

‘Shriek’d against his creed’: Science, Faith, Doubt and the Biblical Language of Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*

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Introduction: ‘Echoes in sepulchral halls’

In Memoriam A.H.H., originally published anonymously in 1850, is one of Tennyson’s most important works; indeed it is the work that led to his Poet Laureateship. Of *In Memoriam* Eliot observes: ‘It is unique: it is a long poem made by putting together lyrics, which have only the unity and continuity of a diary, the concentrated diary of a man confessing himself.’¹ Written over a seventeen-year period, *In Memoriam* is a confession of love, a confession of faith, and a confession of doubt. In short, it is a very human poem.

For *In Memoriam* Tennyson employs the rhyme scheme ABBA (Memoriam Stanzas), which relentlessly oscillates back and forth. The monotonously rigid metre and rhyme, coupled with the poem’s epic length, are indicative of the daily routine of someone bereft, finding relief in order and familiarity. His ‘measured language’ is a ‘narcotic numbing’ his ‘unquiet heart and brain’:

But, for the unquiet heart and brain,
A use in measured language lies;
The sad mechanic exercise,
Like dull narcotics, numbing pain. [V]²

This essay seeks to investigate Tennyson’s ‘measured language’ as a window into the work. Tennyson was a master poet - a superb technician of the English language. He had a lexicographer’s vocabulary and a profound understanding of the measures and weights of words. Coming to one of his texts is like looking at a Rembrandt painting — one can admire the work as a whole, but also get up close, look in detail, and enjoy every brushstroke. It is from looking at a work in small detail that the reader can learn from the master and find subtler levels of meaning and artistry, which is, in part, the purpose of this paper.

Much has been written about the scientific content of *In Memoriam* and the historic and intellectual context in which Tennyson was writing. These were important times for the history of dialogue between science and the Christian faith and many of the questions and ideas raised at that time are still very much with us

today, not just echoes in the halls of Cambridge and Oxford, but on our televisions and in modern day popular science writing and within the sadly still raging arguments between creation and evolution. Tennyson's words, across almost two centuries still capture the emotion of the science/faith dialog. Even the father of New Atheism, Dawkins, in his seminal work, *The Selfish Gene* quotes *In Memoriam*: "I think 'nature red in tooth and claw' sums up our modern understanding of natural selection admirably."³ With an increasing atmosphere of tension between religious fundamentalist of all convictions — theists and atheists alike — it is pertinent to revisit such works as *In Memoriam*, which remind the reader that faith without doubt is no faith at all.

Part 1: Natural Theology: I Found Him Not in World or Sun

In Memoriam, in part, reflects on the subject of Christian apologetics. The term 'apologetics' comes from the Greek word '*apologia*' (meaning to 'give an answer' or 'defence' of oneself) and its appearance in Peter's famous apostolic command: 'But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer [*apologia*] to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.' [1 Peter 3:15]⁴ Natural theology is a biblical tradition that has historically played an important role in Christian apologetics. As Psalm 19 states: 'The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge.' [Psalm 19.1] The apostle Paul shows a similar line of thought in the book of Romans where he writes: 'For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead.' [Romans 1.20]

Arguing for God from the natural world found popular articulation in the natural theologians of the eighteenth century, such as William Derham and John Ray. It is William Paley, however, who is perhaps best remembered and whose ideas are undergoing something of a revival in modern day apologetics.⁵ Paley's contribution to natural theology came at a time of huge social change - the Industrial Revolution. Paley's rendering of the teleological argument mirrored the times, drawing comparison between machinery and the 'mechanics' of biological systems such as the human heart or eye. His famous 'Watchmaker Argument' comes in the opening of his book *Natural Theology*. In his argument, he imagines a watch found on a heath and questions how it came to be there. He concludes:

that the watch must have had a maker — that there must have existed, at some time and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer, who comprehended its construction

and designed its use.⁶

Paley’s *Natural Theology* was very popular, but it fell out of favour - partly for philosophical reasons. There has always been a tension between natural theology and the philosophical and theological questions it raises. As Barth elucidates:

God is knowable to us in His grace, and because in His grace, only in His grace. For this reason [the church] can make no use of natural theology with its doctrine of another kind of knowability of God.⁷

The expanding industrial world of the early nineteenth century brought its own objections to natural theology. With its growing dependence on technology, and technology’s association with scientific advancement, the nineteenth century saw a shift in the conception of ‘truth’ - that the verifiable facts of science are absolute truth at the expense of revelatory truth or the Romantics’ notion of knowledge and wisdom.

