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In the Matrix of the Divine: Approaches to Godhead in Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*

Bibhudutt Dash, M.Phil.

Angels and the Characterization of the Divine

This essay focuses on and makes a comparative study of the critically important roles the angels play in the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies* (1923) and God in Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850), thus examining the poets' approaches to the 'divine' in the scheme of the works. Both the angels and God supercharge the poems' locale, thereby serving as a backdrop to the portrayal of ontological concerns. On both the canvases, the 'divine' is painted in a somewhat grim light, in that, the apprehended apathy of the divine stands as an austere counterpoint to its innate benign properties.

Duino Elegies - An Impassioned Monologue

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 11 November 2011

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rainer Maria Rilke](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rainer_Maria_Rilke)

An impassioned monologue about coming to terms with human existence, *Duino Elegies* is marked by a mystical sense of God and death. In a cycle of ten elegies, Rilke translates the theme of solitude to an existential plane, attempts to penetrate into the essential nature of phenomena and soars to great metaphysical heights.

Characterized by his evocative language, his symbolism and use of metaphor, the poem embodies the metamorphosis of Rilke's personal ontological torments, his agonizing perception of the limitations and insufficiency of the human condition and fractured human consciousness. These messianic elegies encapsulate such themes as man's loneliness, the perfection of the angels, life and death, love and lovers, and the task of the poet.

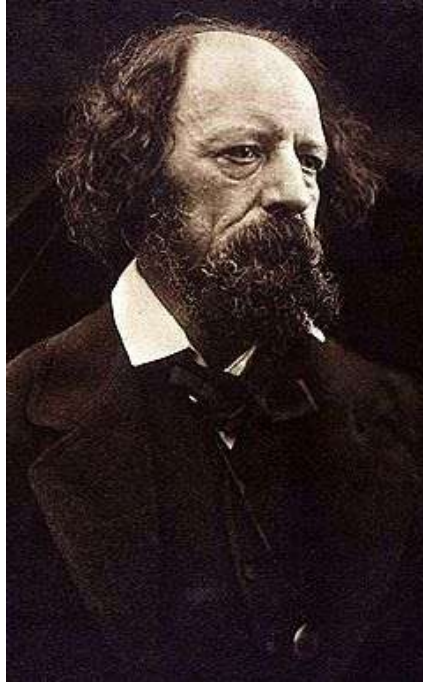
Tennyson's *In Memoriam*

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 11 November 2011

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred,_Lord_Tennyson

Similarly, in *In Memoriam*, Tennyson's heart pours out and questions itself to find at last in religious meditation a tremulous peace. A profound tribute to his dearest friend, the poem is quiet and even in its tone, and inspired by the changing mood of the author's own anxieties about change, evolution, and immortality. From the personal, the poem moves to the universal: first, there is an expression of universal doubt, and then of universal faith, which rests ultimately not on reason or philosophy but on the soul's instinct for immortality. A metrical masterpiece with rhythmic felicities, in *In Memoriam*, the poet grapples with the great religious and philosophic questions, enshrines not only his passionate grief at the loss of Arthur Henry Hallam, but the result of seventeen years of solitary brooding over the great problems of life, love and death.

Aloneness of Human Beings

In *Duino Elegies*, Rilke's concern about the aloneness of human beings in a god-forsaken universe, where memory and patterns of intuition raise the sensitive consciousness to a realization of solitude, is expressed through a portrayal of angels. For Rilke, The Angel is a conceit, a symbol of the non-existent superhuman consciousness. As Flemming writes, "The myth, or symbolism, of the "Angels" elaborates at once the austere projection of an absolute existence beyond human inquietudes and inadequacies, and envisages exemplary models of hope in accomplishing and affirming a sustaining sense of life" (20-21). Angels are the transcendent messengers of God to earthbound men. The opening lines of the First Elegy ring out in both fear and resignation the role of the angels who emerge as terrible apparitions incapable of being

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 11 November 2011

Bibhudutt Dash, M.Phil.

