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An Ambiguous Faith: Tennyson's Response to Victorian Science

Keywords

Alfred Lord Tennyson, Victorian Literature

**An Ambiguous Faith: Tennyson's Response to
Victorian Science**

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Unlike any other time in the history of Western culture since the Enlightenment, the Victorian Era experienced overwhelming intellectual upheaval (Smidt 58). Just as Galileo and Locke transformed science and philosophy in their day, Charles Lyell and the application of modern textual criticism to Biblical text caused a fundamental shift in the Victorian worldview. During this period, scientific thinking rose to preeminence; experimental empirical proofs became the unbending standard for knowledge and truth. In addition to voiding other forms of truth claims, science directly shook the foundation of European Christianity. It contradicted traditional conceptions of the earth's origins and cast doubt on events that lacked empirical verification, such as Christ's

resurrection. By questioning notions of God's original creative process and continued divine intervention, evolution and science challenged the Christian tradition as a whole. Victorian intellectuals began to imagine the world from a new perspective of evolutionary competition and secular science rather than through the lens of the Church. In this new world, many Victorians struggled to maintain a faith in Christianity in light of seemingly contrary scientific discoveries. They were the first to grapple with the modern faith crisis over science and its apparent proofs against Christian doctrine and tradition.

A poet of the age, Alfred Lord Tennyson profoundly wrestled with these ideas throughout his life. Advances in science and correlative and complementary philosophical shifts repeatedly challenged Tennyson's Christian faith. Despite such antagonism, Tennyson refused to abandon his trust in either God or in science. Instead, he fought within himself and in his poetry for a coherent synthesis between the two, a way of rightfully acknowledging the discoveries of science while at the same time intellectually maintaining his Christian convictions.

Tennyson scholarship has approached this struggle in a number of different ways that tend to oversimplify Tennyson's philosophy. Christian scholars, on the one hand, point out Tennyson's criticism of secular science and draw out his frequent use of Christian imagery and symbolism to praise Tennyson as a successful defender of Christian faith in times of doubt. Joanna Richardson, for example, finds his poetry to "preach [a] robust, benevolent Christianity"

(233). On the other hand, secular, or at least non-Christian, critics tend to interpret Tennyson's assumed Christian faith as a gross intellectual mistake. F. Lucas quotes the words of the Victorian poet Matthew Arnold, deriding Tennyson as being "deficient in intellectual power" (6). Many other critics enjoy citing the words of the modern poet W. H. Auden, who refers to Tennyson as "undoubtedly the stupidest" of poets (qtd. in Buckley 67). More recently, in an explication of the poem "Mariana," Richard Collins takes for granted Tennyson's assumed "lack of philosophical depth." Both of these interpretative generalizations fail to portray Tennyson accurately.

Tennyson is neither a Christian hero nor an intellectual failure. He does not adhere to an orthodox Christian faith. To some extent, T. S. Eliot recognizes this, writing that the "religious" or even philosophical value of the poem, "In Memoriam A. H. H.," lies not "in the quality of its faith, but [in] the quality of its doubt" (177). Though he fails to express a sure Christian faith in the poem, Tennyson does affirm a faith in immortality, the poem's primary concern. While the discrepancies between Christianity and science initially inspire Tennyson to reconstruct his worldview, his poetry reveals an effort at reconciliation that ultimately pulls him away from both.

Tennyson's philosophical progression develops through three general phases that surface repeatedly in his poetry. First, Tennyson identifies an inner human need for spiritual faith, valuing it over scientific knowledge. Next, complicit with the effects of scientific thought, he employs

this intuitive faith to devalue Christian creeds. Finally, Tennyson replaces Christianity with a mysticism born out of his own subjectivity. Tennyson's faith in a personal inner sense of spiritual truth eventually overwhelms the claims of science and Christianity. Nevertheless, his movement toward this intuitive faith begins with the clash between Christianity and Victorian science.

The Victorian preoccupation with empirically derived knowledge left little space for the assertion of metaphysical Christian faith. Thomas Gradgrind, a character in Charles Dickens's novel *Hard Times*, expresses the attitude of the period when he claims, "In this life, we want nothing but Facts, Sir; nothing but Facts!" (2). In stark contrast to the Romanticism that preceded it, Victorianism glorified scientific objectivity over imaginative visions. Thomas Carlyle, a prominent Victorian and friend of Tennyson, puts it this way: "To me the Universe was all void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility: it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb" (1081). The universe, described without any reliance upon the supernatural agency of a divine god, appeared quite bare and hostile to Victorians. Everything operated according to the objective laws of science. "Belief in anything intangible and undemonstrable [became] increasingly difficult [. . .]. Fact [took] the place of faith" (Smidt 58).

