

Encountering Spirituality at Death's Door: The Poetry of Tennyson

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Abstract

Garima perceptively enters into the spirit of *In Memoriam* to unveil the spiritual outlook of Tennyson bred on Christian eschatology and yet offering a universal reflection on the poignancy of death.

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The Nineteenth Century Victorian England was beset with problems that marked the transition of a society from a preset order of affairs weighed by tradition. It was an age of rearrangement, reorganization and questioning the very fundamental givens of religious, social, political, economic and philosophical canons. In a way, it was a part of the age old process of preparation for a changed, modern, and therefore a better society in human history. However, the changes were not only instrumental in ushering in the modern age of scientific knowledge, power, money, and an efficient organization of human society but they also brought with them, the shocks of questioning the very foundations on which the social, religious and political values were founded. In literature too, this sudden upheaval, which proved to be a complete departure from the values espoused by the preceding Romantics, had to be accommodated. The Oxford Movement, The Reform Bills, the growing industrialisation, and related events altogether confounded the ordinary person with doubts and uncertainty. The givens of traditional religion and its beliefs were being fiercely contested by the developments made in the natural sciences such as physics, chemistry and biology, along with the continued rise in the application of empiricist ideas to political economy and governmental practices.

As is the case in most works of art, the entire background of socio-economic, political, and other forces went on to have a distinct bearing upon the poetry of Tennyson. The poems of Tennyson like *In Memoriam*, *Ulysses*, *The Lady Of Shallot*, *Tithonus*, *Morte d' Arthur*, *Locksley Hall* and shorter poems like *Crossing the Bar* with the distinct Christian connotations also show his concerns with the immediate issues of life. He spells out at the outset of the Prologue to *In Memoriam* referring to the doubt and crisis of faith of the Victorian Age:

Strong Son of God, immortal Love,
Whom we, that have not seen thy face,
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,
Believing where we cannot prove

Therefore, on becoming the Poet Laureate of England, Tennyson seeks to hold together and restore faith in an age which had become in the words of Arnold a 'darkling plain' where 'ignorant armies clash by night'. The death of Hallam marks an initiation into the realm of religious and secular philosophizing in Tennyson's life from which he works out a negotiation between the rational discourses and religious faith of the Victorian Age. *In Memoriam* therefore lies at the heart of tracing out the spirituality in his poems and I wish to focus for the better part of this paper on *In Memoriam* as it synthesizes the spirituality of Tennyson in a comprehensive manner.

Where *In Memoriam* marks a distinct bent of spirituality in the poet's life, it also stands as one of the five great elegies¹ in English language. Originally entitled as *The Way of the Soul*, Tennyson himself called it a sort of *Divine Comedy*, where he would be led by the guidance of the mighty spirit. It must be kept in mind that though the Christian themes and symbols explicate the religious bent of his mind they present us with a vision that goes beyond doctrinal Christianity. Their underlying significance suggests Tennyson's efforts to go beyond the purview of Christian theology and the immediacy of the situation to address the larger universal crisis.

The Christmas sections (XXX, LXXVII and CV) in the poem present us with the contrast between extreme joy and sorrow. They have mechanically parallel lines to mark the passage of time and thus trace the stages of the poet's changing emotions indicated by the shift of adverb:

And sadly fell our Christmas-eve...
And calmly fell our Christmas-eve...
And strangely fell our Christmas-eve...

In section XXXI the Biblical episode of Lazarus coming back to life clearly signifies the revival of hope and the oblique reference made to the resurrection of Christ through Tennyson's desire to 'touch' his dead friend makes Hallam a Christ-figure. What Tennyson sought to present was a spiritual centre that would serve as an anodyne for the ailments that afflicted the Victorian world 'wandering between two worlds, one dead the other powerless to be born'. Moreover, the third Christmas section is followed immediately by the recollection of Hallam's birthday. In addition to this the retrospective lyrics of Part IV further elucidate the Christ like qualities of Hallam. In CX we are told how Hallam delighted in both the old and the young, and how he openly mingled with the weak and the strong alike. Tennyson therefore sought to preserve the spirit of Christ through the personality of Hallam, and it was in Tennyson's love for Hallam that we find these Christian references universalized and appropriated to the contemporary Victorian scenario where Hallam goes to have a metaphorical afterlife. Hallam continues to be a presence in the life of Tennyson even after his death which provides him with emotional stability and understanding. At this point we are