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reached, and so “Ungraspable” that their indifference borders on disdain. The poet wonders as to what makes them so terrible and further, his own words describe the angels as creatures in whom the transformation of the visible into the invisible has already occurred to the point of apotheosis. However, instead of reflecting the attributes of God, His will or, as in the Gnostic tradition, the rebellious emanations of God’s being, the angels are indicative of Rilke’s particular notion of transcendence, in that we are incapacitated by our limitations to have a feel of this transcendence.

Scream in Elegy

As Martin Esslin writes, “...in facing man’s inability ever to comprehend the meaning of the universe, in recognizing the Godhead’s total transcendence, his total otherness from all we can understand with our senses, the great mystics experienced a sense of exhilaration and liberation. This exhilaration also springs from the recognition that the language and logic of cognitive thought cannot do justice to the ultimate nature of reality” (417). Thus the ontological scream is perceptible in the following lines of the First Elegy:

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels’
hierarchies? And even if one of them pressed me
suddenly against his heart: I would be consumed
in that overwhelming existence. For beauty is nothing
but the beginning of terror, which we still are just able to endure,
and we are so awed because it serenely disdains
to annihilate us. Every angel is terrifying.

The persona utters a cry of despair toward the perfect incarnation of a higher realm of consciousness where the physical world of man has already been perfectly transformed into invisible reality. “The speaker, by elegizing figures of suspended possibility (including the fallen hero and the child who died young), strives,” writes Gossetti-Ferencei, “to achieve in human consciousness the angel’s presumed plenitude of being” (275-296).

Lamenting

Indeed, the entire lamenting, plaintive character of the elegy is based on the fact of a foreclosure that one cannot reach out to the angels. As per the traditional understanding throughout the history of various religious traditions, angels have only been seen in terms of their relationship to God and consequently to man. The angel is conventionally understood as belonging to the realm of the cosmos and as a necessary and contingent bridge between God and man. Rilke uses God and the angels as a mirror through which an understanding of the nature of man is possible.

However, the function of the God imagery in Rilke’s *Das Stundenbuch* is highly comparative in nature, saying more about man than about God and depicting God as a necessary conduit for the

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 11 November 2011

Bibhudutt Dash, M.Phil.

In the Matrix of the Divine: Approaches to Godhead in Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* and Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*

articulation of human consciousness. Man's temporality is juxtaposed with God's eternity, whose ultimate being and central relevance in the cosmos as creator is also used to understand man's position in the universe.

Functions of Angels of Elegies – Pollen of Blossoming Godhead

As for angels, Rilke had clarified that the angel of the elegies has nothing to do with the angel of the Christian heaven. While the angel of Rilke's early poems embodies a simpler kind of melancholic longing, the angel of the elegies represents something quite different. Further, as Ronald Gray observes, "Nowhere does Rilke say that the Angels of the *Duino Elegies*, those most complete realizers of the unity of life and death, are divine or in any way truly comparable to God" (261).

Gray further writes, "They are 'pollen of blossoming Godhead', it is true, and so apparently share in some divine quality. Yet they are part of a hierarchy of spirits, it seems, of whom the highest may well be the 'Archangel', dangerous to behold, spoken of in the Second Elegy. And at one point, Rilke seems to distinguish the smooth, uninterrupted converse of angelic spirits with themselves from the voice of God who has created them" (261). He ballasts his arguments by quoting lines from the First Elegy: "Not that you could endure / *God's* voice—far from it. But listen to the voice of the wind / And the ceaseless message that forms itself out of silence."

Traditionally, angels are the creatures closest to God, surrounding Him and basking in His absoluteness as emanations of His pure being. They are so dependent upon that absolute being that they sometimes appear as pure manifestations of God's will or incarnations of His divine attributes.

Terrifying versus the Benign

Rilke evokes the Old Testament version of the angel as terrifying, versus the benign pagan version of angel as nature spirit. His intense questioning cry has a touch of ambiguity in that he wonders if there is anyone who, among the angels, would hear so inconsequential an entity as himself crying out, since the angels both exist and comprehend all being, encompassing it inwardly. The angel represents to the poet an idea of perfect internality, beyond human contradictions and limitations; a being who attempts, as Rilke sees, to the recognition of a higher level of reality in the invisible, and 'terrifying' because we, still cling to the visible.