In one of his earliest poems, "Timbuctoo," written while attending Cambridge in 1829, Tennyson senses Victorian science's encroachment on idealistic dreams.

Throughout the poem, he flaunts a mystical vision of the "tremulous Domes," stately gardens, and Chrysolite obelisks of the legendary city only to see them destroyed in the last two stanzas by "keen Discovery" (ll. 228-9, 31, 40). The "brilliant towers / [. . .] / Darken, and shrink and shiver into huts" as discovery dispels myth (ll. 240-2). Tennyson recognizes the place of "the great vine of Fable," metaphorical subjectivity, "in the soil of truth" and laments its denigration at the hands of science and objective reasoning (ll. 218, 221). In "Timbuctoo," Tennyson first expresses what will become a common theme throughout his poetry: the inability of facts and objective knowledge to touch "the heart of Man" (l. 19). "Timbuctoo," however, precedes any major poetic indication of Tennyson's religious doubt; it foreshadows the challenges that plague the poet for the rest of his life.

While Tennyson communicates his disagreement with the Victorian preoccupation with scientific fact in "Timbuctoo," the poem entitled "Supposed Confessions of a Second-Rate Sensitive Mind," published the next year, shows him on the defensive. Victorian intellectual ideas make the religious convictions and beliefs of his youth untenable. He wishes "again to be / The trustful infant on the knee" and wonders how one goes "awry / From roots which strike so deep?" (ll. 40-1, 77-8). The answer may lay in humanity's inability to find in religion answers to all of life's basic questions. At one point, for example, he asks his mother:

But why
Prevail'd not thy pure prayer? Why pray

To one who heeds not, who can save
But will not? (ll. 89-91)

Here Tennyson raises some of the big questions of faith. Why do prayers to an omniscient and omnipotent God go unanswered? Why does a loving God condemn people to damnation? No longer a child, Tennyson finds himself grappling with pieces of theological belief that seem empirically unfounded and contradictory. In short, the tenets of his faith do not make sense within their own framework or fit his knowledge of the world.

Even so, Tennyson sees a hope for happiness only in Christianity, a place where he observes humanity to have "moor'd and rested" (l. 125). Yet he cannot return to it, for he is "void, / Dark, formless, [and] utterly destroyed" (ll. 121-2). Questions and doubts have ravaged his mind, making belief impossible. He laments:

I am too forlorn,
Too shaken: my own weakness fools
My judgment, and my spirit whirls,
Moved from beneath with doubt and fear.
(ll. 135-8)

He finds himself too mixed up to choose one way or the other. His "spirit and heart are made desolate" by overwhelming intellectual doubts (189). His rational mind, exalted by Victorianism, dominates over his spirit and heart, the organs of subjective knowing, which otherwise seem willing to believe. Tennyson will strengthen these subjective organs in later poetry.

The monologue in "Supposed Confessions of a Second-Rate Sensitive Mind" turns into an internal dialogue in "The Two Voices." Written three years later, in 1833, "The Two Voices" shows that none of Tennyson's despair has lifted; instead, his depression has only intensified as this poem's speaker wards off thoughts of suicide. In the poem, the speaker engages two voices, one negative and the other positive. The first, a suicidal voice, criticizes his broken "train of reason" asserting that he "canst not think" (ll. 50-1). The speaker also admits to the struggles of his mind: "I toil beneath the curse, / [. . .] knowing not the universe" (ll. 229-230). The voice goes on and disparages the speaker's efforts to achieve knowledge in his earthly life:

Thou hast not gain'd a real height,
Nor art thou nearer to the light
Because the scale is infinite. (ll. 91-3)

Again, the overwhelming nature of ultimate truth hinted at in the "Supposed Confessions" haunts Tennyson. The voice offers no hope that the "dreamer, deaf and blind, / Named man, may hope some truth to find" (ll. 175-6). The task is too much, knowledge too boundless. "Cease to wail and brawl! / Why inch by inch to darkness crawl?" the voice challenges (ll. 200-1). It suggests that it is better to die than to keep seeking.

