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In Memoriam: An Expression of Victorian Religious Doubts and Scientific Development

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Abstract

The Victorian Age was a period of the advancement of science leading to a huge upheaval in the thought. New theories came into conflict with the age old faith and the ancient intellectual order was shaken at its foundation. The philosophical, religious and the scientific revolutionary theories which shook the Victorian Age were clearly reflected in the poem by Alfred Tennyson. The question of death and the survival after death and the existence of a loving God have been confirmed in the poem. The poet at the same time accepts the growing knowledge of science having more reverence for God. The doubts and the anxiety expressed in the poem reflect the feelings of thoughtful persons of the Victorian Age when they were confronted by new scientific theories.

Keywords

Victorian Age; Religious Doubts; and Scientific Development.



The Victorian Age

The Victorian Age can be dated from 1837-1901, the year in which Queen Victoria ascended the throne of England and the year in which she died. Queen Victoria reigns from June 20, 1837 until her death on January 22, 1901. The Age was characterised by the rise of democracy and the advancement of science. With the spread of popular education, newspapers, magazines and cheap books, facts and speculations of the experts were exposed to the reading public. A huge upheaval in thought was the result of this rapid progress and popularisation of knowledge; new theories came into conflict with old faiths; the ancient intellectual order was shaken at its foundation.

Alfred Lord Tennyson

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) was the leading poet of the Victorian Age in England and he was considered as the representative poet of the Age. He became the poet laureate after the death of William Wordsworth in the year 1850. For about half a century he was the voice of the England, expressing the doubts and faith, the grief and triumphs of the people of his age.

In Memoriam

As early as the year of Hallam's death in 1833, Alfred Tennyson started to write the lyrics which eventually became the sections of *In Memoriam* and was published in the year 1850. Gladstone considered the poem "perhaps the richest oblation ever offered by the affection of friendship at the tomb of the departed" (Richardson 58). The elegy became a satisfactory answer to the problems of existence, especially those raised by the struggle between religion and science. We may also cite the words of Basil Willey (1956) who says:

The success and influence of *In Memoriam* illustrate its truly representative quality. The Victorians loved it, and were moved by it, because it dealt seriously and beautifully with the very problems that most concerned them: problems arising from the gradual

fading-out of the older spiritual lights in the harsh dawn of a new and more positive age. For *In Memoriam* is far from being a continuous lament over Arthur Hallam. It begins, of course, with the bereavement, with personal grief and lamentation, and with the inevitable questionings about the soul's survival in a future life. Gradually, the immediate sorrow recedes, giving place to poignant recollection, and then to more general meditations on man's place in Nature and the impact of science upon religious faith. (79-80)

In it the problems of science and religion which were agitating men's minds in the middle of the nineteenth century are portrayed with subtle accuracy of delineation and a wealth of poetic imagination. It would be difficult to find a more clear and concise and at the same time a more poetical statement of a scientific theory than the verse which embodies the geological conception this planet's formation:

The solid earth whereon we tread
In tracts of fluent heat began
And grew to seeming random forms
The seeming prey of cyclic storms
Till at the last arose the man. (Section 118, Lines 8-12)

But perhaps the main interest of the poem centers in the author's attitude towards religion. Without ignoring the results of scientific research, Tennyson remained a firm believer in the immortality of the soul, he passed through his periods of doubt, but he attained an ultimate position of belief, and thus his poetry is the poetry of paramount hope. Tennyson's poetry belongs in this respect to a period of transition. Its message was peculiarly valuable to those who were wavering between ancient belief and modern skepticism (Smith 68-69).

The philosophical, religious, and ethical issues which shook the mid-Victorian age - and to an astonishing degree shaped the Victorian poetic

temper - are refracted through the sensibility of Alfred Tennyson in *In Memoriam*. Among the public issues of his day Alfred Tennyson was particularly well read in the field of science. Norman Lockyer (1836-1920) has observed that Alfred Tennyson's mind is 'saturated with astronomy,' and Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895) also roundly declared him to be "the first poet since Lucretius who has understood the drift of science" (Walker 302). A.C. Bradley wrote,

Tennyson is the only one of our great poets whose attitude towards the sciences of Nature was what a modern poet's attitude ought to be, ... the only one to whose habitual way of seeing, imagining, or thinking it makes any real difference that Laplace, or for that matter Copernicus, ever lived. (Rose 95).

