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GLADSTONE, TENNYSON AND HISTORY: 1886 AND ALL THAT...

William Gladstone (1809-1898) and Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892), titanic icons of the Victorian age, were born within months of each other, remained in contact for over sixty years (despite well-documented disagreements) and died, both over eighty, having survived the majority of their contemporaries. Their shared, passionate regard for their first mutual acquaintance, Arthur Henry Hallam (1811-1833), is the most famous link between them and much of their periodic animosity has been attributed to its strength. David Bebbington indeed judged that Gladstone and Tennyson's "mutual esteem was strained by only one factor, a rivalry over guarding the reputation of Arthur Hallam" (Bebbington, 1993, 131-2).

Not all commentators have been so monocausal: Richard Shannon described the relationship as moving gradually "from courtship to mutual disenchantment", whilst Gerhard Joseph interpreted it as a lifelong intellectual competition, operating within an Homeric frame of reference (Shannon, 1992, 4-6; Joseph, 1992, 127-40, 32).

It is clear that their relationship operated on various different levels and there is evidence to suggest a progressive deterioration in relations not entirely attributable to jealousy over Hallam. Nonetheless, the way both men assessed the person and influence of Arthur Hallam is a starting point for a fresh analysis, which will focus on their differing attitudes to history and culminate in a discussion of their public debate over the state of the nation in 1886.

In *Morte d'Arthur*, written in shock at Hallam's death, Tennyson considered the implications of the King's death and his uncertain legacy. In the same way *In Memoriam* both depicted

the challenges of coping with and seeking to overcome personal loss and grief, whilst also evaluating the broader implications of bereavement for faith and society (Whittem, Shaw and Jefferson, 1999, 16-17). Gladstone's response to Hallam's death also reflected personal and wider concerns. He spoke both of the "elevating effects derived from intercourse with a spirit such as his" but also expressed his opinion that "his mind was calculated...to work powerfully and for good in an age full of import to the nature and destinies of man" (qtd. in Hallam, 1869, xlv, xlv). The existence of a public, universalist and moreover historical aspect to both Gladstone and Tennyson's response offers an intriguing, and potentially, revealing insight into their long and tortuous relationship.

Gladstone and Tennyson had many common intellectual interests but they were both particularly fascinated by history. As boys they immersed themselves in their fathers' libraries, reading both ancient and modern historians, and shared a passion for the work of Sir Walter Scott (Kozicki, 1979, 2-4). As an habit of mind, a branch of philosophy and as an emergent discipline, history significantly influenced their lives and work. And, as will become clear, differences in the way Gladstone and Tennyson viewed history: its workings and humanity's ability to shape it, are crucial to understanding their relationship and public interactions.

It was John Addington Symonds who recorded perhaps the most memorable written portrait of Gladstone and Tennyson, at an artistic dinner party in 1865 hosted by sculptor Thomas Woolner. The account is entertaining but the particular way in which Symonds contrasted the two opponents should be carefully noted:

The conversation continued. They were talking about the Jamaica business – Gladstone bearing hard on Eyre,¹ Tennyson excusing any cruelty in the case of putting down a savage mob. Gladstone had been reading official papers on the business all the morning and said, with an expression of intense gravity [...] ‘And that evidence wrung from a poor black boy with a revolver at his head!’ He said this in an orator’s tone, pity mingled with indignation, the pressure of the lips, the inclination of the head, the lifting of the eyes to heaven, all marking the man’s moral earnestness.

Tennyson did not argue. He kept asserting various prejudices and convictions [...] in *obbligato*, *sotto voce* [...] thrown in with an indefinable impatience and rasping hatred [...] all the while [...] drinking glasses of port and glowering round the room through his spectacles [...]

It is hard to fix the difference between the two men, both with their strong provincial accent – Gladstone with his rich flexible voice, Tennyson with his deep drawl rising into an impatient falsetto when put out: Gladstone arguing, Tennyson putting in a prejudice; Gladstone asserting rashly, Tennyson denying with a bald negative; Gladstone full of facts, Tennyson relying on impressions; both of them humorous, but the one polished and delicate in repartee, the other broad and coarse and grotesque [...] Gladstone is in some sort a man of the world; Tennyson a child, and treated by him like a child. (qtd. in Lang and Shannon, 1982-90, 2, 415-20)

The two men are presented as the antithesis of each other in their physical and vocal characteristics, and in their approach to history. Symonds highlighted the way in which