Toward the end of the poem, the speaker counters this suicidal voice by calling on intuitive feeling. He remarks that something "touches [him] with mystic gleams, / Like glimpses of forgotten dreams" (ll. 380-1). He senses something "such as no language may declare" (l. 384).

All this the first voice laughs off as “dreams” (l. 386), not “reality” (l. 387). Tennyson clearly identifies this feeling as something unscientific and subjective. A few stanzas later, the speaker mentions that his “heart began to beat” and in the next that “the dull and bitter [first] voice was gone” (ll. 422, 26). Immediately, the second voice arrives. The speaker hears “A little whisper silver-clear” encouraging him to “Be of better cheer” (ll. 428-9). Like the suicidal first voice, this voice is also one internal to the speaker, presumably whispering from the speaker’s recently unfrozen heart. In addition to this connection to the heart, Tennyson further clarifies the second voice’s subjectivity by describing its “feel[ing]” as something “no tongue can prove” (l. 445). Whereas the reasoning mind overwhelms the “spirit and heart” (l. 189) of the speaker in “Supposed Confessions of a Second-Rate Sensitive Mind,” the subjective second voice triumphs in “The Two Voices.”

Tennyson turns again to subjective knowledge in “In Memoriam A. H. H.” This long poem, composed over seventeen years, flows out of one of the most trying experiences of Tennyson’s life. In 1833, Arthur Henry Hallam, Tennyson’s closest friend and his sister’s fiancé, died suddenly at the age of twenty-two. Already shaken by science and “the higher criticism,” this tragedy reinforced Tennyson’s doubts and forced him to consider an even bleaker world than he had struggled to accept before. Composed in the wake of this tragedy, “In Memoriam” consists of a number of lyrics wherein Tennyson both grieves

for the loss of his friend and attempts to reassemble his shattered worldview.

Whereas Tennyson reaches for truth beyond the limits of science in “Timbuctoo” and “The Two Voices,” the death of Hallam provokes him to focus specifically on the truth of immortality. The struggle to believe in immortality despite the absence of empirical evidence becomes a major theme of the poem and forms the basis of his criticism of science’s strict valuation of objective knowledge. Tennyson’s relentless belief in Hallam’s immortality leads him to assert the primacy of nonscientific intuitive knowledge and the existence of a reality beyond the realm of science.

Tennyson refuses to believe that Hallam’s death has been the end of his existence. For God to allow such a valued individual to die so young seems too much a loss. Even so, evolutionary theories suggest such a cold, uncaring world, a “Nature, red in tooth and claw” (54.15) that has no care for the extinctions of a thousand species (3-4). Such a meaningless world does not offer Tennyson hope and he refuses to accept such futility. In section 34 of “In Memoriam,” he explains that either immortality exists or “Else earth is darkness at the core, / And dust and ashes all that is” (3-4). As a poet, Tennyson sees too much “fantastic beauty” in the world to affirm the latter (6). He presents the same argument in a later poem, “Vastness.” There Tennyson illustrates the utter futility of numerous earthly pursuits before finally asking, “What is it all, if we all of us end [. . .] / Swallowed in Vastness, lost in Silence, drown’d in the

deeps of a meaningless past?" (17.1-2). Human existence measured against itself is fleeting and meaningless. So, as in "In Memoriam," Tennyson closes "Vastness" with an appeal to immortality, crying, "[T]he dead are not dead but alive" (18.2). Tennyson connects the beauty and significance he senses in the human soul to an eternal hereafter transcendent of the violently competitive and arbitrary natural world he perceives around him.

For Tennyson, the ultimate futility of the world follows primarily from the futility of science to comprehend spiritual reality. He mentions the limitations of human intellect in the preface to "In Memoriam," remarking,

Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be
They are but broken lights. (17-9)

He links these "little systems" to empirical science a few lines later, connecting this imperfect knowledge to the realm of sense perception, to "things [people] see" (22). As Tennyson finds, in regards to the question of immortality that Hallam's death inspires, such experiential knowledge does not have all the answers. Though "science reaches forth her arms / To feel from world to world, and charms / her secret from the latest moon" (21.18-20), Tennyson finds that "the phantom, Nature, stands— / [. . .] / [. . .] / A hollow form with empty hands" (3.5-8). In an echo of his earlier poetry, "In Memoriam" reveals some "truths that never can be proved" (131.10). Science can uncover the physical world, but Tennyson's question regarding immortality reveals to him its limitations. As he perceives, from science's

materialistic perspective, one can only speak of "life as futile [and] frail," but for a "hope of answer, or redress" one must look "behind the veil" (56.25-8).

