

The Spiritual Tenor of the Times of Tennyson

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Abstract

Rosy attempts a quick encapsulation of the Victorian poet Alfred Tennyson as having sustained the spiritual tenor of the era despite its crisis in faith by emphasizing the closeness to nature and its resourcefulness as providing for the optimism that one sees in his poems.

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Although the Victorian Age is ascribed to the years of Queen Victoria's reign from 1837 to 1901, it is rather a fluid transitional stage. It is an age when the old outworn feudal agrarian world was fast crumbling down on the one hand, at the same time this age also looked forward to the future. As such the adumbrations of 'modernism' can be found in this age. The Janus-faced age was thus the site of severe conflicts - the prime among these was the clash between Science and Religion. And nowhere is this conflict most evident than in the writings of Alfred Lord Tennyson. His poems are a response to the contemporary scientific works like Lyell's *Principles of Geology* and Robert Chamber's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*. He seems also not unaware of Darwin's theory of evolution and natural selection. Thus he was modern enough to be aware of the concepts of geological and astrological times. The advances in the study of Geology, which undermined the Biblical timescale and the idea of how Nature reveals evidence of God's design have all resulted in the crises of faith. However, unlike his fellow Victorians, Tennyson's faith in God and spirituality does not suffer. Evolutionary theory to Tennyson did not seem a threat to orthodox religion because it dealt with processes and not the First Cause. The credit for such an attitude in Tennyson goes largely to his Cambridge tutor William Whewell.

The age witnessed the Industrial Revolution and great strides in the field of scientific studies. Tennyson seems to be familiar with important scientific treatises of his time, like Charles, who interestingly was also the inventor of the word 'Scientist.' William Whewell's three *Bridgewater Treatises* argued for the presence of an active creator behind a well-ordered universe. However, it would also be wrong to take Darwin's theory of evolution and natural selection representing the whole of Victorian science. Victorian science is further misconstrued as a homogeneous body of knowledge which is a fallacy considering the immense upheavals, challenging and at times shocking revelations in science. In the very year that Victoria was crowned Queen, in 1837, Thomas Babington Macaulay published a review essay for the *Edinburgh Review* in which he praises the achievements of Science, saying 'it is a philosophy which never rests, which has never attained, which is never perfect. Its law is progress.' The very sentiment of Macaulay

praising the work of science echoes in *Ulysses*, Tennyson's poem of 1833, in which the hero 'cannot rest from travel' and idealistically desires '[t]o follow knowledge like a sinking star/[b]eyond the utmost bound of human thought.'

Both Macaulay and Tennyson capture Science as an outcome of discovery, an effort requiring ceaseless striving. After the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), there arose a strong intellectual debate between Thomas Henry Huxley and the Bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce. Huxley likened Science to an imperial power that would eventually infiltrate and conquer 'regions of thought into which she has as yet hardly penetrated.' The idea of natural selection made it difficult to embrace the idea of God at the helm of Creation and in control of processes by which man and animal adapted to their environment. Tennyson's scientific attitude is most clearly revealed in *In Memoriam* where he imagines evolution converted into a transcendental principle:

Eternal process moving on,
From state to state the spirit walks
And these are but the shattered stalks,
Or ruined chrysalis of one. (LXXXI.5-8)

Tennyson was not anxious to utilize science to promote skepticism and atheism, and when he met Darwin in 1869 he had apparently said, "Your theory of Evolution does not make against Christianity", to which Darwin could only reply 'No, certainly not.'

A major source of consolation for Tennyson came from nature. He recognizes the apparent instability of nature, yet nature was not chaotic but a part of some divine plan of progress towards ultimate perfection. The study of nature in Victorian poetry is inextricably bound up with the study of religion and science. It was the Romantic Movement which upheld nature as an ordered, purposive and benign force. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley have all voiced the wholesome influence of nature which for them was also the symptomatic of the spiritual unity in the universe. In the Victorian Era, if science nurtured a love of nature as intense as anything that one can recognize in previous centuries, but by stressing the mechanical and chemical aspects of natural processes left very little room for spiritual direction. Eventually poets like Arnold lost an all-embracing enthusiasm for nature, especially as an ethical and moral force. But Tennyson's scientific attention to nature only served to intensify the perception of the minute particulars. When in *Maud* he speaks of the 'million emeralds' which 'break from the ruby-budded lime' (I.iv.102) he is giving an accurate account of the red flecks on the buds of lime trees. When in *The Gardener's Daughter* he describes 'hair/[m]ore black than ash buds in the front of March' (II.27-28), he seems to have looked at the trees closely.

