

**Jesse Oak Taylor: “Tennyson’s Elegy for the Anthropocene: Genre, Form and Species Being.” *Victorian Studies* 58. 2 (2016): 224-233.**

This article examines ways in which the identification of the anthropocene, which is conceived here as originating in the industrial revolution, served to instigate new definitions of both animal and human species. Taylor suggests that the critical point of this definition lies in the process of the loss of certain species, and the consequent sense of mourning which this entails. The early-Victorian advances in geology greatly increased the legibility of both creaturely and human history and served to dismantle the boundaries between the animal kingdom and *homo sapiens*. The recognition of widespread species extinction which the new geology brought into focus, Taylor argues, was refracted in literary terms through the form of the poetic elegy. Such acts of memorialisation, it is suggested, are reliant on the ‘afterlife of the image’ in which life is defined in terms of the trace of the remains of other species, and the article proposes that species may be defined in both biological and aesthetic categories. Taylor argues in Benjaminian terms that the concept of translation is crucial to interpretations of the anthropocene, and he applies this insight to a brief reading of Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* as an elegy which allows the dead to speak. In some climactic sections the Tennysonian text, it is stressed, specifically addresses geological issues and the evidence of extinction, and the poem is resonant with the implications of the identification of successive ‘types’ in the fossil record. Taylor’s article seeks to move beyond current readings of *In Memoriam* reflective of Victorian geology, stressing instead the thematic centrality of the sense of the newly identified and defined anthropocene to Tennyson’s poem. In elaborating and extending his argument, Taylor specifically explains the unintended valence of the text’s recording of the way in which evolution will ‘let the ape and tiger die’ in relation to the current concern for endangered animal species: such disappearing species, he suggests somewhat paradoxically, are in fact now reproduced or resurrected in aesthetic forms. In other words, Taylor maintains in a telling conclusion, “Footprints, skeletons, and other fossilised remains reanimate the species they represent as features of both the landscape and the human imagination” (232).

Taylor’s article acutely and thoughtfully addresses the key question of evolutionary ethics in terms of the relatively recent stratigraphic designation of the anthropocene. The argument which develops is eloquent in its response to what Timothy Morton has defined as “a geological time marked by a decisive human ‘terraforming’ of the earth” (*Hyperobjects*, 2013, 4), and the thesis is both ingeniously developed and original in its approach, not least in bringing readings of *In Memoriam* up to date vis à vis what may be termed the textual ‘defamiliarisation’ of the earth. Taylor seeks here to address the problematic issue first defined by T. J. Clark of the complex relation between language/literature and the anthropocene, and his article is a nuanced piece which is certainly alert to the role of evolutionary ideas in *In Memoriam* as an ‘embodied practice’. At the same time, whilst Taylor’s stated aim to move the geologically inflected reading of *In Memoriam* beyond current critical understanding offers a number of valid and insightful perspectives, the article is perhaps too little responsive to, or inflected by, previous scholarship in relation to Tennysonian readings

of what may be termed the unimaginable temporalities of the anthropocene. The article might, thus, have offered the reader a somewhat more detailed account of Tennyson's text, which here tends to feature somewhat allusively as illustrative of Taylor's indubitably cohesive and thoughtful thesis, and the evidence could have been productively buttressed by a fuller account of some relevant earlier scholarship (see, for example, Dennis R. Dean, *Tennyson and Geology* (Lincoln: The Society, 1985), and Lyall Anderson and Michael Taylor, "Tennyson and the Geologists" (*Tennyson Research Bulletin* 10. 4, 2015).

This is, nonetheless, a fruitful and thought-provoking account of the issues which, in reflecting and elaborating recent eco-critical concerns, illuminates both our understanding of Tennyson's great elegy and the wider context suggested by literary interpretations of the anthropocene.

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