The Value of Literature: III—Tennyson's Doubts

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In words that tried, but failed, to temper growing contempt with resignation, John Henry Newman in *Tract XC* wrote this of the Thirty Nine Articles: 'let the Church sit still; let her be content to be in bondage; let her work in chains; let her submit to her imperfections as a punishment; let her go on teaching with the stammering lips of ambiguous formularies...'.[1] In Newman's ears the language of the *Via Media* had come to seem deceitful. It took pride in plain speech, yet its words were so framed to include heresy with orthodoxy, false with true. The assured tones of the Articles and Prayer Book, cadences in which generations of Englishmen had come to find comfort and devotion, now seemed in 1841 to belong to a Church that would not listen to the sterner, clear, voices of Church Fathers. Such tones seemed instead to lull their hearers into complaisance. The lips of the Church could be said with irony to stammer, for assurance was only the proud veneer that smoothed over, as it smooth-talked, doctrinal confusion and hesitation. Newman's words were those of Isaiah, who prophesied that the 'stammering lips' of foreign conquerors would command the sinful Israelites, as a result of their desertion of the Law's clear precepts. Such words hit home: those who complained that the allusion to Isaiah fell wide of the mark could not do so except by excluding broad interpretations of Scripture and Creed of this kind, Newman's very targets. But if not thus, how are we to proclaim our faith?

That question receives different answers. The fundamentalist waves his Bible and rails against sin in the market place on a drizzly Thursday afternoon. His smart suit and tie seek to portray a decency, respectability, and submission to the authorities of Romans 13, that is hopelessly lost against his tub-thumping voice. The Catholic Church issues encyclicals on the ethical implications of the international debt, but does so in the odd voice and language of an institution that tries to harness something of the heat of Biblical prophecy to the cool, analytical, jargon of a tired civil servant. Albert Camus in 1948 explained to the Dominicans how during the Nazi occupation he 'waited for a great voice to speak up in Rome'. He had heard nothing, and, when told later of encyclicals, complained that 'what the world expects of Christians is that Christians should speak out, loud and clear, and that they should

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voice their condemnation in such a way that never a doubt, never the slightest doubt, could rise in the heart of the simplest man'.[2] Yet the simple faithful can indeed have doubts, think that some encyclicals are nothing to shout about, and find doubtful also the certain proclamations of the liturgy, when they themselves are none too sure how firmly they believe. Charismatics and Quakers, unsure of formularies disputed by the schools and bitterly contested in religious struggles, turn to tongues and silence.

In the previous two articles in this series[3] I have attempted to explore some of the reasons for which we should value works long established in the literary canon. I have shown how in two cases such works tackle our all too cartesian attention on the content of speech, the bare proposition. They require us instead to listen to the voices that speak and attend to the power of utterance. In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* I suggested that we learn how to distinguish between condemnation and judgment on the lips of the narrator and his fellow pilgrims. In Shakespeare's early History Plays the lesson was in hearing how the words of God may be mouthed by civil government, while propaganda hides in the abuse of simile. But if we have heard how not to speak, how are we to talk of what we believe? Will not literature be the place where we can discover something of how to proclaim our faith, if not the faith to proclaim? These are the questions for this final article as it looks at *In Memoriam,* Tennyson's faith in, and doubts about, art and religion.

> 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;
>
> Thine are these orbs of light and shade;
> Thou madest Life in man and brute;
> Thou madest Death; and lo, thy foot
> Is on the skull which thou hast made.

The opening words of *In Memoriam* were criticised by those nineteenth-century readers who felt or thought (and were not entirely sure whether it was thought or feeling) that they were over-confident. The philosopher Henry Sidgwick wrote how:

> I have always felt that in a certain sense the effect of the introduction does not quite represent the effect of the poem. Faith, in the introduction, is too completely triumphant. I think this is inevitable, because so far as the thought-debate presented by the poem is summed up, it must be summed up on the side of Faith. Faith must give the last word: but the last word is not the whole utterance of the truth: the whole truth is that assurance and doubt must alternate in the moral world in which we at

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present live, somewhat as night and day alternate in the physical world.[4]

But Sidgwick was a poor reader, poor listener, if he believed Tennyson's poem fell decidedly into the genre of Christian consolation, as is betrayed by choice of 'summed up' and 'last word' to describe a preface or prologue. The introduction cannot be judged alone, out of the sequence in which it stands, a sequence in which apparent, initial, confidence is shown to be misplaced. Once that sequence was read over, the reader who returned to what had previously been heard as the accepted voice of traditional, devout, prayer now heard it differently.