Looking beyond the empirically verifiable physical world, Tennyson posits inner feelings and spiritual revelation as epistemological methods of embracing metaphysical truths. Though science has nothing to say on the matter, Tennyson points out an intrinsic human sense of immortality that humanity "thinks [it] was not made to die" (Preface 11). In language nearly identical to that found in "The Two Voices" (l. 422), "In Memoriam" describes "A warmth within the breast [that melts] / The freezing reason's colder part" (124.13-4). Feeling, unobservable and immeasurable, must break down the metaphysical doubts projected by cold objective reason.

Unlike his rendering of the "silver-clear" whisper (l. 428) in "The Two Voices," Tennyson's experience in "In Memoriam" goes beyond language. His subjective experience, in contrast to scientific facts, transcends even language. He illustrates his lack of words through the repeated use of the image of an infant "with no language but a cry" (54.20). Tennyson parallels his mystical experience to that of a child who though comprehending little of the larger world, finds comfort in its father's arms (124.20). Though unquantifiable, something experientially occurs in the "blind clamour" of Tennyson's childlike crying that makes him "wise" (124.18). He remains entirely dependent upon God, "his father," whom "no man understands," to reach "out of darkness" and shape the world (124.20-3). He relies

upon an utterly incomprehensible God: "By faith, and faith alone, [he] embrace[s] [God], / Believing where [he] cannot prove" (Preface 3-4). Lacking rational explanation, his faith depends upon a subjective feeling of divine presence in "the hands" he senses "moulding men" (124.23-4). This warm feeling overcomes "freezing reason" and offers Tennyson the assurance he desires of both God and immortality (124.14). While Victorian ideology proclaims the inerrancy of empirical science, Tennyson counters that there exists a higher way of knowing and that the certainty of science must bow to the certainty of the human heart.

"De Profundis" also asserts the value of subjective knowledge. In this poem, composed between 1852 and 1880, Tennyson presents two separate greetings to his newborn son: one from the perspective of science and the other from faith. The two greetings illustrate the significant difference between the two paradigms. Both of them open with the same line: "Out of the deep, my child, out of the deep" (1.1 and 2.1.1). What becomes significant then is the way Tennyson distinguishes between these two "deeps." In the first, the greeting written in terms of scientific materialism, the deep stands for an immeasurable void. The child comes out of "the vast / Waste dawn of multitudinous-eddy light" (1.3-4). In the greeting written in terms of spiritual faith, the child comes out of a deep infused with the vitality and brilliance "Whereon the Spirit of God moves as he will" (2.1.3). Moreover, though Tennyson asserts the vastness of the physical world in the first greeting, he qualifies it in

the second. He makes this point definitively, describing the material world in these terms:

this divisible-indivisible world
Among the numerable-innumerable
Sun, sun, and sun, thro' finite-infinite space
In finite-infinite Time—our mortal veil
And shatter'd phantom of that infinite One.
(2.2.9-13)

Though it originally seems so endless, the material "world is but the bounding shore" in comparison to the true endlessness of the spiritual universe (2.1.6). "De Profundis" stresses the superiority of spiritual reality over the physical world in terms of both scope and vibrancy.

As seen throughout Tennyson's poetry, his first major response to Victorian science is to assert the primacy of spiritual, intuitive knowledge. To do this, he challenges the authority of science to explain all reality according to objective standards of truth, a standard his subjective experience can never meet. However, he does not reject science in the way many Victorian intellectuals reject faith. While their epistemological paradigm denies all nonscientific truth, Tennyson relegates science to a position of relative authority, still valuable for discovering and explaining truths about the material world. He respects science enough for Thomas Henry Huxley to declare him "the first poet since Lucretius who has understood the drift of science" (qtd. in Ross 95). Even so, his interest and respect for science does not prevent him from questioning it, something other Victorian poets often seem reluctant to do.

