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“No language but a cry”: Grief, Faith, and Doubt in Tennyson’s “In Memoriam”

Throughout Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s “In Memoriam,” interactions of grief and faith form the impetus for profound doubt. The speaker of the elegy is driven by a desperate search for significance and certainty to alleviate the grief and doubt caused by the death of his dearest friend. However, while the speaker eventually seems to experience satisfying resolution to his grief and doubt, the reader is denied the speaker’s consolation, and is resigned to ponder the ambiguities of the text. Through his wrestling with his friend’s fate after his death, troubling scientific theories, and the character of God, the speaker gains comfort that only he is able to experience.

First, while “In Memoriam” concludes with the speaker having found consolation regarding the death of his friend, the reader is left questioning the implications of this consolation, and thus wonders whether it is truly consolation at all. “In Memoriam” begins with the speaker utterly despondent with grief in the wake of his friend’s death, and it is this specific grief which precipitates much of the lamentation over the course of the elegy. One of the first concrete images given in the elegy is that of the speaker standing outside his friend’s “Dark house...where my heart used to beat/ So quickly, waiting for a hand, / A hand which can be clasped no more” (7.1-5). This is the first mention of grasping or clinging onto an ever-fading reality, a motif which recurs throughout the elegy. Here, the speaker mourns the literal separation between him and his friend, and that he will no longer be able to physically ‘clasp’ his friend

since “He is not here” (7.9). The speaker is tormented by this breach, and indicates that he himself is also physically impacted. He describes himself as being “like a guilty thing” (7.7), indicating that just as his friend has become distant and abstract through death, so too has he been transformed by his own grief into a metaphorical spectre of himself.

However, for the speaker, neither he nor his friend remains in this abstract state. As he reads memoirs of his time spent with his friend, he experiences a startling occurrence: “So word by word, and line by line,/ The dead man touch’d me from the past,/ And all at once it seem’d at last/ The living soul was flash’d on mine” (95.33-36). In this climactic moment, what the speaker desperately desired to experience outside his friend’s house comes to pass. He is able to make contact with his friend, albeit contact through words, not physical touch. The full significance of this incident can be understood only if Tennyson’s attitudes towards personal immortality are considered. Tennyson held that without life beyond death, human existence was meaningless, and he therefore had to believe in the possibility of the communion with the dead (Baum 627). The immortality of the human soul was of paramount importance to him. Similarly, the speaker’s contact with his dead friend confirms, at least for the speaker, that physical life and death do not constitute the final end for a person (Sinfield 24), and thus allows for the optimistic thought that the speaker and his friend may be reunited after death (24). It is this optimism which begins to alleviate the pain of the speaker’s grief, and inject solidity into his life again.

In addition, the speaker’s friend is not content to describe his friend only in the terms of their previous encounter. As “In Memoriam” draws to its conclusion, the speaker addresses his friend in venerating apostrophe: “Dear friend, far off, my lost desire, / So far, so near in woe and weal... Known and unknown, human, divine; Sweet human hand and lips and eye; / Dear heavenly friend that canst not die, / Mine, mine, for ever, ever mine” (129.1-8). In this soliloquy,

the speaker essentially apotheosizes his friend, making him both transcendent and immanent (Hinchcliffe 243). While this paradox seems to satisfy the speaker, the reader is left with numerous difficulties. The tensions in the speaker's description of his friend's attributes is problematically ambiguous, and his friend's new ontology seems to remove him even further from the speaker rather than bringing him closer. This matter is further complicated through a comment by the speaker in a subsequent lyric that his friend is "mixed with God and Nature" (130.11). This conflation of the identities of God and the speaker's friend raises questions regarding who the speaker is in fact loving: is it his friend? God? Nature? These hints of pantheism, coupled with the fact that there is no indication of any bodily resurrection after death, imply that the speaker will never reunite with his friend in a discernable, distinct form; rather, his act of apotheosis has only confused his friend's identity with that of God and Nature, and thus the reader is left in the same state of abstraction as the speaker was in front of his friend's door early in the elegy.

