

Victorian Poetry: A Way to Spirituality

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Abstract

This piece contains an attempt to make an overall assessment of the religion/spirituality-literature nexus with the help of glimpses into the poetry of Tennyson and Browning in particular as representatives of the Victorian era.

Keywords: Religion, Literature, Tennyson, Browning.

What comes first – Religion or Literature? In the very answer to this question lies the truth about the interface between religious experience from which religions are born and the human desire to communicate through artistic forms of which the most expressive is literature. As is said in the Bible, “In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth. Now the Earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” God said, ‘Let there be light’ and gave shape and life to this formless landmass called Earth. Infused by the creative spirit, the love of God, every creature began to breathe.

Life on earth is a constant unfolding of the mysteries and unending search for the truths behind it. The primordial human need for an outlet to express those realizations find diverse manifestations, and one such is in the form of literature. Only the one who has drunk the nectar of life can plunge into its multi-faceted character and give us the real taste of life. The creator of genuine literature is the one whose life’s journey has helped to encounter the ‘true self’ as to depict the truth of life and its wonders.

If we flip our pages back to the Victorian age of the nineteenth century, we will see that it was not an ordinary age - it was an age wherein brand new conceptualizations were being built and many an old custom and belief were crumbling down along with the sanctity and definitiveness of revealed truths. Darwinian Theory of the evolutionary ‘origin of species’ questioned the very faith in the singular creation by an omnipotent God. Industrial Revolution had reached its pinnacle - the world which looked so small until then seemed to open up new vastness and hide new mysteries. Yet there were also discordant and lurking voices of doubt as if to prove the saying, ‘fire burns to its brightest before it dies out.’ In other words, conflicting thoughts and contrary dreams wafted in the air waiting for the dawn of a new age. The Victorians, in spite of so many contrasting forces, a final summation would show, were able to uphold their faith in the trueness of religion and secure the uniformity of life.

In Alfred Tennyson’s (1809) poem *The Lady of Shalott* the whole image of the Victorian period was pictured. The beautiful maiden confined in a castle in a lonely island untouched by the outer world, alone sings and weaves to her pleasure and is

connected with the world only through the reflections given in the magic mirror. If she crosses the threshold she is cursed to death. It is an allusion for the wo/man of Victorian age - surrounded by so many alluring discoveries in scientific field made to feel superior and capable of grasping at any limit. It was as if what until then had remained confined and isolated got filled with desires to cross all limitations though unaware as to where it would all lead. An age wherein people at large saw their old faiths and ideals splitting up and it felt like the shackles of the then prevalent way of life broken by a yearning to cross the boundary to an unknown world. Their representative voice is what Tennyson describes in the 'Lady of Shalot' as she pines to cross from Shalot to Camelot: 'I am half sick of shadows'

Tennyson's invocation of a spirit in section 82 of *In Memoriam* that moves in an 'eternal process' (l. 5) through one phase of existence to another in a way conjures up the spirit of Victorian poetry. When the poet states that '[f]rom state to state the spirit walks' (l. 6), he recalls the 'well-worn epistemology of a disembodied spiritual truth that lives on in different forms through time but in essence is unchanging.' Margarel Linley sees in the 'solemn formality and stately rhythm,' of the statement a methodic display of the spiritual sublime as a mechanism of faith, and an apparatus meant for measuring and molding faith, in the utilitarian spirit of the age. For 'virtue' will be of 'use' (l. 10) and 'human worth' (l. 11) will 'profit' (l. 12) in exchanging one state for another: spirit's rise is therefore simultaneously a decline.¹

In Robert Browning's (1812) poem 'Caliban upon Setebos' we have a world in a miniature in the form of an island where the Caliban is a creature (wo/man) and the creator is Setebos (God). The sentiments expressed in this poem are closely related to certain developments in the age in which it was written. In the nineteenth century, the emergence of natural science led people to formulate theories on the character of God on the basis of evidence provided by nature and scientific laws. At the same time, Darwin's *Origin of Species* set people speculating on the 'missing link' between man and lower organisms on the evolutionary chain. This poem probably has its origin the attempt, in Browning's mind, of uniting the traditional images of the primal human beings with the notions of new discoveries and inventions based on reason and the study of natural laws.