Tennyson's questioning of science leads him to challenge other truth claims, including those of the Christian church. In contrast to the oppositions posed by empirical science and evolutionary theory, Tennyson criticizes traditional Christian doctrine for conflicting with his intuitive and subjective knowledge of metaphysical reality. The philosophic move he makes to surmount empirical materialism in turn subverts his Christian faith. His poetry shows a dissatisfaction with Christian creeds that prompts him to establish a new spiritual faith.

Tennyson's dissatisfaction and his desire to replace orthodox creeds resonate with the discourse of the Victorian era. Thomas Carlyle presents this idea in *Sartor Resartus*, a foundational text to the Victorian episteme, published in 1833. In his work, whose title itself means "the tailor retailored," Carlyle argues for the need to cast off dead religious traditions and false superstitions and rebuild a new and vigorous faith in their place (1077). Though the science and philosophy of the age undermine significant tenets of Christian faith, Carlyle, like Tennyson, senses within it some inner truth. Similar to Tennyson, Carlyle turns toward the subjective experience of the heart to discover this truth, writing in *Sartor Resartus*, "if my as yet sealed eyes, with their unspeakable longing, could nowhere see [God], nevertheless in my heart He was present" (1080). Carlyle attributes his lack of sight to "the sphere of blind custom" (1098). "Custom doth make dotards of us all," he accuses, asserting that tradition and familiarity deaden one's encounter with the Divine (1098). He specifically aims this critique at organized

religion. God is no longer in the traditional Christian faith; "the Temple [. . .] founded some eighteen centuries ago, now lies in ruins, overgrown with jungle, the habitation of doleful creatures" (1093). Even so, at the same time, hidden in "a low crypt, arched out of falling fragments, thou find[s] the Altar still there, and its sacred Lamp perennially burning" (1094). In response, Carlyle asks for help "to embody the Divine Spirit of that Religion in a new Mythus, in a new vehicle and vesture" (1094). According to him, faith requires a new form, fashioned according to new ideas and experiences relevant to the Victorian era.

This desire for the new surfaces repeatedly in Tennyson's poetry. Tennyson echoes Carlyle in the poem, "Ulysses," where he uses the mariner's now-famous speech to his sailors to speak to his own time, declaring that "'Tis not too late to seek a newer world" (l. 57). Unwilling to retire to his home in Ithaca, Ulysses looks to the future and turns again to the sea to voyage after new lands. Similarly, in "Morte D'Arthur," the dying King Arthur encourages Sir Bedivere with these remarks concerning the future:

The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfils himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.
(ll. 291-3)

Though the narrative speaks of the fall of Camelot, these words also relate to the fall of Christian tradition relative to the ascendancy of Victorian science. In "The Two Voices," for example, Tennyson applies this idea of progress to the

replacement of obsolete religion. The poem's speaker accepts the following:

know[ing] age to age succeeds,
Blowing a noise of tongues and deeds,
A dust of systems and of creeds. (ll. 205-7)

Tennyson also points to the creeds as old and empty symbols of Christian faith in "In Memoriam," asking "who would keep an ancient form / Thro' which the spirit breathes no more?" (105.19-20). He has no desire for the old traditions in which the divine spirit no longer lives and acts. In fact, he suggests their propensity for evil, alerting the reader to beware of "divine philosophy / [unless she] should push beyond her mark, and be / Procuress to the Lords of Hell" (53.13-16). "In Memoriam" looks toward a faith that has "reach'd a purer air, / [that] has centre everywhere, / [and that has not] fix[ed] itself to form" (33.2-3). Like Carlyle, Tennyson wants a faith transcendent and free of creed and dogma. He finds "faith and form / [...] sunder'd" (127.1-2) not only by science but also, like Carlyle, by the creeds' inability to capture his experience. They do not offer Tennyson a faith he can feel.

He chooses to look past the traditional creeds toward a new faith. The sounding of Christmas bells in "In Memoriam," to "Ring out the old, ring in the new," "Ring out the false, ring in the true," reverberates Carlyle's call for a new Mythos (106.5, 8). They announce Tennyson's desire for a refashioned Christianity by "Ring[ing] in the Christ that is to be" (106.32). Thus, Tennyson bases his new faith upon those intuitive "truths that never can be proved" (131.10).

He asserts subjective truth over traditional creeds just as he has over science.