The very first stresses call to mind an unspoken counterpart, a weak son of man, while the third stress passes over the initial, slight, syllable of 'immortality' so that what is voiced and thus felt is the weight of mortality. Sidgwick comments on the triumph of 'Faith'. Tennyson offers only the lower case 'faith', while 'Life' and 'Death' occupy the centre of their respective lines. The heavy punctuation of the stanzas frustrates charismatic hopes for union with God that do not submit to the painful endurance of time, painful separation from God. Where Tennyson writes of 'faith alone' his words keep company with St Paul and with Luther, yet they acknowledge also, for the speaker, a terrible loneliness. On first reading, the mind's eye may pass over the poet's choice of 'embrace', regarded as commonplace figure of speech, 'to embrace the faith'. In retrospect a gap between the literal and metaphorical may give pause: Tennyson cannot, despite desire, embrace Hallam, not even in death, for only his ashes are returned for burial. Nor, despite appearances, do the poet's rhymes (love, prove), embrace the first stanza. What it is to embrace Christ, faith in Christ, is shown to be difficult, in the absence of Christ's body, in the absence of certainty. It is difficult in as much as it is awkward, something that in this life is not polished, never accomplished, bound to be clumsy. Kingsley in 1850 opined, 'that while the major rhyme in the second and third lines of each stanza gives the solidity and self-restraint required by such deep themes, the mournful minor rhyme of each first and fourth line always leads the ear to expect something beyond ...' But the poem never satisfies these expectations, refuses to give them.

Tennyson's lines echo those of George Herbert:

> Immortall Love, authour of this great frame,
> Sprung from that beautie which can never fade;
> How hath men parcel'd out thy glorious name,
> And thrown it on that dust which thou hast made,[5]

These echoes are familiar with traditional devotion, hence Sidgwick's criticisms, but no longer at home there in the same way. Herbert, the author who orders words into the stanza's frame, describes the Creator

God as author of the world's frame, author whose commands bring order out of chaos. In so doing he does more than describe God, he describes his own relationship to that God, in shared image and likeness, as in shared nouns and metaphor. Tennyson does not see God as poet; and thus does not see the poet as God-like. In Herbert's lines it is men who show violence in the face of God's goodness, where 'thou hast made' recalls the words of Genesis—that God looked on all that he had made and found it good. In Tennyson's lines, the image is at once of Christ's victory over death, his feet resting on the skull, and that of a God of violence who grinds his own creatures with the heel of his boot, back into the dust from which they came. The first line of the next stanza runs: 'Thou wilt not leave us in the dust', will not leave us in death, will not even in death leave us in peace. The rhythms of the King James Bible, 'and lo', harmonize with the repeated 'Thou madest' in such a way that you cannot decide whether the tone is of praise or accusation, whether these two lines are regular and iambic or have an initial trochee. Tennyson has created a cadence that is a counterpart to the smooth tones of the Church, one which on the surface mirrors its contentment and calm, yet continually asks for other readings, other voices that lack confidence, know despair. It is not simply that these are present within the verse as alternatives, voices that alternate, for Sidgwick was wrong to think that faith and doubt like mutually exclusive opposites must each have their sphere and their times. Rather, faith and doubt inhabit one sphere at all times, in such a way that doubt becomes constitutive of faith, and that faith doubts. Sidgwick conceived *In Memoriam* to be a 'thought-debate', with two sides battling for victory. It is not that, but a poem that comes close to prayer, may be prayer, if prayer, as with those stanzas that call on God, may keep company with reverie, with conversation, with elegy and confession.