It is to this emerging ‘brave new world’ that Tennyson belongs, as his keen interest in the sciences demonstrated. Tennyson was, in Huxley’s words ‘the only modern poet ... who has taken the trouble to understand the work and tendency of the men of science.’

The impact of Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* on Tennyson’s faith was profound — a subject which Mattes addresses in detail.¹⁰ Lyell’s *Geology* suggested long time scales for the age of the earth. It also revealed a fossilised natural history of millions of years of plant and animal death. These were aspects of God’s ‘very good’ creation that were not part of Victorian natural theology, and made ‘terrible’ Tennyson’s ‘terrible Muses:’ astronomy and geology, as he wrote in ‘Parnassus.’ House claims that ‘they (astronomy and geology) made impossible a literal acceptance of the account of creation given in the book of Genesis.’¹¹ What *Geology* and *Astronomy* actually made impossible was an acceptance of John Lightfoot and James Ussher’s date for the creation — 4004BC. Ussher and Lightfoot, debating in the seventeenth century, came up with this proposition by their independent studies of the genealogies in Hebrew Scriptures.¹²

From the turn of the Eighteenth Century Ussher’s *Chronology* found its way into the King James Version of the Bible in the side-notes accompanying the Genesis 1 text, and 4004BC became entrenched in the minds of its readers. A careful exegesis of biblical creation accounts does not require subscription to such a date, on the contrary, it forces its rejection,¹³ but the impact of astrological and geological timescales that suggested that the earth was millions of years old, no doubt impacted upon natural theology and on people’s trust in the reliability of the Bible, because of a shift in people’s definition of “reliability”.

Meadows retells the story of Tennyson when as ‘an undergraduate at Cambridge,

he had voted in a debate at one of the student societies against the argument that an “intelligible First Cause” could be discerned from the phenomena of the Universe.’¹⁴ Tennyson’s very revealing observation when examining ‘moths’ wings, gnats’ heads and ‘...all the lions and tigers which lie perdus in a drop of spring water...’ Strange that these wonders should draw some men to God and repel others. No more reason in one than the other.’¹⁵ It is to these “wonders” that he draws the reader’s attention to in CXXIV:

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: [CXXIV]

This stanza is written in the first person and expresses Tennyson’s personal search for God. The first two lines deal with the poet’s personal rejection of the arguments for God derived from natural theology. Tennyson identifies four points from cosmological, geological and biological spheres where he appears to have searched for God and ‘found him not,’ namely; the ‘world,’ ‘sun,’ ‘eagle’s wing,’ and finally ‘insect’s eye.’ These four points have important significance in the history of teleological apologetic history, not only for their scientific interest, but their biblical significance also. Tennyson’s selection of these is more than mere coincidence and warrants further investigation.

Tennyson begins with the realm of geology and his search for God in the ‘world.’ ‘World’ appears twenty-two times in the text of *In Memoriam*. The King James Version of the Bible translates nine different Hebrew and Greek words into ‘world’. Tennyson no doubt chooses this word ‘world’ for its spectrum of meanings, but in its context it seems to be aimed at one aspect of it - the Greek word ‘*kosmos*’. ‘*Kosmos*’ actually means ‘orderly arrangement’ with the suggestion of beauty. This ‘*kosmos*’ is the ‘world’ that ‘God so loved’ in John 3.16. To the thinker engaged in natural theology, ‘*kosmos*’ is an important concept. ‘Orderly arrangement’ requires an orderly arranger, and like Paley’s watch in the field, ‘order’ and ‘arrangement’ speak of intelligent agency. To the natural theologian, this ‘world’ in all its senses, bears the hallmarks of a loving creator God, his creative power, his wisdom, might and provision and is a powerful apologetic tool. Tennyson’s ‘world’ is no longer one of ‘orderly arrangement’ it is a world prescribed by Lyell’s geology. Tennyson is unable to find God in Lyell’s world and he seemingly rejects the notion of ‘*kosmos*.’