The First Elegy

The First Elegy deals with the realm of the dead, the invisible world where the essence of being is captured through the memory of life. In the first few lines, Rilke indicates the all-encompassing power of completed transformation, its 'overwhelming existence,' and the terms it represents to us, the terror of eternity for finite beings. In that terror, Rilke finds a strange beauty

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 11 November 2011

Bibhudutt Dash, M.Phil.

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and then generalizes that beauty itself is full of incipient terror because it draws us, without destroying us, into the orbit of that deeper perception where we see the transience, our limitations, our incapacity for transformation, and a depth and complexity beyond our grasp. The poet despairs in the absence of any possible anchor which we can cling to, and gets no hope from the humans, not from the angels either: “And so I hold myself back and swallow the call-note /of my dark sobbing. Ah, whom can we ever turn to /in our need? Not angels, not humans.”

Recognizing the impossibility of finding succour, the poet points at our incapacity to assist with the task of transformation. Contrary to it, Rilke writes to Witold Hulewicz in November 13, 1925, “The angel of the elegies is that creature in whom the transformation of the visible into the invisible, which we are accomplishing, already appear in its completion...” (Mitchell 317). While Rilke hints at the supremacy of the angels, he also describes them as indifferent to the human condition. While Rilke uses awesome epithets like ‘terrifying,’ ‘deadly,’ ‘appalling,’ and ‘perilous’ in respect of angels, he also highlights their essence as a combination of beauty and terror, adumbrated in the First Elegy, “beauty is... the beginning of terror.”

Second Elegy – On Compatibility of Terror and Beauty

Equating beauty with terror, the terror that ensues from beauty, Rilke muses on their compatibility. The note of desperation still persists in the Second Elegy, with the first stanza ending with a bemused question:

Every angel is terrifying. And yet, alas,
I invoke you, almost deadly birds of the soul,
knowing about you.

.....
But if the archangel now, perilous, from behind the stars
took even one step down toward us: our own heart, beating
higher and higher, would beat us to death. Who *are* you?

Angels and Nietzsche’s Superman

Rilke’s angel is akin to Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* (Superman). Both Rilke and Nietzsche conceive of beings much greater, more beautiful, and more complete than man is. Rilke refers to the angels again in the Fourth Elegy and diagnoses the human condition, and its many limitations. In this context, he makes specific reference to the lovers who promise each other eternity and the boundlessness of a sense of space, pursuit and resolution, but also meet boundaries in each other formed by pretence and non-comprehension.

The speaker, thus, wants to wait before the puppet stage, or, rather to gaze at it intensely so that “at last, / to balance my gaze, an angel has to come and / make the stuffed skins startle into life. / Angel and puppet: a real play, finally.”

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 11 November 2011

Bibhudutt Dash, M.Phil.

In the Matrix of the Divine: Approaches to Godhead in Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* and Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*

The speaker cannot get rid of the wish for the coming of an angel, but the puppet is akin to those wooden, wide-eyed creatures that teach us the indifference of the angels by receiving impassively the pure ardour of our childish affections.

A Glimpse of Reconciliation

There is a glimpse of reconciliation here: by waiting he believes the angel must arrive, and by gazing into the world he anticipates that his thought and art will be transformed into a higher plane, where the human will be mediated between the angel and the puppet. Rilke highlights the inscrutable play of the angel and strikes at the root of our pretence: “Above, beyond us, / The angel plays. If no one else, the dying / Must notice how unreal, how full of pretense, / Is all that we accomplish here, where nothing / Is allowed to be itself.”

Angels Do Not Need Relationship

Further, the purest creatures of Rilke’s imagination, the angels of the Elegies do not need relationship because they are complete as they are. They are “mirrors, which scoop up the beauty that has streamed from their face / and gather it back, into themselves, entire.” By contrast with the angels, Rilke feels, we human beings are transient and incomplete; we breathe away our existence like incense among embers, and in relationship our identity even if grasped for a moment, is unstable. Probing into the metaphysical nature of the angels, Rilke writes,

Does the infinite space
we dissolve into, taste of us then? Do the angels really
reabsorb only the radiance that streamed out from themselves, or
sometimes, as if by an oversight, is there a trace
of our essence in it as well?

