

TENNYSON, HARDY AND THE EXERTING SENSE OF CHRISTMAS

Denis FongeTembong, PhD
Department of English
University of Yaoundé, Cameroon

ABSTRACT : *The article, “Tennyson, Hardy and the Exerting Sense of Christmas”, seeks to establish that despite the marked differences in the theological beliefs of Alfred Lord Tennyson and Thomas Hardy, two renowned nineteenth century English poets, they share commonalities of the Victorian spirit, especially, their similar Christmas nostalgic impulses. The discourse delves into critical analysis of “The Oxen” and “In Memoriam A.H.H”, wherein Hardy’s and Tennyson’s overwhelming childhood influences of Christmas legend actively play into their adult mines. The feelings appear to be so strong and alive that the agnostic and pessimistic character, which Hardy later developed, could not erode past memories of his youthful Christmas excitements. Similarly, Christmas became a therapy for Tennyson’s broken spirit issuing from the dead of his beloved friend A.H Hallam. The essay highlights with textual evidence, the positive influences of Christmas artistically recollected from past memories, as valuable piles to dull moments of their adult life.*

Introduction

Tennyson and Hardy are two Victorian poets with radically opposing ideologies on matters of faith and beliefs. At the same time, there are issues they share in common. A brief discussion of the repelling differences between these iconic poets would be helpful at the takeoff point of this discourse. Hardy perennially questions accepted values, be it the meaning of life or the conventional attitudes of the Middle Classes, which predominated in Victorian England. In “Hap”, the persona blames his failed relationship on “a Powerfuller than I” (L.7) when in fact whether a relationship blossoms or “unblossoms” is entirely due to ‘happenstance’ or pure Chance. Hardy appears to have nothing such as destiny in his cosmology, rather, he believes that the universe has no cosmic purpose or order.

Hardy belonged to The Midnight Society, which regard Christianity as irrational and needing to be removed from society. In Andrew Corbett’s words,

They were strategically committed to removing all traces of Biblical Christianity from society. They reasoned that this could be done by undermining two Institutions: firstly, the Church, and secondly, marriage. Destroy these two institutions and Christianity would be eradicated from society, they reasoned. (2)

Tennyson on the other hand is one of the English poets who were not shaken in their beliefs by the new scientific theories that swept their generation and modified worldviews and thinking patterns. Unlike Hardy, he was steadfast regarding the infallible authority of the Church and ultra

conceptions and beliefs concerning the saving efficacy of the sacraments. Tennyson states his belief in “In Memoriam”, when he says:

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. (*CXXXI 153-156*)

Similarly, in the prologue to the same poem he says:

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. (*MDCCCXXXIII 1-4*)

He “desires a supernatural faith to ‘embrace,’ a verb pre-eminently physical and even erotic” (Michael Tomko 8). For Tennyson, God remains the main mover of the universe who has to be accessed through faith. He was convinced that science was important for human development on the planet earth, but it was inadequate to replace God in His role as creator of the universe and maker of Man.

These differences notwithstanding, the poets share in common Victorian features such as, taking literature closer to daily life, giving it a moral purpose, thus, deviating from “art for art’s sake”, idealism, doubt and pessimism. Above all, Hardy and Tennyson exhibit exerting influence of Christmas, a phenomenon which constitutes the centrality or main focus of this essay. In the light of Victorian literature as a reflection of its daily life, Chen Zhen argues that “As the dramatized reality, literature artistically represents many aspects of history and society, which serve as the sources for literature creation” (24). Hardy and Tennyson faithfully observe this in their writing. Owen Schur’s opinion that “We usually perceive Tennyson and Hardy as poets shaped by tradition, conservers of the past” (1) is pertinent. It is important to remember that their similar notion and impact on folk of the old Christmas legend is not excluded as part of this tradition. Schur adds that “For all their differences, Tennyson and Hardy are similar in their sense of partial exclusion from the traditions they draw upon. One of these areas of literary tradition is pastoral” (ibid). The list may just be extended to include the views of both poets of the past Christmas traditions, which are not radically disconnected from the pastoral, if we must remember how the young Jesus Christ was born in the sheep house with herdsmen all around.