¹ The Governor of Jamaica, whose stern repression of alleged insurrection by former slaves, provoked heated debate in Britain between such luminaries as John Stuart Mill and Thomas Carlyle.

they reacted differently to Governor Eyre's actions. Gladstone was interested in the provenance as well as the use of evidence, whereas Tennyson was merely interested in it as a means to an end and gave no indication that he had read anything at all. Gladstone was described as "full of facts" whilst Tennyson was repeatedly called prejudicial, impressionistic and impatient. This is not to say Symonds thought Gladstone above reproach (he was sceptical of Gladstone's political posturing) but he did detect a fundamental difference in perspective which we would now label historical. Gladstone and Tennyson's simmering battle that evening focused on Homer as well as politics, but there was clearly an important link, illustrated here, between their attitudes to history and their attitudes to politics, which should be explored.

Gladstone and Tennyson's parliamentary relationship commenced in 1883 on the friendliest of terms, but it was not ultimately successful. This was a sore disappointment to Gladstone as he was determined that Tennyson should be a Liberal asset (Tennyson, 1897, 2, 298-9). The origins of Gladstone's (ultimately misguided) belief in Tennyson's political fellow feeling dated from the 1850s and Gladstone's first public comments on Tennyson's poetry, in the *Quarterly Review* of October 1859. His greatest praise and admiration was reserved for the *Idylls of the King*, which

According to Gladstone [...] brilliantly blended the national with the universal, the human with the Christian. In drawing on nature for his illustrations, Gladstone claimed, Tennyson could bear comparison with any poet, ancient or modern. (Bebbington, 1993, 131-2)

Gladstone's admiration for and to an extent identification with Tennyson's Arthurian 'epic' and his simultaneous criticism but crucial downplaying of *Maud* were to prove pivotal factors in their relationship and the expectations each man had of the other. Gladstone, at

the time when he most wished to collaborate politically with Tennyson, had moved from the instinctive conservatism of his youth to a radical liberalism inspired by the signs of the times and evidenced by history. But it remained deeply inspired by the philosophy of Tennyson's *Idylls*, which he made the mistake of directly equating with Tennyson's practical political outlook that was in fact dictated by a deep, instinctive old patrician-whig conservatism which he maintained throughout his life.

In 1855 Tennyson had published *Maud* which dealt directly with the Crimean War. Gladstone's 1859 review incorporated a strong attack on the poem's climax, which apparently endorsed war as a social panacea (Gladstone, 1859, 460-64). Gladstone qualified his attack when the article was republished in *Gleanings* in 1879, acknowledging he should have focused on poetics rather than on politics (Gladstone, "Tennyson," 1879, 141ff). But, as with his reading of Tennyson's *Idylls* and other texts, it was their intellectual and philosophical underpinning that remained of primary interest. Gladstone was concerned with Tennyson's approach to assessing and representing truth in *Maud*. He wrote:

We frankly own that our divining rod does not enable us to say whether the poet intends to be in any and what degree sponsor to these sentiments, or whether he has put them forth in the exercise of his undoubted right to make vivid and suggestive representations of even *the partial and narrow aspects of some endangered truth*. *This is at best, indeed, a perilous business; for out of such fervid partial representations nearly all grave human error springs; and it should only be pursued with caution and in season* [my emphasis] [...] We fear the passages we have quoted far overpass all the bounds of moderation and good sense. (Gladstone, 1859, 462)

Gladstone believed, following the eighteenth-century philosopher-bishop, Joseph Butler (1692-1752), that decisions relating to morality and truth should be reached by assessing as broad a range of evidence as possible in order to establish, by probability, the right course of action (Gladstone, "Probability," 1879, 908-34). Reliance on "partial and narrow aspects of [...] truth" was, in Gladstone's view, unlikely to provide a sound basis for the exercise of one's moral duty. The duty of the public figure to engage in world and human affairs in a responsible and morally-defensible way was a clear corollary of this view. Tennyson's duty to his 'public' was something Gladstone felt he had to remind Tennyson, in the conclusion to his original onslaught:

Mr Tennyson is too intimately and essentially the poet of the nineteenth century to separate himself from its leading characteristics, the progress of physical science, and a vast commercial, mechanical, and industrial development. Whatever he may say or do in an occasional fit, he cannot long cross or lose its sympathies; for while he elevates, as well as adorns, it, he is flesh of its flesh and bone of its bone. We fondly believe it is his business to do much towards the solution of [...] how to harmonise this new draught of external power and activity with the old and more mellow wine of faith, self-devotion, loyalty, reverence and discipline. (Gladstone, 1859, 464)

