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Composing Decomposition: *In Memoriam* and the Ecocritical Undertaking

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By the time Arthur Hallam finished his continental travels and returned to England in January 1834, he was literally falling apart. Sad as it was, his breakdown should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the facts of putrefaction: Hallam, after all, had been dead for four months in an age when refrigeration was impractical and embalming virtually unheard of. To make matters worse, Viennese authorities had ordered an autopsy on his body, which entailed opening the skull and thoracic cavity to dissect Hallam's brain, lungs, spleen, gall bladder, and other organs. Afterward, local officials collected the remains and shuttled them around the city in a series of erratic attempts to either extort money from Hallam's father for his return or, failing that, to bury what was left of him. With the help of the English Embassy, Henry Hallam eventually located his son's remains and began the process of shipping them home. But that journey, too, proved unusually arduous, as foul weather rerouted or sank a number of vessels that winter, delaying interment further.[1]

Only this last incident finds its way into Alfred Tennyson's enduringly popular elegy about Hallam's death, *In Memoriam A. H. H.* (1850). Nevertheless, Tennyson's tribute to his friend shows a haunting consciousness of Hallam's bodily afterlife that has eluded critical notice. As Deborah Lutz observes, "A tradition of criticism has developed that attempts to make the corpse disappear in Tennyson's elegy" (119). That tradition overwhelmingly ignores Hallam's physical body to focus on the poem's philosophical concerns with love, loss, identity, and faith. Yet attempts by Lutz and others "to put the body back into *In Memoriam*" only ignore the corpse by other means (Lutz 119). They idealistically treat it as a singular, stable object rather than acknowledging what it really was—a messy collection of organic material steadily advancing through the process of rotting.[2]

This is not merely a prurient point. Focusing on the distasteful state of Hallam's remains helps clarify the cultural work of Tennyson's elegy, which appeared at a moment of radical transformation in Western attitudes toward death and decomposition. Our failure to appreciate these aspects of the poem is, moreover, a sign of a larger critical blind spot: an unwillingness to explore or even acknowledge the existence of decomposition. The ways we imagine bodily decay shape both our response to death and our understanding of the relations between humanity and the natural world. An unflinching cultural history of decomposition would thus constitute a valuable addition to the environmental humanities—but because rot has long been a taboo topic, this history must begin with the

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development of new modes of ecocritical reading that expose the aesthetic strategies designed to mask putrefaction.

In Memoriam provides a useful proving ground for such a project because of the poem's unique historical position at the center of major changes in Western deathways. Those changes entailed a professionalization of undertaking and cemetery management that removed bodily decay from most people's daily experience, resulting in the sterilized funerary rituals that now predominate in Anglo-American culture.[3] Modern funeral practices rely on a combination of industrial technology and calculated staging to disavow the existence of decomposition, presenting a carefully curated illusion that individual bodily integrity persists after death. That illusion may offer some temporary consolation to the bereaved, but it comes at a hefty environmental price: in obscuring rot, we obscure ecological realities, turning our backs on a vital connection between individual human beings and the broader biotic community of which we are a part.

If, as Darrell Mansell and others have suggested, *In Memoriam* constitutes a sort of textual tomb for Arthur Hallam, it shares the tomb's dubious function of shoring up the boundaries of a body whose distinction from its material environment wanes with each passing day. Revisiting Tennyson's elegy with a nose for these morbid matters restores the poem to its prominent place in the cultural history of death and decay. More importantly, it reveals how apparently innocuous aspects of literary composition collude with other cultural practices to reinforce the delusion that humans live and die in a kind of ecological vacuum. Indeed, reading in this way uncovers a tacit refusal to address the topic of rot that has restricted both literature and the critical enterprise, as critics emphatically but inaccurately equate death with total closure. To fully understand how culture influences our ability to think ecologically, we need reading strategies that will ruthlessly exhume issues of decomposition that our decorous aesthetics leave shrouded in silence—a decadent ecocriticism that turns to the grave not with sadness or shame, but with a certain ghoulish gusto.

1. *In Memoriam* and the matter of decay

It is hardly surprising that Tennyson resorted to verse to express himself after Hallam's death: Tennyson was already an accomplished poet, and poetry played a substantial role in their relationship. It is odd, however, that the poet's earliest verses on his friend detail the frustrations of international shipping. The lyrics that became section IX of the elegy were among the first stanzas of the poem that Tennyson composed, but instead of chronicling his shock and grief, they dilate on the coffin's journey from Vienna to Hallam's burial plot at St. Andrew's Church in Clevedon, Somerset. Tennyson later added ten more sections devoted to the topic.[4]

The coffin's safe arrival seems to free the poem from such mundane preoccupations. After lyric XIX Tennyson leaves funerary matters behind to focus, instead, on the mental and metaphysical consequences of his friend's death. But if Hallam's body is gone, it is not forgotten—the poem exhibits an undeniable compulsion to return to words related to decay. Its elaborate conceits about grief and the dissolution of identity are riddled with recurring terms such as *must*, *mould*, *rank*, and *blow*, words whose buried secondary meanings all involve decomposition. The poem wraps its earthy interests in transcendent questions about individual identity and the afterlife, but a close analysis of

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Tennyson's language indicates that his struggle to process his friend's absence actually masks a more material difficulty processing Hallam's continuing, putrefying presence.