Fifth Elegy – Child/Poet vs. Angels

Rilke refers to the Angel in the Fifth Elegy in a different context. He defines the human position in comparison and contrast with some common archetypal themes and explores the archetypes of the Child and the Poet and their contrast with the Angel. While representing man’s struggle for meaningful existence, the poet contemplates Picasso’s *Les Saltimbanques*, the Acrobat’s *Dasein*:

Oh gather it, Angel, that small-flowered herb of healing.
Create a vase and preserve it. Set it among those joys
not yet open to us; on that lovely urn
praise it with the ornately flowing inscription:
“Subrisio Saltat.”

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 11 November 2011

Bibhudutt Dash, M.Phil.

In the Matrix of the Divine: Approaches to Godhead in Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* and Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*

The crucial expression, “those joys not *yet* open to us” that underscores the task of the Angel, as requested by the speaker, to pluck the healing herb and preserve it in a vase and inscribing on it “Acrobats’ smile,” renders a tribute to the ruthless work-ethic of the acrobats, bereft of any pretence.

The Seventh Elegy

By the end of the Seventh Elegy, the persona even more boldly invites the angel to marvel at his own, just completed celebration of human experience: “Wasn’t all this a miracle? Be astonished, Angel, for we / are this, One; proclaim that we could achieve this, my breath / is too short for such praise.” Rilke writes in surpassingly emotional lines: “Don’t think that I’m wooing. /Angel, and even if I were, you would not come. For my call is /always filled with departure; against such a powerful / current you cannot move.” In essence, what Rilke tells in the Seventh Elegy is that life itself, through resonance with nature and its origins, achieves moments of splendour, but those moments perish unless they are transformed and taken inward, into our deepest consciousness. Prior to this, in line 71 of this poem, Rilke uses the phrase “in your endless vision” in respect of the angels and highlights the mystery of the invisible and man’s response to it. In a letter to Witold Hulewicz, November 13, 1925, Rilke writes:

For the angel of the Elegies, all the towers and palaces of the past are existent *because* they have long been invisible, and the still-standing towers and bridges of our reality are *already* invisible, although still (for us) physically lasting....All the worlds in the universe are plunging into the invisible as into their next-deeper reality; *a few stars intensify immediately and pass away in the infinite consciousness of the angels..., others are entrusted to beings who slowly and laboriously transform them, in whose terror and delights they attain their next invisible realization. We, let it be emphasized no more, we, in the sense of the Elegies, are these transformers of the earth; our entire existence, the flights and plunges of our love, everything, qualifies us for this task* (beside which there is, essentially, no other) (Mitchell 328).

Not Messengers but Witnesses

“Rilke’s persona posits the Duino angels,” writes Karen J. Campbell, “not as messengers but as pure witnesses, manipulating them by sheer force of argument to ratify his own aesthetic apology. Least “human” and familiar of all ethereal authorities, they are called upon here to valorize precisely what is most human and familiar—the proper subject of poetry as defined by Rilke and explicated most eloquently in his eighth elegy: the poet’s role is to render the “things” of the human world into invisibility” (191-211). Rilke tells it with authority in the Ninth Elegy, already hinted at earlier while contrasting the weaknesses and transience of humanity with the power of the angels that if we seek anything that can outlast us, it is not our emotional experience because the angels have far more capacity for emotion than we have, they feel more deeply and powerfully; it is no good trying to

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 11 November 2011

Bibhudutt Dash, M.Phil.

In the Matrix of the Divine: Approaches to Godhead in Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* and Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*

impress them with our feelings; and in any case feeling cannot be expressed in words because they are unsayable, but the things, and the simple words that express them:

Praise this world to the angel, not the unsayable one,
you can't impress *him* with glorious emotion; in the universe
where he feels more powerfully, you are a novice. So show him
something simple which, formed over generations,
lives as our own, near our hand and within our gaze.
Tell him of Things. He will stand astonished.