In essence, Tennyson's faith relies upon his ability to interpret subjective experience, which he has already explained to be beyond the scope of human intellectual and linguistic comprehension. Unable to make firm or detailed assertions about his intuitive feelings, Tennyson's poetry expresses only a vague subjective faith, lacking the traditional substance of the Christian faith.

Though "In Memoriam" looks forward to "the Christ that is to be," for example, the poem argues only for a general faith in subjective experience, offering little that pertains particularly to Christianity (106.32). While the prefatory invocation to the "Strong Son of God" alludes to Christ, the rest of the poem rarely makes such clear references to a specifically Christian God (1). Instead, the poem develops a simple faith in love and duty. Tennyson writes, "Love is and was my lord and king," making it the central tenet of his faith (126.1). Such a subjective, even emotional focus follows sensibly from the nature of his intuitive faith that relies on an experiential encounter with a fathering God. Duty, then, flows out of love as the application of love to other human beings. He mentions it in the next stanza, "proclaim[ing] social truth [. . .] / And justice" (127.5). One also sees this theme when the Christmas bells "ring out the feud of rich and poor / [and] Ring in redress to all mankind" (106.11-2). While compatible with and likely inspired by orthodox Christianity, these ideals do not relate back to specific Christian roots in

the poem. Rather, they stand alone as simple assertions of Tennyson's intuition.

Similarly, Tennyson presents an ambiguous refashioning of religious faith in the 1867 poem "The Higher Pantheism." As the title indicates, this poem attempts to express a nuanced view of pantheism. Tennyson does not argue that everything is part of the Divine, but contends for the presence of God in all existence. Though not divine, nature nevertheless carries traces of God. Thus, nature presents Tennyson with a valuable, though imperfect and partial, vision of God. Perceiving God becomes a simple matter of perspective in the poem, a willingness to see the aspect of divinity in all things. One chooses to see God or make "Him broken gleams and a stifled splendor" (l. 10). Nature offers a sufficient "vision of Him who reigns" if approached with a heart of faith (l. 2). One cannot expect a fuller vision because, as the end of the poem states, "the ear of man cannot hear, and the eye of man cannot see" (l. 17). The speaker of "The Higher Pantheism" instructs readers to accept the vague transcendent figure of God revealed in nature. The poem points to the existence of God, but does little to define or identify Him.

This ambiguity regarding God persists in the two stanzas in "De Profundis" labeled "The Human Cry." Beginning "Hallowed be Thy name," these stanzas present a rendering of the Lord's Prayer (3.1.1). They serve as a creed for Tennyson's new faith. However, Tennyson does not make the message of his creed clear. The two greetings that occur prior to "The Human Cry" in "De Profundis" present two

perspectives for viewing reality, and one can interpret "The Human Cry" either way. On the one hand, it clearly alludes to the Lord's Prayer and asserts a spiritual meaning that identifies God in the following unorthodox terms:

Infinite Ideality!

Immeasurable Reality!

Infinite Personality! (3.1.2-4)

However, such terms are very different from the traditional "Spirit of God" mentioned in the second greeting (2.1.3). By addressing this prayer to boundless abstractions, Tennyson adopts language conceivably applicable to the material universe. From the perspective of strict science, the universe, evolution, and other scientific entities easily replace a mystical God and perform those functions normally attributed to divinity. The duality between the spiritual and the scientific continues in "The Human Cry." One can perceive ultimate reality through either lens. Tennyson's creed remains thoroughly ambiguous, alluding to secular science as heavily as it does to Christianity.

Tennyson continues to evade specific Christian assertions in "The Ancient Sage" written in 1885. This poem, one of the last of Tennyson's poems to confront the Victorian faith crisis directly, concludes his public intellectual struggle and illustrates his final commitment to a vague and "nameless" spiritual faith. He sets the poem "A thousand summers ere the time of Christ" (l. 1). While some readers may use this setting to excuse the poem's spiritual ambiguity, his move away from positive statements of Christian faith, as

already mentioned, began earlier in "De Profundis" and "The Higher Pantheism."