The refusal to debate can be seen in the fourth stanza:

> Thou seemest human and divine,
> The highest, holiest manhood, thou:
> Our wills are ours, we know not how,
> Our wills are ours, to make them thine.

Our wills may be ours, so that we make them obedient to God's, made over. They may be ours and yet made by God, Creator of all. Amid what seems to be, and what we do not know, the syntax neither asks us to choose one reading or the other, allows us to take both at once. Tennyson had written an earlier version of this stanza:

> Thou seemest human and divine,
> Thou madest man, without, within,
> But who shall say thou madest sin?
> For who shall say, 'It is not mine'.[6]

The weight fell too heavily, readily, on the supposed answer 'no-one'. The repetition in the final version is heavy with irony: it sounds

mechanical, so that a statement of freedom by its very repetition seems forced.

Tennyson's achievement is also a rejection of an earlier poetics, and of demands from a public seeking more from poetry than he was willing or able to provide. For an age that was tempted to see the poet as visionary and prophet, gifted with heightened powers of awareness, wanted from poets works that would calm the doubts raised by science and the collapse of natural theology. Wordsworth's pantheistic discovery of God in nature was a prop to those whose faith no longer looked firmly established upon the rock of Biblical testimony, philosophical inference. Keble, in the preface to his *Psalter* of May 1839, made some revealing comments on the relationship as he saw it between prophecy, revelation, and poetry: he had tried

> to observe the rule, which He who spake by the Prophets has (if it may be said) appointed for Himself in all His communications to mankind; to disclose, rather than exhibit, His dealings and His will; to keep Himself, to the generality, under a veil of reserve, through which the eyes of men might see just as much and so clearly, as they were purged by Faith and Purity and Obedience. Considering the Psalms especially as divine *Poems,* this surely is a quality which we should expect to find in them: a certain combination of reserve with openness being the very essence of poetry: and the Psalms being apparently ordained to leaven the poetry of the whole world, as the history of the Old Testament to be 'the Sun of all other histories'.[7]

Whether Roland Barthes knew that his interest in textual striptease was not so novel as many think, but had its roots in a much older, dated, poetics, is a question that can be left here unanswered. What does matter is that this poetics of intimation has within it the belief that some are prophets not because they are the chosen ones to whom words are spoken, revelations made, but because they see more, see more in exactly what we ordinary mortals see also. In that sense the prophet was like the reader of poetry who saw not just words and sentences, but allusions and patterns. With such views it was an easy move to see the poet as one himself able to see further, and make in poetry works that allowed others to see the divine in and behind the mundane.

Tennyson had no faith in such poetry. As Wittgenstein's philosophy is often designed to be a 'therapy' for readers who come with other and bad philosophy in mind, so Tennyson composed stanzas that seemed to intimate the divine, only to return with that intimation disappointed to the mundane.

> He is not here; but far away
> The noise of life begins again,
> And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain
> On the bald street breaks the blank day.
>
> (In Mem. VII, 9—12)

The first half line gives the words of the angel to the women at the tomb, conflates in the initial pronoun Hallam and the Son of God, and raises hope: Hallam is far away, with the Christ to whom Tennyson turns. But the enjambement denies the line-end and the stanza moves on, mercilessly, to disappoint. Life does not begin again, only its noise. There is no Holy Ghost in whose name to baptise, only horror, the ghastly blank day. The scene portrayed is precisely one of revelation, day appearing through a veil of rain; but this is no covenantal rainbow and what is revealed turns out to be less than what was once there, an empty world of monotony marked by that echoing long 'a' vowel. To such acts of therapy, Tennyson appointed, and pointed, the rhythms of the stanza: the first half line may be scanned either as two iambs, and thus stresses that Hallam is alive, is not here but elsewhere, or as two unstressed with two stressed syllables, so that the emphasis falls on absence, what is not. The second half of the line with the next two that follow reasserts a strong iambic pulse, a rising rhythm that asks for culmination in hope and affirmation. In the last line that rhythm breaks, falls flat, thuds to a close, shatters amid the alliteration on 'b', 't' and 'k'. Hopes, like bells 'swell out and fail' (XXVIII).