Subordinate to the Objectives of the Poetic Persona

The idiosyncratically conceived angels that are the figurative mainstay of the entire poetic cycle are finally subordinate to the objectives of the poetic persona or the poet. What the angels lack is material experience since they are not embodied. They are an embodiment of the sense of absence which had been at the centre of Rilke's difficult life. They are absolute fulfillment, or rather, absolute fulfillment without any diminishment of intensity, completely outside us. As Robert Hass sees, if the angel is the personal demon of Rilke's inner life, it is also a figure for a very old habit of human spirituality, as old, at least, as the Vedic hymns. All dualisms spring from it, and all cult religions of death and resurrection. Hass comments:

For Rilke, however, the angels were never hermetic knowledge. They were the ordinary idea, the one that belongs to children at home by themselves looking in the mirror, to lovers bewildered by the intensity of their feelings, to solitaries out walking after dinner: whenever our souls make us strangers to the world. Everyone knows that impulse—and the one that follows from it, the impulse to imagine that we were meant to be the citizens of some other place. It is from this sensation that the angels come into existence, creating in the world their ambience of pure loss (Mitchell 'Introduction' xxxviii).

Representing Everything That Man Is Not

In view of the infinite consciousness of the angels in the *Duino* elegies, Rilke's reference to the angels in elucidating the human condition is fitting because they represent everything that man is not and have just as much to do with death, pain and oblivion as they do with life, happiness and consciousness. What Rilke looks for is a means of transforming visible things into invisibility, so that their essence might be retained at a deeper level of sensitivity. Rilke sees the human condition as a constant struggle toward the higher realm of the angels, a realm that is, however, in the end unattainable in its purest form.

To Rilke, we must try to make the transition from visible to invisible by making cold objective reality a part of our deeper consciousness. But that same consciousness, as described in the Eighth, prevents us from reaching the angels, hence the lamentation. The picture of the human

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 11 November 2011

Bibhudutt Dash, M.Phil.

In the Matrix of the Divine: Approaches to Godhead in Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*

condition and above all of human consciousness that the elegy provides is important when examining the figure of the angel. The angels make clear the conflict of the poet by placing that conflict on a mytho-poetic level, endowing it with a dimension that transcends the individual and which is thus not solely applicable to the situation of the poet but clearly indicative of the human condition in general as a philosophical problem.

Whereas the angel of cultural tradition is either a divine attribute or a rebellious emanation, Rilke uses the figure as the last hint of a God that is no longer reachable. Rilke subtly redefines the angel, shifting its role from within the traditional constellation and sees the angel no longer as a creature of the God that created the cosmos and man but the symbol of what God has become for modern man, namely an invisible world of innerness and inwardness tied to the remnants of transcendence and duality. However, Rilke is not shorn of deep spiritual convictions that highlight his mystic pantheism:

I find you, Lord, in all Things and in all
my fellow creatures, pulsing with your life;
as a tiny seed you sleep in what is small
and in the vast you vastly yield yourself. (From *The Book of Hours*) (Mitchell 5)

Tennyson's Sporadic Bouts of Skepticism

While analyzing Tennyson's approach to God, we see his thoughts inextricably linked with sporadic bouts of skepticism and faith as to the justness of the divine order. On that score, Rilke's dismay at the indifference of the angels finds echoes in Tennyson. Whereas Rilke has neither misgivings nor guilt as to the existence of angels, Tennyson regrets at his profanity in doubting God and thus surrenders. The major points of reference to God in the poem are found in the Prologue and in such sections like 54, 55, 56, 124, and the Epilogue.

The Prologue – An Afterthought

The Prologue, composed in 1849, and standing as an afterthought in the poet's part for that might exonerate from profanity is, however, a monumental doxology singing the glory of God, depicting Tennyson's engaging philosophical questions. As per Tennyson's averment, faith in God is man's reason to live, and the Prologue is his supplication to God for forgiveness and a definitive assertion of His irrefutable presence, supreme power and boundless mercy. It is a celebration of immortal love in the form of a prayer of invocation. Since the Prologue serves as a preamble to the entire poem and presents Tennyson's thoughts on God in microcosm, a discussion of the Prologue is necessary to highlight not so much Tennyson's quest for God but a theistic assertion of God's benign presence and purpose.