In "The Ancient Sage," the title character defends and explains this faith to a young materialistic poet. Though the young man complains that "The nameless Power, or Powers, that rule / Were never seen or heard," the ancient sage (changing the poet's lowercased adjective to a capitalized noun) positively proclaims the existence of "the Nameless" (ll. 29-31). The young man's scientific "knowledge [...] sees and stirs [only] the surface-shadow" of the material world (ll. 37-8). It "never yet hath dipt into the abysm / the abysm of all abysms" that exists "beneath [and] within" the physical world and though "ever vanishing, never vanishes" (ll. 39-41). The youth's knowledge cannot touch this spiritual reality. Like other philosophical ideas, one "canst not prove the Nameless" (l. 57). Science, as Tennyson describes in his earlier poetry, cannot explain all. Moreover, "nothing worthy [of] proving can be proven / Nor yet disproven" (ll. 66-7).

Any understanding ultimately involves "Faith" (l. 69). The same radical skepticism that denies the spiritual denies any certainty of the physical realm. The sage argues that if a person will accept the intuition of a material universe, then one should also "cling to [spiritual] Faith" (l. 69). As the sage asks, "who knows [. . .] whether this earth-narrow life / Be yet but yolk, and forming in the shell" (ll. 129-130)? Perhaps the physical world is an illusion that will become something beautiful. The sage alludes to Plato's allegory of the cave, explaining to the young man the

limitations of human perception. "All / The splendors and voices of the world" will astound the human mind, just as the brilliance of the sun blinds those who leave Plato's cave (ll. 176-7). The sage echoes Plato's advice regarding a time of adjustment to the light, for the development of a "last and larger sense to make / The phantom walls of [the] illusion fade" (ll. 180-1). For now, humanity can handle only fleeting gleams of the spiritual realm, but in the future, it will become clear.

However, Tennyson departs from Plato to explain the development of this "last and largest sense" (l. 180). Whereas, in *The Republic*, Plato approaches knowledge through an education in philosophy and reason, Tennyson points to "that world-prophet in the heart of man" (l. 213). Tennyson's vision comes from intuition. He finds the Nameless after "div[ing] / into the temple-cave of [his own] self" (ll. 31-2).

This focus on the individual's connection and experience with the spiritual world causes the Nameless to disappear from the latter half of the poem. The sage shifts emphasis from "the hand of what is more than man," the Nameless, to "man's hands when man is more than man" (ll. 36, 57). The Nameless, or God, becomes secondary to humanity and humanity's ability to do the following:

Look higher [...] beyond
A hundred ever-rising mountain lines,
And past the rage of Night and Shadow and see
The high-heaven dawn of more than mortal day
Strike on the Mount of Vision! (ll. 281-5)

Tennyson's attempt to point to the Nameless in the human heart fails as the heart reveals a boundless spiritual realm instead. As the poem moves to justify the Nameless, the breadth of the poem expands and the poem loses its original focus. The poem's turn toward the heart leads the sage away from his first aim to help the young man "hear the Nameless" to show him instead the "The Mount of Vision" (ll. 31, 285). Though valuable, this spiritual vision falls short of a mystical experience with the Nameless. The sage leads the young man toward spirituality, but not theism. In the same way, the turn toward subjectivity in Tennyson's larger quest for Christian certainty pushes him toward a faith too open and undefined to embrace anything distinctly Christian.

Tennyson's intuitive rejection of Victorian science's objective claims spills over into an overwhelming distrust of any ideas not immediately affirmed by that intuition. Thus, he feels no certainty in regards to specific Christian doctrines. Though he senses God, his poetry cautiously avoids saying more about God than his subjective experience can positively confirm. His intuition alone cannot fully reconstruct his Christian faith. His rejection of science through the valuation of subjective experience simultaneously devalues Christian creeds and prevents him from expressing more than a vague theism in his poetry. Without an acceptance of historical religious tradition, Tennyson's poetry can only attest to a mysticism that dimly shadows orthodox faith.

Though rarely studied, "Despair," contains the three major themes of Tennyson's poetry in a single poem and can serve as a microcosm of his work as a whole. The poem

presents a radical illustration in the ranting of its suicidal speaker that nevertheless parallels the philosophical phases found in Tennyson's poetry. Like Tennyson, the narrator, rescued from an attempted suicide, struggles with science and follows his intuition to the detriment of his faith in orthodox Christianity.

