for their unsurpassed metrical virtuosity and admitting that ‘I hardly know what not to notice’, George Saintsbury was open-minded about Simeon’s position: ‘It may be rational or

irrational to balance yourself on pillars of increasing cubital height: I think we had better not be too sure about that either way’.

*

Tennyson wasn’t too sure about his numbers. In 1844 he read in Chambers’s *Vestiges of Creation* that ‘Man is seen to be an enigma only as an individual, in mass, he is a mathematical problem’. The age of the ‘average man’ has dawned, and with it the law of mean statistical values, not specific variation. The new dispensation is acknowledged in W. S. Gilbert’s ‘A. and B., or, The Sensation Twins’; A is laughed at for being too short and B suffers the same fate for being too tall, so they reply in unison:

‘But why this taunt from every curb,
 In bold defiance hurled?
 The average we don’t disturb –
 We wouldn’t for the world!

‘If you complain we’re badly planned,
 Why all you’ve got to do,
 Is add us both together and
 Divide the sum by two!’

‘The average we don’t disturb’, although the word ‘average’ *is* lightly disturbed by a metrical pattern that encourages readers to coax a full three syllables out of a word that so often averages out at two (or two and a half?) when spoken. The form is casting gentle aspersions on the need for syllables and people to toe the line. Tennyson would later defend passages in which his own ‘accentuated syllables are under the average’, as though anxious about economical readers who would insist they knew what the average should be. The incalculability of a person becomes linked in his mind, I think, to that of a syllable—both are experienced as enigmas as well as facts—and the implications of this mixed feeling can be sensed in his responses to that most collective and divisive of experiences: war.

The word ‘numberless’ appears only once in Tennyson’s poetry (when he’s counting the dead at the Battle of Brunanburh—‘numberless numbers’) and he uses ‘numbers’ as a noun only three times, all in the context of warfare (the Latin *numerus* is also a term for a body of troops). This brings into view his most insistent attempt to make something count:

‘Forward, the Light Brigade!’
 Was there a man dismayed?
 Not though the soldier knew
 Some one had blundered:
 Their’s not to make reply,
 Their’s not to reason why,
 Their’s but to do and die:
 Into the valley of Death
 Rode the six hundred.

One rarely encounters a refrain built on an imperfect rhyme, although—as Tennyson’s friend W. F. Rawnsley noted—the word was pronounced ‘hunderd’ in Lincolnshire. But then this would suggest that such counting is not quite beholden to the Queen’s English, carries local inflections within an apparently national utterance. Having sent the poem off for publication, the Laureate became increasingly unsure about the line. The *Times* reports that had inspired the poem had been inconsistent about the numbers involved in the charge (one saying around 700, another 607, another 600). Tennyson asked that a note be included at the bottom of the poem quoting the exact figure once it was ascertained, but privately acknowledged to his publisher that ‘Six is much better than seven hundred (as I think) metrically so keep it’. The concern here is that rhythmical thinking belies the messiness of circumstance—and also, perhaps, that poetic numbers may be implicated in a process that turns individuals into approximations (Tennyson will later have his Lucretius talk of the ambiguous value of ‘shutting reasons up in rhythm . . . To make a truth less harsh’.) Thinking metrically is one way to get over things; rhythm can finesse and absorb the unpredictable into a pattern, but it can also encourage hypersensitivity to deviation (whatever habituates us to seriality will also heighten our sense of oddity). Edison’s recording of Tennyson reading his poem is revealing in this respect;

whenever the poet arrives at the phrase ‘the six hundred’ he offers a muted, hurried whisper (William Allingham later observed a ‘peculiar incomplete cadence at the end’ when Tennyson read aloud). It’s as though he can’t bring himself to dwell on the number, or on the fact of his having this number in the poem.

Certainly, *The Times* reports enlist number in ways that may have given him pause; one article calls for more troops quickly because the enemy’s numbers are increasing: ‘There must be some numerical ratio which will counterbalance the moral superiority of the Western over the Eastern soldier’. A ratio of 1 to 1.167, perhaps? Tennyson’s rhythms pull against ratio even as they search for order. He later said that ‘my poem is dactylic, and founded on the phrase, “some one had blundered”’, but some prosodists have felt that his vocal performance is itself a blunder because it’s not dactylic enough. In *Meter in Poetry, A New Theory*, Nigel Fabb and Morris Halle offer this transcript of Tennyson’s performance:

/ / /
 ‘Forward, the Light Brigade!
 / / /
 Charge for the guns!’ he said:
 / /
 Into the valley of Death
 /
 Rode the six hundred.