The quality of rhythm needs to be heard against the ease that poets like Keble thought fitting to their verse, as in this, Keble's translation of Psalm XII:

> Lord, save me, for the good man fails,
> The true are minish'd from mankind,
> Their talk is all deceitful tales,
> A smooth false lip, a double mind.
>
> Lord, mar the lips of guile and sleight,
> The tongue that speaks so loud and free,
> Which say, 'Our tongue shall be our might,
> 'Our lips, our stay;—no Lord have we!'
>
> 'Now for the wasting of the poor,
> 'The sighing deep of souls oppress'd,
> 'I rise,' saith God, 'and plant him sure;
> 'E'en as he breathes to Me for rest.'
>
> The words of God are words most pure,
> As silver purged from earth and tried,
> That seven times did the fire endure,
> And came out seven times purified.
>
> Thou, Lord, wilt keep them, faithful found,
> Wilt guard him safe from these dark days,
> Though ne'er so proud the foe range round,
> While vilest men have all the praise.[8]

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Unfortunately for Keble, his praise sounds no different from that of the vilest men, speaks with as smooth a lip as theirs. They share a self-confidence that Keble does not want to assert. Tennyson's words are more treacherous, and thus keep readers from self-righteousness:

> I can but trust that good shall fall
> At last—far off—at last, to all,
> (In Mem. LIV, 14—15)

Tennyson suppresses the 'be' in 'befall' to destroy the promise of future joy with the reminder of our loss in Eden, when good fell, as the second line falls, into a world of fragments, of waiting, the agony of waiting. We are left in suspense, and in waiting try to put together some of the pieces. In 'Theodicaea Novissima' Arthur Hallam had announced that 'in throwing together then some thoughts, which have occurred to my own mind, while employed in such meditations, I wish to contribute what little I can to the completion of a true intellectual system'. Tennyson's memorial to him suggests the failure of that enterprise, is both poem and poems. Keble talked of poetry's powers of 'combination', a word then in vogue, and in philosophical fashion, for Kant had written 'I exist as an intelligence which is conscious only of its power of combination'. Tennyson would have us admit that our understanding of the world is piecemeal:

> I held it truth, with him who sings
> To one clear harp in divers tones,
> That men may rise on stepping-stones
> Of their dead selves to higher things.
>
> But who shall so forecast the years
> And find in loss a gain to match?
> Or reach a hand thro' time to catch
> The far-off interest of tears? (In Mem. I.1—8)

That first stanza of the first poem in *In Memoriam* after the preface is all-of-a-piece, one sentence. The result, as it looks back on Tennyson's earlier Hegelian beliefs, is bathos. The rhymes chime in with the pat image of the stepping-stones, an image that claims to be harmonised with, at one with, the Romantic image of the clear harp, but is not. The metre is totally regular, jog-trot iambic, scarcely held back by a comma at line-end. Not surprisingly the second stanza splits this system and unity into two questions introduced by 'But', sets metephors of finance and business against physical acts of stretching out a hand and weeping. The first stanza talked of beliefs 'held'; the second returns the metaphor to its physical roots to ask whether any recompense could equal the loss of a friend, a hand to hold in hand, a friend to hold in embrace. The metre falters and decays in the final line, the falling cadence of 'interest' that betrays loss of faith in the metaphor. Yet again, there is an image of

the pierced veil, but what is on the other side for the hand to catch is not revealed, is at best ambiguous, for as it stands the far-off interest may itself be only tears. *In Memoriam A.H.H.* becomes a forum where the broken voices of the age encounter and echo, as for example in section LXXXII:

> Nor blame I Death, because he bare
> The use of virtue out of earth;
> I know transplanted human worth
> Will bloom to profit, otherwhere.
>
> For this alone on Death I wreak
> The wrath that garners in my heart;
> He put our lives so far apart
> We cannot hear each other speak.

Once again there is the voice of profit, scientific process, rubbing now against words of agriculture, seasonal life. One reason that Hallam and Tennyson cannot hear each other, as we cannot hear fully the eye-rhyme of wreak/speak, is because of these other voices that force themselves, and the way of thinking they imply, upon the ear. Tennyson considered calling his work 'Fragments of an Elegy'. The unity of a single assertion is brought down by the competing registers of the words that make it up.