Tennyson then turns his attentions to astronomy and looks for God in the sun. It was in Isaac Newton’s *Celestial Mechanics* that British natural theology initially

made its appeal. To modern day Christian apologists, as in the days of Newton, the sun is an apologetic gift.¹⁶ Biblically, the sun is one of God's creations with great importance both astronomically and figuratively speaking. The Genesis creation account refers to the sun as the 'greater light[-giver] to rule the day' (Genesis 1.16), and it has two purposes - to give light (and therefore heat) (Genesis 1.15) and also to measure time (Genesis 1.14). Biblically, the sun is often referenced to figuratively and often in very beautiful poetry, such as Psalm 19. The sun is charged with biblical as well as poetic symbolism. Beyond it being the biblical emblem of beauty (Song of Solomon 6.10), constancy (Psalm 72.5), and God's law (Psalm 19.7), the sun is also the emblem of the presence and the person of God, as in Psalm 84.11: 'For the LORD God is a sun.' In the Judeo-Christian tradition God and his attributes are only ever likened to the sun, but to religious traditions across the globe, the sun is a god or goddess, such as the Egyptian god *Re* or Japanese Shinto goddess *Amaterasu*.

The third subject on Tennyson's list is the 'eagle's wing.' The subject shifts here to the biological realm. Biblically, the 'eagle's wing' is a symbol of God's might and providence: Exodus 19.4: 'Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself.' In Deuteronomy 32.11 God is likened to an eagle: 'As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings: So the LORD alone did lead him.' It is biblically significant, rather than scientifically significant, that Tennyson should specify the 'eagle's wing.' The wing was regarded by the natural theologians as a wonder of God's engineering design. As Gillespie writes; 'Paley related the fact of bird flight to the engineering of their bones and deduced the method of their flight from the engineering in their wings.'¹⁷ Yet arguments from homology circulating at the time that Tennyson was writing, were suggesting that the bird wing was the bi-product of chance evolutionary change, which is, of course, a piece of evidence Darwin later cites for 'common ancestry' in *The Origin of Species*.

Staying within the field of biology the last example from nature that Tennyson draws attention to is the 'insect's eye'. Scientists, for as long as they have had lenses and microscopes have been examining eyes. Eyes represent one of biology's most awesome features. They were one of Paley's favourite biological 'machines.' He drew analogy between sophisticated machinery and 'the eye's ability to regulate itself to conform to the shape needed for near or distant vision.' The eyes of insects are fascinating simply for the beauty of their structure. The insect again holds biblical significance, being a symbol of God's wrath and judgment. For example in Exodus: And the LORD said unto Moses, Say unto Aaron, Stretch out thy rod, and smite the dust of the land, that it may become lice throughout all the land of Egypt. [Exodus 8.16] The lice mentioned here are better translated as gnats - the same insect that Tennyson recalls examining through a microscope and a wonder that does not draw

him to God.

Cosslett suggests that the ‘eagles wing’ and the ‘insect’s eye’ are the sort of random examples of contrivance in Nature that Paley used to prove God’s existence.’¹⁸ Although wing and eye structures are Paleyesque examples of contrivance in nature, Cosslett misses the point that the choice of examples used here by Tennyson are anything but random — they are biblical.