What Fabb and Halle feel they should hear in the last line is:

/ ~ ~ / ~
 Rode the six hundred.

Such numbers can accentuate one function of the refrain as a sad mechanic exercise—numbing pain by numbering it, coaxing immeasurable loss into measured language, turning carnage into incantation. The prosodists assure us that these lines should be ‘scanned as dactylic dimeter by the rules, but there is no relation between Tennyson’s performed rhythm and the metrical grid structure’. Not ‘no relation’, I think, but a strained relation. Each time the refrain returns, the impulse towards roll-call is

surprised by itself; the poem becomes less a settling of accounts, and more a bewildered meditation on the need to count in the first place:

Then they rode back, but not
Not the six hundred.

The penultimate line ended with a comma in the manuscript, but Tennyson decided he wanted something less smooth, less hearable, and so cut it. The awkward glitch in the syntax, coupled with the run-on line and the sense here, conspire to raise the previously unstressed ‘six’ into prominence (as though to say, ‘They’re coming back, I can see them again now, all six hundred of—no, wait, not **six** hundred, fewer . . .’). Then the next stanza ends:

All that was left of them,
Left of six hundred.

Christopher Ricks observes that ‘the words “six hundred” have to be heard quite differently within that rhythm and syntax’. For the first time, the poem refuses to say ‘**the** six hundred’, turns from an act of naming into a form of numbering, even as the line seems almost to flinch at the difficulty of calculating the loss. Such lines are not exactly refusals to count, but rather refusals to make counting easy for us.

On the subject of his metres, Tennyson once noted: ‘if you vary the beats unusually, your ordinary newspaper critic sets up a howl’. This doesn’t just entail moving the beats around; it signals variation *within* the beat, coupled with a sense of the beat itself as a kind of relation, not a kind of thing. To return to the poem’s founding phrase: in the recording, Tennyson says: ‘Not though the soldier **knew** | Some one had blundered’. He dwells on that verb for as long as he can; the force of his voice disturbs the ‘usual’ beat, and (along with the enjambment) it also disturbs the next line, because having a strong stress on ‘knew’ may tempt us to read the next two syllables as unstressed in order to re-establish the dactylic pattern, which would in turn put pressure on the word ‘had’: ‘Not though the soldier **knew** | Some one **had** blundered’. This lets the soldier’s astonished realisation into the line; we are given not just an external narration of the event, but a sort of free indirect style which re-lives the soldier’s insistence and experience. ‘Some one’ (two words, not one):

perhaps we might allow for the faintest of pauses between the words, an unmetrical pause that could raise (or half-raise) some questions that were being asked at the time. Put broadly: can culpability be tied to a number? Put more specifically: if so, whose fault was the charge? Lord Raglan's (for giving a possibly ambiguous order)? Captain Nolan's, or maybe Lord Lucan's (for misunderstanding that order)? Last but not least, even though we might say we know what the soldier knew, do we know the soldier? It's tricky to say what the man counts as and for: is 'the soldier' a collective plural, or a singular? 'Some', or 'one'?

For all its inexorable momentum, 'The Charge of The Light Brigade' is caught between observance and accusation, and between knowledge and blunder—uncertain of the right tone to take or the correct accent to accord. If the poem was meant to lay the dead to rest, there was something about its sound that Tennyson couldn't rest easy with; he later said that it was 'Not a poem on which I pique myself', and this lack of trust in what he's created is revealing. A year after its publication, an article in *The Critic* spoke blithely of how war-reports in the newspapers now took precedence over poems on the subject: 'the unmetrical has supplied the place of the metrical'. But Tennyson was inclined to listen out for what the rhythmic and the arrhythmic might learn from each other, even if—especially if—that process entailed an unlearning of the knowledge upon which their opposition was founded. In 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' it is said of the six hundred that 'Right through the line they broke'. The Laureate's rhythms don't exactly break the line, or break rank, but they do provide a space in which to wonder what it's meant to count for.