One of the most remarkable things about *In Memoriam* was its popularity with Alfred Tennyson's contemporaries. It seemed to provide such a satisfactory answer to the problems of existence, especially those raised by the struggle between religion and science that the Victorians clasped it to their bosoms to supplement the consolation offered by the Bible.

In Memoriam is an epitome of Tennyson's deepest thoughts and feelings concerning the existence of God, immortality, and free-will; it is a philosophical study that begins as personal, but closes with the answer to a universal problem. It seems like Alfred Tennyson was speaking to us directly regarding the problems of life and destiny. According to Anna Swanwick (1892), there is a special interest in the works of both Tennyson and Browning because in this skeptical and scientific age, these two great minds held a strong belief in "the existence of God, as a Being 'who ever lives and loves,' and in the personal immortality of the human soul."

This Prologue summarizes the issue of Alfred Tennyson's long inner struggle and is, in brief, the poet's creed. Alfred Tennyson affirms of absolute faith in God and immortality of the Soul, his faith in God seems strong. He

speaks of God's face we have not seen but we embrace Him through our faith alone and believe in God's existence even though we cannot prove His existence by reasoning. He writes:

Strong Son or God, immortal Love,
Whom we, that have not seen thy face,
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,
Believing where we cannot prove; ("Prologue" 1-4)

It is the God of Love who made both Life and Death, and is master of the dominion of each. He accepts God as the source of Life and Death: "Thou madest Life in man and brute;/Thou madest Death;" ("Prologue" 6-7). He is sure that God has created mankind with a purpose and so will not allow the life to come to an end with his death: "Thou wilt not leave us in the dust:/Thou madest man, he knows not why" ("Prologue" 9-10). He sees God as the highest and holiest of mankind: "Thou seemest human and divine,/The highest, holiest manhood, thou" ("Prologue" 13-14).

Alfred Tennyson's attitude toward knowledge is shown here. He says that knowledge is like a light in the darkness which comes from God. Knowledge is never ending; it must grow and must be accompanied by faith and reverence. Alfred Tennyson does not worry about the threat posed by science to religion. He says that we should accept the growing knowledge of science but at the same time we should have more reverence for God. He wants the mind and the soul to work together in a spirit of mutual co-operation and form one harmonious whole like before modern science had created the gulf between intellectual 'knowledge' on the one hand and instinctive 'reverence' on the other:

We have but faith: we cannot know;
For knowledge is of things we see;
And yet we trust it comes from thee,
A beam in darkness: let it grow.

Let knowledge grow from more to more,
 But more of reverence in us dwell;
 That mind and soul, according well,
 May make one music as before. ("Prologue" 21-28)

In Section 4 Alfred Tennyson referred the scientific fact, that water can be lowered in temperature below the freezing point, without solidifying; and the suddenness of the expansion breaks the containing vessel when he says that: "Break, thou deep vase of chilling tears,/That grief hath shaken into frost!" (Section 4, Lines 11-12).

The doubt concerning immortality still exists. He seeks ideals in human life that will substantiate its reality. He tries to reason whether death is really death. If someone he trusted could affirm that there was nothing beyond Death, he would then strive to keep his ideal of Love alive for even a short time. Without immortality, love would be just a mere sensuality. In Section 35, he insists, for he hopes that Love is immortal: "... If Death were seen/At first as Death, Love had not been,/Or been in narrowest working shut" (Section 35, Lines 18-20).

From Section 40 through 47, he appears to be reaching a point where immortality seems reasonable. In Section 40, he says that Hallam is living a new kind of life in Heaven which will yield immortal fruit. He believed that Hallam is moving somewhere in an unknown place like he is moving here on this earth:

And, doubtless, unto thee is given
 A life that bears immortal fruit
 In those great offices that suit
 The full-grown energies of heaven.