Whatever consolation emerges from the elegy hinges on the gradual passage of time and, with it, an acceptance of the need to move on. The grief and despair expressed in individual stanzas slowly give way to faith in a providential universe, a sense that "it needs must be" that grows as the lyrics accrue (LIX line 4).[5] Often—eleven times, to be exact—necessity, inevitability, and the passage of time find expression through the word *must*. While the verbal form of *must* refers to occurrences Tennyson needs to accept, it hides a homonym that refers to occurrences the poem cannot accept or even explicitly mention: *must* describes fungal growths that proliferate in dark, wet places and aid in the breakdown of organic matter.[6]

The poem never acknowledges this meaning of must, but from the beginning the text associates its many *must*s with Hallam's remains. The poem's first "must" is coupled with the "dust" of Hallam's body: "Ye never knew the sacred dust: / I do but sing because I must" (XXI 22–23). The association of "must" with lower, buried life provocatively recurs when Tennyson engages in one of the poem's several imaginative reversals, which involve the poet thinking his way into Hallam's position, effectively trading places with his dead friend.[7] If a heavenly Hallam were to look down on the poor mortal Tennyson, the poem suggests, Hallam would see his friend as degraded and lower:

> And if thou cast thine eyes below,
>
> How dimly character'd and slight,
>
> How dwarf'd a growth of cold and night,
>
> How blanch'd with darkness must I grow! (LXI 5–8)

Viewed from above, the earthly state is mortifying—but it is also putrefying. It casts the paltriness of human ignorance in cadaverous terms, as Tennyson imagines the lower existence as a combination of shrunken size ("dimly character'd and slight") coupled with—and caused by—hazily imagined growths arising from exposure to the elements ("dwarf'd a growth of cold and night"). The stanza paints an image of the strange whiteness caused by this covert growing process ("blanch'd with darkness"), concluding with a morbidly unspeakable double entendre as Tennyson marvels at both at how this deathly self must grow unappealing and, implicitly, how that self grows unappealing must.

Other recurring terms follow the same pattern. The poem compulsively returns to words recalling putrefaction, but avoids any mention of such semantic possibilities each time, focusing on abstract or regenerative meanings instead. Some version of "blow," for example, appears seventeen times, allowing Tennyson ample opportunity to play across its many meanings. Early on, "blow" tends to describe the jarring force of Hallam's death hitting home (LXIV 7, LXXXV 56, XCV 44), and the aimless, entropic wind (XV 4, LXXII 3). These meanings alternate with, and finally give way to, more positive possibilities: the blowing on pipes that creates lyric (XXI 19), the winds of change clearing away storms (CXXII 17), and the blowing (or blossoming) of flowers (CV 7, CXV 4).

"Blow," in short, is a transformative word for *In Memoriam*, and its shifting significance figures the metamorphosis effected by mourning itself. Its changing implications move the

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elegy's focus from the injurious wounds and cold buffets of fate through to the invigorating breezes and blossomings of springtime—an affective change mirrored in the growth of flowers and trees in the cemetery. Yet "blow" has another, related meaning that remains conspicuously absent: "blowing" describes the act of depositing eggs or newly hatched young. By the time of Tennyson's writing, this version of blowing referred almost exclusively to blow-flies, which lay their eggs in tender flesh and the orifices of corpses. The association between these flies and human burial sites was well-known. "The female deposits its eggs wherever putrescent matters accumulate," one Victorian veterinarian explains, "and large numbers are found on putrid flesh … One species of blow-fly—*Sarcophaga mortuorum*—frequents burial grounds, vaults, &c." (Gamgee 194).

The blow-fly serves as a fitting emblem of the transformative processes the poem indexes through the term *blow*. Indeed, some nineteenth-century observers openly admired the blow-fly for its role in such processes. In *Insect Transformations* (1830), the Scottish naturalist James Rennie expresses awe at the metamorphoses achieved by "the voracity of these maggots," which transform both their own bodies and the dead on whom they feed (268). "In the case of the blow-flies," he notes, "Linnaeus tells us that the larvae of three females of *Musca vomitoria* will devour the carcase of a horse as quickly as would a lion; and we are not indisposed to take this literally, when we know that one mother of an allied species (*M. carnaria*) produces about 20,000 [larvae], and that they … increase in weight two-hundred-fold within twenty-four hours" (267–8). From a scientific perspective, the way the maggots swell in size, harden into pupae, and finally emerge as adult flies is an astonishing feat; Rennie sounds almost aggrieved that others do not appreciate it: "Were such an extraordinary transformation as this to happen to one of the larger animals, it would be held forth as altogether miraculous … there would be no bounds to our admiration. Yet the very same circumstances in miniature take place every day during summer, almost under the eye of every individual, without attracting the attention of one person in a million" (283). As they undergo their changes, Rennie notes, the maggots also enact a positive transformation in the world around them by "removing the offensive parts of carcasses" (110).