Part 2: God of Love and Natural Evil: ‘Are God and Nature then at strife’

It could be argued that *In Memoriam* is above all else a poem of love. Love is a vital ingredient. The word ‘love’ appears in various forms and with various connotations a hundred and twenty-six times across the text. As previously stated, much of the poem is about Tennyson’s love for Arthur Hallam - which finds its most passionate expression in stanza CXXX, where, interestingly, Tennyson’s thoughts of Hallam are “mix’d with God and Nature”:

My love involves the love before;
 My love is vaster passion now;
 Tho’ mix’d with God and Nature thou,
 I seem to love thee more and more. [CXXX]

This third line is particularly interesting to unpack. It gives the reader deep insight into the connection of ideas, memories, images and gives us a window into Tennyson’s struggle with love and theologically interestingly his struggle with the comprehension of God’s love. It is the Johannine teaching ‘God is Love’ that really engages the poet’s attention. Significantly, this was a concern close to Arthur Hallam’s heart, being the focus of his essay ‘Theodicaea Novissima.’¹⁹ So what does Tennyson’s theology and his theodicy look like? The following lines begin to answer this question:

He, They, One, All; within, without;
 The Power in darkness whom we guess; [CXXIV]

Tennyson’s portrayal of ‘God’ and humanity’s search for ‘God’ is intentionally different from a traditional theological conception. The third and fourth lines of stanza CXXIV list Tennyson’s ideas that betoken God. ‘He, They, One, All,’ the words oscillate between singular and plural values.

‘He’ is a very obvious pronoun used in the Bible to denote ‘God’ in the third person singular. ‘They’ is used here to refer to the triune God of Christianity or the plurality

of God’s nature suggested at by the Hebrew word for ‘God:’ *‘elohyim’* (Gods) which is the plural of *‘eloahh’* (God). Aside from the Judeo-Christian tradition ‘they’ could be referring to a polytheistic understanding of ‘gods.’ ‘One’ is a deeply important statement about God. The monotheism of the Hebrews set them apart from all other religions of the ancient world, a concept inherited later by Christianity and Islam. Deuteronomy 6.4 is the key Hebrew text: ‘Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD.’ [Deuteronomy 6.4]

The last of the four is the most interesting. ‘All’ and the sense of ‘allness’ are significant for Tennyson. The word ‘all’ recurs numerous times in the text of *In Memoriam* and its usage here reflects the notion of ‘all’ revealed in I Corinthians 15.28: ‘And when all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all.’ *‘Panta en Pasin,’* the Greek notion of ‘all things in all things,’ is where we get the term ‘pantheism.’ Pantheism is the system of theology which maintains that the universe is the supreme God. Pantheism is of course not a Christian concept. To the Christian, the universe in its entirety answers to God’s will and reflects His mind, but the universe is not God. The tendency of naturalism toward a pantheistic world-view was interesting for Tennyson. He addressed this subject in ‘The Higher Pantheism,’ a poem which ‘suggests that divinity is immanent in nature and is beyond human comprehension.’²⁰

Tennyson further describes God as ‘The Power in darkness whom we guess.’ Power is often attributed to God in various terms such as omnipotence, might, authority, but God is always a personal being with a name - never merely an impersonal ‘Power’. John’s picture of God goes beyond a ‘power in darkness,’ to the vivid image of ‘light’ in darkness: ‘And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.’ [John 1.5] In stanza LV, we again see a repetition of the image of darkness and God:

I falter where I firmly trod,
And falling with my weight of cares
Upon the great world’s altar-stairs
That slope thro’ darkness up to God,

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. [LV]

It is Tennyson’s honesty here that captivates his reader. The reader can relate to

Tennyson's image of the poet faltering, falling, stretching lame hands, calling out and faintly (not resolutely) trusting the larger hope. This is often the human experience of struggle with faith in the darkness of grief.

The dust and chaff are very biblical images. Dust is an extremely common word in the Bible, with over a hundred occurrences in the King James Version, and it carries a number of associations. Perhaps the most interesting is from the second Genesis creation narrative where 'the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.' [Genesis 2:7] It is also associated with the Fall and human death: 'In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.' [Genesis 3:19] In the Hebrew Scriptures the act of putting dust on one's head is a symbolic act of repentance or showing grief as in Joshua 7:6 and Lamentations 2:10 and Job 2:12: "they lifted up their voice and wept; and the rent every mantle, and sprinkled dust upon their heads toward heaven". Job particularly seems very concerned with dust (occurring twenty times in the text), as indeed is the prophet Isaiah where the word occurs seventeen times.