 My paths are in the fields I know,
 And thine in undiscover'd lands. (Section 40, Lines 17-32)

In Section 45, the basis of his faith arises. The purpose of life is to establish an individual consciousness or identity. Surely, then, the dead must retain some memory of their earthly life; otherwise, man would have to learn himself anew after death, thus rendering the purpose of living a mere waste of blood and breath. He believed that personalities must differ for some specific reason. He thought that we must develop these varied personalities only to carry them with us at Death:

So rounds he to a separate mind
From whence clear memory may begin,

.....

Which else were fruitless of their due,
Had man to learn himself anew

Beyond the second birth of Death. (Section 45, Lines 9-16).

However, in section 55 and 56 he returns to the doubts with the scientific reading of Nature. The evidence of Nature makes him doubt the existence of immortality and contradict the concept that love is the ultimate law of creation. It reminds himself that though nature is: “So careful of the type...” (Section 55, Line 7), she is yet “so careless of the single life” (Section 55, Line 8).

Alfred Tennyson takes up his wish that ‘not one life shall be destroyed’ and asks whether our hope of eternal life does not spring from what is most nearly divine in us. But, if God himself inspired this hope and expectation, how can it be that Nature, which seems so careful of each species, should seem so careless of the individual? This initial questioning leads to a single complex sentence which extends from the second stanza to the end of the fifth and last stanza of the lyric:

So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life;
That I, considering everywhere.
Her secret meaning in her deeds,

And finding that of fifty seeds.
 She often brings but one to bear,

 I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,
 And gather dust and chaff, and call
 To what I feel is Lord of all,
 And faintly trust the larger hope. (Section 55, Lines 7-20)

Alfred Tennyson here suggested the principle of natural selection long before Darwin made it a Victorian commonplace. Primarily because it implied that nature was indifferent to man, natural selection subsequently became, for many Victorian thinkers, which was also one of the most unsettling concepts in Darwin's theory of evolution as set forth in *The Origin of Species* (1859). Alfred Tennyson, according to his son, Hallam Tennyson 'was occasionally much troubled with the intellectual problem of the apparent profusion and waste of life and by the vast amount of sin and suffering throughout the world, for these seemed to militate against the idea of the Omnipotent and All-loving Father'. Hallam Tennyson further says that his father meant by "the larger hope, that the whole human race would, through perhaps ages of suffering, be at length purified and saved" (Memoir I, 313).

Section 55 seems to show clearly the turmoil in Alfred Tennyson's mind where he wishes to believe in immortality, but logically he cannot; consequently, he gropes blindly for the faith that will enable him to accept what reason will not allow him to believe. Universal immortality seems probable, since it is based on Love and Mercy, but Nature's apparent disregard of the individual fails to justify this, and there is nothing to do but turn to the Lord of all.

Section 56 has a reference of Lyell's discovery of geology as he wrote in his great book, *Principles of Geology*, because Alfred Tennyson, "During some

months of 1837 my father was deeply immersed in Pringle's *Travels*, and Lyell's *Geology*" (Memoir I 162). Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, which appeared in three volumes from 1830-1833, proved revolutionary not only to the geologic theories of the period but to religious thought as well. He sought to demonstrate that the present state of the earth is wholly the result of natural forces like wind and water erosion, rock faulting, and sedimentation operating over long periods of time. Lyell in his second volume proceeded to explain that the continual physical changes which geology revealed pointed out that certain extinction of species after species throughout the earth's history, as they found themselves unable to cope with the new conditions they encountered. Section 56 shows Tennyson's doubts become more radical still. He has assumed that Nature, though negligible of the individual, takes care of the species:

'so careful of the type?' but no.
From scarp'd cliff and quarried stone
She cries, 'A thousand types are gone:
I care for nothing, all shall go.
'Thou makest thine appeal to me:
I bring to life, I bring to death:
The spirit does but mean the breath:
I know no more.' (Section 56, Lines 1-8)

The notion of survival of the fittest is extremely disconcerting to Alfred Tennyson. He notices in Section 56, the even more alarming fact that many species have passed into oblivion, and that humans could very well follow in their footsteps. This is the mechanistic: "...Nature, red in tooth and claw," (Section 56, Line 15) whose existence seemed beyond the care of human lives and human needs. No longer were men God's chosen and beloved, but, on the contrary, they seemed no more noble than the countless scores of other lives which had roamed the planet and passed into extinction. Alfred Tennyson observes:

O life as futile, then as frail!