In Memoriam stays mum on such associations, but it cannot help linking blowing to metamorphic changes in the bodies of the dead. In the famous lyric on "Nature, red in tooth and claw," the poem indignantly asks whether it could possibly be true that human beings, after death, can "[b]e blown about the desert dust, / Or seal'd within the iron hills?"—a question that leaves the agency of the blowing (wind or fly?) unexplored (LVI 19–20). When it describes the despair of "the blowing season," too, the poem offers the double possibility that Tennyson is uncheered by the blooms of spring (one kind of blowing) or by another organic transformation that stirs to life at the same time: the revival of dormant and pupating flesh-flies, which emerge to deposit eggs and maggots when warm, wet spring weather accelerates decay (XXXVIII 5).

Occasionally these semantic games become almost explicit. The poem openly toys with the multiple meanings of "mould," which alternately signifies decay—"the moulder'd tree" (XXVI 7), "the mouldering of a yew" (LXXVI 8)—and its opposite, the shaping or reshaping of matter into a new form: "mould a mighty state's decrees" (LXIV 11), "moulded like in Nature's mint" (LXXIX 6), "matter-moulded forms of speech" (XCV 46). But again, Tennyson insists on treating this recycling process abstractly, even as he uses a word with much earthier meanings. Beneath the rather poetic sort of "mouldering" applied to

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trees lie two more visceral possibilities: the word can refer either to the fungal agent of the decay or to the rich, fertile earth produced by it. Those possibilities are once again veiled and suppressed by the poem, transformed into philosophical and theological metaphors whose buried meanings suggest the unrepresentable creatures responsible for turning flesh into dust: "And out of darkness came the hands / That reach thro' nature, moulding men" (CXXIV 23–24).

The success of the poem's decorous misdirections is apparent in the extensive critical tradition surrounding it. The vast bulk of work dedicated to *In Memoriam* focuses on its wavering theological and philosophical positions, with special attention to its engagements with Victorian science.[8] But even those scholars who examine the elegy with respect to death and its threat to identity miss the mark; they eagerly take up the abstract notions of eroding individuality proffered by the poem itself, rather than digging into the language to reveal the mouldering matter from which the concern emanates. Isobel Armstrong, for example, expertly traces "The Collapse of Object and Subject" in the poem in her essay of that name. But her analysis never broaches the possibility that the "fundamental anxiety in *In Memoriam* about the dissolution of language" and "the dissolving relationship between the internal and external worlds" might register a far more fundamental anxiety about the dissolution of bodies, the literal loss of all division between interior and exterior (137, 145). The cohesion of the poem's many buried meanings suggests that *In Memoriam* does not exhibit anxieties about linguistic deconstruction that mark it as ahead of its time, as Armstrong argues. Instead, it exhibits anxieties about decomposition that mark it as very much a product of its time, and an important forebear of our own.

2. The aesthetics of burial reform

It took sixteen years for Tennyson to compose and collate his verses into a publishable manuscript. Although *In Memoriam* treats its extended meditations as records of an isolated grieving process, the poem coincided with a major public debate in Britain about the fate of human remains. The results of both the private mourning and the public deliberation were unveiled almost simultaneously, with Parliament approving "An Act to Make Better Provision for the Interment of the Dead in and Near the Metropolis"—generally shortened to the Metropolitan Interments Act—in August 1850, just three months after the appearance of *In Memoriam*. The discourse surrounding burial reform shows how Victorians' disgust at rotting bodies had profound, entangled effects on the aesthetics, economics, and politics of the dead. Written amidst these shifts, Tennyson's elegy features a set of unique aesthetic strategies—including its grisly puns, its fragmented form, and the famous *In Memoriam* stanza—that work together to mediate between traditional and modern approaches to decay.

The story of Victorian burial reform begins with the industrious efforts of a single man: the surgeon George Alfred Walker. After taking lodgings adjoining an ill-managed burial ground, Walker became convinced that many of London's most urgent public health problems could be traced to the city's overflowing churchyards. Walker drew on miasma theory—the now-debunked belief that unhealthy air was a primary cause of illness—to argue that "the miasmata from animal putrescency may occasion not only the instantaneous loss of human existence, but increase the intensity of pestilential diseases" (Walker iv). Walker's theory grew into a lifelong crusade.[9] Starting in 1839, he began

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publishing and presenting a trove of grisly information on the subject, compiling a series of sensational reports that drew the attention of Parliament and the sanitary reformer Sir Edwin Chadwick. Their joint efforts eventually led to definitive legislation with the Metropolitan Interments Act of 1850 (Glen iii-iv).