Hardy is something of a transitional figure in modern British poetry, with one foot in the Nineteenth century and the other in the Twentieth century. In this vein, Francis Bennion remarks that, “The stature of Hardy among the literary giants of the nineteenth century is very great; in many ways the greatest of all. As a portrayal of human emotions and the moods and mysteries of nature, his position is pre-eminent” (1). This observation is stretched further in Azmir Pasaribu’s remark that “The poetry of Thomas Hardy is typically Victorian in its attitude to life and its

structure” (88). Similarly, genuine commentary would hardly be done on Victorian poetry without allusion being made to Tennyson who is described as the greatest representative of the period. “Certainly, in the annals of literary history Tennyson ranks – both in stature and precedence – as the first Victorian poet...At the start of the 1830s, Tennyson’s writings formed part of a heated debate about the state of poetry in general” (Joseph Bristow 3). Furthermore, it is important to note that similarities between the two poets lie in the fact that the form of Hardy’s poetry is not radically different from the poetic norms, which prevailed in the nineteenth century. His subject-matter, for instance, is not unfamiliar with Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, which is equally sceptical about the meaning of life. Both poets surely were affected by the wave of scientific theories of the time. Joy Griffith points out that “Darwin’s findings not only dramatically reshaped the scientific landscape ... but also the cultural narrative for nineteenth-century novelists” (3).

The exerting sense of Christmas

Historians and theologians hold that irrespective of its holy connotation today, Christmas has a pagan origin. Russell K. Tardo observes, “How intriguing it is ... to trace them to their origins. Many of our cherished traditions are buried deep in the pagan past...” (1). The origin of the cultural manifestation that surrounds one of the world’s most celebrated events is not only that it is rooted in pagan practices, but that it is shockingly very uncertain. James A. Fowler posits that,

“There are a multitude of varying cultural customs that are associated with the Christmas holiday in the diverse regions and countries of the world. Developed through the centuries of almost two millennia, the origins of many of these customs often cannot be historically ascertained” (1).

Research in this subject surprisingly reveals that most of the traditions practised on December 25 have nothing to do with the birth of Jesus, which probably actually occurred in late summer or early fall. Most of the customs and traditions of Christmas actually pre-date the birth of Jesus. The date of December 25, history holds, originated with the ancient birthday of the sun-god, Mithra, a pagan deity whose religious influence became widespread in the Roman Empire during the first few centuries A.D. Although the Christian celebration of the birth of Christ was superimposed upon ancient Pagan traditions, it does not, or should not, diminish the arrival of the “Prince of Peace”, and his original message of tolerance, compassion, giving and peace. In “Christmas Considered Theologically” Fowler argues that,

The historical event of an infant’s birth in Bethlehem in approximately 6 B.C. was but the external and physical expression of a singular and never to be repeated divine action. The theological implications of what transpired on that night must be explored in order to understand the divine reality of the event. (Par.1)

Hardy's opinion about religion, Christianity and the Bible is that of intense curiosity. As a late Victorian with his share of contamination with 'death of God' philosophy, He was left in a spiritual vacuum. The philosophy, Tim Armstrong points out, "left a palpable absence – a God shaped hole – which could not simply be a matter of indifference" (12) in Hardy's life, especially, in Poems like "The Respectable Burgher on the Higher Criticism", "God's Funeral", and the late "Drinking Song" "Chronicle the depredations of rationalist criticism and Darwinian science on accepted belief, and reprise Hardy's own loss of faith around 1865" (Armstrong 12). However, Hardy attended church services, showed interest in church music, read bible intensively and of course made extensive use of biblical allusions in his work.

Hardy wrote "The Oxen" in 1915 when he was seventy-five years old and it was first published in *The Times* on 24th December (Christmas Eve) of that year. Tennyson wrote "In Memoriam" in a span of ten years as separate lyrics and published as *In Memoriam* in 1850, sixty-five years before "The Oxen" was published. A superficial reading of "The Oxen" may leave the reader with the question as to whether Hardy had actually drifted away from his agnostic and anti-Christian stance. Agnosticism is "The view that it is not possible to have any certain knowledge beyond ordinary experience, so that one cannot know whether or not God exists" (Donald K. McKim 6). In Bryant McGill's words, "the poem seems to reaffirm faith in the noble and spiritual...a speaker's journey back into the ideals and joys of Christmas that he encountered as a child" (1). Hardy is certainly being nostalgic of his childhood Christmas experiences. The Oxen indeed describes a folk myth of cattle kneeling on Christmas Eve. David Tolley argues that "it declares the poet's wish to be persuaded to visit a barton in the expectation that 'it might be so'. This suggests Hardy's regret of his loss of faith" (2). More so, Hardy's current desire for a similar experience if it were possible. Hardy himself acknowledges the fact that one's past life is always an inspiration of the present. Knowing how we think previously is an important part of life experiences as expressed in the following lines of his poem, "I Rose Up As My Custom Is",

But a poet wants to know

What one has felt from earliest days,

Why one thought not in other ways . (L.32-34)

