

Temporal Topographies: Tennyson's Tears

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Abstract

Alfred Lord Tennyson's abstract thinking was frequently traditional and conventional, however his "poetic thinking" differed from his abstract thinking and was also more subtle. The poem *Tears, Idle Tears* in *The Princess* contains an example of Tennyson's profound apprehension of temporality. The poem's expression of an apprehension of human time, Tennyson's rich meticulous writing techniques, and the performative use of the allegorical signs, prosopopoeia and catachresis, call forth that apprehension of temporality. In "*Tears, Idle Tears*" temporal distance is associated with spatial distance. For example, in "looking on the happy Autumn-fields" there is the image of a ship appearing or disappearing over the horizon. Temporal distance also permeates expressions of loss of a loved one or unassuageable desire. In these kinds of images, past and future are inverted, gone forever in the past, foreshadowing a death that will in the future cause the ultimate loss. Thus, the "idle tears" themselves in the poem remain the most important allegorical sign, as opposed to symbol, of the transience of time. The person in the poem, as they gaze at the happy autumn fields, continues to cherish the days gone by, and the tears continue to fall. Tears here are allegorical signs, in the Benjaminian sense of the definition. Unlike the Coleridgean definition, under which tears are used symbolically, these tears allow the person reminiscing to fully understand the illusion of yesterday. In other words, the failure of tears to express what they mean makes them function as an allegorical sign for temporality.