Every action of man was looked upon with the critical lens of reason and the very concepts of God seem to be changing in that age. One could say that the logicity of the world was being reshaped by the little reasoning of man unaware that to know the Divine, one need to know the true self. Caliban works on his instinct and lives randomly without any fixed principle. He crushes the crab under his foot at his fancy; even a little fish trying to take bath in the warm sea is thrown back to the biting cold of the icy stream: 'Flounced back from bliss she was not born to breathe.'

1 Cfr. Margaret Linley, "Conjuring the Spirit: *Victorian Poetry*, Culture, and Technology", in *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 41, 2003, URL: questia.com/googleScholar.qst;jsessionid=L8bjC4TFYNgLr74tv8lcnjJ FjYLLnhKvTxV DF0Gh ZvFP VXYfsGgv!2076661070!1823011750?docId=5005987571

People seemed to justify the ways of God by using their own yardstick built on the human attributes and activities forgetting a perennial wisdom exemplified even in the Indian sacred Scripture, *Bhagavad Gita*, wherein it is said: 'To realize life and God one need to go beyond five senses' (2.58). It is beyond senses one can have knowledge of the soul and only in the discovery of the soul/*atman* the question of God arises. One realizes and understands life not by the boasting of one's knowledge but by alighting the divine light within and just believing in it. In the midst of such wavering moments of faith and religion Browning always clinged to the never undying trust towards the harmonial working order of the unsurpassed God.

The very study of poetry makes certain spiritual claims, it could be said, especially so in the case of Browning's poetry. Browning is generally 'regarded as the most intellectual of poets' and is therefore charged with the intensity of discursive thought. He is also, at the same time, regarded the most 'spiritual and transcendental of poets', the 'subtlest assertor of the soul in song'. His thought is never an end to itself, but is always subservient to an ulterior spiritual end - always directed towards 'a presentment of the correspondency of the universe to Deity, of the natural to the spiritual, and of the actual to the ideal.' In Browning's poetry the idea of personality as 'a quickening, regenerating power,' along with the idea of art as 'an intermediate agency of personality,' are, reiterated often implicitly, than explicitly. It even leads up to the dominant idea in Christianity, of a Divine Personality being mirrored in the soul. The 'soul,' for Browning as in 'Pauline', one of his earliest poems, must "rest beneath some better essence than itself in weakness".²

His poem *The Last Ride Together* and many other poems reflect unflinching faith towards the Almighty. From the failures of life he is able to extract a little hope and believes every thing is fine: 'Changed not in kind but in degree/ [t]he instant made eternity.' In spite of a heavily hostile environment and unsteadiness towards religion he could spread a ray of hope and could make moments eternal. Victorians like him are the ones who showed that life is beautiful and that is the truth. We are entertained by their works and going through them the entire life of that age is again made alive before us and we are inspired and enlightened by such great work.

The Victorian verse is replete with experiences that truly convey their emotions and thoughts leading to the transcendent. Despite the scientific, social and religious evolution the average Victorian did not dare question the God within knowing that it would be blowing the light within, bringing nothing but disaster to one's life. An age, in this sense, depicts the predominant character of its people. As a person grows s/he goes through a series of transformations but the irony lies in the fact that every time s/he acquires a new characteristic, s/he considers it to be his/her completeness, unaware of the fact that it is just one phase of her/his totality of perfection. Even though the

2 Cfr. URL: online-literature.com/robert-browning/introduction-to-browning/0/+Spirituality+in+Robert+Browning+&cd=5&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=in

Victorians strove against the new patterns of life that appeared on their horizon they stand out because they survived the age. Epochs come and go but a period such as the Victorian age makes us ponder for a while and by the time our glimpse into its uniqueness lapses we acquire a new character as do the passers by.

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