Walker and Chadwick both characterized the overflowing churchyards as an unprecedented public health issue, the product of burgeoning urban populations that required a novel administrative solution. But as Thomas Laqueur has recently shown, complaints about England's crowded churchyards can be traced back to at least the 1300s (223). In these historically overcrowded graveyards, "bones and pieces of coffin were jostled about to squeeze in just one more body" until the earth swelled above the surrounding landscape, at which point parishes would simply "level the churchyard … throw away the bones, and start again. Even the smallest churchyards in scantily populated places did that; urban ones did it more often" (Laqueur 226). And while the concentrated urban populations of the Victorian era were a new phenomenon, rotting corpses played an almost negligible role in the organic waste cities produced (Laqueur 221). The movement for burial reform, in short, was driven not by a veritable public health crisis or even an unmanageable preponderance of dead bodies, but by economic, political, and cultural shifts that prompted new responses to a centuries-old complaint.

Nevertheless, the success of the Metropolitan Interments Act inaugurated several decades of legislation with a shared aim of distancing rotting bodies from the British populace. Whereas encounters between the living and the putrescent bodies of the dead were once commonplace, the policies advanced by Walker, Chadwick, and others dramatically transformed the geography of British burial, requiring the movement of all but a fraction of bodies away from traditional parish churchyards to locations outside the boundaries of the metropolis. As a result, affairs of death, burial, and decomposition became not just increasingly private—that is, removed from the public eye—but increasingly privatized. Enterprising businessmen took advantage of the new public health imperative to bury bodies away from the community by forming cemetery companies and acquiring vast tracts of land for extramural burial—land that they zoned and divided, then leased or sold like any other commercial real estate.[10]

The success of this new speculation depended, in part, on peddling idyllic fantasies of eternal rest to a public forced to look beyond the parish for interment options. The new cemetery managers worked hard to differentiate themselves from the overflowing churchyards that garnered such sensational press. This differentiation was partly a matter of space. The new cemeteries had much more of it—at least at first—so they did not need to pile coffins on top of each other or re-open graves with the same regularity as older churchyards within city limits. (This advantage was somewhat mitigated by the cemeteries' freedom from religious affiliation, which enabled them to accept more bodies than an Anglican burial ground could.) But cemetery companies also relied on aesthetics to develop their respectable reputation as havens of unbroken slumber rather than crowded, makeshift spaces of decay.

The decay was inevitable, of course, but it could be hidden to make cemeteries feel more welcoming. The Scottish gardener and landscape designer John Claudius Loudon captures this innovative approach to graveyard maintenance in his work *On the Laying Out of Cemeteries* (1843). There he writes, "The *main object* of a burial-ground is, the disposal of the remains of the dead in such a manner as that their decomposition, and return to

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the earth from which they sprung, shall not prove injurious to the living; either by affecting their health, or shocking their feelings, opinions, or prejudices" (1). Though Loudon understands the necessity of decomposition, he advises cemeteries to conform to a specialized aesthetic that allows that process to occur without attracting undue attention. As Mary Elizabeth Hotz notes, Loudon's vision for the Victorian cemetery features "monuments nearly indistinguishable from the narrow, columnar trees, the combined effect of which is to draw the eye upward"—away from the matter of decay and into the empyrean (30).

Loudon, whose involvement with cemeteries began with a commission from "the Directors of a Cemetery Company at Cambridge," showed a characteristically modern dismay at the way older churchyards shuffled and cast out remains (Loudon 1). "In a burial-ground properly arranged and managed," he writes, "a coffin, after it is once interred, should never again be exposed to view, nor a human bone disturbed" (2). Rejecting traditional methods that treated "[t]he buried dead as a giant compost heap" (Laqueur 222), Loudon fantasizes about graves that "would remain uninjured for ages, and, like the foot-marks which geologists have found in red sandstone, might, in some far distant age, become part of the geological history of our globe" (Loudon 6). At the same time, however, Loudon is practical enough to admit that England does not have the land necessary to leave its dead permanently undisturbed, so he designs a compromise system that will provide everyone with "separate graves … never again opened for generations" (7).

Although these ideas represent a significant shift in the form and practice of human burial, they would prove only the first, tentative step toward a far more total and problematic denial of decay. The growing public disgust with decomposition found its fullest expression in modes of interment that sought to quarantine the body from the environment entirely. Loudon, for one, decried such developments, complaining openly about "the use of leaden or iron coffins" and the practice of "depositing them in vaults, catacombs, and other structures, in which they can never, humanly speaking … be mingled with the soil, or, in the beautiful language of Scripture, be returned to the dust from which they sprung" (2). Though he denigrated these trends, he acknowledged them as important economic factors in the cemetery landscaping business, conceding that "the modes of burial which prevent the body from mixing with the soil, which … we shall call the sepulchral modes … must be kept in view" (2).