Strong Son of God, immortal Love,
Whom we, that have not seen thy face,
By faith, and faith alone embrace,

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 11 November 2011

Bibhudutt Dash, M.Phil.

In the Matrix of the Divine: Approaches to Godhead in Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and
Tennyson's *In Memoriam*

Believing where we cannot prove;

Thine are the orbs of light and shade;
Thou madest Life in man and brute;
Thou madest Death; and lo, thy foot
Is on the skull which thou hast made. (1-8)

Highlighting the Power of Faith

Assuming Christ as “immortal Love,” Tennyson says, “This might be taken in a St. John sense” (Ross 3). Tennyson highlights the power of faith by which man loves and feels God; the faith the poet professes is intuitive. The expression “faith alone” emphasizes, along with line 4, the power of intuition as the basis of belief.

The importance of faith for realizing God is related to the conception of God as transcendent. In medieval philosophy, God is said to transcend himself when he creates the world. To Kant, there can be no knowledge of anything transcendent, and a large number of representatives of nineteenth century positivism agreed, albeit for reasons different from his. A famous expression of their view is Du Bois-Reymond’s slogan, *Ignorabimus* (Latin. We shall remain ignorant of the ultimate nature of reality). Further, science can only describe phenomena but cannot genuinely explain them.

Spencer’s theory of the Unknowable is another example. This agnosticism is rejected by philosophers who maintain that we possess ways of knowing other than the sensory way, and that what lies beyond the world of experience need not be unknowable. The question whether there is anything transcendent, beyond the world of experience, is answered in the negative by materialists since the eighteenth century. A negative answer has also been given by some of the twentieth-century philosophers who gave philosophy a linguistic turn. They argue that certain conditions have to be met in order that the expressions we use in our language make sense. These conditions are not satisfied by assertions that something transcendent, for example, God, exists.

Therefore, such assertions do not make sense. Since they do not make sense, they cannot be true. The conditions said by empiricists to be necessary are to the effect that only expressions whose meaning can be reduced to sensory experience make sense. A clear instance of this approach is the logical positivism of Carnap, Schlick, Ayer, etc. The upshot is that no assertion that implies the existence of something transcendent can be true. One line of argument for the opposite view is that the material world, nature, the world of experience, the world open to scientific enquiry, cannot be ultimately self-sufficient or self-explanatory, but must, in its totality, be assumed to stand in some relation of dependency which, accordingly, must be transcendent.

Never Know the Divine Purpose?

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 11 November 2011

Bibhudutt Dash, M.Phil.

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Musing on the inscrutability of the divine purpose that one can never “know,” Tennyson thinks of the limitations of eschatology and teleology because man knows not the Final Causes of created things—or can never know God’s purpose in His work of creation.

The questions of the divine purpose or human immortality passing through Tennyson’s mind have much to relate to the idea of perfection and progress in conjunction with Darwin’s thoughts in a biological scheme that defeat the ideas of immortality and prefigure extinction. By the middle of the nineteenth century virtually all philosophical speculations about the origins of things was evolutionary, though not Darwinian, in character. Nature was personified as an immaterial agency striving for ever more complex forms of being. The variety of living organisms represented stages in the expression of systematic progress towards a variously defined state of perfection, either infinitely elusive and unknowable or more or less clearly identified with traditional virtues of the higher beings of Christian mythology.

Contrary to such scientific polemic, Tennyson asserts his stance as to reposing faith in God although the use of the word “seemest” in the lines admits lack of logical proof of the human-divine character of the “highest, holiest manhood.”

Thou seemest human and divine,
The highest, holiest manhood, thou.
Our wills are ours, we know not how;
Our wills are ours, to make them thine. (13-16)

Tennyson’s Definition of Faith

Tennyson defines faith as “A beam in darkness,” the darkness he refers to is undoubtedly the prevalent religious crisis of the time but it hints at the ignorance from which man suffers. Faith, in such conditions, can act as an antidote to restore normalcy to any sacrilegious or behavioural aberrations. The word “but” preceding “faith” (“we have but faith: we cannot know”) underscores Tennyson’s asseveration, that man’s only possession is faith, without which there is only “darkness.” The expression “let it grow” (“A beam in darkness: let it grow”) is a kind of wishful feeling the poet entertains which, had it been “make” instead of “let,” would have contained the character more of a prayer than of a wish..