Critics hold the view that Hardy was certainly influenced by Tennyson's *In memoriam*, published in 1850 when Hardy was ten. Increasing religious doubts dominated most minds at the time. However, Tolley argues that "whereas Tennyson seemed able to find a way to remain a Christian in spite of his doubts, Hardy could not. And Hardy expresses that terrible conflict in his mind between Faith and Doubt, and often conflict produces the best drama and the best poetry" (2). Tennyson like Hardy read Darwin's theory. E. E. Snyder remarks that "Tennyson had earned

a reputation as a poet who understood science, a reputation which largely rested on *In Memoriam*" (27). Christopher Ricks posits:

Not seeing any reason within Christian theology with which he can attribute Hallam's death, he can but despairingly conclude that biological evolution weeds out individuals in a 'careless', cruelly random manner. This surmising thought process is usually attributed to his reading *Principles of Geology* by Charles Lyell in 1836/1837, which can be used to reiterate Tennyson's exploration for meaning during the seventeen years of writing. (397)

However, Tennyson was not swept from his conservative Christian worldview by the emerging scientific theories. This is perhaps the premise that George P. Landow takes in his remark that "*In Memoriam* resolves the crisis of faith precipitated by Hallam's death by presenting him doubly as a type, because he foreshadowed both the second appearance of Christ and the coming higher race of human beings" (Par.2). What is fundamentally true is that the human being is not static in his thoughts. Events around him can always lead to adjustments and modification of his beliefs. By belief in this case I mean "a form of knowledge which may or may not be based on facts...a form of commitment to a way of life and involves the acceptance of the Dogma of a religious community" (Irving Hexham 32). Hallam's passing into eternity created doubt and later strengthened Tennyson's faith in God as he says "That God, which ever lives and loves". For Hardy, it is a move from pessimism to some measure of faith in the birth of Christ. The following lines announce Hardy's recollection of past Christmas memories:

If someone said on Christmas Eve,
Come; see the oxen kneel,
In the lonely barton by yonder comb
Our childhood used to know
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so (L.11-16).

These lines may suggest the speaker turning to faith in the God that he had previously denied to acknowledge, but at the same time reveal a subconscious recollection of childhood event that has left an indelible mark in the poet's soul. The speaker is recalling a situation in the past, which is not necessarily what he held at the time he wrote the poem.

Hardy actually wrestles with past remarkable childhood experiences and certainly seeking to reconcile the conflicting beliefs that compete in his mind. While Tennyson's past and present Christmas experiences continue to act as a therapy for his depressed spirit. *In Memoriam*, according to Stephen Griffin and Julian Thompson, "expresses the grief and subsequent emotions that the poet felt over the death of Arthur Henry Hallam" (1). It is also clear that it is a collection of one hundred and thirty one separate lyric poems, out of which seven lyric (28-30,

78, 104-106) are devoted to describing the Christmas legend. Tennyson like Hardy recalls the euphoria that is associated with the eve of Christmas in his description of the echoing bells. "The Christmas bells from hill to hill / Answer each other in the mist" (28.3-4). Christmas events had left remarkable prints in Tennyson's memory and caused him to recover from the depression issuing from the death of his love one.

But they my troubled spirit rule,
For they controll'd me when a boy;
They bring me sorrow touch'd with joy,
The merry merry bells of Yule. (28.5-8)

Like Hardy whose pessimism gave way to strong nostalgic Christmas feelings, Tennyson is literally transported from his melancholy to a happy state as stated in the following lines:

With such compelling cause to grieve
As daily vexes household peace,
And chains regret to his decease,
How dare we keep our Christmas-eve. (29.1-4)

Christmas-eve was so precious to Tennyson that it became a pearl of the heart as indicated in "How dare we keep our Christmas-eve" (29.4). In section 106 "Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky", the word "ring" appears twenty-five times. The emphasis in the use of the word does not only tell the degree to which Tennyson identifies with the event, but also communicates his strong anxiety to see this day come to pass. The following lines measure Tennyson's trembling anxiety of Christmas "With trembling fingers did we weave / The holly round the Christmas hearth;" (30. 1-2). The repetition in section 78 "Again at Christmas did we weave / The holly round the Christmas hearth" (78.1-2) demonstrates his nostalgic feelings. Furthermore, the anxious expectation expressed in section 104 "The time draws near the birth of Christ" (104.1) reinforces the importance of the event to Tennyson. Although Christmas in the poem is also used to measure the passage of time as three Christmas seasons have come and gone, the event itself is a consoling one because it is a means of relief to Tennyson's broken spirit. The various parts of the poem describe Christmas celebrations in the December following Hallam's death. As more Christmas events come and go, Tennyson gradually recovers from his stress and sorrow. This is evident in his choice of words. The use of 'sadly' in the earlier piece, next to 'calmly' show a sense of recovery in his emotions.