Caught between old and new attitudes towards the dead, Loudon's work shares with *In Memoriam* a distinctly modern yearning to memorialize the dead by assigning every body an individual span of earth that will remain undisturbed forever. But both texts also retain a pre-modern awareness of the novelty and impracticality of such a scheme, resulting in an ambivalent desire to accommodate decay while also treating every corpse as eternally inviolable. They turn to aesthetics to reconcile these contradictory impulses, carefully crafting forms of remembrance that promise to sacralize individual identity while still allowing decay to work beneath the surface. Like the monumental stones dotting Loudon's burial grounds, *In Memoriam* functions both as a permanent tribute to Hallam's individuality and a marker revealing where and how the erosion of that individuality has been hidden. Its divided purpose is inscribed in the morbid multiplicity of its buried meanings, but also in the structure of the elegy itself. With its hermetically sealed rhyme scheme of *abba*, the famous *In Memoriam* stanza endlessly rehearses the fantasy of total containment epitomized by the airtight tomb. But the larger pattern of the poem

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undercuts this untenable ideal, as it pieces together poetic fragments into a corpus whose organic wholeness requires more than a bit of wishful thinking.

The demure approach to decay that runs through Loudon's landscaping treatise and Tennyson's elegy marks both works as transitional, mid-Victorian responses to decomposition. In the decades that followed, once unthinkable phenomena such as professional undertaking and ritual embalming came to dominate Anglo-American burial practices.[11] The upshot was the modern way of death, which removed the dead from their traditional intimacy with the living and impeded their intermingling with the nonhuman environments in which they were interred. Death became a problem to be overcome, the dead became unspeakable, and decay became unimaginable. Only recently, with the rise of the death positive movement, have the downsides of these developments begun to attract public attention.[12] But the negative consequences of death-denial are not limited to the material concerns of human mental health and unnecessary expense. The reciprocal relations between *In Memoriam* and Victorian burial reform demonstrate how our growing death-denial has expanded, in part, by reshaping our aesthetics—our ability to see, describe, and imagine what death is, how it works, and why it might be significant. As a result, we have lost the ability to make visible the relations connecting human death with nonhuman life.

3. Elision fields: notes toward a decadent ecocriticism

Although we typically use it as an intransitive verb, decay is not an intransitive activity. Bodies do not decay unless other organisms decay bodies.[13] As Joanna Radin notes, "Processes of putrefaction … conjure multispecies worlds and with them alternate visions for what it means to be alive … . Rotting is a process that requires collectivity." In their intransitive formations, however, words such as *decay*, *rot*, *decompose*, and *waste* elide the existence of saprobes and decomposers, denigrating these creatures' nutritive needs as well as the vital services they offer the biotic community. Our refusal to say what rot is thus prevents us from acknowledging how it serves all members of the ecosystem, humans included. Our literary forms and critical methodologies collude in this refusal, replicating the resistance to decomposition on a grander scale. Thus a commonplace of literary theory holds that death serves as the ultimate form of closure—a point beyond which linguistic representation is impossible. According to this line of thinking, "ends in fiction" constitute a "figure for [our] own deaths" (Kermode 7). In their unbroken stillness, cadavers concretize this understanding of death as the end-stop of both life and literary representation. Corpses become material figures of closure, because—as E. M. Forster whimsically puts it—"[T]heir apparatus for communicating their experiences is not attuned to our apparatus for reception" (48). Even Walter Benjamin, who is otherwise critical of modern deathways, casts death as the unambiguous end that offers each life its conclusive form (94).

Yet the idea of a lifeless corpse is itself pure fiction. As Victorian naturalists and sanitary reformers both knew, corpses undergo constant change, and they frequently teem with life. Our critical insistence on equating death with closure reinforces—and probably springs from—the nineteenth-century distaste for decomposition that shaped modern deathways into privatized affairs ending in sepulchral isolation from other species. When it comes to death, then, our best critical methodologies still impede our ability to think what Timothy Morton calls "the ecological thought," cramping our imaginative capacity "to join the dots

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and see that everything is interconnected" (*Ecological* 1). Ecocriticism, too, approaches death tentatively because, as the geographer Jamie Lorimer points out, "In the modern European pastoral, nature is green, not brown, and life is disconnected from aesthetics of death and decay" (237).

A more accurate account of our place in the ecosystem requires an aesthetics capable of facing death and decay, and a cultural history that explains the shortcomings of current approaches to these issues. Rethinking past and current aesthetics, in other words, is a necessary step in revising our politics to account for ecological interconnection, to make apparent the fact that "behind every human being [lie] proliferating associations of nonhumans whose tangled consequences make the old division between nature and society impossible" (Latour, *Politics* 226). New modes of reading and writing are crucial to recognizing and disseminating the insights of the renovated political ecology advanced by Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, and others who work to show how humans and nonhumans collaborate in "the progressive composition of the common world" (Latour, *Reassembling* 254).