This passage clearly illustrates Gladstone's understanding of Tennyson as a social poet of great potential; Gladstone's annoyance with *Maud* did not for a moment outweigh his enthusiasm for Arthur: 'it is [...] human in the largest and deepest sense; and therefore [...] it is universal' (Gladstone, 1859, 468). It also illustrates his tendency, which developed in complexity and intensity during subsequent years, to focus on the moral possibilities offered by the full incarnation and integration of the public figure within society.

Others, including Robert Martin and Richard Shannon, have recognised the importance and danger of Gladstone's straightforward enthusiasm for *Idylls of the King*. Shannon suggested Gladstone interpreted the cycle as a political manifesto for the second half of the nineteenth century, usefully highlighting the way in which Gladstone's enthusiasm for Tennyson sprang from a peculiarly historical interpretation of their respective roles:

We can read Gladstone as proposing, in effect, to set up with Tennyson a kind of political-cultural partnership. He envisaged a beneficial collaboration between the greatest man of Victorian letters and [...] the greatest man of Victorian politics, in a joint undertaking to raise the character and hopes of their age and country. (Shannon, 1992, 4)

Shannon suggested the self-representation of both men belied their inner character. Gladstone appeared conservative and upright but underneath was a wild romantic, whereas Tennyson looked every inch the romantic poet but was stubbornly conventional, inflexible and hysterically xenophobic. This led both to misread the other. Gladstone simplistically equated Tennyson's Arthurian world with the author's contemporary political outlook, which, considering he did not know him that well personally, is understandable. He then went on to interpret their later political disagreements and Tennyson's damning indictment of Liberalism in *Locksley Hall Sixty Years After* as a betrayal of the earlier Christianised-Arthurian vision. On the other hand, Tennyson was annoyed and terrified by what he saw as Gladstone's increasingly wild radicalism and hit out against it, ironically, as Shannon argued, rejecting the political child of his own poetic vision.

According to Martin, Tennyson fundamentally "lacked the theoretical mind that makes politics more than personal emotions writ large. Independence, the struggle against oppression, heroism: all naturally moved him, but they touched his heart not his mind"

(Martin, 1980, 67). The truth of this insight is revealed by a letter Tennyson wrote to Gladstone in 1868, to accompany a volume of poetry deploring the treatment of Fenian prisoners.

The enclosed has been sent to me – possibly to you also: if not, read it now. It seems to me a terrible cry. *I don't much believe in the accuracy of the Irishmen generally* [my emphasis]– but I wish you who enlightened us formerly on the Neapolitan prisons to consider whether here too there be not a grievous wrong to be righted. (Lang and Shannon, 1982-90, 2, 505)

Tennyson's concern was circumstantial and limited. (He had clearly not heeded John Stuart Mill's early criticism of his tendency to embrace "as truth, not the conclusions which are recommended by the strongest evidence, but those which have the most poetical appearance" (qtd. in Martin, 1980, 226)). The treatment of these prisoners did not lead him, as it would Gladstone, to reassess and recontextualise their place within the British political system and its history. Also, Tennyson's sympathy and concern did not affect his instinctual belief in the untrustworthiness of the Irish. This was significant for it was the 1880s' debate over Ireland's political future that provided the context for Gladstone and Tennyson's most serious public clash.

On entering the Lords, Tennyson had immediately asserted his political independence from Gladstone by refusing to take a party seat. He behaved awkwardly over the 1884 Franchise Bill, only voting with the Government after receiving assurances that redistribution would follow franchise extension. He expressed criticism of Gladstone at this point, and subsequently, through verse. From 1885 things went from bad to worse for Gladstone. February saw the fall of Khartoum and the death of General Gordon. His Government stumbled on through the Spring, plagued by crisis and Cabinet disagreement.

It was finally defeated in June over the Budget and resigned. The second half of the year saw serious discussions with Parnell on Irish governance and preparation of the first Home Rule Bill which was to be the *raison d'être* and downfall of Gladstone's brief third ministry of 1886.

Meanwhile, Tennyson enthusiastically publicised his political opposition to Gladstone's Irish policies, although he always prefaced his attacks by saying how much he liked Gladstone personally. He coupled these attacks with savage criticism of Gladstone's apparent reluctance to keep up the fleet.