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If Tennyson's writing walks in and out of step with the rhythms of his times, it also prompts reconsideration of how time itself is to be conceived and counted. Lines that are often read as a hymn to an Age of Progress contain more than one tune:

Not in vain the distance beacons. Forward, forward let us range,
Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change.

This sounds purposive enough, but it also feels strangely enervated—and perhaps slightly unhinged. Of this poem's rhythm, Tennyson said: 'Mr Hallam said to me that

the English people liked verse in trochaics, so I wrote the poem in this metre'. In the first version of the lines, the poet did indeed give the 'people' what they liked, partly by incorporating a form of the word into his line (the 1842 version has the line begin 'Let the peoples spin for ever'). But the revision suffers the trochaics to be disrupted (unlike 'peoples', 'great world' edges towards a spondee). The disruption is significant because timing would have been playing on the poet's mind when he wrote the words. As he recalled, the factual error enshrined in the line came from his taking the first train from Liverpool to Manchester in 1830: 'I thought that the wheels ran in a groove . . . there was such a vast crowd round the train at the station that we could not see the wheels'. When travelling on this train, Tennyson would have noticed that time did not behave in an orderly manner. The clocks at Liverpool and Manchester were not yet synchronised to GMT, but ran independently at local time (based on sunrise), so trains gained time when travelling east, and appeared to be losing it when travelling west. In 'Locksley Hall Sixty Years After', Tennyson's speaker will archly note:

Forward then, but still remember how the course of Time will swerve,
Crook and turn upon itself in many a backward streaming curve.

Poetic lines, like railway lines, can ostensibly be the same length, but they may take different swerves in and through time depending on which direction you are travelling. If, as a punctual sort of reader-citizen, you should wish to arrive at the end of the couplet from 'Locksley Hall' in a timely manner, you will range swiftly forward and the movement of the eye across the page from west to east will encourage the ear to keep in time with the regularity of the metre. But should you have concerns about where the 'great world' is headed, you may appreciate the drag as eye and ear crook and turn back on themselves, journeying back from east to west, to pick up on the sound of a poem that is not quite at one with its own motions.

Speaking of the fragile position of 'innumerable man' in apparently progressive times, the speaker of 'Locksley Hall Sixty Years After' observes that 'Progress halts on palsied feet', and Tennyson's poetic feet explore and enact such concerns. The railway would become the prime mover in the shift towards GMT throughout the country (the first recorded use of the word 'time table' occurs in the year that Tennyson finished writing 'Locksley Hall'), and the standardization of

time—like that of accents, or syllables, or people—tends towards the quantitative rather than the experiential. Even though the astronomical clocks at the Royal Observatory registered odd shocks and inconsistencies, their champions found ways to evade such anomalies (Adolphe Quetelet, a founding member of the Brussels observatory, introduced his concept of the ‘average man’ as a formal analogue of the average position of a star deduced from several measurements.) Not everyone shared the confidence that informed such aggregates; or, rather, some wished to highlight this confidence for the alternately useful, dangerous fiction it was:

Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning. Even science, the strict measurer, is obliged to start with a make-believe unit, and must fix on a point in the stars’ unceasing journey when his sidereal clock shall pretend that time is at Nought. His less accurate grandmother Poetry has always been understood to start in the middle; but on reflection it appears that her proceeding is not very different from his; since Science, too, reckons backward as well as forward, divides his unit into billions, and with his clock-finger at Nought really sets off *in medias res*. No retrospect will take us to the true beginning; and whether our prologue be in heaven or on earth, it is but a fraction of that all-presupposing fact with which our story sets out.

George Eliot reminds us that poetic senses of timing are not inferior to mathematical ones, but constitutive of them. To ‘reckon’ (backward as well as forward) may be to settle something or to count something, but also simply to suppose something, and Tennyson’s writing blurs the boundaries between these different senses of the verb, edges the ‘all-presupposing’ fact towards a sense of ‘nothing’ and ‘Naught’ by means of a pacing and a pausing that takes the measure of measure.