What better place than the graveyard to begin this resurrection of the ecological body politic? Cemeteries mark the sites where human tales typically end—not because life actually stops within their walls, but because they are the ordained hiding places of the untoward facts of decay that enable our communities to continue. A thoughtful examination of what happens in the cemetery shows that death is not the ultimate form of closure that literary theorists often claim it to be. As Julia Kristeva observes, corpses strike us as horrible and incomprehensible because they explode the conventional categories that help us define and narrate ourselves as discrete, individual beings. Falling outside the dichotomous concepts of subject and object, self and other, inside and outside, the "decaying body" lies somewhere "between the inanimate and the inorganic, a transitional swarming" (109). As such, corpses epitomize what Kristeva calls the abject—that class of things that disturb us by "[notifying] us of the limits of the human universe" (11). These are precisely the limits that political ecology seeks to transcend as it moves beyond "the tiresome polemics of objects and subjects" and teaches us to "stop taking nonhumans as objects … [and to] allow them to enter the collective in the form of new entities with uncertain boundaries, entities that hesitate, quake, and induce perplexity" (Latour, *Politics* 74, 76).

In the graveyard, this emerging vision of an interspecies community is made flesh—or rather unmade flesh, as humans are literally transformed into humus by a set of ecological actors whose importance has gone unacknowledged for too long. Indeed, Donna Haraway has recently suggested the figure of compost as a tool for rethinking interspecies community, arguing that compost illustrates how individuals of different species "require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles" (4). Drawing on the linguistic roots that entangle "human" with "humus" (11), she suggests we commit ourselves to "humusities instead of humanities" (32) as we imagine "compositionist practices of building effective new collectives" (40). The graveyard exemplifies this vision of humanity folded into compost with other creatures who devour us even as they enrich our world. Learning to conceive of ourselves as members of the ecological order means accepting ourselves as fodder for such communal consumption—seeing ourselves "from the outside," as Val Plumwood puts it, and admitting that "[w]e are edible" (58, 61).

Modern deathways are ripe for critical analysis precisely because of their role in obstructing these processes and obscuring this reality: "[T]his denial that we ourselves

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are food for others is reflected in many aspects of our death and burial practices—the strong coffin, conventionally buried well below the level of soil fauna activity, and the slab over the grave to prevent any other thing from digging us up, [keep] the Western human body from becoming food for other species" (Plumwood 60). A small group of writers, artists, and academics have already begun this work of rethinking the politics of decay. They include scholars in geography, history, and art, among other fields.[14] Literary critics can contribute to this ambitious undertaking by retelling the history of our mustiest cultural forms, pausing over the many genres that grapple with death—from novels and life-writing to elegies and epitaphs—to sniff out their strategies for covering over decay. We need to dig up their decorous omissions if we want to piece together the story of how our deaths became untellable, to overcome our imagined isolation from other species, and to build a new, ecologically inclusive culture.

In Memoriam provides a useful test case. As Valerie Purton observes, "Tennyson seems initially an unpromising subject for an environmental or ecocritical reading," and *In Memoriam* is no exception (29).[15] Tennyson's poem appeared sixteen years before Ernst Haeckel coined the term *ecology*, at a time when the role of biological agents in decomposition was poorly understood. Nevertheless, searching *In Memoriam* for traces of decay reveals a world of muffled ecological awareness hidden within it: the elegy is cognizant of the nutritive potential of the human body for other creatures, suspicious of their role in decay, and disturbed by the way rotting bodies are literally the foundation of our common world.

Indeed, the poem's intuition of this shadowy interspecies public finds an outlet in a series of puns on the ancient political idea of the common. Early in the poem, Tennyson laments that the consolation of friends and relatives feels trite and useless:

> One writes, that 'Other friends remain,'
>
> That 'Loss is common to the race'
>
> And common is the commonplace,
>
> And vacant chaff well meant for grain.
>
> That loss is common would not make
>
> My own less bitter, rather more:
>
> Too common! … (VI 1–7)

Landing repeatedly on the question of the "common," this lyric naturally incites remarks on the *Hamlet* references scattered across Tennyson's text (Sacks 174). The most Hamlet-like aspect of these stanzas, however, is their morbidly witty wordplay, as the emphasis on "common" ushers in the poem's anxious preoccupation with the ways bodies and environments mingle after death. The bumbling consolations of Tennyson's friend repeatedly trip over this issue. The verb "remain" painfully calls up the matter of Hallam's mortal remains, while the subsequent comment that "Loss is common" combines with Tennyson's caustic response to provide a shocking, unwelcome reminder that death restores nutrients to the natural world.