June 1886 saw the defeat of the first Home Rule bill in the Commons, which Gladstone described as 'a serious mischief' (GD² 7/6/86). This was followed by defeat in the General Election and Gladstone's resignation of the Premiership. The 'mischief' was exacerbated by an impressive parting shot from Tennyson at end of July, the publication of his long and vitriolic poem *Locksley Hall Sixty Years After*, colourfully described by Shannon as, "a big squib which exploded with electrifying results under Gladstone's seat" (Shannon, 1992, 6).

In conclusion to the debate on Home Rule on Monday 7 June 1886, Gladstone had described the imminent vote as 'one of those golden moments of our history [...] which rarely return, or [...] return at long intervals, and under circumstances which no man can forecast [...] Ireland stands at your bar expectant, hopeful, almost suppliant [...] she asks a blessed oblivion on the past' (Gladstone, 1886, 165-8). It was an appeal to the collective historical imagination of the House of Commons, which still resonates, but it did not touch Tennyson, a fact made abundantly clear by *Sixty Years After*. And by this stage, Gladstone must have been well aware that it would not.

² M. R. D. Foot and H. C. G. Matthew, eds., *The Gladstone Diaries: With Prime Ministerial Correspondence*, 14 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968-96).

Locksley Hall Sixty Years After was published in *The Times* on 31 July 1886. *The Athenaeum* described the poem's hero "as a broken-down man of 80, whose modified views of life and liberty may be taken to reflect the Laureate's own" (qtd. in Lang and Shannon, 1982-90, 3, 340). It was written when Tennyson was both disillusioned with Gladstone and politics, and suffering private grief over the death of his son Lionel.

Tennyson's original poem *Locksley Hall*, to which this is a loose sequel, was published (and read by Gladstone) in 1842. Tennyson described it as a representation of "young life, its good side, its deficiencies and its yearnings" (qtd. in Ricks, 1989, 181-2). The philosophy of history exhibited through Tennyson's poetry was, of course, never constant but, at the time he wrote *Locksley Hall*, "Tennyson emotionally affirmed, if with some ambiguity, the meaning of history by the 'end-determined' frame of reference implicit in the idea of progress" (Kozicki, 1979, xv).

There is no doubt that Gladstone, re-reading the earlier poem in the late 1880s, concurred with this interpretation, particularly highlighting its emphasis on international co-operation and the unifying and improving tendencies of history and calling Tennyson "the Prophet [who] has seen, down the long avenue, all the way [...] to the great result" (Gladstone, 1887, 3). However, in *Sixty Years After*, Tennyson totally revoked *Locksley Hall*'s optimistic endorsement of progress. Direction and meaning in history were both questioned.

'Forward' rang the voices then, and of the many mine was one.

Let us hush this cry of 'Forward' till ten thousand years have gone. (lines
77-8)

Patterns of history remained important determinants of the human condition, but Tennyson no longer detected ameliorative improvement. Instead humanity is tossed

Forward, backward, backward, forward, in the immeasurable sea,

Swayed by vaster ebbs and flows than can be known to you or me. (193-4)

The historical process is represented as a malevolent, enthralling force; whereas once the revival of Camelot offered regeneration, now “the Present” is “fatal daughter to the Past” (105). Evolution is allowed to exist, but it is checked by ‘Reversion’, which constantly drags humanity back to the level of ‘the beast’ (199-200; 147-8).

Tennyson detected these malignant processes at work in late nineteenth-century society, impacting on the lives of individuals and he represented the resultant social evils in horrifying terms, posing such questions as:

Is it well that while we range with Science, glorying in the Time,

City children soak and blacken soul and sense in city slime? (217-18)

Complicit in this national decay were the politicians “of realm-ruining party” of which “the practised hustings-liar”, obviously Gladstone, was the most culpable (120; 123).³ His self-serving behaviour and that of his supporters encouraged fear amongst reasonable citizens, who, Tennyson argued, are left no option but to reach for “dynamite and revolver” to defend themselves against the “menace”, “madness”, “written” and “spoken lies” peddled by these irresponsible governors of the age (107-8).

