

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

TENNYSON, OBSCURED

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Writing to Mary Russell Mitford in August 1836 after reading the *New Monthly Magazine*, Elizabeth Barrett recounted in rolling syntax the ‘strangeness’ and ‘music’ of Tennyson’s verse. ‘There is a tone in the poetry – in the very extravagance of the poetry & language – an abandonment & wildness’, one which ‘stayed with me afterwards’ and excused both ‘perplexities & obscurations’ (*Brownings’ Correspondence*, III, 191). Prefiguring the rise of his reputation over the next twenty years, the word ‘obscurations’ hits a nerve deep in the body of Tennyson’s verse: a tension between the word’s literal and figurative senses – between darkened light and concealed meaning, reason or passion. As Tennyson’s close friend, James Spedding, remarked of his early poems, there is ‘an over-indulgence in the luxuries of the senses’, which ‘make[s] the glories of the outward world’ begin ‘to obscure and overshadow the world within’ (Jump, 1986, 143). Long before the publication of *In Memoriam* V (‘For words, like nature, half reveal / And half conceal the Soul within’), the language used by Tennyson’s contemporaries to unveil his evasions had already started to shift in use. By the 1850s, when usage of the word ‘obscurations’ had surged, its origins in the Latin *obscuratio* had partly been rerouted as a metaphor not only of vision but of sound: a term in modern *phonetics* for what the philologist Caleb Bates Josselyn described in 1866 as an ‘obscured vowel’, a ‘sound’ in voice ‘so indistinct’ as to begin to evade linguistic description (Josselyn, 1866, 40). That Tennyson’s obscurities and auditory imagination can blend in one word’s meanings should attune us to the ways that critical terms themselves can drift in sense between the 1830s and modern readers. Such modulations reinforce the value of letters in dating and shaping the language of poetics.

For all Tennyson’s public influence on the shape of Victorian verse, the private criticism of his contemporaries reveals aspects of his reception that have otherwise been obscured. Their interactions clarify how his poetry responded to traditions of rhyme, both historical and recent, and how it engaged with the evolution of language’s meaning and diction. Each of these insights resonates with the articles in this Special Issue, which

examines Tennyson's poetics in relation to the Brownings, Wordsworth and Morris. Sarah Weaver reads Tennyson's and Morris's rhymes through their historical modes of pronunciation. Tennyson's interactions with the Brownings, with conflicted and at times grudging admiration, are laid out by Leonée Ormond. Yimon Lo compares Tennyson's 'Tears, idle tears' with Wordsworth's soundscapes, while Susan Donovan's note details the ambivalent and changing relationship between Clough and Tennyson. A second note on redacted lines from Ruskin's correspondence shines new light on his developing aesthetics and views on the Poet Laureate. The issue closes with two accounts of Tennyson's significance to modern readers, edited by Valerie Purton, and with Seamus Perry's moving obituary for Michael O'Neill – a critic and poet of great kindness and outstanding distinction.

Works Cited

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