Chaff occurs fourteen times in the Bible, mainly in the Old Testament, each time it is being either burned up by fire or blown away by the wind - something worthless, unwanted. Tennyson draws upon these biblical images to give us a picture of his grief - the image of a man with dust upon his head "stretching lame hands of faith" toward a deity, not one that he "knows" is "Lord of all", but one he "feel[s]" is "Lord of all". Tennyson here "faintly trusts" rather than "strongly trusts" the larger hope. This image is an extremely important one for unlocking perhaps the key theme of the poem, which will be dealt with in the final chapter of this essay, namely faith and doubt.

Part of the poem's great appeal is Tennyson's honest dealings with the problem of pain and how this relates to a God of love. As Bradley writes: Like me he (Tennyson) has been forced to meditate on "the riddle of the painful earth," and to ask whether the world can really be governed by a law of love, and is not rather the work of blind forces, indifferent to the value of all that they produce and destroy.²¹ This focus on the problem of natural evil in the poem produces some of its most fascinating and disquieting stanzas:

Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life; [LV]

"So careful of the type?" but no.
From scarped cliff and quarried stone

She cries, "A thousand types are gone:
I care for nothing, all shall go. [LVI]

The language of these passages owes much to Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*. Mattes, Willey and Gibson all highlight striking parallels between the text and Lyell's writing.^{22, 23, 24} But further to the similarities of language and imagery between the two texts, Mattes analyses the way in which Tennyson has drawn out the shocking implications of Lyell's geology and interpreted them into his text.

Who trusted God was love indeed
And love Creation's final law --
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed — [XVI]

'Love' as 'Creation's final law' refers to Jesus teaching on the Law, which is so significant that it is recorded in each of the synoptic gospel texts. And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. [Mark 12.30] The Greek verb for 'love' here is *'agapao'*, which in its noun form describes the essence of God in John's profound insight that 'God is love' (I John 4.8-16). Tennyson articulates this in the first line of the Prologue: 'Strong Son of God, immortal Love.' 'God is love' is the 'creed' that is 'shriek'd against' in the final line of the quatrain. The high-pitched vowel sounds accented on 'ravine', 'shriek'd' and 'creed' screech like the caw-caw-caw of a circling vulture 'red in tooth and claw.' When writing about stanza XVI Mattes suggests:

It (XVI) recognizes that Lyell's theory of natural laws operating ruthlessly throughout the earth's history is incompatible with belief that God is love and love is the law of creation. And it suggests that a horrible mockery and self-delusion permeates the entire structure of Western civilization, in which men build churches to worship a God of love whom nature disproves, and fight for supposedly eternal values like truth and justice, which die with the species that cherishes them.²⁵

Stanza XVI certainly does recognise the seeming ruthlessness of Lyell's natural law, and elucidates many of the questions it purports to raise against a belief in a God of Love. But, as he concludes XVI, Tennyson concedes that the answers to the problem of natural evil lie 'behind the veil.' One need only look at the popular writings of the New Atheists, such as Hitchens' book *God is not Great*²⁶ to realise that this issue, that

Tennyson struggled with and in the poem voices so eloquently, is still one of the most significant stumbling blocks for people believing in a God of Love.