There are indications that in later drafts of the poem Tennyson sought to temper these criticisms, (Ricks, 1989, 640) but the poem remained a completely devastating attack upon the previous half-century and the record of the Liberals in government. Specifically, it was a crushing indictment of what Tennyson saw as Gladstone’s duplicitous political

³ G was aware of the directness of this attack. He underlined ‘realm-ruining party’ thus in his edition of the poem, preserved in the Temple of Peace, Hawarden Castle, shelf mark E VI 20.

philosophy, which had not only dispatched “old political common-sense” but heralded the demise of civilisation, in the form of heraldry, history and poetry (249-50).

Gladstone had remained largely unmoved by Tennyson’s earlier admonitions in verse, merely acknowledging them politely. However, at the urging of James Knowles, editor of the *Nineteenth Century*, Gladstone undertook a full-scale review of *Sixty Years After*. It was published in January 1887 under the title “‘Locksley Hall’ and the Jubilee”. Altogether, it is a sophisticated piece of writing. Tennyson’s poem is bitter, accusatory and at times hysterical. In contrast, Gladstone’s review is diplomatic and positive, mirroring the tenor of his private annotation of the poem. For example, he marked with ‘+’ (his sign of approbation) a number of passages which can be read as pro-Christian.⁴

Gladstone praised Tennyson’s abilities as a poet and defended his right to be taken seriously as a thinker. His only reservation was (like Mill’s) that, even in the greatest thinker, emotion might sometimes replace philosophy as the dominant influence (Gladstone, 1887, 1-2). He carefully established impartiality on both sides, characterising Tennyson’s poem as a dramatic monologue, not “a confession of political or social faith” (Gladstone, 1887, 2). This, of course, allowed him “greater freedom to estimate the utterances of the Prophet in the new *Locksley Hall* by the rules of truth and soberness, but ‘without respect of persons’” (Gladstone, 1887, 4). Thus, in the spirit of impartial historical enquiry, Gladstone established a clear frame of reference for his defence of Liberal progress:

⁴ For elucidation of G’s annotation system, cf. Ruth Clayton, “W. E. Gladstone: An Annotation Key,” *Notes & Queries*, 246.2 (2001): 140-43.

For the present I will only shut out from the review important divisions of the subject with which I am not competent to deal: those of literature, of research, of science, of morals [...] I shall only venture to refer to those portions of the case which can [...] be inventoried: the course and acts of public authority, and the movement [...] of public opinion, and of the most palpable forms of voluntary action. (Gladstone, 1887, 7)

By default he presented himself as competent to deal with historical questions and went on to provide a catalogue of improving measures from the preceding half century, concentrating on those achieved through parliamentary legislation. His review was panoramic, covering issues of labour, empire, education, communication, taxation, suffrage and religious freedom. This litany, of course, undertook to validate Gladstone's political career in the aftermath of the June defeats and his resignation as Prime Minister, however, his historical scope extended beyond the parliamentary. He thought it "of interest to turn from such dry outlines [...] to those more delicate gradations of the social movement, which [...] may be apprehended and made the subject of record" (Gladstone, 1887, 16).

In response, Tennyson sent a surprisingly beneficent telegram to Gladstone on 1 January 1887, thanking him for the "kindly eloquent Locksley article" (Lang and Shannon, 1982-90, 3, 345). He "ignores the antithetical thrust of Gladstone's catalogue of societal advances over the past half-century and his concluding admonition, 'Justice does not require, nay rather she forbids, that the Jubilee of the Queen be marred by tragic tones'" indicates a level of unconcern (Lang and Shannon, 1982-90, 3, 346). (Tennyson was already at work on his ode *On the Jubilee of Queen Victoria* and would have seen little threat to his reputation with the Queen from this article). However, at the heart of Gladstone's riposte was the implication that Tennyson was directly attacking the Queen and the British constitution she represented.

The representation of constitutional government by the monarch in Parliament had been spectacularly reinvented during Victoria's reign. Gladstone argued that the British constitution was now so allied with a positive and progressive understanding of the past that an attack on the one necessitated an attack on the other. Moreover, he believed this alliance between progressive history and constitutional government would find its greatest expression in the further expansion of popular government. It is no surprise to find him quoting Prince Albert, a man venerated by both men, in his defence.

In the words of the Prince Consort, 'Our institutions are on their trial,' as institutions of self-government; [...] condemnation [...] must sweep away [...] hopes [...] that, by this provision of self-government, the Future might effect some moderate improvement upon the Past, and mitigate in some perceptible degree the social sorrows and burdens of mankind.

