



Religion, Body and Spirit in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*

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"In Memoriam" by Mr. Tennyson happens to be perhaps the most profound oblation ever offered by the fondness of friendship at the tomb of the dead. It, however, did not make its deep, ineradicable impression by lyricism, or by verbal painting. The greatest virtue of the poem is that it had a stronger, wider appeal than the two supreme elegies with which it was inevitably compared. It is a sort of spiritual odyssey undertaken by Tennyson to know all the anxieties, fears, miseries, and hopes of his time in lamenting the loss of Arthur Hallam.

The fourth child of an Anglican clergyman, Alfred Tennyson knew from an early age that he would be a poet. By the time he left his home in Lincolnshire County for Trinity College at Cambridge University, he had already composed a large body of work, much of it influenced by both neoclassic and Romantic writers such as Percy Bysshe Shelley. At Cambridge, Tennyson met Arthur Henry Hallam, acknowledged by many as one of the most promising men of his generation. The two became fast friends, and Hallam helped Tennyson publish volumes of his poetry in 1830 and 1832. Their friendship was further solidified when Hallam became engaged to the poet's sister Emily. Tennyson's world was shattered, however, when the twenty-two-year-old Hallam died of a cerebral hemorrhage while traveling in Austria in 1833.

Almost immediately after Hallam's death, Tennyson began writing poems to capture his sense of loss. Some were published in his 1842 volume of poetry, the most notable being *Ulysses* and *Morte d'Arthur*. For more than a dozen years, however, he composed many disparate short lyrics on the same theme; only in the late 1840's did he determine to organize them to form a long elegiac meditation on the ideas of friendship, love, death, and immortality. By 1850, he had written a prologue to introduce the themes of his collection and included an epilogue to carry the process of his meditation from sorrow at the death of his friend to joy at the celebration of the wedding of his sister. At the suggestion of his fiancé, Emily Sellwood, Tennyson titled his newly made long poem *In Memoriam*.

Clearly, Tennyson intended to organize his lyrics into a single, long poem modeled on the pastoral elegy. Like its great predecessors in English, John Milton's *Lycidas* (1638) and Percy Shelley's *Adonais* (1821), the poem loosely follows the conventions of that type of poem, beginning with an invocation to the deity, then moving to an examination of the speaker's grief at the death of his friend, a commentary on the funeral, a digression on a larger theme, and finally a statement expressing a belief that all is well—actually an affirmation of the doctrine of immortality. His examination of the world around him leads him to realize that, though gone, his friend is still with him in spirit; that realization gives the one who remains in the world some hope, usually for reunion in the afterlife. What makes his elegy distinct, however, is his superimposition of a decidedly Christian framework on the classical form. This framework can be seen in his organization of the lyrics and in his inclusion of specifically Christian references.

The poem consists of nine large segments made up of a varying number of lyrics. For example, the first segment consists of eight lyrics that reveal the speaker's grief at the loss of his friend. The second group of twelve lyrics describes the return of his friend's body to England for burial. The third segment, seven lyrics, depicts his recollections of the dead friend. The remaining segments continue this irregular pattern, but the shift from topic to topic is clearly noticeable.

The fourth segment marks the first important contrast with traditional elegies; included is a poem on the first Christmas after the friend's death, contrasting the happy celebration of the birth of the Savior with the sorrow the speaker feels at his personal loss. Twice more in the poem (in the seventh and eighth segments) the celebration of Christmas marks a point for special reflection. Before these occur, however, Tennyson inserts a major segment in which the speaker experiences grave doubts about the relationship of God and man, as he contemplates new scientific discoveries about the nature of the world. The speaker wonders how a benevolent God could have created a world in which "Nature, red in tooth and claw," seems to have no regard for individuals or even species. Following this fifth segment, however, the speaker is buoyed by reflections of his friend, whom he sees as a harbinger of a greater race of humans, toward which humankind is steadily evolving. In the final segment the speaker celebrates the return of hope to his life, a hope symbolized by the marriage described in the epilogue.

The speaker passes through several emotional stages: from grief and despair resulting from the immediacy and the immensity of his loss, through a period of doubt, to a state of hope based on his faith that there is a divine entity guiding humanity's destiny. The progress of the poet's feelings is marked by the three Christmas seasons celebrated in the work. During the first and second Christmases, the poet's feelings are scarred by his loss; during the third, however, he is able to rejoice in the realization that his friend, though vanished from the earth, awaits their reunion in heaven, where he has gone after fulfilling his role on earth. Hallam becomes for Tennyson a symbol of an idea that the poet and his contemporaries were slowly coming to accept and investigate: the idea of progress. By the end of his elegy, Tennyson is celebrating Hallam as the precursor of a new age that will be greater and more blessed for the world; Hallam, like Christ, is a harbinger of better times, and the poet is able to take solace in having been able to share his acquaintance and love.

Several critics have pointed out the similarities between Tennyson's elegy and William Shakespeare's sonnet sequence, which also carries forward a single story beneath the individual lyrics.

The note of optimism in the final stanzas of the epilogue is reached only after the poet has agonized long over doubts about both his personal future and the future of the human race. A particularly poignant series of lyrics (ones often anthologized out of the context of the entire series) deals directly with the implications of new discoveries about evolution, and in them the speaker, comparing himself to "an infant, crying in the night," agonizes over the possibility that "nature, red in tooth and claw" is governed not by a beneficent deity but by senseless forces that serve no higher purpose.