Though the narrator first attributes his despair to the shortcomings of religion, Tennyson hints in other parts of the poem that scientific theories also play a role. The man complains of "brainless Nature," "the blind wave," and "the dead fossil that [reveals] an earth that is dead" (6.2, 10.1, 15.6). In the background looms the dark and empty world of Victorian science, "the homeless planet [in the] silence of space" (15.3). Like Tennyson, the speaker in "Despair" struggles with the ideas of evolutionary science and a mechanistic universe.

However, on top of this undercurrent of scientific despair, the poem reveals the man's struggle with Christian creeds and doctrines. He calls Christianity a "fatalist creed" and rejects "Christ, [as his] human brother and friend, / For he spoke [. . .] of a hell without help, without end" (4.1, 4-5). This cruel doctrine overwhelms his perception of Christ's love and kindness. The man cannot reconcile "the God of love and of hell together" (19.3). As already seen, Tennyson too struggles throughout his poetry with religious creeds, turning away from them as he exalts subjective knowledge. However, unlike the man in "Despair," Tennyson's intuition does not directly conflict with the creeds; it simply transcends them.

Even so, the contradiction in "Despair" resolves itself in a similar assertion of the supremacy of the speaker's intuition. He refuses to adjust his personal experience to fit rigid and "cramping creeds" and willingly risks "blasphemy" to reject the idea of a cruel God (4.4, 20.1). Like Tennyson, the man commits to following his inner vision, holding it as a higher standard than what is offered by theological doctrines.

Nevertheless, this subjective inner vision draws the man toward a measure of spiritual faith. He confesses, "I have had some glimmer, at times, in my gloomiest woe, / Of a God behind all—after all—the great God, for aught that I know" (19.1-2). These fleeting gleams of something empirically unverifiable form the foundation of his faith as such glimpses do for Tennyson throughout his poems. Tennyson illustrates intuition to be a religious ideal in the poem's final stanza. There the man remarks that an "orthodox coroner doubtless will find [his blasphemy] a felo-de-se," meaning a suicide (21.3). Of course, his attempt at drowning literally is a suicide, but the man connects such a death to martyrdom as he goes on to reference "the stake and the cross" (21.4). He perceives his blasphemy as an honorable commitment to his inner despair; his intuition becomes an ideal worthy of sacrifice. Tennyson, in his own way, risks blasphemy and theological suicide as his commitment to his inner vision often draws his poems away from the content of Christian creeds. Though Tennyson's ends appear more reasonable, he follows the same argument as the man in "Despair" to reach them. Both Tennyson and the man in the poem place a primary

emphasis on subjective perception that ultimately leads away from orthodox ideas.

In the final analysis, Tennyson's poetry displays an overwhelming desire to make room within Victorian intellectual discourse for metaphysical truth. The death of A. H. Hallam and the increasing uncertainty of Christian tradition motivated Tennyson to find a way to reestablish the spiritual faith of his past with the degree of certainty presently expected of all truth by Victorians obsessed with scientific objectivity. Tennyson quickly realized the inability of physical science to explain spiritual reality and turned instead to his own subjective experiences and inner feelings to find signs of truth. He began to assert subjective knowledge as a truth superior to that of objective science since it reveals higher level concerns transcendent of the physical world. However, his poetry shows a reluctance to state anything more than an ambiguous mysticism. Though strewn with allusions to Christianity, Tennyson's poetry sounds sure of itself only when claiming metaphysical generalizations and vague spirituality. He expresses a strong sense of immortality and a divinity, but not of heaven or hell or of Christ. Subjective experiences did not provide Tennyson with enough certainty to make more definitive assertions. Moreover, the authority Tennyson gave intuition over science easily translated into an authority over traditional Christian creeds and dogmas already vulnerable to Victorian science. Thus, this inner vision began to shape an entirely new subjective encounter with the spiritual realm,

freed both from the limitations of scientific empiricism and traditional orthodoxy.

In the end, Tennyson's failure to achieve intellectual resolution does not necessarily mean that his personal struggle offers us only a negative example. On the contrary, his honest doubt of Christian creeds serves as an intriguing model of vigorous intellectual faith that lives, not on an omniscient understanding of ultimate reality, but in an active effort to comprehend one's faith and world. Furthermore, Tennyson's encounter with Victorian science remains thoroughly relevant to contemporary Christians experiencing similar challenges to faith situated within a persisting modernist episteme. Though imperfect, an ambiguous faith nevertheless opens discussion and takes a step forward. Tennyson does not succeed, but he begins pointing in the right direction.

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