This obsession with vivid accuracy not only made Jack Kemble, in 1833, say 'he had a touch of mathematics in him', but also smacks of the Victorian dislike of imagination. But this did not disrupt the special place allocated to the poet. Tennyson

derives much of his inspiration from dream-like states, and there was much in him that was disordered and neurotic. Tennyson's characters share his paranoia coupled with accurate and heightened impressions. Tennyson's *Armageddon* talks of himself as filled with 'beatitude'; *The Ancient Sage* talks of 'a state of transcendent wander' and in the poem *The Mystic* the poet is said to have access to experience denied to the common man. Thus, for Tennyson, nature is allied to the destructive forces of time and decay but it is also the image of cyclical renewal. Thus when Tennyson says, '[t]he Law of Life, man is not man as yet' and 'in complete man begins anew/[a] tendency to God', we cannot mistake the optimism and self-confidence, the 'upward-tending' impulse in him.

Tennyson demonstrates that his optimistic philosophy is not at war with scientific theories, but somehow complementary to them. He was as close to saying that Biblical scholarship was not a divinely inspired product but rather as products of human endeavor and aspiration. This makes it very easy to accommodate scientific study with religious belief. His poem *In Memoriam* expresses the resilience of faith in the face of uncertainty, emphasizing that though 'we, that have not seen thy face, by faith, and faith alone, embrace/ [b]elieving where we cannot prove.' Given the convergence of myriad intellectual currents, those heralding the benefits of Science faced intense opposition from those eager to preserve religious authority. The Victorian era also faced an array of other challenges like the utilitarian philosophy that questioned the usefulness and rationale of religion and the spirit of Higher Criticism which advocated the historical and secular approach to the Bible. Conflicts also existed within the Church of England and the overall hegemony of the Church as an institution was undercut by the rise of non-conformist and dissenting sections like the Presbyterian Church in Scotland. The Oxford Movement was an attempt to restore to the church the power it had as an institution in the middle ages and the mysticism and piety which had been lost due to scientific and material advancement.

Tennyson escaped the Oxford Movement as he had gone to Cambridge. While the Oxford Movement was based on an emotional appeal to the authority of the past, the Cambridge Movement aimed at an intellectual appeal to due opportunities of the future. Tennyson faced all disconcerting scientific discoveries with equanimity like at Cambridge he faced the discovery that the first chapter of Genesis was scientifically inadequate. Tennyson could adopt this attitude because he was in search for something higher and more essential than religious creed. Thus in *St. Simeon Stylites* he proved that the truly religious man was the man of action, and in *The Holy Grail* he upheld honest doubts than the superficial convictions of the less enlightened. But reconciling Science with religion did not come easy for him; one notices a tone akin to panic, a note of indignation and injured fury in many of his theological poems. For him, the only true Victorian compromise lay in the formula 'God is Love'. But again the problem of reconciling the supremacy of the spirit of love with the existence of evil cropped up. Tennyson solved the problem by believing in the immortality of the soul.

Harold Nicolson in his biography on Tennyson writes: "It was all very well for Browning, that robust and bustling casuist, to exclaim, '[t]here's heaven: and night by night/ I look right through its glorious roof.' Browning was made of sterner stuff. Tennyson would also, from the little platform on the roof of Farringford, gaze upon the 'illimitable inane'; but it did not convince him that all was right with the world: it convinced him only that he must find some more effective compromise than 'God is Love'. He, therefore, evolved the formula, the pathetically inadequate formula that God must exist because the human heart felt an instinctive need of His existence; that the soul must be immortal because any other solution was unthinkable."¹ Thus Tennyson's spiritual stance is self-explanatory in his own words: "It is hard to believe in God, but it is harder not to believe. I believe in God, not from what I see in nature, but from what I find in man. I would rather know that I was to be lost eternally, than not to know that the human race was to live eternally."

1 Harold Nicolson, *Tennyson : Aspects of his Life, Character and Poetry*, London, Constable & Company Ltd., 1949, p. 252

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