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The Bible in Tennyson.

By the Rev. Henry J. Van Dyke, D.D.

III.

In trying to estimate the general influence of the Bible upon the thought and feeling of Tennyson we have a more delicate and difficult task. For the teachings of Christianity have become a part of the moral atmosphere of the age; and it is hard for us to tell just what any man would have been without them, or just how far they have made him what he is, while we are looking at him through the very same medium in which we ourselves are breathing. If we could get out of ourselves, if we could divest ourselves of all those views of God and duty and human life which we have learned so early that they seem to us natural and inevitable, we might perhaps be able to arrive at a more exact discrimination. But this would be to sacrifice a position of vital sympathy for one of critical judgment. The loss would be greater than the gain. It is just as well for the critic to recognise that he is hardly able to—

> "Sit as God holding no form of creed,
> But contemplating all".

Tennyson himself has described the mental paralysis, the spiritual distress, which follow that attempt. A critic ought to be free from prejudices, but surely not even for the sake of liberty should he make himself naked of convictions. To float on wings above the earth will give one a bird's-eye view; but for a man's-eye view we must have a standing-place on the earth. And after all the latter may be quite as true, even though it is not absolutely colourless.

The effect of Christianity upon the poetry of Tennyson may be felt, first of all, in its general moral quality. By this it is not meant that he is always or often preaching, or drawing pictures—

> "To point a moral, or adorn a tale".

Didactic art sometimes misses its own end by being too instructive. We find in Tennyson's poems many narratives of action and descriptions of character which are simply left to speak for themselves and teach their own lessons. In this they are like the histories of the Book of Judges or the Books of the Kings. The writer takes it for granted that the reader has a heart and a conscience. Compare in this respect the perfect simplicity of the domestic idyl of "Dora" with the Book of Ruth.

But at the same time the poet can hardly help revealing, more by tone and accent than by definite words, his moral sympathies. Tennyson always speaks from the side of virtue, and not of that new and strange virtue which some of our later poets have exalted, and which, when it is stripped of its fine garments, turns out to be nothing else than the unrestrained indulgence of every natural impulse, but rather of that old-fashioned virtue whose laws are—

> "Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control,"

and which finds its highest embodiment in the morality of the New Testament. Read, for example, his poems which deal directly with the subject of marriage: "The Miller's Daughter," "Isabel," "Lady Clare," "The Lord of Burleigh," "Locksley Hall," "Love and Duty," "The Wreck," "Aylmer's Field," "Enoch Arden," the latter part of "The Princess," and many different passages of the "Idylls". From whatever side he approaches the subject, whether he is painting with delicate, felicitous touches the happiness of truly wedded hearts, or denouncing the sins of avarice and pride which corrupt the modern marriage mart of society, or tracing the secret evil which poisoned the court of Arthur and shamed the golden head of Guinevere, his ideal is always the perfect union of two lives in one, "which is commended of St. Paul to be honourable among all men". To him woman seems loveliest when she has—

> "The laws of marriage charactered in gold
> Upon the blanched tablets of her heart";

and man noblest when he devotes his strength to some high and generous end, following it with absolute loyalty, and recognising that—

> "Man's word is God in man".

The theology of Tennyson has been accused in some quarters of a pantheistic tendency; and it cannot be denied that there are expressions in his poems which seem to look in that direction, or at least to look decidedly away from the conception of the universe as a vast machine, and its Maker as a supernatural machinist who has constructed the big watch and left it to run on by itself until it wears out. But surely this latter view, which fairly puts God out of the world, is not the view of the Bible. The New Testament teaches us, undoubtedly, to distinguish between Him and His works, but it also teaches that He is in His works, or rather that all His works are in Him. "In Him," says St. Paul, "we live, and move, and have our being." Light is His garment. Life is His breath.

> "God is law, say the wise; O Soul, and let us rejoice,
> For if He thunder by law, the thunder is yet His voice."