(Gladstone, 1887, 6)

Tennyson had dedicated *Idylls of the King* to Prince Albert in 1862 and had described him as the perfect Arthurian knight, "modest, kindly, all-accomplished, wise," a model of manhood and leadership pointing to "the rich dawn of an ampler day" (Whittern, Shaw and Jefferson, 1999, 18). Gladstone's view of Albert was also Arthurian but he saw him as the King himself. Just as Arthur personified "the great pillar of the moral order, and the resplendent top of human excellence", (Gladstone, 1859, 477) so Albert represented a universal moral standard:

Every statue and memorial of the Prince may [...] be considered as a sermon made visible. He is one of the few [...] characters on the active stage of modern life, in whom the idea of duty seems to be actually impersonated, and to walk abroad in the costumes of State. It is good for us to be taken back [...] to see the spectacle, and so to learn its lessons [...] [We] are safe in saying that [...] we may travel far and wide, before the eye is blessed with so strong and happy a combination of mental and moral force [...] [Few] indeed have been the lives, in this curiously chequered age of ours, which [...] come nearer to the standard which in general we contemplate rather than attain. (Gladstone, "Prince Consort III," 1879, 97-8)

For Gladstone, in the wake of 'Arthur's' death, the central historical question at stake was: "Has this great attempt in an old country at popular government, when brought by trial by relative, not abstract standards, failed, or has it not?" (Gladstone, 1887, 8). The author of the *Idylls* bluff was being imperiously called.

It is no surprise that Gladstone's association of progress with increased popular government and his insistence that society should have a historical conscience found their ultimate expression in his campaign for Irish Home Rule. Gladstone's belief in Home Rule as a necessary legislative measure was based on an historical interpretation of the Union of 1801 as a travesty of justice, an instance where contemporary political action was divorced from historical understanding. He wrote "Our judgement on the age that last preceded us should be strictly just" (Gladstone, 1887, 4). He was convinced that this was not the case respecting Ireland. And he was satisfied that lack of support for the measure amongst MPs and the general public was a result of widespread historical ignorance. From the defeat of the first Home Rule Bill, Gladstone seemed obsessed by history, levels of historical

ignorance and the need to convince colleagues, opponents and the general public of its relevance to current issues. Repeatedly Gladstone reiterated the need to supply “the people of Great Britain with the historical information, in which their ‘titled’ and ‘educated’ leaders are so woefully deficient”.⁵ As a remedy he suggested publishing Irish History favourable to the Home Rule cause. Politically expedient this undoubtedly was; it was also reflective of a wider intellectual vision. Gladstone wrote to his son, Willy, on 8 July 1886: “The whole business is historical, and will come up again in the future, probably at no distant day [...] I grieve that England will seemingly not learn the lesson written in the book of fate until she has to learn it with more or less of pain and shame” (qtd. in *GD* 8/7/86). Gladstone’s estimation of the Irish Question was the driving force behind his preoccupation with history during the late 1880s. He not only supported schemes to make revisionist Irish history more widely available, but also steeped himself in Irish texts and produced a substantial body of articles and reviews on historical themes. During 1887, for example, he published six other historical articles, including one of the first for the fledgling *English Historical Review*. It is not surprising, therefore, that he drew attention to the Irish Question in his Tennyson review, making clear that Ireland was “the vital subject” of recent British history and for contemporary society. It was the one element that marred his depiction of national improvement (Gladstone, 1887, 11-12).

The heart of Gladstone’s epistemological understanding was the belief that the past is the defining other of society: knowable and educative. He wrote: “No greater calamity can happen to a people than to break utterly with its Past [...] for [...] we dislocate the axis of the very ground which forms our own point of departure” (Gladstone, 1887, 4). In contrast, Tennyson was becoming increasingly disillusioned with history as a force in society. For Tennyson, history

⁵ G to Barry O’Brien, 7 July 1886, British Library, Gladstone Papers, Add MS 44548 fol. 111.

has come full tilt onto the natural field of chance and animal anarchy. Redemptive forces do not appear. Heroes embody debased social qualities and [...] morbid suicidal proclivities [...] Tennyson's philosophy of history [...] [fragments] into poems that confirm the hopelessness of contemporary history, that work with primal beginnings divorced from any context in current affairs, and that celebrate pure spirit, now totally disentangled from history. (Kozicki, 1979, xvi)

There was no place for a messianic hero like Arthur in a society where the only prospect for humanity was to be "Swallow'd in Vastness, lost in Silence, drown'd in the deeps of a meaningless Past" (*Vastness*, XVII: 3-4). Instead human society was corrupted by "Raving politics, never at rest" (II: 1) accompanied by "a popular torrent of lies upon lies" (III: 5).