The critic T. S. Eliot once observed that the greatness of *In Memoriam* lies not in its final message of hope, but in the quality of doubt that permeates the central lyrics. Nevertheless, the marriage that Tennyson describes in the epilogue is clearly intended to suggest the resiliency of humankind and the promise that life will continue, if not for individuals, then at least for the human race as a whole. Not only will life go on, Tennyson implies, but it will improve, and Hallam has been an early messenger of these better times. For this the poet is thankful, for he has been able to associate with one who symbolizes the great future that the world is to enjoy.

In Memoriam perfectly expressed the average theological temper of England in the mid-nineteenth century. Milman had questioned the importance of Biblical miracles. Darwin's theory of evolution would make apparent nonsense of Genesis: where, in the descendants of apes, was there evidence of divinity? When, in 1856, FitzGerald was shown the eleventh-century Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám, with its doubts of immortality, he would discover

an anticipation of nineteenth-century thought, 'a desperate sort of Thing, unfortunately found at the bottom of all thinking Men's minds.' FitzGerald was moved to anger by the injustice of predestination and the cruel indifference of God; and his wrath, his Lucretian resignation, were to touch his age. Tennyson moved his contemporaries more profoundly because he understood not only their anger but their aspirations: because, after all his suffering, all his questioning, he had come to believe in a just and loving God and in immortality.

In Memoriam 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:

... Arise and fly
The reeling Faun, the sensual feast;
Move upward, working out the beast,
And let the ape and tiger die.

Man was born to a higher destiny. 'Nature, red in tooth and claw,' might seem to belie the conception of the God of love; but God was love, and God existed in the hearts and minds of men:

I found Him not in world or sun,
Or eagle's wing, or insect's eye;
Nor thro' the questions men may try,
The petty cobwebs we have spun:

If e'er when faith had fall'n asleep,
I heard a voice 'believe no more'
And heard an ever-breaking shore
That tumbled in the Godless deep;
A warmth within the breast would melt
The freezing reason's colder part,
And like a man in wrath the heart
Stood up and answer'd 'I have felt.'

And so *In Memoriam* became essential to those who mourned in a doubting generation. Lord Carlingford, writing to Edward Lear on the death of his wife, declared that 'during these dreadful three months *In Memoriam* has been constantly in my hands. I have found it soothing and strengthening both by its varied experience and expression of sorrow and loss, and by the deep inward trust in God and a future life which is worked out. I am grateful to its author, and I wish you would take an opportunity of telling him so.' After the death of his friend Horace Moule, Hardy bought a copy of *In Memoriam*, and marked the passages which gave him comfort. Ruskin, in 1866, sent the poem to a young widow. A copy of *In Memoriam* which belonged to the Rev. John Hullett, a Derbyshire clergyman, suggests the living importance of the poem, for flowers and leaves are pressed between the pages, and the book is full of references to his personal sufferings. At the end of the century, Archbishop Benson recorded:

"*In Memoriam* was inexpressibly dear to me for the best part of my life. It came out just when my mother and my sister Harriet died. I sank into it and I rose with it, and I used to teach - to love it .."

In Memoriam did what hymns and sermons ought to do: it went afresh to the primal springs of religion, virtue and truth. It went deeper than the difference between theism and Christianity: it presented the rock-bottom needs and perplexities of humanity. 'I have written what I have felt and known,' Tennyson told de Vere, 'and I will never write anything else.' *In Memoriam* was supremely personal; and it was the personal sympathy and example, as much as the speculations, that made it a universal book of consolation.

While *In Memoriam* is clearly autobiographical, it was intended to be much more than the meditations of a single individual on the loss of a close friend. In fact, Tennyson pointed readers toward a decidedly Christian interpretation. Shortly after the poem was written, he insisted that the “I” of the poem was not written to be simply himself but was meant to represent the entire human race. The poet also said he intended his elegy to be a kind of *Divine Comedy*: the speaker, modeled on the author Dante Alighieri, passes from misery into ecstasy by traveling through hell and purgatory to end eventually in heaven. In these ways, Tennyson invited readers to interpret his personal experiences as representative of those which all humans might feel in passing through trials that test not only their personal fortitude but also their belief in the Almighty and the purpose of human existence.

The central religious issue of the poem is the conflict of faith and doubt. Although the poem was written eight years before Charles Darwin published his theory of evolution, Tennyson and his contemporaries were familiar with the discoveries of science that had, for nearly a century, begun to challenge biblical accounts of the creation of the world. Geologists and biologists had been hinting that humankind enjoyed no special place in the world but was simply a highly developed species that might one day become extinct, the way other species had. Tennyson makes use of this controversy to highlight the crisis of faith that is brought on by the death of his close friend—one that causes him to question God’s purpose not only for his own life but also for human life in general.

Tennyson offers a view of evolution that made it acceptable to Victorian people of faith. For him, all things are evolving—humankind included—toward higher forms of themselves; as he says in the final stanzas of the epilogue, all of creation is moving inexorably toward a reunion with its Creator. Nevertheless, the dangers of purposeless evolution are represented in the middle segments of *In Memoriam*. In these lyrics, the speaker quails at what seems to be a universe where the hand of a benevolent deity is notably absent.

Against such doubt, however, stands the speaker’s knowledge of his friend, whom he sees as Christlike. Hallam is not Christ but is representative of a higher form of humankind. Knowing that such higher beings exist reassures the poet that there is purpose to the world and that God will care for his creation. The speaker’s reflections on the marriage celebration at the end of the poem indicate that, though the death of an individual may be painful and perhaps even unfathomable, the human race will go on fulfilling the purpose for which God created it: to be fruitful, multiply, and give God glory.

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