The consoling role Christmas plays in Tennyson's psyche however, does not seem to affect Hardy in the same measure. Hardy appears to suffer the fate of Doctor Faustus, in whom

the Good and Bad Angel wrestle for his soul. Each time they appear Faustus begins contemplating the state of his mortal soul. The Good Angel's goal is to convince Faustus to abandon his sins and return to God, while the Bad Angel tries to get the scholar to continue in his pursuit of magic and so remain loyal to the devil. It is rather in "Two Voices" that Tennyson like Faustus is in a dilemma as he wrestles with conflicting voices. The voice presses on the narrator a recognition of the undeniable gulf between the grand desires of the human will and the triviality of that same individual will in the face of the boundless cosmos and teeming, wasteful life. It is in the same manner that Job struggles between his integrity stemming from his faith in the unfailing love of God and the contrary voice of his wife, "Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!" (Job 2.9). Generally speaking, Tennyson stays firm in his orthodox Christian beliefs. In the same light Sarah Eron comments that, "Tennyson does construct his poem in such a way as to create a turning aside from his personal sorrow (along with a resurging belief in God) at the end of the poem" (2). She adds further that "Tennyson illustrates a phenomenological sentiment at the end of the poem that could be construed as a multifaceted resurrection of sorts: a resurrection of hope, of spring, of man, of God, of spirit" (ibid). Tennyson's progressive turn from his melancholic depression to a state of hope in God, his only source of happiness, marks a difference between him and Hardy.

There are shades of opinion that hold that Hardy's past memories of Christmas rather ironically exhibit his disbelief of what he was made to believe by elders when he was young. This is illustrated in the following lines:

Nor did it occur to one of us there
To doubt they were kneeling then" (L.7-8).
So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years!" (L.9-10)

The use of words such as "lonely" and "gloom" betray the extent to which he is far removed from the youthful opinion of the legend. The word "gloom" in the last line is a logical clue to the poet's double attitude to the folk-myth behind the poem, which is a central image and eventually its controlling metaphor. Philip V. Allingham's opinion that "the poem is neither picturesque nor sweetly nostalgic, but aches with a sense of loss and exclusion" is plausible. Also, Ruth A. Firor's observation that, "the poet looks back regretfully to his boyhood days when he believed in miracles" (150) is worthy of note. However, it should be remembered that there is the tendency for the human mind to recall and recount only good or positive experiences. One can only be nostalgic over issues or events that positively appealed to his senses. Like every other human, Hardy could not be completely cut-off from his childhood or prevented from being nostalgic about it.

It is interesting to note that Hardy's memories of the Christmas legend go beyond a mere recollection of the past, giving that the poem was written during the First World War, when the poet's mind sought consolation from the turbulence of war. Therefore, Like Tennyson, Hardy's recall of the happy impulses of old Christmas legend appeared to be a means to calm the poet's unstable emotions. Just like Tennyson, who finds consolation from the sad memories of Hallam's death in three successive Christmas events. John Welford argues that "This old traditional superstition had clearly stuck with Hardy for many years, long after he had ceased to have any formal religious beliefs himself" (1). It is curious to note that even when Hardy lost his faith his memories of the events leading to the birth of Christ could fade from his mind. Furthermore, R. W. King describes this legend as "a significant anecdote, chosen or invented, not merely for its own sake, but for its value as a symbol, as a 'moment of vision' which gathers up the emotional experience of years" (107). These emotions are so strong in Hardy that his ability to recall them can only be comparable to Horatio's recollection in *Hamlet*:

That ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated
The bird of dawning singeth all night long;
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad;
The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallow'd and so gracious is that time. (I, i; 158-164)

Conclusion

Although Hardy and Tennyson share similar Christmas feelings in the poems under discussion, the following slight differences must be considered. While Hardy on the one hand lives his experiences in the past, Tennyson on the other hand lives his in the present. Eron points out that "Tennyson explores time as something which oscillates along a present-past-present continuum. That is to say, even in the here and now, Tennyson shows that we can experience the immanence of the past, that the past resurfaces in the present," (Par. 4). Furthermore, the bells do not only ring in Christmas events, they also symbolise the close of one year with its problems and usher the beginning of a new year with its expectations as suggested by the lines below. 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!

Henry Van Dyke posits that "In regard to the life beyond the grave, he asserts with new force and beauty the old faith in a personal immortality" (249).

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