Self-criticism Based on Intermittent Skepticism

Tennyson passes through a series of self-criticism for his intermittent skepticism toward God, but deems it a reprobate mistake. The word “we” in lines 29 and 30 of the Prologue (“We are fools and slight / We mock thee when we do not fear”) relate to the general tendency of skepticism in man and the consequent irreverence that arises when love of God is precluded by a lack of fear. In the following lines, Tennyson implores God for help and forgiveness:

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 11 November 2011

Bibhudutt Dash, M.Phil.

In the Matrix of the Divine: Approaches to Godhead in Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* and Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*

Forgive what seem'd my sin in me;
 What seem'd my worth since I began;
 For merit lives from man to man,
And not from man, O Lord, to thee.

Forgive my grief for one removed,
.....

Forgive these wild and wandering cries,
 Confusions of a wasted youth;
 Forgive them where they fail in truth,
In thy wisdom make me wise. (33-44)

Plea for Forgiveness

Tennyson's impassioned plea for forgiveness on such scores like "sin," "grief," and "wild and wandering cries, / confusions of a wasted youth" demonstrates his true Christian character. The element of humility and surrender passing through this prayer and in particular, Tennyson's attitude to God and the divine order makes *In Memoriam* a very religious one. But the occasional incidence of doubt frustrates the already established religious character of the poem, thus prompting T.S. Eliot to remark that *In Memoriam* "is not religious because of the quality of its faith, but because of the quality of its doubt. Its faith is a poor thing, but its doubt is a very intense experience" (186-203).

What Tennyson wants to be forgiven, in particular, are his sin, his grief, and his wild and wandering cries born out of the "confusions of a wasted youth". Tennyson's realization of the inherent purpose in God's plan, explicit in the expression "I trust he lives in thee, and there / I find him worthier to be loved summarizes his faith and the courage of conviction which is for a while obfuscated by doubt. He preempts God's forgiveness for the upcoming "wild and wandering cries," the reason being he cannot cease to love either Hallam or God since he is inescapably positioned between the two.

Every Seeming Present Evil is a Future Final Good?

Tennyson's attitude to God in *In Memoriam* takes an important turn in section 54 in his hopes that not only good will come out of evil, but every seeming present evil is a future final good. The expressions, "That nothing walks with aimless feet," "That not a worm is cloven in vain," "That not a moth with vain desire/ Is shrivell'd in a fruitless fire" asseverate the poet's realization of the divine purpose. Tennyson's sanguine expectations visible in the lines, "I can but trust that good shall fall / At last—far off—at last, to all" do also echo in the last lines of the Epilogue: "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."

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 11 November 2011

Bibhudutt Dash, M.Phil.

In the Matrix of the Divine: Approaches to Godhead in Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*

In section 54, Tennyson's helplessness is manifest in his desperateness to understand his true self vis-à-vis his inability to comprehend the divine purpose. He gropes to find answer to the metaphysical question "what am I?" but the uses of the verb "cry" three times heightens the speaker's desperation. He feels like an infant who knows nothing, understands nothing, but only feels a want: "An infant crying in the night: / An infant crying for the light: / And with no language but a cry." This helplessness runs in consonance with his flaccid faith in section 55 where he gropes and gathers dust and chaff and "faintly trusts the larger hope."

Strife between God and Nature

Although the poet backtracks and totters in his faith, silhouetted against the supposed strife between God and Nature, yet the circumstantial situations condemn him to "falter" where he "firmly trod." The misgivings that vanish in part in section 56 in the lines equating God and love, "who trusted God was love indeed / And love Creation's final law..." again relapse into helplessness born of his inability to demystify the recondite divine order: "What hope of answer, or redress? / Behind the veil, behind the veil." However, the realization of the truth is manifest in section 124 where the poet feels the presence of God and the growth of wisdom.