The denial of the nineteenth century's desire for a poetry of visionary combination, 'a gushing fount/ Of praise that cannot fail' (stealing a line from Keble's Psalm XIX), may be summed up in lines from Tennyson's poem, 'Old ghosts whose day was done ere mine began':

> There lies the letter, but it is not he
> As he retires into himself and is;
> Sender and sent-to go to make up this,
> Their offspring of this union.

The first phrase has in mind the *hic iacet* of the grave, and the line runs on to suggest more that the letter, and the grave, cannot see. The letter tells lies, distorts, so that what is 'made up' is both composed and fabricated by the writer. The work is both child and corpse.

This article began by asking how we are to proclaim our faith, noted the very different ways that the question is answered by modern Christians. Tennyson's poetry suggests that, however we do this, we must carry with us the voices of our past prayers, past liturgies, and when such voices have within them different emphases, registers and tones, not attempt to smooth these over. Indeed, those past voices need to be brought into contact with, ear-shot of, present voices—of success, worldliness, consumerism, urban poverty. There has been much criticism

of the liturgical prose and prayer the Church has used in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council. It seems to many colourless, flat, insipid. Tennyson's poetry can offer one reason for this: that we have tried to create a single prayerful voice in clinical isolation from the many different and competing ways of talking that surround our world and make it habitable. Newman, addressing the 'brothers of the Oratory in the summer of 1851', attacked Protestantism for its approach to Scripture: 'Picked verses, bits torn from the context, half sentences, are the warrant of the Protestant idea, of what is Apostolic truth, on the one hand, and, on the other, of what is Catholic falsehood'.[9] But it looks now as though Catholic liturgy and encyclicals perform the same operation on the voice. Until prayer, and religious poetry, can keep company again with the rest of speech, it will ring hollow, fail us.

When Newman came to prepare his second edition of *Tract XC* he dropped that phrase, 'the stammering lips of ambiguous formularies' in the face of the rage and opposition caused by the original. It may be also that he had come to see more clearly the value in lips that stammer words of faith. There is a passage in his novel, *Loss and Gain,* where Carlton and Reding discuss the merits of English, Catholic prose:

> 'But look at their books of devotion', insisted Carlton; 'they can't write English'. Reding smiled at Carlton, and slowly shook his head to and fro, while he said, 'They write English, I suppose, as classically as St John writes Greek'. Here again the conversation halted, and nothing was heard for a while but the simmering of the kettle.[10]

1 Quoted in *The Victorian Church* Part One, 1829—1859, by Owen Chadwick, SCM, pbk, 1987, p. 184.

2 I am indebted to Gilbert Márkus OP for this quotation.

3 'The Value of Literature: I—Chaucer's language of forgiveness', *New Blackfriars* Vol 69 No. 819 (September 1988), pp. 374—382; 'The Value of Literature: II—Shakespeare and the Tudor Homilies', *New Blackfriars* Vol 69 No. 822 (December 1988), pp.516—525.

4 In, *Enoch Arden and In Memoriam,* annotated by Alfred Lord Tennyson, ed. by Hallam, Lord Tennyson, Macmillan 1908, p.203.

5 The first stanza of 'Love I', in *The English Poems of George Herbert,* ed. C.A. Patrides, Dent 1974, reprinted 1978, p.73.

6 In *Enoch Arden and In Memoriam,* op. cit., p.224.

7 In *The Psalter or Psalms of David: in English Verse,* by Rev J Keble MA, Vicar of Hursley, Oxford and London, 1869, pp.10—11.

8 Ibid, pp.18—19.

9 *Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England,* Longmans, 1903, p. 322.

10 *Loss and Gain, The Story of a Convert,* Part three, chapter five, Universe Books, 1962, p.211.

I would like to close this short series on the value of literature by saying that I am to blame for whatever may be amiss in these articles, but, for whatever good is in them, I am indebted to the teaching and patience of Eric Griffiths. His book *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* is the place to turn to for further insight on Tennyson.