

Tennyson's Spiritual Quest

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Of the varied aspects of the life of the English poet, Alfred Tennyson, the most interesting, and that which affords the clearest insight into his character, is the spiritual quandary in which he found himself. Puzzled and confused in the affairs of the soul, Tennyson groped his way through life in an effort to find among the doubts and various beliefs current in his day the comforting truths of a religion which he fondly hoped would bring him rest from doubt and fear. His whole problem consisted in a great internal conflict between the "fairy tales" of science and the old Christian traditions with which, at times, they seemed almost completely incompatible. Such perplexities might well evoke the sympathy of those who study his life, but this feeling cannot be one of regret alone. Without these difficulties, he might never have written those poems in which he expresses his fears, and which are among the most beautiful of the English language.

From early boyhood, his deeply religious nature made him extremely susceptible to the influences to which he was exposed. His father, stern, irritable, and unhappy, left a lasting impression on Alfred's mind by the spells of gloom and despondency to which he was subject, probably on account of his being forced to enter the ministry against his will. Even the gentleness and tender love of his mother could not rouse the boy from his morbid sensitiveness, her protecting care seemed rather to make him even more sensitive. During this period, the doctrine of original sin seems to have troubled him deeply, and this difficulty appears to reflect the influence exercised on him by his Calvinistic aunt, Mrs. Bourne. In one of his earliest poems, we observe this characteristic.

"Oh! 'tis a fearful thing to glance
Back on the gloom of mis-spent years."

and later,

"And I was cursed from my birth,
A reptile made to creep on earth."

With such a disposition, and reared in such an atmosphere, Tennyson was ill-fitted to bear the snubs and bruises

of the rugged environment in which he found himself when he went to Cambridge. He retreated into a sort of moody silence. He feared himself, he feared his companions, above all he feared God. Then came Arthur Hallam, the guiding star of Tennyson's college days, the "kindly light amid the encircling gloom." Tennyson admiringly acknowledged Hallam's intellectual superiority, and rejoiced in his confident belief in religious matters. It was Hallam who gave him comfort in his moments of despair, and courage to battle bravely the doubts which assailed him concerning his soul, its immortality, the usefulness of life, and even the existence of God Himself. It was Hallam who drew him out of himself and encouraged him to take part in the intellectual activities of the students.

But the trusting confidence of Tennyson in this inspiring friendship was short-lived. The premature and sudden death of Arthur Hallam, at the age of twenty-two, shook Tennyson's faith to its very foundations, and left him in panic-stricken bewilderment. The effects of this terrible blow are very evident in the two poems, "The Two Voices," and "In Memoriam."

In the first of these, he has left us a picture of the perplexities caused by his intense grief. Written in the form of a dialogue between his weaker and his stronger self, it portrays vividly the torturing doubts with which his weaker self torments him. It suggests that life "without his friends is 'full of misery,' that, therefore, he ought to commit suicide, and that, in fact, life on earth is worth nothing in comparison with the vastness of the 'hundred million spheres.'" Onward the voice proceeds, insinuating other doubts of the value and extent of human knowledge,

"Forerun thy peers, thy time, and let
Thy feet, millenniums hence, be set
In midst of knowledge, dreamed not yet.
Thou hast not gained a real height
Nor art thou nearer to the light,
Because the scale is infinite."—

doubts of any purpose in life,—

"Thou hadst not between death and birth
Dissolved the riddle of the earth."—

and doubts of the immortality of the soul,—

"A life of nothings, nothing worth
From that first nothing ere his birth
To that last nothing under earth!"

Against all of these suggestions, Tennyson's stronger self clings, at times, apparently in desperation, to the "hidden hope" that "there must be answer to his doubt," that there must be a God of love, and that he is determined to hold this faith, although he cannot prove it:

"To feel altho' no tongue can prove,
That every cloud, that spreads above
And veileth love, itself is love."

In the other poem occasioned by the death of Hallam, "In Memoriam," Tennyson reveals the depths of spiritual agony which he suffered during the years that followed this tragic event. Not only is his mind agitated by the mystery of death, but he becomes more and more confused as he ponders the rapidly-developing scientific and especially the evolutionary theories which seemed to strike at the very core of his all but shattered faith. Yet from it all he rallies with a

"Trust that somehow good
Will be the final goal of ill."

In spite of the theories of science that men are "cunning casts in clay," and life ends with the grave, Tennyson feels that man was "born to other things." Hopefully, he proclaims his belief, "Love is and was my Lord and King," and yet the spectre of doubt confronts him with the problem of reconciling a God of Love with all the evil so evident in the world. Throughout the poem, there is a cry of anguish of soul, "when the sensuous frame is racked with pangs that conquer trust," and anguish, which even the faith to which he stretches out "lame hands" cannot altogether allay.

Later, when his life was made happier, through his fame, his marriage, and financial security, Tennyson's difficulties do not manifest themselves so openly. Although they are evident, at times, in a spirit of timidity and desolation in some of his poems, he appears to have found a certain rest in the theory that God must exist because the human heart feels a natural need of His existence, and that the soul must be immortal, because the thoughts of any other solution are unbearable. To us, his solution is pitifully inadequate, but for many of his contemporaries it was a consoling answer to the moral uncertainties with which they were confronted.

Tossed about all through his long life between faith

and doubt, in agonies to which a weaker soul might have succumbed in despair, Tennyson, at the last, found courage to meet the death, of which he had been so long afraid, with a confident assurance of salvation as expressed in the immortal lines:

"I hope to see My Pilot face to face
When I have crossed the bar."



Poise the cause in justice's equal scales,
Whose beam stands sure, whose rightful cause prevails.
—Shakespeare.

When you see a good man, try to emulate his example an
when you see a bad man, search yourself for his faults.
—Confuciu

A moral, sensible, and well-bred man will not affront me,
and no other can.
—Cowper.

