

**Review of John Morton, *Tennyson Among the Novelists* (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. xiv, 194, £60.00, ISBN: 9781441102379.**

Quotations from Tennyson's poetry seem to have been cropping up everywhere recently. The final line of 'Ulysses' is due to be inscribed on a wall at the entrance to the Olympic village for the 2012 London games. And Alan Hollinghurst's 2011 novel *The Stranger's Child*, although dealing with the life, work, and critical afterlives of a fictional World War I poet, takes its title from *In Memoriam*. Tennyson's work is evidently seen at the moment as a suggestive source of allusion for writers (as well as an inspiration to athletes). *The Stranger's Child* appeared too late for inclusion in *Tennyson Among the Novelists*, but Hollinghurst's novel affirms the timeliness of John Morton's monograph, which 'sets out to ask why writers of fiction from the 1850s to the present day found on their lips refrains from Tennyson' (xiii). In its study of novelistic appropriations of Tennyson, Morton's book is 'allied' (6), as the author notes, to *Tennyson Among the Poets* (2009), the volume of essays which marked the poet's bicentenary year by examining his relation to his poetic predecessors and heirs. Both books testify to a widespread interest in Tennyson's literary and cultural influence, as scholars seek to explore how his verse resonates in the work of later writers and in Anglophone culture more broadly. *Tennyson Among the Novelists* gives plentiful evidence to support the view that Tennyson's influence has been, since the mid-nineteenth century, vital and persistent, and it offers some revealing insights about the importance of Tennyson's poetry to specific novelists.

Morton begins his book by introducing some key theorisations of the concept of literary influence, citing the work of Harold Bloom, Christopher Ricks, and Robert Douglas-Fairhurst. However, his own approach is flexible and inclusive, not defined by any systematic theoretical framework. He discusses a diverse range of novelistic responses to Tennyson (overt quotation from his poetry, covert allusion, the presence of Tennyson as a character within a novel), considering each case on its own terms and giving nuanced accounts of the particular ways in which different authors engage with Tennyson and his work. A similar flexibility is apparent in the scope of the book's coverage, as Morton examines critical writings about Tennyson (and, in his later chapters, references to the poet in film and television) as well as novels. This approach allows him to place the novels within their wider cultural contexts, demonstrating how novelists have reflected and contributed to more general perceptions of Tennyson. At the same time, though, it has the effect of diluting his focus on the novel as a form, and it threatens to distract attention away from the specific devices, practices, and concerns which distinguish novelistic writing about Tennyson from poetic allusion or critical commentary.

The chapters of *Tennyson Among the Novelists* proceed chronologically, starting in the mid-nineteenth century and ending in the early twenty-first. Morton maps changing attitudes to Tennyson across this time-span, noting, for example, how the decline in Tennyson's critical standing in the early twentieth century is identifiable too in the ambivalent comments of novelists. But he also succeeds in showing that, in some respects, Tennyson's status among writers of fiction has remained largely unchanged. In novels from Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (1850) to Michel Faber's neo-Victorian pastiche *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002),

Tennyson, Morton astutely points out, is 'invoked in order to evoke periodicity' (10) and to operate as a representative symbol of Victorian culture. Another convincing argument involves the claim that novelists consistently present Tennyson's poetry as a means of escaping or denying the real world. These arguments are founded on extensive research and on detailed readings of a vast array of novels: Morton cites several popular and non-canonical twentieth-century texts as well as works by Elizabeth Gaskell, Thomas Hardy, George Gissing, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Evelyn Waugh, Agatha Christie, and A. S. Byatt (this list is not exhaustive). This thoroughness lends significant authority to Morton's work: his knowledge of fictional allusions to Tennyson is comprehensive, and his presentation of that knowledge is informative and illuminating.

In some sections of the book, however, the mass of material weighs heavily on Morton's argument: the lengthy fifth chapter reads like a survey or summary of references to Tennyson in the 1930s and '40s. The most successful chapters, conversely, make a case for Tennyson's unique relation to a particular novelist or group of novelists. Chapter 4, for instance, presents a persuasive account of D. H. Lawrence's response to Tennyson, showing how Lawrence's repeated allusions to the phrase 'an infant crying in the night', from *In Memoriam*, reflect his association of Tennyson's poetry with states of spiritual or psychological childishness. Chapter 7 has a similarly sharp focus, exploring the feminist reimaginings of 'The Lady of Shalott' undertaken by several authors (including Jessica Anderson and Margaret Atwood) in the 1970s and '80s. These chapters demonstrate the strengths of Morton's approach, as they pay close and rewarding attention to the way in which novelists working in different historical moments draw on and rework different aspects of Tennyson's legacy. It is a pity that *Tennyson Among the Novelists* contains several typing (or printing) errors and incorrect spellings, because in other respects this is a skilful and convincing analysis of Tennysonian allusion, and of Tennyson's place in literary and cultural history. It is to be hoped that other scholars will follow Morton's example and continue to explore this fertile territory in the future.

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