The poet once proclaimed that he knew the quantity of every word in English except the word ‘scissors’. This speaks both to the prowess of his classically-quantifying ear and to his sense of the limits of such endeavours, and the choice of ‘scissors’ is perhaps a wry joke, for ‘scissors’, like ‘caesura’, comes from the Latin ‘caedere’, meaning ‘to cut’. A pause—call it a pretence that ‘time is at Naught’—is hard to quantify in any language, and in English poetry caesura and syntax help to cut across and to shape stress-value. This messily productive state of affairs has a bearing on Tennyson’s feelings about the broader value of his own utterances. If pushed to

give a sum-total for what poetry might amount to, he would I think have opted for zero. His early enthusiasm for the East led him in the direction of translations of Bhaskara and Sanskrit mathematical verse, where the invention of zero—and its essential role in the development of the numerical place-system—was marvelled over for the range of its applications. As a something that is nothing—a figure which has no value in itself, but which gives value by its presence to other numerals—zero might be seen as a figure of the literary—something akin to Tennyson’s poet-figure who is heard in one poem ‘mouthing out his hollow oes’. In Henry Thomas Colebrooke’s *Algebra, with Arithmetic and Mensuration, from the Sanskrit of Brahmagupta and Bhaskara* (1817), Colebrooke quotes Bhaskara: ‘The arithmetic of known quantity is founded on that of unknown quantity . . . questions to be solved can hardly be understood by any, and not at all by such as have dull apprehensions, without the application of unknown quantity.’

Reading Tennyson, an early reviewer noted, ‘You are sure of a sweet sound, though nothing be in it’, but Tennyson was interested in what lies in nothing itself, and in the application of unknown quantity:

There is no rest, no calm, no pause,
Nor good nor ill, nor light nor shade,
Nor essence nor eternal laws:
For nothing is, but all is made.

Angela Leighton has ventured that ‘Form, perhaps, is the sense of nothing’, and form here may suggest what that sense might be. Contrary to what the first line says, there is a ‘pause’, one that changes how readers tot up the value of essences. The word that dances its way through the ontological mine-field—‘is’—is stressed and then unstressed in the last line, and so itself becomes a relational rather than an intrinsic value. Yet, from behind the vertiginous scepticism of the final line, the pause allows us to hear: ‘for nothing *is*’. It’s as though essence were looking to make a comeback even as the line tells of its demise. The passage is on its way to a sense of Nothing that is not there, and the nothing that is. The proclamation that ‘all is made’ can be heard as self-delighting, not simply doom-laden: the poet is looking back on the marvels of construction in his own stanza, smiling at how its syllables have come good, enjoying as well as enduring the ways in which poetry makes nothing happen.

Tennysonian nothingness—his longing for a kind of vacancy that is not mere vacuity—can be approached, if not calculated, by turning briefly to Edward FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, a poem its author acknowledged as 'all moulded' by Tennyson. FitzGerald stressed in his Preface that Khayyám was also famed for his pre-eminence in astronomy and for his computation of time (he helped to reform the solar calendar); his 'Mathematical Faculty', FitzGerald noted, 'regulated his Fancy, and condensed his Verse'. The Preface ends by stating that Khayyám fell back upon 'TODAY' as 'the only Ground he got to stand upon, however momentarily slipping from under his Feet'. Those feet are metrical too, and the poem is committed to telling its readers that there's no time like the present even as its rhythms tell of the difficulty of holding on to it:

The Stars are setting and the Caravan
Starts for the Dawn of Nothing—Oh, make haste!

As Daniel Karlin has noted, 'Nothing' lies at the very centre of FitzGerald's poem (it arrives here in the central stanza: number 38 of 75 in the first edition). The Dawn of Nothing re-writes daybreak as our moment of annihilation: we're all in the dark so we should embrace our benighted yet unsettled condition while we can. Yet the metrical stress on 'Oh' perhaps invites us to hear an apostrophe from within the sigh ('O', not simply 'Oh'), and so to imagine the present as an address to and shaper of the future, not simply as a fleeting nullity. Tennyson once confessed that 'In the present is always something unreal and indistinct', and his feeling for the weirdly intangible life of the present moment is related to the something-and-nothing he apprehends in the life of the syllable when viewed under the aspect of rhythm. Indeed, what Arthur Hallam superbly described as rhyme's 'constant appeal to Memory and to Hope' could also be applied to metrical motion. As Nicholas Abraham observes of 'lived time' and of rhythm: 'Each present, in short, requires a bipolar description of *its* past and *its* future . . . *rhythm begins at the precise moment when I anticipate a recurrence*'. The apprehension of such moments is an affective state, a mediation, a movement: 'In these movements and *through* this affectivity, I grasp something that surpasses them, *that is not there*'. This something is not there in the same way that zero or nothing is: you can't put your finger on it, but you couldn't live without it.