But if I wished to prove, against those who doubted, Tennyson's belief in a living, spiritual God, immanent in the universe, yet not confused with it, I should turn to his doctrine of prayer. There are many places in his poems where prayer is not explained, but simply justified as the highest

activity of the human soul, and a real bond between God and man. In these very lines on "The Higher Pantheism," from which I have just quoted, there is a verse which can be interpreted only as the description of a personal intercourse between the divine and the human:

"Speak to Him thou, for He hears, and Spirit with Spirit can meet.
Closer is He than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet."

Of Enoch Arden, in the dreadful loneliness of that rich island where he was cast away, it is said that—

"Had not his poor heart
Spoken with That, which, being everywhere,
Lets none who speaks with Him seem all alone,
Surely the man had died of solitude".

When he comes back, after the weary years of absence, to find his wife wedded to another and his home no longer his, it is by prayer that he obtains strength to keep his generous resolve to be silent, and to bear the burden of his secret to the lonely end.

Edith, in the drama of "Harold," when her last hope breaks, and the shadow of gloom begins to darken over her, cries:

"No help but prayer,
A breath that fleets beyond this iron world,
And touches Him that made it".

King Arthur, bidding farewell to the last of his faithful knights, says to him:

"Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice
Rise like a fountain for me night and day.
For what are men better than sheep or goats
That nourish a blind life within the brain,
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer,
Both for themselves and those who call them friend?
For so the whole round earth is every way
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God."

But, lest anyone should say that these passages are merely dramatic, and that they do not express the personal faith of the poet, turn to the solemn invocation in which he has struck the keynote of his greatest and most personal poem:

"Strong Son of God, immortal Love".

It is the poet's own prayer. No man could have written it save one who believed that God is Love, and that Love is incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ.

Next to the question of the reality of God comes the problem of human life and destiny. And this has a twofold aspect. First, in regard to the present world, is man moving upward or downward; is good stronger than evil, or evil stronger than good; is life worth living, or is it a cheat and a failure? Secondly, in regard to the future, is there any hope of personal continuance beyond death? To both these inquiries Tennyson gives an answer which is in harmony with the teachings of the Bible.

He finds the same difficulties in the continual conflict between good and evil which are expressed in Job and Ecclesiastes. Indeed, so high an authority as Professor E. H. Plumptre has said that "the most suggestive of all commentaries" on the latter book are Tennyson's poems "The Vision of Sin," "The Palace of Art," and "The Two Voices". In the last of these he draws out, in the form of a dialogue, the strife between hope and despair in the breast of a man who has grown weary of life, and yet is not ready to embrace death. For, after all, the sum of the reasons which the first voice urges in favour of suicide is that nothing is worth very much; no man is of any real value in the world; *il n'y a pas d'homme necessaire;* no effort produces any lasting result, all things are moving round and round in a tedious circle; vanity of vanities—if you are tired why not depart from the play? The tempted man—tempted to yield to the devil's own philosophy of pessimism—uses all arguments to combat the enemy, but in vain, or, at least, with only half success, until at last the night is worn away; he flings open his window and looks out upon the Sabbath morn.

"The sweet church bells begin to peal.

"On to God's house the people prest:
Passing the place where each must rest,
Each entered like a welcome guest.

"One walked between his wife and child,
With measured footfall, firm and mild,
And now and then he gravely smiled.

"The prudent partner of his blood
Leaned on him, faithful, gentle, good,
Wearing the rose of womanhood.

"And in their double love secure,
The little maiden walked demure,
Pacing with downward eyelids pure.

"These three made unity so sweet,
My frozen heart began to beat,
Remembering its ancient heat.

"I blest them, and they wandered on:
I spoke, but answer came there none:
The dull and bitter voice was gone."

And then comes another voice, whispering of a secret hope, and bidding the soul "Rejoice! rejoice!" If we hear in the first part of the poem the echo of the saddest book of the Old Testament, do we not hear also, in the last part, the tones of Him who said, "Let not your heart be troubled: . . . in my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you"?

