

# language

['leɪŋwɪdʒ]

by John Talbot (Poetry, Greek and Latin Translation)

Language. You would think a poet (of all people) would be all for using it to express his feelings. But a grieving Alfred Tennyson, mourning the sudden death of his best friend, was wholly halfhearted about entrusting his feelings to language:

*I sometimes hold it half a sin  
To put in words the grief I feel:  
For words, like Nature, half reveal  
And half conceal the Soul within.<sup>2</sup>*

It is one thing to feel words failing us when we want to speak of grief, love, or the experience of God. (They fail me now as I try to write about language itself.) It is something else, though, for Tennyson to feel himself sullied by language's betrayals

and obfuscations. Like the humans who use and abuse it, human language is fallen<sup>3</sup> and in need of redemption.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, though, even fallen language is not without resources, even if they are only half measures:

*But, for the unquiet heart and brain,  
A use in measured language lies;<sup>5</sup>*

Tennyson's own language is literally "measured":<sup>6</sup> four beats and eight syllables to a line, all the lines bundled into stanzas of four lines each, each stanza neatly encased in outside rhymes (lines 1 and 4), which themselves enclose<sup>7</sup> still tighter inside rhymes (lines 2 and 3). The expression of

his misery is not at all spontaneous and unfiltered.<sup>8</sup> Here is language painstakingly measured, cut, lathed, and joined.

The immediate "use" of such measured language is to shape<sup>9</sup> speech into a stable structure to support the poet in his grief: he wraps himself in words "like coarsest clothes against the cold."<sup>10</sup> But Tennyson has done much more than that. Setting his words into rhythmic motion, arranging its sounds into chiming sonic patterns, he has lifted language into the realm of music, "music heard so deeply / That it is not heard at all, but you are the music / While the music lasts."<sup>11</sup> Language—even the everyday language of us everyday people—is music waiting to happen. In its best moments

## Footnotes

1 Merriam-Webster, s.v. "language (n.)," [www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com).

2 Tennyson, *In Memoriam A. H. H. OBIT* MDCCCXXXIII: 5, 1–4.

3 The notion of the fallenness is tied to the wiggliest bit of our fallen bodies. What, asks the apostle James, is the most destructive body part? It is the tongue, which he calls "a fire, a world of evil among the parts

of the body" (James 3:6 [New International Version]; *Hē glōssa pūr, ho kosmos tēs adikias en tais melesin hēmōn*). The Greek word he uses, *glōssa*, means both *tongue* "part of the body" and *tongue* "language." Romance languages preserve the same relation via the Latin *lingua* (tongue): thanks to the Norman conquest, it gives us English *language*.

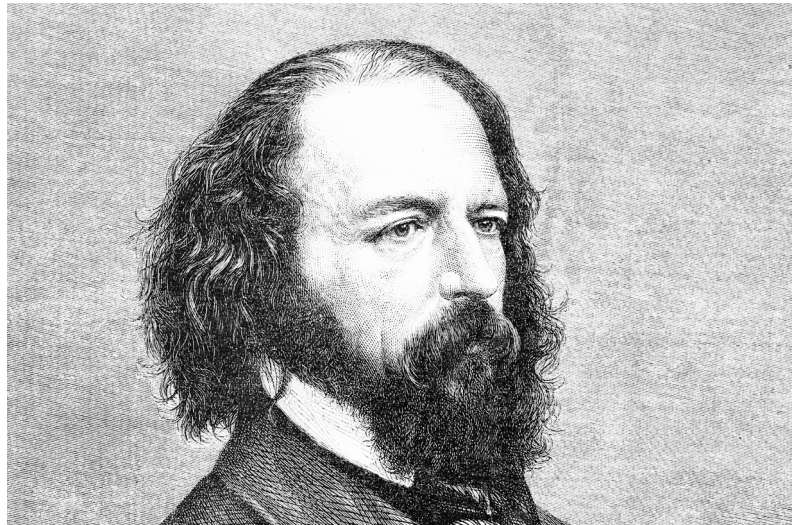
4 A contestable claim; the book to read is Geoffrey Hill's *The Lords of Limit: Essays on Literature and*

*Ideas*; the sharpest rebuttal is Donald Davie, "Fallen Language," *London Review of Books* 6, no. 11 (21 June 1984).

5 Tennyson, *In Memoriam*: 5, 5–6.

6 Poetic *meter* (from a Greek root for *measuring*, via Latin and French) is where language and music (which is *measured* sound) overlap.

**Noun.** The words, their pronunciation, and the methods of combining them used and understood by a community.<sup>1</sup>



Alfred Lord Tennyson, poet laureate of the United Kingdom. 1809-1892. Antique illustration. 1867. / Adobe Stock

### In Memoriam A. H. H. OBIIT MDCCCXXXIII: 5

by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

I sometimes hold it half a sin  
    To put in words the grief I feel;  
    For words, like Nature, half reveal  
And half conceal the Soul within.

But, for the unquiet heart and brain,  
    A use in measured language lies;  
    The sad mechanic exercise,  
Like dull narcotics, numbing pain.

In words, like weeds, I'll wrap me o'er,  
    Like coarsest clothes against the cold;  
    But that large grief which these enfold  
Is given in outline and no more.

(whether prose or verse) language touches a plane of order and timelessness that seems momentarily to redeem it. To achieve such intimacy with language is at the heart of the humanities. In a fallen world, what could be more useful than to make contact with the eternal?

Not that Tennyson was deceived into thinking that for all his own intimacy with words, he or any other mortal could entirely redeem human language. Its pleasures and beauties are bound up with its slippages and duplicities, like wheat growing up with the tares. So we cannot rest satisfied with language but must (for now) live in patience and hope, as Tennyson well knew. It is hard to miss the chastening glint in the final word of this line: “measured language *lies*”<sup>12</sup> (emphasis added). **H**

7 In a poem concerned with wrapping (line 9) and enfolding (line 11), Tennyson’s outer rhymes wrap around, or enfold, the inner rhymes. Consult Christopher Ricks’, *Tennyson* (New York: 1972), page 228.

8 Nobody should fall for the ersatz Romantic notion that language is true and heartfelt when spontaneous yet somehow false when crafted and measured. The opposite is more often true.

9 The Old English word for poet, *scop*, whose first two letters are pronounced “sh,” is cognate with modern English *shape*. A poet is a *shaper* of language, a craftsman. The modern English *poet* derives from the Greek verb *poieō* “to make, fashion, give form to.” The Scots word for *poet*, *makar*, literally translates like the Greek: “maker, shaper, fashioner.”

10 Tennyson, *In Memoriam*: 5, 10.

11 T. S. Eliot, “The Dry Salvages.” Nothing can touch music for its immediacy, but there is a good argument to be made that language can more nearly approach the motions and melodies of music than music can approach the discursive precision of language.

12 Tennyson, *In Memoriam*: 5, 6.