Part 3: Faith and Doubt: 'Our dearest faith, our ghastliest doubt'

That which we dare invoke to bless;

Our dearest faith; our ghastliest doubt; [CXXIV]

The words 'faith', 'faithful' and 'faithless' collectively appear thirty-one times throughout *In Memoriam* and is one of the poem's major themes. The significant passage on 'faith' appears in the Prologue where Tennyson, very early in the poem, describes faith in Jesus the 'Strong Son of God' as 'believing where we cannot prove':

Strong Son of God, immortal Love,

Whom we, that have not seen thy face,

By faith, and faith alone, embrace,

Believing where we cannot prove;

We have but faith: we cannot know;

For knowledge is of things we see; [Prologue]

There is a deliberate technical imbalance and awkwardness about this opening stanza, which is perhaps representative of some of Tennyson's spiritual disquiet. The first line is extremely majestic: 'Strong Son of God, immortal Love.' The assonantal vowel sound on the 'o' strikes very forcefully and deeply. The repetition of 'faith' on the third line 'By faith, and faith alone,' beats like a determined fist on a table. The fourth line, in contrast lacks the strength of sound; the assonance of the 'e' sound in 'Believing' and 'we' sounds shallow in comparison to the opening line. The first syllable of 'we cannot' indeed echoes of the word 'weak'. The slight awkwardness of the rhyme of 'prove' and 'Love' sits uncomfortably, perhaps expressing a desire that 'immortal Love' would 'prove' Himself, perhaps in the Victorian scientific, rationalist sense of the word.

Indeed, these few verses are theologically problematic, and they reflect an arguably uniquely Victorian concept of empirical understanding. These verses essentially render Christ unknowable, as Tennyson states that 'knowledge is of things we see' and 'we ... have not seen thy [Jesus'] face'. Knowledge, of course, is not only 'of things we see,' but one could argue that Tennyson uses this kind of empirical understanding to underscore this seeming divide between knowledge and faith. The biblical understanding of these two things, faith and knowledge, is more interwoven. A key New Testament text on the subject of faith is Hebrews 11: 'Now faith is the

substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen ...’ Faith here not some extra-sensory faculty divorced from rationality, rather faith is described as being the ‘evidence’ the ‘substance’, something tangible, by which we can begin to understand the unseen. Indeed the Greek word ‘*pi’stis*’ (πιστις) that is translated as “faith” in English Bibles carries the connotations of loyalty, trust, belief and, indeed, proof.

In the second line of stanza CXXIV Tennyson juxtaposes ‘dearest faith’ with ‘ghastliest doubt.’ As with ‘faith,’ ‘doubt’ is an important feature of *In Memoriam*. The words ‘doubt’, ‘doubts’, ‘doubtful’ and ‘doubtless’ collectively occur twenty-five times in the poem. Perhaps most significantly the subject of ‘doubt’ is addressed in stanza XCVI, where, as Bradley suggests Tennyson could well be writing of his friend Hallam.²⁷

Perplex in faith, but pure in deeds,
At last he beat his music out.
There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds.

He fought his doubts and gather'd strength,
He would not make his judgment blind,
He faced the spectres of the mind
And laid them: thus he came at length
To find a stronger faith his own; [XCVI]

This is a very Victorian depiction of the subject’s (Hallam’s) triumphant battle with ‘his doubts.’ It has all the flare of the galloping cavalryman, sabre aloft, and all the glory of the Empire. The repetition of ‘He’ at the beginning of lines thirteen to fifteen begins each line’s metre like the ‘thump’ of a battle drum, as the hero gathers strength and overcomes his doubts, being true to his conscience and facing his ‘spectres of the mind’ to reach at last the goal of ‘a stronger faith.’ ‘Doubts’ for Tennyson, despite being something he describes as ‘ghastly,’ are also important, integral to the development of faith. Tennyson acknowledges that there is a stronger interconnection between faith and doubt than perhaps religiosity sometimes allows:

There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds.

The relationship of faith and doubt is an interesting one. It is a common misconception that faith and doubt are polarised opposites, but the opposite of faith is not doubt. Faith and doubt are rather symbiotic: the two coexist. A faith without

doubts is no faith at all. Doubts are natural to the thinking person, and as Tennyson illustrates in lines thirteen to sixteen, they are something to be worked through and, hopefully, satisfied. “The nineteenth century,” writes Hecht, “was easily the best-documented moment of widespread doubt in human history.”²⁸