O for thy voice to soothe and bless!

What hope of answer, or redress?

Behind the veil, behind the veil. (Section 56, Lines 25-28)

Section 55 and 56 of *In Memoriam* resonate profoundly with one another - encompasses perhaps Tennyson's most aggressive confrontation with the tension that exists between God and Nature. In Section 55, Alfred Tennyson particularly addresses that nature seems to care only for the continuation of species - the biological "types" - as opposed to the preservation of the individual life. God, unlike Nature, considers each life so precious that it survives forever in the afterlife; Tennyson implies that the belief that "no life may fail beyond the grave" represents an intrinsically spiritual tenet. God and Nature, given the opposite perceptions of each regarding individual life worth are effectively "at strife" with one another. Alfred Tennyson, familiar with contemporary scientific treatise, acknowledges the ruthlessness of the struggle for survival in nature that most associate with Darwin's theory of natural selection. In the third stanza of the Section, he shows a picture of the inherent cruelty that exists in nature and the "secret meaning in her deeds" - her perpetual pursuit of the ideal biological type. In realizing this struggle, however, he turns to God of his own volition to pray that man will not also succumb to nature's ruthless selectivity. Tennyson still withholds doubts regarding God's supremacy and His preservation of the human soul in the afterlife; the assurance of life after death remains of particular importance, he yearns for an eventual reunion with his departed friend, Arthur Hallam. Tennyson at this point in the poem, continues to journey towards spiritual maturity but can only "faintly trust the larger hope" a hope that contains both the promise of an eternal and a spiritual reunion with Hallam afterlife. The one hope that remains for Tennyson is the thought that evolution might actually be God's divine plan for humanity. If we have, in fact, developed to our present

state from a lower form, then who is to say that development has ceased? Might we not be evolving ever closer to God's image and divinity itself, leaving behind the "Satyr-shape" (Section 35, Line 22) and ape-like visage of our ancestors?

Sir Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-33) seems to have suggested some of the scientific ideas used in section 55 and 56. From the evidence of the rocks, Lyell infers that the biological species were simultaneously created and have been subject to gradual elimination in the struggle for existence. 'It is not only the individual that perishes, but whole species' (Ricks 911). The time-scale Lyell requires is much longer than that envisaged in the Old Testament, and many orthodox Christian took offence at his implicit rejection of the Mosaic cosmogony. Alfred Tennyson may well have had Lyell's grim conclusions in mind when speaking of Nature's carelessness of the single life, when withdrawing his initial reference to her carefulness of the single type, when describing her as 'red in tooth and claw', and when alluding to the evidence 'sealed within the iron hills'. These ideas serve to project his nightmare vision of man as the merely ephemeral product of physical forces (Palmer 102). The doubt and anxiety expressed in these sections reflect the feelings of many thoughtful persons in the first half of the nineteenth century when they confronted the new theories in comparative anatomy, geology, and natural history which appeared to contradict the scriptural account of the Creation and the notion of a beneficent Creator. Tennyson seems to have read most of the conventional scientific sources of these theories (Shatto & Shaw 216).

Section 118 is generally regarded as a key statement of the philosophy or message of *In Memoriam*. It is Alfred Tennyson's most explicit attempt to present some reassuring words on the relation of development to man's beliefs and hopes, probably the most disturbing religious problems of the 1840's to the Victorian people as well as to the poet personally. Here Alfred Tennyson

elaborates the detailed themes of human development, time, and the purpose of life, in order to get through Hallam's tragic death.