Tennyson wrote to FitzGerald to say how much he admired the *Rubáiyát*, but he also added (grouchily, affectionately): ‘You stole a bit in it from the Gardner’s Daughter, I think; perhaps not’. In that poem the narrator speaks of his passing attraction to Juliet. She had been

To me myself, for some three careless moons,
The summer pilot of an empty heart
Unto the shores of nothing!

This may play on older, bawdier meanings of ‘no-thing’ as slang for a hollow female centre towards which male numbers (and members) gravitate. Tennyson’s joke—if it is a joke—would suggest that, in this unfortunate case, nothing came of nothing. But the lines also have a resonance and a seductiveness that goes beyond such play: the empty heart and the shores of nothing feel like two partners, two zeros, and to speak of shores is to apprehend nothing not as mere flirtation or non-consummation, but as a sort of homecoming—or as a kind of release. FitzGerald replied:

I remember . . . having been at a loss to express the “*no-thing*”—Nothingness, Non-existence; Non-entity, etc. . . . you may set it down as an Echo of yourself if you will. I remember so often wanting a word like the French ‘*Néant*’ to express what is so much the burden of the old song.

This sense of nothing as an inscrutable key to plenitude or pleasure—a way to enrich a life, not simply to mark its insignificance—is wrapped up in the ambiguously measured O in the word itself: nothing or *no-thing* (the second option allows for a sense of something that doesn’t appear to obey the laws of thing-ness). From early on, I think, Tennyson picked up on strange alliances between nothing and innumerability. Bhaskara, for one, conceived the idea that when a finite number is divided by zero, the result is infinity, and Schiller, in his *Letters on The Aesthetic Education of Man*, spoke of the aesthetic state as a place in which ‘man is Nought’, but also, as a result, ‘an infinity filled with content’. The pairing of 0 with ∞ is caught most suggestively, for my purposes, in a comment by R. P. Blackmur: ‘there is a zero quality in style by which it seems to project, as it contains, the infinity of numbers’.

What would this style sound like? And what, if anything, would it be telling or tallying? In this stanza (itself a figure of 8 by 8) from Tennyson's 'The Miller's Daughter', the burden of an old song, echo, and nothing come together to make strange music:

A love-song I had somewhere read,
 An echo from a measured strain,
 Beat time to nothing in my head,
 From some odd corner of the brain.
 It haunted me, the morning long,
 With weary sameness in the rhymes,
 The phantom of a silent song,
 That went and came a thousand times.

A prosodically-economical reader might not be impressed by this: Adam Smith, for example, was firm about the exchange-value of stress values and noted that 'if the accent falls upon odd syllables, it spoils the verse'; moreover, redundant syllables should be 'considered a sort of excrescence of the verse, and are in a manner counted for nothing'. In this tune, coming from 'some odd corner of the brain', the word 'odd' is in an odd prosodic position as the third syllable of the line, yet it feels as though it might aspire towards taking an accent. Where does such a feeling come from? Partly from the word 'from' itself, whose own hollow 'o' is carried over from the beginning of the line into 'odd' and then re-echoed in the stressed word 'of'. This often happens in Tennyson; rhythm is generated backwards as well as forwards, and the assonance of the line lends new, variegated life to syllables that might, in other tunes, have been passed over without notice. The strange potency of the song is also caught in another O, the one lurking in 'song' itself. In the first line, 'song' is half-hidden in a compound and in a relatively unstressed syllabic position, but then it returns as part of a full rhyme, fully stressed—a magical echo, then, that resists the law of diminishing returns by building rather than dissipating over time (it's important that the song 'went and came', rather than 'came and went'). In Tennyson's writing, apparently redundant things count *for* nothing, give nothing a space to make itself felt on a page that can both hold and take a 'measured strain'.