Richard Shannon essentially concurred with Tennyson's assessment of Gladstone's political motivation, especially with regard to Ireland. Shannon contended that Gladstone was driven by "a majestic vision of a political vocation derived from a conviction of prerogative by providential election", (Shannon, 1992, 5) which, he suggested, involved Gladstone in a selfish deception of colleagues and the public. For, whilst he was the People's William in public, in private he believed that "people were materials which existed to be formed into public opinion and directed to a particular end [...] [which] involved publicly flattering the people with a far higher estimation of their merits and capabilities" (Shannon, 1992, 6).

However, such an explanation proffers no explanation for Gladstone's changed attitude towards Ireland, except the implication that he received direct instructions from the Almighty. The assertion that Gladstone believed in providential election is, I think, founded on a misunderstanding of Gladstone's theology, his understanding of history and his view of humanity. Shannon wrote "Gladstone had no Shelleyan humanist faith in 'man

as man'. He believed quite ferociously in original sin and human depravity" (Shannon, 1992, 6). However, this portrait bears more resemblance to the Tennyson of the 1880s than Gladstone. Gladstone's early evangelical training in human self-deprecation coloured his private writings all his life, but his view of humanity was developmental. We have already seen how much he valued Arthur Hallam (and Tennyson) for the potential influence they possessed over "the nature and destinies of man". The belief that "to the long chapters of [...] [human] experience, every generation of man makes its own addition" was central to Gladstone's epistemological understanding and he firmly believed that Tennyson "by his own single strength, has made a sensible addition to the permanent wealth of mankind" (Gladstone, 1859 484-5). Further evidence is offered by his positive review, published in *Good Words* January to March 1868, of J. R. Seeley's *Ecce Homo* (first published anonymously in 1866), in which he defended the author's exploration of the humanity of Christ in the face of much dogmatic opposition. Engagement with the work further affirmed Gladstone's renewed and strengthened affinity with a human Christ (which had been steadily developing since the early 1850s). This combined with his extensive work on Homer to focus Gladstone's mind on the value of the human condition.⁶ In his last unfinished work on Olympian religion Gladstone was not only seeking to recover an integrated, synoptic vision of the relationship between world religions, he was also exploring the key area of humanity's relationship with the divine (Joseph, 1992, 136-7; Turner, 1981, 159-70). Thus, in his review of *Sixty Years After*, Gladstone was able to write: "The multiplication and better formation of the institutions of benevolence among us are but symptomatic indications of a wider and deeper change: [...] acknowledgement of the great second commandment, of the duties of wealth to poverty,

⁶ David Bebbington, 'Gladstone and the Classics', unpublished paper, 19-20. Cf. David Bebbington, *The Mind of Gladstone: Religion, Homer, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

of strength to weakness, of knowledge to ignorance [...] of man to man” (Gladstone, 1887, 17).

The duty of “knowledge to ignorance” was what Gladstone was seeking to fulfil in his championing of the Irish cause. For Gladstone, attaining knowledge was a diachronic process to be achieved by contending rationally with the views of others not through irrational condemnation, and certainly not by listening maniacally to the whisperings of providence. Thus he had criticised other reviewers of *Ecce Homo* for their “determined adhesion to fixed and unelastic modes of thought” which have “unhappily, put a dead stop to any real investigation of the work in its general bearings” (Gladstone, 1868, 3). In exactly the same way, he believed that education of society could be gained by a fair evaluation of its own past. Alfred and Emily Tennyson were also careful readers of Seeley’s *Ecce Homo*. Their copy was so much used and marked that a new cover was required, but their reading of the text exhibited somewhat different priorities than those shown by Gladstone. One of their chosen passages marked for meditation reads: “The indispensable conditions of progress, is the personal relation of loyal vassalage of the citizen to the Prince of the Theocracy [...] A disinterested surrender is implied in the very notion of a political community’ (qtd. in Kozicki, 1977, 148). This was quite at odds with Gladstone’s belief in the link between societal progress and popular government. As he wrote in his *Locksley Hall* review, “in the sphere of the State, the business of the last half-century has been in the main a process of setting free the individual man, that he may work out his vocation without wanton hindrance, as his Maker will have him do” (Gladstone, 1887, 17). It also reflected a real difference in the way Tennyson and Gladstone regarded the relationship between humanity and divinity and, concomitantly, their value for incarnation. As Joseph points out, the gods of Tennyson’s classical poems, like *The Lotus-Eaters*, are remote entities and