No, like a child in doubt and fear:
But that blind clamour made me wise;
Then was I as a child that cries,
But, crying, knows his father near. (17-20)

A Quest After Belief in Immortality

An important aspect of the elegy, in relation to Tennyson's approach to God, is the apotheosis of Arthur Henry Hallam. Ostensibly, the elegy is concerned with a quest after belief in immortality, renewal of friendship with his dead friend. Tennyson may speak of Hallam as the ideal type of humanity, but the Hallam he wishes to find again is the Hallam as he knew him on earth. Tennyson's quest for the Incarnate God is materialized by making Hallam a Christ-figure. In the New Year's hymn Hallam is, by implication, the prototype of the "larger heart, the kindlier hand," "the Christ that is to be" (section 95).

Built on the solid foundation of faith, in spite of desultory aberrations, Tennyson explains his spiritual way in a beautiful manner in section 124. His faith in the "He, They, One, All; within, without; / The Power in darkness whom we guess" has come not through ratiocination, but through the heart: "I have felt." Eighteenth century theologians such as William Paley had attempted to demonstrate the existence of God by reasoning from natural phenomena. Tennyson, however, was something of a Coleridgean and a good deal of modern in that he based his belief in God not upon external evidences but upon inner experience.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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I found Him 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. (5-8)

Determination to Hold On To God

Another important aspect of Tennyson's approach to God lies in the fact that *In Memoriam* is not so much a quest for God, rather it is the poet's determination to hold onto God, a determination not to let Him go. The apotheosis of Hallam relates to the poet's desire to prove that God is the provenance of solace which he veritably finds in Hallam, even while revelling in grief. Tennyson's musings on such apotheosis is congruent with the definiteness of the poem's progression which never fails to underline the simultaneous upheaval and placidity in the poet's mind. As Sarah Eron writes,

Despite the general non-linearity of *In Memoriam*, however, the poem does undergo a definite progression. Much of the progression derives from the poet's (or speaker's) ultimate personal reconciliation with Hallam's death. Tennyson experiences a more general kind of spiritual renewal that accounts for his attempt to reshape the elegiac mode of the poem into a Carlylean ideal for a more social, conciliatory, and less self-absorbed, type of poetry. Thus the poem takes on a structure similar to the story of Job in which man, after undergoing the tests and trials of God, emerges out of human suffering with some kind of spiritual, and or, material gain, returning to a belief in a mysterious, and often unjust, divinity. (www.victorianweb.org)

What Do We Learn?

A comparative study of the poets' approaches to godhead, which while reveals the similarities as to the portrayal of the divine in a grim light does also highlight a note of supplication to the supremacy of the divine Being.

The similarities pertain to the fact that insofar as the stated objectives of the works are concerned, both Rilke and Tennyson do not differentiate between God and His messengers. For them, the two are interchangeable. It is important to see that the word 'God' does appear certain times in Tennyson's poem, in particular, when Tennyson fails to comprehend the fancied complicity between God and Nature, the latter supposedly taken as God's ruthless handiwork: "Are God and Nature then at strife?"

Again, it is worthwhile to mark Tennyson's use of the expression, "Strong Son of God" in the Prologue, and not "God" or "God, the Holy Father." Thus, Tennyson does not distinguish between the two but his reference to "One God" in the Epilogue makes us think if this refers to God or the Son of God. Again, in Christianity, "the Incarnation" refers to the act of God coming to earth in human form as Jesus.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 11 November 2011

Bibhudutt Dash, M.Phil.

In the Matrix of the Divine: Approaches to Godhead in Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*

For Tennyson they are essentially the same. Similarly, in the matrix of the divine, the task of the poet in Duino elegies pertains more to harp on the fact that “we are not really at home in / our interpreted world” than making a finical distinction between God and angel. Both the poems hasten in us an experience of “the absolute otherness.” As Esslin writes,

The answer is simply that there is no contradiction between recognizing the limitations of man’s ability to comprehend all of reality in a single system of values and recognizing the mysterious and ineffable oneness, beyond all rational comprehension, that, once experienced, gives serenity of mind and the strength to face the human condition. These are in fact two sides of the same medal—the mystical experience of the absolute otherness and ineffability of ultimate reality is the religious, poetic counterpart to the rational recognition of the limitation of man’s senses and intellect, which reduces him to exploring the world slowly by trial and error (418).

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 11 November 2011

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