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As with the poem's other suppressed references to decay, "Loss is common" works on both an abstract and a material level. In its abstract sense, the platitude suggests that all humans experience loss. But Tennyson's response refuses this philosophical bromide and recasts it in a macabre light. His retort "And common is the commonplace" dismisses the consolation as a cliché. But it also anchors the palliative "common" in a more literal, terrestrial register, recalling the semantic links between the abstract "common" and literal common grounds or *topos*—those physical places from which such rote rhetorical moves derive their name. Playing up the dead metaphor at the heart of his friend's consolation, Tennyson foregrounds issues of interment by returning to the subject at hand: the earth-bound body. The agricultural trope that follows—"vacant chaff well meant for grain"—only underscores the terrestrial register the elegy insists on revisiting.

Tennyson's earthy metaphorics work one final alchemy on his friend's words that transforms them from weakly tonic advice into unsettling chthonic wisdom. Reading "common" as "commonplace"—that is, as a reference to the open landscapes and seascapes whose resources are freely available to all members of the community—suggests another meaning of "Loss is common": that the apparent "loss" of death is, in fact, an increase in shared resources. When we die, the jealously guarded borders of our bodies are unceremoniously abandoned, releasing our body's trove of natural reserves to the multitudinous biotic community. Death names the moment when the body becomes a public thing, a *res publica*, as the corpse provides an enticing meeting place for a new sort of cadaverous community that comes together to transform it. Belying the literary association of death with closure, this ecological understanding of death recasts it as a moment of radical openness, when the enclosure of natural reserves within the human body ends, and resources arrogated by private individuals revert to the common. From the perspective of political ecology, then, the rotting body is revolting not just aesthetically, but politically as well.

The poem's incredulous horror at this revolutionary potential is registered in the disgusted exclamation of "Too common!" and its subsequent retrenchment in ideas of individuality, with special emphasis on the noble transcendence of the human soul. Its resistance to the ecological upside of decay also helps explain the otherwise bewildering obsession with the ship carrying Hallam's remains. Sections IX through XIX are haunted by the possibility that Hallam's body may be lost at sea, that his hands might "toss with tangle and with shells" (X 20). As Francis O'Gorman has shown in his analysis of the seaweed colloquially called "tangle," this disquieting image incorporates multiple kinds of mingling between Hallam and the algae, ranging from the homosocial clasping of hands to the culinary brining of Hallam's body alongside this edible vegetation. Both associations subvert Hallam's supposedly discrete, human individuality and nauseate the poet, who feels himself adrift in a sea of thought that "mingles all without a plan" (XVI 20).

This concern with Hallam's body being lost at sea is another transformation of the poem's amalgamated political-ecological terror: the ocean is the oldest and most enduring commons on the planet. Although the text never explicitly links the fear of Hallam's unlocalizable body with the ocean's political history as an ungovernable commons, the ideas bob to the surface in the homophones of *common*—"calm in" (XI 19), "calm and" (XI 5, 9, 13), and "calm on" (XI 17)—that echo across the ocean passages:

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Calm on the seas, and silver sleep,

And waves that sway themselves in rest,

And dead *calm in* that noble breast

Which heaves but with the heaving deep. (XI 17–20; my emphasis)

Here, sonorous puns link the common seas to the disturbingly calm, dead matter that rides and rocks with them in one great, unified mass. The horror of the image depends, in part, on the reactionary political terror of losing private holdings to the masses; the dead, common ("dead calm in") body is all the more unthinkable given its previously "noble" status.

This nightmare vision of Hallam lost to the elements only subsides when his remains reach dry land, where they can occupy a clearly defined burial plot—a delimited stretch of ground that reassuringly confirms the sense of individual boundaries that the ocean threatened to erode:

'Tis well, 'tis something; we may stand

Where he in English earth is laid,

And from his ashes may be made

The violet of his native land. (XVIII 1–4)

Yet as the persistent recurrences of *must*, *mould*, and *blow* attest, the burial does not truly resolve the poem's preoccupation with the body's new status as sustenance for other creatures. Indeed, another of the elegy's double-dealing words, *rank*, captures its discomfort with the leveling tendencies of the common republic of rot. Four of the word's five uses venerate Hallam by classifying him as a kind of higher being—"It was but unity of place / That made me dream I rank'd with him" (XLII 4)—while the other, apparently unrelated use describes lush vegetation: "ranks / Of iris and the golden reed" (CIII 23). This brief, seemingly random association of "rank" with growth provides a reminder that the lofty *rank* also possesses more messily democratic applications: *rank* can describe rotten, putrefying matter as well as the chaotic, luxuriant growths that emerge from such fertilizer.