When such divinities touch the human sphere, they do so like the Zeus of Yeats' 'Leda and the Swan': their ravaging gifts are too terrible for man to bear; the price they exact for the power they offer or are forced to relinquish is catastrophic to the individual and to entire civilisations. (Joseph, 1992, 138-9)

There is a lack of understanding and integration and no real possibility of a beneficial relationship between the human and the divine. Joseph argued that "for Tennyson, at the end of his life, one sign of the race's emerging spiritual maturity is its ability to transform classical deities who hoard their ancient secret or 'wisdom' from man into a beneficent God who sends surrogates into the world to bring the race intimations of the soul's immortality" (Joseph, 1992, 139-40). However, on the basis of *Sixty Years After*, this is not a picture which rings true. Gladstone, on the other hand, maintained and built on the implications of the *Idylls* in his understanding of his own public and political life. In his 1859 review he had unfavourably compared Tennyson's characters like Maud, who he described as "of dreamy, shadowy quality, doubtful as to flesh and blood, and with eyes having little or no speculation in them" with his Arthurian subjects. "He is far greater", Gladstone wrote, "and far better when he has [...] a good raw material ready to his hand, than when he draws only on the airy or chaotic regions of what Carlyle calls unconditioned possibility" (Gladstone, 1859, 483).

A fascinating suggestion of the way in which Gladstone's sense of Christianised political vocation, Arthurian idealism and awareness of the isolation and unpopularity that could be the fate of the moral-historical prophet merged together, is given by a single annotation of his copy of *Ecce Homo*, preserved in the Temple of Peace in Hawarden Castle (alongside his editions of Tennyson's poems). The following is Seeley's description of John the Baptist but it could easily be a description of Gladstone:

He was a wrestler with life, one to whom peace of mind does not come easily, but only after a long struggle. His restlessness had driven him into the desert, where he had contended for years with thoughts he could not master, and from whence he had uttered his startling alarum to the nation. He was among the dogs rather than among the lambs of the Shepherd. He recognised the superiority of him whose confidence had never been disturbed, whose steadfast peace no agitations of life had ever ruffled. He did obeisance to the royalty of inward happiness. (Seeley, 1866, 6)

And Gladstone wrote one word next to this passage: 'Lancelot', revealing, in my view, his understanding of his own place in the Arthurian hierarchy.

Gladstone's understanding of both history and politics was rooted in a belief that human society needed to engage with its own past in order to discover its sense of being and purpose. In the same way, the individual should seek knowledge through engagement with the thought of previous generations. Self knowledge and, he increasingly believed, knowledge of the divine, could be ameliorated by a balanced appreciation, rather than condemnation, of the imperfect but noble human inheritance.

Tennyson, on the other hand, ultimately rejected the need for connection between human society present and past, losing faith in humankind's capacity and worthiness for redemption. He thus played down the connections between the spheres of humanity and divinity. In his poem *Vastness*, Tennyson envisaged humanity nailing 'all flesh to the Cross, till / Self died out in the love of his kind' (XVI: 4-5). And, at the end of *Sixty Years After*, mankind is advised to 'Follow Light, and do the Right' whilst Christ (the ultimate fusion between humanity and divinity) is forever trapped between crucifixion and resurrection, at the point where 'the deathless Angel' is seated in the vacant tomb' (277-8).

To conclude then, Gladstone and Tennyson had much in common: education, friends and intellectual tastes. Despite the dinner-party banter they maintained a degree of mutual respect and affection, which even Tennyson's violent opposition to Home Rule could not completely eradicate. Martin's assessment of them at their last meeting, that "they were both aware of their advanced age and of the fact that they were bound together by memories that were more important than the differences that separated them", (Martin, 1980, 275) is a fair one. However, for the root cause of the differences that existed between them, one has to look deeper than jealousy over Arthur Hallam or inveterate love of intellectual argument. There was a real difference of philosophical outlook surrounding their view of history, which, over time, fuelled both their personal and political disagreements. Gladstone had an historical conscience and a sense that practical lessons could be learned from the past for the improvement of the human condition. Tennyson had an historical imagination through which the author increasingly sought to escape to an idealised past with no relation to the present.

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