Susan Stewart has claimed that ‘keeping time, the work of intended care in meter . . . makes infinity bearable’. Tennyson’s poetry half-supports this idea, but beating (rather than keeping) time to nothing also sounds less achieved, less ‘intended’—more like a compulsion than a craft, or like a sense of craft *as* compulsion, a tune that haunts as well as soothes. For Tennyson, the infinite that can be generated from nothing is both resource and predicament. Recall his comment: ‘Before a crowd, which consists of many personalities, of which I know nothing, I am infinitely shy.’ Knowing nothing, infinitely shy, the poet hovers somewhere between zero and infinity. Listening to the sound in his head is at once purgative and pathological—a working *through*, and a working *with* or working *under*. In ‘Owd Roä’, the old man from Lincolnshire is accosted by his mother who wonders whether he’s ‘good for owt’:

And I says, ‘If I beänt noäwaäys—not nowadays—good for nowt—

Yit I beänt sich a Nowt of all Nowts as ’ull hallus do as ’e’s bid.’

H. D. Rawnsley remembered Tennyson chuckling over these lines when he read them aloud. They are a portrait of the artist as an old man—at once a good-for-nothing, an apparent waste of space, but not quite a ‘Nowt of all Nowts’ because he shines in negation, turns negation into a space in which to do his own thing. To put it this way, though, doesn’t get at the strangeness of what is being said here. The speaker doesn’t say that he *isn’t* ‘A Nowt of all Nowts’. He is that, but he’s other things besides; the line allows for a range of ways in which the singular old ‘Nowt’ is more than the sum of his parts, and for a sense that the Nowt is part of a wider collective of Nowts with whom he has things in common. One translation of the feeling here might be heard in George Oppen’s lines:

Obsessed, bewildered

By the shipwreck

Of the singular

We have chosen the meaning

Of being numerous.

Tennyson never quite *chooses* that meaning; he prefers rather to have it foist itself upon him the better to resist it. I think this is what T. S. Eliot was getting at when he said that Tennyson was ‘the most instinctive rebel against the society in which he was the most perfect conformist’. A singular shipwreck upon the shores of nothing is at once an island from which the numerosity of the social contract might save you, and a catalyst for a replenished me-ness, a desolated yet delectable sense of selfhood.

There’s a side of Tennyson that trusts, in *In Memoriam*, ‘That nothing walks with aimless feet’, but hearing ‘nothing’ here as an entity, not simply a negative, one also catches a subterranean allegiance to aimlessness—as though aimlessness were what his metrical feet were really in search of. Elsewhere in *In Memoriam* he compares the O of the Earth—‘This round of green, this orb of flame’—with ‘Fantastic beauty such as lurks | In some wild poet, when he works | Without a conscience or an aim’. For him, the unknowingness of poetry is often bound up with a feeling for nothingness. He writes elsewhere that ‘Nothing knew’. What Nothing knows is that knowledge requires some kind of supposition or belief; and for Tennyson, belief (especially belief in himself) is often felt as a kind of ambivalence. A friend recalled that the poet ‘deplored the narrowing of our vowels and the general clipping of our words’, and that he gave the word ‘knowledge’ itself as a prime example: “‘The word ‘knowledge’, he said, should not be pronounced “knollege”, but with the emphasis on the “know”.’ Know-ledge, then—drawing out the zero, the long O, the vowel that avows the Nothing at the heart of knowledge.

Ian Hacking has written lucidly on ‘the avalanche of printed numbers’ that appeared in the modern age, and on the ways in which categories were invented into which people could conveniently fall in order to be counted. When he says that ‘the first half of the nineteenth century generated a world becoming numerical and measured in every corner of its being’ he is more than half right. Still, there are some odd corners of the brain where these developments can be re-thought, and the act of beating time to nothing is a fitting image for Tennyson’s sense of poetry’s reckoning. In the letter to his publisher concerning the numbers who died in the charge of the Light Brigade, Tennyson asked his wife to add a postscript: ‘Then the fact of the numbers—We don’t know what it is—’. He is looking for a specific number, of course, but he’s also confessing a loss of bearings before the strange fact—and factitiousness—of Number. This disorientation needn’t preclude a certain assurance,

a feeling for commotion that may allow for a sense of calm. It could be both a sorrow and a relief to confess, as Paul Celan did:

We
don't know, you know,
we
don't know, do we?,
what
counts.