In the end, then, what haunts *In Memoriam* is not simply decay. Decay provokes anxiety because it intimates the existence of shadowy nonhuman actors whose needs seem profoundly different from—and sometimes directly opposed to—the desires of the human community. Precisely because this intimation of ecological others threatens anthropocentrism, the cultural history of decay is worth exploring. But rather than greeting decomposition with the anxiety of *In Memoriam* or the sepulchral mode, we can exhume this history with a certain savor, because the escalating ecological crises that call our attention to the nonhuman world also teach us that these excluded, unloved decomposers are integral to our own flourishing. As Latour observes, "humans can experience pleasure when they discover that they are in the presence of new nonhumans that can participate in the composition of their collective existence" (*Politics* 80). We must develop modes of reading that capitalize on this pleasure as they look past the anthropocentric understanding of death as closure. We need a methodology that can expose and historicize

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the cultural forms that encourage this sense of human superiority, one that can reintroduce us to those creatures who materially restore us to the ecological community from which we have tried, fruitlessly, to separate ourselves.

What we need, in short, is a decadent ecocriticism—an ecocriticism that, like the decadent movement of the *fin de siècle*, glories in decay instead of condemning it. There are many reasons to be excited about death and decomposition. Embracing decay provides a practical way to reject the linear apocalypticism of so much environmental storytelling, with its gloomy mooning over extinction and planetary degradation.[16] We might all agree on the signs of decline. But rather than responding with pain or helplessness, we can delight in the Wildean paradoxes that attend the breakdown of ancient, impractical barriers dividing the natural from the artificial, subjects from objects, and humans from nonhumans. In an age when it sometimes seems like the world is ending, we need to explore decay to learn more about the insignificance of endings themselves, to overcome the closure of anthropocentric narrative, and to discover new forms on which to model a common world. Otherwise, we are just digging our own grave.

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Notes

1. These details are drawn from Kolb, who provides the best single account of the death and posthumous fate of Arthur Hallam.
2. Lutz 119. For another reading of the centrality of Hallam's corpse, see McMullen and Kincaid.
3. A classic account of the nineteenth-century origins of modern deathways is found in Ariès chs. 3-4. For a recent revision of this account, see the magisterial work of Thomas Laqueur. For more concise cultural histories of death focused on nineteenth-century England, see Rugg; Jalland.
4. A brief overview of Tennyson and Hallam's friendship appears in Bradley 1-10. A brief chronology of the poem's composition can be found in Bradley 11-19.
5. All following citations of the poem include the lyric or section number followed by the line numbers within that section.
6. With one exception: lyric LXXXII abruptly explains that the poem is not at all about a struggle to accept decomposition. Obviously, this essay greets that odd and isolated claim with deep suspicion.
7. These perspectival shifts can be dizzying, because in each case Tennyson struggles to adopt an inaccessible perspective on himself—a posthumous point of view that paradoxically casts his own life on earth as a kind of death when compared to his friend's fuller, richer afterlife. These reversals permit the poem to imagine the state of the dead and decaying, but only through an obscuring veil of analogy and chiasmus: Tennyson can invoke the rotten corpse only by associating it with himself in place of Hallam.
8. Among the earliest extended works of criticism to dwell on these subjects is Bradley; a later influential account is Sacks. For important twenty-first-century examples of work on these issues, see Henchman; Gold; Gray; and Griffiths, ch. 3.
9. Popular belief in the dangers of corpses lingers to this day. Nevertheless, Walker's theory was incorrect: there is no legitimate evidence that rotting corpses pose a particular threat to human health. See Doughty 173-174, Laqueur 231-238.
10. For a comprehensive history of the relationship between public health claims, religious policies, municipal politics, and the English cemetery, see Laqueur 211-238. For a history more attentive to aesthetics and class politics, see Hotz, ch. 1. The cemetery's relationship to capitalism is explored in Laqueur 288-293. The long-term economic feasibility of cemetery companies is a more complex issue; see Arnold and Bidmead for a more detailed economic history.

11. For an overview of the cultural history of embalming, see Williams. For an overview of the professionalization of funerary practices, see Salomone. For an analysis of English cultural resistance to embalming in *fin-de-siècle* horror fiction, see Scandura. For an entertaining recent account (and critique) of modern deathways, see Doughty.
12. The most prominent public face of this movement is bestselling author, mortician, and founder of the Order of the Good Death, Caitlin Doughty.
13. Only the first stages of cellular decay occur without the agency of decomposers, as waste products and enzymes break down parts of the cells that contain them—a process known as autolysis. For a lively account of saprobes and decomposers in the wild, see Heinrich.
14. For intriguing recent scholarship, see Cole, DeSilvey, Hamlin, Marshall, and Radin. For innovative attempts to rethink the actual practices of burial and decomposition, see *Urban Death Project* and *Coeio's Infinity Burial Suit*.
15. Purton seeks to redeem Tennyson as an environmental writer. This essay, by contrast, is interested in adding to those modes of ecocritical reading that make it possible to analyze a wide range of texts for their ecological implications, regardless of their status as nature writing or environmental writing.
16. Ursula Heise identifies this tendency as the elegiac mode that structures modern environmentalism. See Heise, chs. 1-2. For other formulations of and possible responses to this commonplace attitude, see Haraway 3-4 and Morton, *Ecology Without Nature* 181-197.

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