There are many places in the poems of Tennyson where he speaks with bitterness of the falsehood and evil that are in the world, the corruptions of society, the downward tendencies in human nature. He is in no sense a rose-water optimist. But he is in the truest sense a meliorist. He doubts not that—

"Through the ages one increasing purpose runs,
And the thoughts of men are widened with the process of the suns".

He believes that good—

"Will be the final goal of ill".

He rests his faith upon the uplifting power of Christianity—

"But I count the grey barbarian lower than the Christian child".

He hears the bells at midnight tolling the death of the old year, and he calls them to—

"Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land,
Ring in the Christ that is to be".

In regard to the life beyond the grave, he asserts with new force and beauty the old faith in a personal immortality. The dim conception of an unconscious survival through the influence of our thoughts and deeds, which George Eliot has expressed in her poem of "The Choir Invisible," Tennyson finds—

"Is faith as vague as all unsweet:
Eternal form shall still divide
The eternal soul from all beside;
And I shall know Him when we meet".

The Christian doctrine of a personal recognition of friends in the other world has never been more distinctly uttered than in these words. It is not, indeed, supported by any metaphysical arguments, nor are we concerned thus to justify it. Our only purpose now is to show—and after these verses who can doubt it?—that the poet has kept the faith which he learned in his father's house and at his mother's side.

On many other points I fain would touch, but must forbear. There is one more, however, on which the orthodoxy of the poet has been questioned, and by some critics positively denied. It is said that he has accepted the teachings of Universalism. A phrase from "In Memoriam"—

"The larger hope"—

has been made a watchword by those who defend the doctrine of a second probation, and a sign to be spoken against by those who reject it. Into this controversy I have no desire to enter. Nor is it necessary; for, whatever the poet's expectation may be, there is not a line in all his works that contradicts or questions the teachings of Christ, nor even a line that runs beyond the limit of human thought into the mysteries of the unknown and the unknowable. The wages of sin is death; the wages of virtue is to go on and not to die. This is the truth which he teaches on higher authority than his own. "The rest," as Hamlet says, "is silence." But what is the universal end of all these conflicts, these struggles, these probations? What the final result of this strife between sin and virtue? What the consummation of oppugnancies and interworkings? The poet looks onward through the mists and sees only God—

"That God, which ever lives and loves,
One God, one law, one element,
And one far-off divine event,
To which the whole creation moves".

And if anyone shall ask what this far-off divine event will be, we may answer in the words of St. Paul:

"For He must reign, till He hath put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that shall be abolished is death. For, He put all things in subjection under His feet. But when He saith, All things are put in subjection, it is evident that He is excepted who did subject all things unto Him. And when all things have been subjected unto Him, then shall the Son also Himself be subjected to Him that did subject all things unto Him, *that God may be all in all.*"

And now, as we bring to a close this brief study of a subject which I trust has proved larger than it promised at first to those who had never looked into it, what are our conclusions? Or, if this word seem too exact and formal, what are our impressions in regard to the relations between Tennyson and the Bible?

It seems to me that we cannot help seeing that the poet owes a large debt to the Christian Scriptures, not only for their formative influence upon his mind, and for the purely literary material in the way of illustrations and allusions which they have given him, but also, and more particularly, for the creation of a moral atmosphere, a medium of thought and feeling, in which he can speak freely and with assurance of sympathy to a very wide circle of readers. He does not need to be always explaining and defining. There is much that is taken for granted, much that goes without saying. What a world of unspoken convictions lies behind such poems as "Dora" and "Enoch Arden". Their beauty is not in themselves alone, but in the air that breathes around them, in the light that falls upon them from the faith of centuries. Christianity is something more than a system of doctrines; it is a life, a tone, a spirit, a great current of memories, beliefs, and hopes flowing through millions of hearts. And he who launches his words upon this current finds that they are carried with a strength beyond his own, and freighted oftentimes with a meaning which he himself has not fully understood as it flashed through him.