Doubt was deepened in Tennyson by the death of Hallam and also from questions raised by the emerging sciences, as discussed in previous chapters. But it is arguably the death of Hallam that must have had the most overwhelming impact of the two factors. Tennyson’s elegy and his intense language of love for his friend, elucidates this point. Tennyson’s own doubts apparently found their satisfying answers in Hallam — as the poet cries out: ‘O for thy voice (Hallam’s voice) to soothe and bless!’ [LVI] What might be concluded, then, is that doubts for Tennyson are not primarily scientific or empirical, but rather an emotional response. Tennyson’s faith underwent upheaval in the 1830’s, yet he emerged from this crisis with Christian faith:

Yet God is love, transcending, all-pervading! We do not get this faith from Nature or the world. If we look at Nature alone, full of perfection and imperfection, she tells that God is disease, murder, rapine. We get this faith from ourselves, from what is highest within us, which recognises that there is not one fruitless pang, just as there is not one lost good.²⁹

Conclusion: ‘Coarsest clothes against the cold’

This grief and the difficult questions raised by Victorian science had profound impacts on Tennyson’s faith, and this is what the reader finds expressed so eloquently within the text of *In Memoriam*. It could be argued that Tennyson’s own faith was bound up more with his love for Hallam than it was with his love for God. His experience of love seems more real for him in Hallam, than it is in God. The death of Hallam had a profound and lasting effect on him. The faith depicted in stanza XCVI is the strong faith of Hallam that has overcome his doubts, but for Tennyson his doubts stay with him. As Eliot observes:

He was desperately anxious to hold the faith of a believer, without being very clear about what he wanted to believe: he was capable of illumination which he was incapable of understanding.³⁰

Tennyson’s faith, it seems, could not be reconciled with his reason. His experience of faith (as depicted in the Prologue) was founded rather on his mystical religious experiences.³¹ Where ‘faith in a God of love’ finds the strongest articulation in the text, it is from a second-hand experience of Hallam’s faith and not the poet’s own. His own experiences, as Wiley best articulates, are faced:

virtually, as a soul unprovided with Christian supports ... The doubts, misgivings, discouragements, probings and conjectures which make it (*In Memoriam*) so humanly moving could not have existed in a mind equipped with the Christian solutions ... It goes behind Christianity ... confronting the preliminary question which besets the natural man, the question of whether there can be any religious interpretation of life at all.³²

Tennyson’s language when dealing with natural theology in CXXIV is arguable biblical before it is scientific, and pre-empts the increasing suspicion concerning the reliability of the Bible, a suspicion which has now evolved into a full-blown myth - that science undermines biblical truth. Tennyson, from his Cambridge days, rejected natural theology, presumably for philosophical reasons. A brief reading of ‘*Theodicaea Novissima*,’ suggests that this is the influence of Hallam. The text of *In Memoriam*, however, represented a new line of argument against natural theology. No longer was the debate a philosophical one for Tennyson, it was a scientific one.

It is from this new emerging Victorian science, with its new palette of diction, that Tennyson wrote some of the most compelling stanzas. The ‘disturbing religious implications’ of Lyell’s geology sparked sentiment in Tennyson that lingers today, and this is, perhaps, his poetic genius. The poet consciously blends the language of an orthodox Christian faith with a newly emerging scientific diction. By assuming this voice it enabled him to articulate an overwhelming sense of doubt that was prophetic of the separation of science and religion, and the growing secularisation of Britain. The separation of faith and reason, science and religion, is a Victorian invention, but it foreshadowed an ongoing dialogue between religion and science in the twenty-first century. But more important than this are the bigger issues of love and loss, faith and doubt and their unique expression in the work that make it truly a remarkable work. *In Memoriam* winds the two themes of personal grief and religious doubt like the double helix molecule — the DNA of our human condition, our human struggle to understand the goodness of God in a seemingly evil and unfair world. For this reason, it has a lasting appeal.

References

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- 2 Full text available at:
http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/In_Memoriam_A._H._H.
http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/In_Memoriam_A._H._H. (accessed
- 3 Dawkins, Richard, *The Selfish Gene*, New Edition (Oxford University Press 1989) p. 2
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