In Section 118, we find an allusion to science, or more specifically, to the theory of evolution which is filled with faith. For Alfred Tennyson and for his age i.e. the Nineteenth Century, generally speaking evolution was a physical process from the amoeba to man, but from then on it became spiritual. Alfred Tennyson sees no reason why, because we have animal instincts, we cannot flee from these and seek for higher things. To him the present life of man is not the last stage of development, but man can rise into a higher form of life. However, to accomplish this, the individual must discipline himself and subdue his lower nature. Several quotations from this section show these ideas. Firstly, death is not final: "But trust that those we call the dead/Are breathers of an ampler day/For ever nobler ends" (Section 118, Lines 5-7). He speaks of Hallam as: "The herald of a higher race" (Section 118, line 14) suggesting that his friend was merely a glimpse of what is yet to come. Secondly, it is for man to subdue his lower nature if he wishes to rise spiritually. The 'Ape' symbolises of the subhuman portions of man's phylogenetic inheritance and the 'Tiger' symbolises of man's amoral, natural cruelty, also a part of his racial inheritance must be repressed if a man is to progress morally and become 'the herald of a higher race'. It showed a reverent docility to the lessons of contemporary science. Geology had shown in 'scarped cliff and quarried stone' that 'a thousand types' had lived and vanished; but Tennyson maintained that man would survive and constantly refine himself (Richardson 59):

...Arise and fly
The reeling Faun, the sensual feast;
Move upward, working out the beast,
And let the ape and tiger die. (Section 118, Lines 25-28)

For a time, in Section 120, Alfred Tennyson appears to be defeated spiritually, and he takes a defensive attitude against science. As he looks back

upon his work, he trusts that he has come out victorious in his conflict concerning death. He has a momentary fear that Science may prove the creed of materialism, and if that were to take place, life would not be worth living. But this is a trifling doubt, for his native instinct, he feels, proclaims materialism false, and he ends on a note of optimism:

I trust I have not wasted breath:
 I think we are not wholly brain,
 Magnetic mockeries; not in vain,
 Like Paul with beasts, I fought with Death;

.....

Let him, the wiser man who springs
 Hereafter, up from childhood shape
 His action like the greater ape,
 But I was born to other things. (Section 120)

In the last part of the Epilogue, Alfred Tennyson brought together the matters which had concerned him throughout the poem. He brought together the religious reassurance he had offered piecemeal in various earlier sections reaffirming the relation of both Hallam and the development to God. The sentence culminates in the prediction of a 'crowning race'. The last verse of the Epilogue brings *In Memoriam* to a close with a repetition of the thought of the Prologue. "...the soul, after grappling with anguish, and darkness, doubt and death, emerges with the inspiration of strong and steadfast faith in the Love of God for man, and in the oneness of man with God, and of man with man in Him" (Memoir I 327):

Of those that, eye to eye, shall look
 On knowledge; under whose command
 Is Earth and Earth's, and in their hand
 Is Nature like an open book;

.....

.....
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. (“Epilogue” 129-144)

In Memoriam, then, is in the first instance a personal poem; it expresses the desolation of a man whose friend has died with his great promise unfulfilled, and it evokes for us the love which bound, and binds, the two of them. But the poet’s experiences naturally lead him to questions about death and survival after death and the existence of a loving God. As a result, *In Memoriam* is both a personal and a philosophical poem. It records Tennyson’s concern about the very question of the relationship between the inner and outer worlds of the poet. We have one God, transcending, yet immanent in, the universe.

The success and influence of *In Memoriam* illustrate its truly representative quality. The Victorians loved the poem, *In Memoriam* and were moved by it because the poem dealt with the very problems that most concerned them: problems arising from the gradual fading-out of the older spiritual lights in the harsh dawn of a new and more positive age. The poem begins with the lament of Arthur Hallam but gradually becomes universal questioning about the soul’s survival after death. *In Memoriam* has done to resolve the doubt and justify the ways of God to man.

In Memoriam provides a satisfactory answer to the problems of existence, raised by the struggle between religion and science. Tennyson affirms absolute faith in God and immortality of the soul. He wants the mind and soul to work together in a spirit of mutual co-operation and form one harmonious whole like before modern science had created the gulf between intellectual knowledge on the one hand and instinctive reverence on the other.

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