1 "Lycidas" - John Milton, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" - Thomas Gray, "Adonais" - P.B. Shelley, "Thyrsis" - Matthew Arnold, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" - W.H. Auden.

reminded of the parallel figure of Christ whose presence continues to be felt in the life of people.

The mysticism of Tennyson, for the most part remains overshadowed by his fame as a metrist par excellence. Sir Charles Tennyson wrote that 'Tennyson was at heart a mystic...with a capacity for true mystical experience.'² Sections from XC to XCIV for example, consist of the poet's plea for the vision of Hallam which is also generally taken to be the climax of the poem. The poet actually goes to a trance like state and feels the hand of Hallam. His mystic communion with the soul of Hallam inspires an optimistic view of life and progressive future of mankind. A number of other passages and phrases suggestive of Tennyson's belief in the communication of souls occur in the poem as,

reach a hand thro' time to catch
far-off interest of tears.

The instance where he feels disembodied in front of the old yew tree:

I seem to fail from out my blood
And grow incorporate into thee,

and when he describes his soul leaving his body in Section XII:

I leave this mortal ark behind
A weight of nerves without a mind.

He, therefore, gave importance to such experiential evidence for resolving many doubts in his life. They express his belief in the indestructibility of the soul which becomes the source of his faith in the immortality of Hallam and therefore, also faith in the immortality of all the ideals and values represented by Hallam that were fast ebbing away in the Victorian Era. However, Tennyson reworks this model and propounds instead the immortality of the entire mankind. He shows implicit faith in man and his capacity to evolve. The likes of Ulysses and even the life of Hallam exemplify such kind of zeal for active life which is capable of even transcending death. The immortal venturing and heroic spirit of Ulysses that animates each one of us will continue to strive towards perfection in its thirst for immortality. Following this argument, entire mankind will perpetuate itself through such restive spirits of every age till they too become the highest form of perfection of the 'Happy Isles' in *Ulysses*.

However, his two poems, *Ulysses* and *Tithonus* problematize the notion of striving for higher forms. Through them, Tennyson presents two contradictory situations. The longing of Tithonus for '... happy men that have the power to die, / [a]nd grassy barrows of the happier dead,' tells us about immortality without youth, which in other

2 Carlisle Moore, "Faith, Doubt and Mystical Experience in *In Memoriam*", *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, (Dec. 1963), 55-169, Indiana University Press, URL: jstor.org/stable/3825084.

words mean immortality without any form of vigour or activity. Ulysses on the other hand exhorts his men to embark upon an adventure to attain a life like that of Tithonus. While Tithonus longs for mortality after having been there and knowing what it is like to live such a life, Ulysses still strives for such life. The two figures of Tithonus and Ulysses therefore establish the contraries of mortality and immortality in Tennyson's poems as the contradictory twin nature of human desire which is hard to reconcile.

Death played a significant part in the life of Tennyson right from the time of his father's death in 1831, Hallam's death in 1833, till the death of his own son, Lionel in 1885, which is why it also forms an important part in his poetry. There are numerous suggestions of Tennyson's longing to be with the dead in *In Memoriam*, and an envy of their state in the early inconsolable sections. His faith in the immortality of the soul makes him regain peace and reconciliation with life and raises him to almost transcendental heights of spirituality that provides the final hope and means of sustenance in a world without Hallam.