Second, the speaker's attitude towards scientific disciplines and questions mirrors his portrayal of his friend's divine elevation, creating a similar lack of resolution for the reader. While the majority of "In Memoriam" addresses the speaker's grief regarding his friend's death directly, it also contains the speaker's doubts regarding the origins and functioning of the cosmos. He laments the circumstances of humankind, "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" (56.13-16), a despair whose questions show heavy influence of Darwinist evolutionary theory. The Victorians were deeply troubled by the implications of theories asserting the survival of the fittest, including the idea that species came into existence through violent conflict and not through benevolent acts of an omnipotent Creator, and the speaker is no exception. He feels that

all he can do in response to the assertions of naturalist theories is to “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” (55.17-20). Here again the speaker displays his desire for any sense of intellectual surety, any concrete and tangible belief to cling to, and again is left to claw frantically at the intellectual assertion of a sovereign supernatural power that is becoming increasingly uncertain.

In response to this climate of intellectual vulnerability, the speaker begins to profess a different view regarding the functioning of the cosmos, and in doing so regains much of his faith in God. In one of the last lyrics of the elegy, the speaker declares, “I found [God] 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” (124.5.8). For the speaker, any teleological argument meant to prove the existence of a good God cannot bring any comfort, since Nature, with its “Dragons of the prime, / That tare each other in their slime” (56.22-23), gives no indication of a loving designer. Thus, he cannot adhere to a mechanistic theory of creation, since a mechanical God cannot guarantee that the speaker will be reunited with his friend after death (Sinfield 25). To hold onto such theories would be to continue to grope with the lame hands of faith. Moreover, the speaker goes so far as to issue a challenge to the discipline of science itself: “Let Science prove we are, and then / What matters Science unto men, / At least to me? I would not stay” (120.5-7). Integral to this defiance is the speaker’s increasing distrust of reason, a key characteristic of the Romantic movement that arose in response to the Enlightenment. For the Romantics, including Tennyson, Enlightenment rationalism provided an unsatisfactory framework for understanding the universe, since it excluded other valid epistemological frameworks, including personal experience (Sinfield 20). Indeed, for the speaker, “A warmth within the breast would melt / The freezing

reason's colder part, / And like a man in wrath the heart / Stood up and answer'd, 'I have felt'" (124.13-16). Reason, with its arguments for a universe in meaningless flux, is the cause of much of the speaker's grief, and therefore must be combatted with personal experience and emotion in order to alleviate the feeling of instability.

However, the speaker's continued belief in an evolution of sorts within humanity creates obscurities almost as troubling as his previous doubt. From the first lyric of "In Memoriam," the speaker alludes to his belief "That men may rise on stepping-stones / Of their dead selves to higher things" (1.3-4), a belief that is deeply shaken by his friend's death. The speaker struggles to comprehend how humans can evolve to greater versions of themselves if Nature ends their lives in their youth (August 219). The solution to this dilemma arises after he experiences his friend's presence in the middle of the elegy. With the apotheosis of his friend, the speaker feels he has proof that human existence does in fact have meaning, and that humans are in fact evolving in that they are constantly striving upwards towards God (Sinfield 24).

The nature of this evolution, however, is not inherently mechanical like that of naturalistic, materialistic evolutionary theory; rather, the speaker's evolution is defined by spiritual progress, a process labeled by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin as "hominisation" (August 221). For the speaker, his divine friend is now "The herald of a higher race, / And of himself in higher place" (118.14-15), and this race is comprised of humans who have morally evolved to become nearer to God. Moreover, this process is not externally thrust upon human beings: "Arise and fly / The reeling Faun, the sensual feast; / Move upward, working out the beast, / And let the ape and tiger die" (118.25-28). It is up to human beings to morally purify and perfect themselves through this process (August 221). In asserting such a claim, the speaker relocates the centre of morality for humanity from a deity to within humans themselves, a shift which is necessary for

him to regain a sense of purpose for humanity within the world. Yet for the reader, this conclusion about morality does not solve all of problems the speaker identified, particularly that of Nature. If creation is inherently savage and in conflict with itself, as the poet seems to concede, there is no certainty that humans may evolve morally. It seems just as likely that humans will continue to slight each other, and thus remain in a state of strife, getting no closer to God.

