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**Tennyson Revised:  
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Carl Plasa

## Tennyson Revised: Influence and Doubling in *Four Quartets*

the communication

Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.

—T S. Eliot<sup>1</sup>

In *Poetry and Repression*, Harold Bloom intriguingly identifies T. S. Eliot as Tennyson's 'true ephebe'.<sup>2</sup> He returns to this somewhat gnomic utterance twelve years later in 'Reflections on T. S. Eliot', an essay written to mark the centenary of the poet's birth. In this piece, Bloom situates Eliot not only in relation to Tennyson but also Walt Whitman, Tennyson's transatlantic contemporary, commenting that a 'direct comparison of Eliot's elegiac achievement to Whitman's or Tennyson's seems [...] inevitable'.<sup>3</sup> In the end, however, Bloom is only half-responsive to his own insight, marginalising Tennyson's role in the formation of Eliot's poetry and preferring instead to undertake an analysis of *The Waste Land* as a revision of Whitman's 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd'. In contrast to Bloom's approach, this essay shifts the emphasis back from Eliot and Whitman to Eliot and Tennyson, focusing on the intertextual relation between Eliot's *Four Quartets*, first published as a single work in 1944 and Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850), taking the opening section of 'Burnt Norton', the first of the *Quartets*, as an implicit synecdoche for the operations of the relation as a whole. In a brief speculative coda, the essay goes on to suggest that the Eliot with whom Bloom is evidently so reluctant to engage in any detail provides, in 'Burnt Norton' 1, a curious prefiguring of an important aspect of Bloom's own model for the reading of the relations between poets.

Bloom first systematizes this model in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), subsequently elaborating and refining his position throughout his critical *oeuvre*. Poetic relations are shaped, for Bloom, according to the Freudian logic of the Oedipus complex in which the goal of the self-consciously belated ephebe or poetic son is 'to be his own father'.<sup>4</sup> The later poet becomes caught up in an agonistic