The loss of Hallam was also a familial loss for Tennyson since his sister Emily has been betrothed to Hallam. Therefore, the personal loss of Tennyson gets compounded into a larger social community. The final consolation comes to Tennyson when he thus, integrates himself in his loss into the wider public domain. The isolated figure of the poet gets absorbed into the larger social fabric with his participation in social life. The marriage of Cecilia and Edmund Lushington towards the end becomes a transformation of faith into love which would get transferred from the personal to the collective. This reiterates the transformation of love for Hallam into strong faith which is there to stay with the poet. The celebration of a social institution like marriage forms the epilogic theme which is an affirmation of traditional faith and also reconciliation with the larger social mainstream.

In his other poem *Crossing the Bar*, death becomes an eager anticipation for Tennyson who waits to crossover the 'bar' '[t]o see my Pilot face to face'. The poem, apart from being heavily loaded with Christian themes, also lends us a glimpse into the mystical aspect of Tennyson, just few years before his death.

Though *In Memoriam* (1849) antedates *Origin of Species* (1859) of Charles Darwin, the treatment of nature clearly shows his reading of Robert Chamber's *Vestiges of Creation* and Herschel's *A Preliminary Discourse on the Study of Natural Philosophy*. The nebular theory of creation also shaped his ideas to a great extent in his understandings of nature and universe. The fact that in course of the history of evolution many species had been extinct and the drastic changes had worked upon the face of the earth to come to the present state put the notion of divine creation of earth and (wo)/man as per the Biblical sources into question. This puts the relation between God and nature at odds with each other. He had read Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-33) and the direct influence of this can be seen in *In Memoriam* (Section LVI), where his famous lines echo the concept of ruthless and indifferent nature in contrast to its Romantic conception.

Who trusted God was love indeed
And love Creation's final law-
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed-

However, Tennyson saw from the history of creation, the potential for constant evolution and growth. The concluding lines of *In Memoriam* strongly reiterate this thought:

That God, which ever lives and loves,
One God, one law, one element,
And one far-off divine event,
To which the whole creation moves.

These final lines of his great poem echo the synthesized view of the different voices of the Victorian Age. The carefully laid words such as 'lives' and 'loves', 'God' and 'element', 'divine' and 'moves' create a sense of mediation between science and religion and the large number of binaries that it entails.

John D. Rosenberg says that for the synthesis of the poem, Tennyson draws on two great myths, 'the myth of Progress and the Christian vision of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth,' in order to unite 'evolutionary science and Christian faith,' especially in 'the evolutionary argument of Section CXVIII (man thriving from clime to clime)'. Jonathan Bishop addresses secular eschatology when he says that 'sympathy with Hallam's spirit' has shown the person that "the cycles of nature and history are not 'seeming random forms,/ [t]he seeming-prey of cyclic storms,' but parts of a slowly spiraling ameliorative progress of which such individuals as Hallam are an inspiring prophecy."³ At the same time, it also makes him look for an ideal that would offer a resistance against this defeating mutability of nature. The collective human endeavour is what promises a lasting resistance against the weathering of natural forces. Therefore, the restless spirit of adventure in Ulysses, and the desire to explore the boundaries of knowledge should animate the purposeful life of man on earth.

Spirituality in the life of Tennyson finds expression in his poetry. It becomes a way of resisting the onslaught of rational discourses which places him at the centre of the Victorian debate. Tennyson who rode the Victorian poetic scene never completely lost faith in the spiritual springs. With a tendency to trust, a propensity to believe what eludes proof infused him from infancy, he retained a ray of paradise. Nevertheless living in a wasteland of shattering articles of faith causing spiritual uncertainty cast its shadows over him haunting him like a spectre. But what triumphs in him ultimately is the ardour of an apostle shifting his gaze from earth to heaven. If one is to go by the terms of the great Victorian sage Matthew Arnold, then the poetry of Tennyson

3 Henry Kozicki, "Meaning in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 17, No. 4, Nineteenth Century (Autumn, 1977), pp. 673-694, Rice University, URL:jstor.org/stable/450315.

precisely 'interprets life', 'consoles' and 'sustains' his age. It not only sustains faith in the larger Victorian perspective, but Tennyson's own personal life found anchorage in the mediation of spiritual and rational faith of opposing discourses.

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