But, on the other hand, we cannot help seeing that the Bible gains a wider influence and a new power over men as it flows through the poet's mind upon the world. Its narratives and its teachings clothe themselves in modern forms of speech, and find entrance into many places which otherwise were closed against them. I do not mean by this that poetry is better than the Bible, but only that poetry lends wings to Christian truth. People who would not read a sermon will read a poem. And,

though its moral and religious teachings may be indirect, though they may proceed by silent assumption rather than by formal assertion, they exercise an influence which is perhaps the more powerful because it is unconscious. The Bible is in continual danger of being desiccated by an exhaustive —and exhausting—scientific treatment. When it comes to be regarded chiefly as a compendium of exact statements of metaphysical doctrine, the day of its life will be over, and it will be ready for a place in the museum of antiquities. It must be a power in literature if it is to be a force in society. For literature, as a wise critic has defined it, is just "the best that has been thought and said in the world". And if this is true, literature is certain, not only to direct culture, but also to mould conduct.

Is it possible then for wise and earnest men to look with indifference upon the course of what is often called, with a slighting accent, mere *belles lettres?* We might as well be careless about the air we breathe or the water we drink. Malaria is no less fatal than pestilence. The chief peril which threatens the permanence of Christian faith and morals is none other than the malaria of modern letters—an atmosphere of dull, heavy, faithless, materialism. Into this narcotic air the poetry of Tennyson blows like a pure wind from a loftier and serener height.

The Care of the Young.

Monthly Examination Papers.

An Examination Paper will be set monthly on the Reign of Solomon, and on the Life of Paul. Books recommended are: *The Life and Reign of Solomon*, by the Rev. R. Winterbotham, and *The Life of Paul*, by the Rev. J. Paton Gloag, price 6d. each.; published by T. & T. Clark. Answers must be accompanied by the name, age, and address of the Candidate. Prizes will be given to successful Candidates *every month.*

EXAMINATION PAPER, II.

(Answers must be received by the 15th November.)

Reign of Solomon.

1. What part did the following persons take in connection with the succession to the throne: Nathan, Abiathar, Zadok, Joab, Benaiah?
2. Describe the anointing of Solomon.
3. What is the history of Shimei?

Life of Paul.

1. Sketch the recorded history of Stephen.
2. Mention any references which Paul makes, in speeches or letters, to his persecuting zeal.
3. How often is the story of his conversion told? What is the meaning of the words Jesus spoke to him then?

Sunday School.

The International Lessons.

Monthly Examinations.

Questions will be set monthly on the International Lessons. It is intended that they should serve as an Examination of each month's work after it is finished. Accordingly, the questions will be set upon the lessons of the previous month. The name, age, and address of the boy or girl must accompany the answers each time they are sent. Prizes will be given to successful Candidates every month.

EXAMINER'S REPORT FOR OCTOBER.

1. Alexander Gillies, Main Street, Bothwell.
2. William C. Edwards, 21 Grosvenor Place, Aberdeen.

Prizes have been sent by the publisher to these candidates.

EXAMINATION ON THE LESSONS FOR OCTOBER.

I.

For children under twelve.

1. Who said, "Except thou take away the blind and the lame, thou shalt not come in hither"? What was meant by these words?
2. What is told us in the Lessons about Hiram and about Obed-edom?
3. Write out from memory a verse of the 32nd Psalm.

II.

For boys and girls from twelve to sixteen.

1. Describe the capture of Jerusalem by David.
2. What was the origin of the name Perez-uzzah?
3. What are the thoughts that run through David's thanksgiving prayer in 2 Sam. vii.?
4. Explain either the 3rd or the 9th verse of Psalm xxxii.

The International Lessons for November.

Short Notes and Illustrations.

I.

Nov. 3.—2 Sam. xv. 1-12.

The subject is the commencement of Absalom's rebellion. It is easily broken up into two parts—(1) Verses 1-6, which show how Absalom ingratiated himself with the people; (2) Verses 7-12, which describe his conspiracy.