Finally, ambiguities regarding the character of God left unexplained by the elegy's end prevent the reader from experiencing the same religious consolation as the speaker. At the same time that he laments the viciousness of Nature as described by Darwinian naturalists, the speaker declares:

O, yet we trust that somehow good
 Will be the final goal of ill,
 To pangs of nature, sins of will,
 Defects of doubt, and taints of blood;
 That nothing walks with aimless feet;
 That not one life shall be destroy'd,
 Or cast as rubbish to the void...
 Behold we know not anything;
 I can but trust that good shall fall
 At last – far off – at last, to all,
 And every winter change to spring. (54.1-16)

This short passage which wrenchingly questions the providence, sovereignty, and foreknowledge of God acts as the hermeneutical key for the elegy as a whole. The fundamental concern of the

speaker is that everything, and especially the survival of the human soul, will reach a good and wholesome conclusion through the power of God. Unfortunately, these concerns remain unanswered at the elegy's end. Indeed, its prologue, the most overtly Christian section of "In Memoriam," is riddled with ambiguous proclamations about God. The speaker prays to the "Strong Son of God, immortal Love," proclaiming that "Thou madest Life in man and brute; / Thou madest Death; and lo, thy foot / Is on the skull which thou hast made... Thou wilt not leave us in the dust: / Thou madest man, he knows not why, / He thinks he was not made to die..." (Prologue.1-11). These hesitant comments are simultaneously the most powerful declarations of faith and the most insidious tremors of doubt in the entire elegy, leaving the reader unsure as to which are the stronger feelings. God is portrayed as benevolent life giver, yet he also seems to be poised to smite humanity into oblivion. The speaker is even unsure as to why he exists in the first place. The language of the entire prologue is religiously inconsistent with the tenor of the elegy as a whole, and does not adequately provide an appropriate conclusion for the speaker's spiritual quest. Thus, the reader wonders if the speaker has in fact found any surety, or if he is simply floundering in the ethereality of doubt.

In addition, the specific identity of the person of Christ is far from clear. As a result of his apotheosis, the speaker's friend achieves Christ-like status in the speaker's mind; by extension, the speaker becomes like an apostle for his friend to demonstrate his friend's faith and virtue to the world (Sinfield 109). Consequently, the reader is left to ask whether Christ remains the speaker's saviour, or if the speaker's friend has in fact usurped Christ in that position. Indeed, since the speaker professes belief in the ability of humans to evolve morally, does he truly need a saviour? Moreover, some critics cite what they see as attempts by Tennyson to assert the idea of "Christogenesis." Similar to hominisation, Christogenesis involves the universe giving birth to a

Christ-that-is-to-be (August 224), and this event is the “one far-off divine event, / To which the whole creation moves” (Epilogue.143-144). Given the speaker’s earlier conflation of the ontology of his friend and God, the reader is able only to debate what this far-off event actually entails, including whether the speaker’s friend will be born again, given his union in God. Likewise, the speaker’s invocation to the “Strong Son of God, immortal Love” bears only a vague connection to the second person of the Trinity (Eliot 212), and thus the reader begins to doubt whether the speaker professes faith in the paradoxically immanent and transcendent triune God of Christianity, or whether he in fact worships and places his hope in a pantheistic, distant, unintelligible deity.

“In Memoriam” chronicles the speaker’s journey from doubt and despair to a state of consolation regarding the death of his friend, yet the reader does not follow a parallel journey. The speaker’s search for substance and solidity in his memory of his dead friend, his intellectual interactions with naturalistic scientific theory, and his relationship with God all compel him to find a type of consolation in each area; nevertheless, the ambiguities and contradictions of the text deny the reader any participation in that consolation. By conflating the identities of his friend and God, and by appropriating evolutionary theory into Christian doctrine to alleviate his doubts, the speaker creates the very thing he sought to remove: a vacuum into which meaning and solidity vanish. Although the speaker fears that he cannot adequately express his grief through language since it is so piercing (Grandsen 47), what ability he feels he lacks, he in fact possesses. He believes his grief to be hopelessly ethereal, ungraspable, and undefinable, when it is in fact the most concrete, dense, and solid entity in the entire elegy. It is therefore in the speaker’s articulation of his grief, despair, and doubt, and not his consolation, that the true potency of “In Memoriam” lies.

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