

## APOCALYPTIC TENNYSON: REVELATION, GRIEF AND HOPE

*Andrew Tate*

How might apocalyptic narrative, so often associated with spectacles of destruction on a global scale, connect with individual grief? This article will argue that Tennyson's long elegy, *In Memoriam, A.H.H.* (1850), enacts, in what the poem in Section XI names 'a calmer grief' (l.2), a form of quiet apocalypse: one that fuses the tradition of Christian messianic anticipation of redemption and renewal with a subjective experience of hope amidst significant personal loss. The poem is saturated with questions of temporality: the fearful mysteries of deep geological time vie with the brevity of human life and the ringing of church bells; the reality of mortality, registered in the sudden death of the poem's dedicatee, is not rendered painless by faith in a loving God. In one of the most spiritually disconsolate sections of the poem, the speaker, apparently physically weakened, 'stretch[es]'

[. . .] 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 (LV, ll. 17-20)

To trust 'the larger hope' is an act of defiance, one in which Tennyson's famously ambivalent notion of 'honest doubt' is the root of a humane and empathetic faith (XCVI, l. 10). One of the problems with which Tennyson struggles in writing *In Memoriam* is how to mourn authentically. Section LXXVIII - one of the Christmas sections, marking the experience of time and shifting sorrow - reflects on '[t]he *quiet* sense of something lost' (l. 8; italics mine): the poem makes the experience of an extended grief audible. Kevin Mills has observed that although the apocalyptic mode of the poem 'may appear to have universal significance [. . .] it does not emerge from currents of public interest or concern. It is not underpinned by war, famine, pestilence or the manipulation of political

power; rather it flows from the death of an intimate friend' (Mills 2007, 29). Similarly, my reading of *In Memoriam* will emphasize that the 133 sections of the poem bear witness to an embodied sorrow for Arthur Hallam that is intimately linked to its wrestling with the biblical promise of resurrection and eventual reconciliation. This article traces elements of Tennyson's life-long wrestling with Christian eschatology - questions of death, judgement, heaven and hell but also of revelation - and place *In Memoriam* in dialogue both with a number of his early poems and with the distinctively theological idiom at work in the popular culture of the 1850s, including the visual arts, fiction and sermons.

\*

In contemporary western culture the term apocalypse is both widely used and, in one sense, distorted in its common association with spectacular destruction, the dramatic end of civilizations and the threat of species extinction. Apocalyptic imagery - fantasies of cosmic destruction - are now so familiar to the twenty-first century imagination that they have become mundane. The family of genres that imagine the destruction of this world as a result of dystopian political forces, alien invasion, environmental disaster and - perhaps now most presciently - pandemic have thrived since the early nineteenth century. Thinking about the religious origins of apocalypticism, specifically in relation to John Ruskin's work, Michael Wheeler describes it as

[. . .] a tradition coming down from early Judaism and from Christ's teaching, in which eschatology, which concerns the end-time and the inauguration of a new world order, is held in tension with wisdom teaching, which assumes that the world will continue. [. . .] in our own age the disaster movie, the science-fiction dystopia, and the nightmare scenario of a world destroyed by nuclear weapons or unfiltered solar rays, the term has come to mean simply the disastrous end of things (Wheeler 1999, 263-5).

Mary Shelley's pioneering tale of Lionel Verney, *The Last Man* (1826), drew on classical traditions of prophecy to construct a lonely end time narrative. Later in the century, H.G.Wells's 'scientific romances' including *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898), dared to suggest that both civilization and humanity itself are transient, fragile and less ethically sophisticated than might be assumed. Twenty-first-century fiction by Margaret Atwood, David Mitchell, Emily St John Mandel and others frequently engages with similar 'last human' figures. Yet this mode of apocalypse is a secondary sense of a word stemming from the Greek term *apocalypsis* which translates as revelation, the uncovering of that which was once hidden or secret. In fact, the Revelation of St John begins with this word, 'suggesting a disclosure or unveiling' (Mangina 2010, 37). The climactic narrative is defined by its radical vision of a world of injustice and evil being brought to an end and replaced by a new heaven and earth. In Terry Eagleton's words, New Testament eschatology

is not to be mistaken for the consummation of history as a whole, and thus as the triumphal conclusion of a steadily upward trek, but as an event that breaks violently, unpredictably into the human narrative, upending its logic, defying its priorities, and unmasking its wisdom as foolishness. The Messiah does not sound the top note of the tune of history but breaks it abruptly off (Eagleton 2018, 27).

St John's prophetic text has been crucial in shaping Christian eschatology: the study of four particular 'last things': 'the final advent of the Lord of the cosmos, the last judgement, heaven and hell' (Fiddes 2000, 6). Fiddes further notes a deep affinity between these 'last things' and all forms of writing: 'eschatology [is] the basic mood' not just of theology but also of 'literary creation' (2000, 6).

Tennyson's early writing, including some notable juvenilia, demonstrates a vivid fascination with biblical apocalypse. In his mid-teens, he precociously wrote a dream-vision poem inspired by St John's Revelation: 'Armageddon' explores the scriptural end-times prophecies via a narrator who encounters an angel who elucidates the day of God's judgement:

Spirit of Prophecy whose mighty grasp  
Enfoldeth all things, whose capacious soul  
Can people the illimitable abyss  
Of vast and fathomless futurity  
With all the Giant Figures that shall pace  
The dimness of its stage,—whose subtle ken  
Can through the doubly-darkened firmament  
Of Time to come with all its burning stars  
At awful intervals. I thank thy power,  
Whose wondrous emanation hath poured  
Bright light on what was darkest, and removed  
The cloud that from my mortal faculties  
Barred out the knowledge of the Latter Times (ll. 1-14) (Quoted in LaPorte 2011, 95).

LaPorte describes 'Armageddon', written in Miltonic blank verse, as 'an earnest attempt to grapple with the problem of sacred history by pinning it down in tangible ways' and contrasts its geographically-specific focus with similarly Revelation-inspired poets: Tennyson located 'its seer in a map of the Middle East' because he 'reproduces the Hebrew *har megiddon*, which early nineteenth-century scholars understood to be a Palestinian valley near the Plain of Esdraelon' (LaPorte 2011, 96). The poem was famously repurposed a few years later to become the basis of 'Timbuctoo' (1829) for which Tennyson was awarded the Chancellor's Gold Medal when he was an undergraduate at Cambridge (for an account of the revisions see, for example, Ricks 1966; LaPorte 2011, 94-100). The second iteration of the poem displaces the biblical landscape for an imagined version of, in LaPorte's terms, 'the fabled African city, a mythical sort of paradise'. In so doing, LaPorte suggests that in common with higher

critics such as David Friedrich Strauss, the poem ‘insists upon the importance of myth itself and myth’s organic, human foundation’ (2011, 99). These poems are neither designed as wholly orthodox commentaries for the pious nor as heretical rejections of the biblical canon. Rather, they embody the nascent interpretative possibilities of reshaping sometimes forbidding scripture into narratives that may illuminate abiding human concerns and which transcend the limits of a specifically Christian readership.

Tennyson was still a very young man when he turned again to the **B**ook of Revelation as part of his inspiration for ‘The Kraken’, originally published in *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830). The poem is an example of the evolving writer’s fascination with indirect and unresolved forms of apocalyptic narrative. The poem’s horror-tinged expectation of a hidden threat associated with end times is more melancholy than obviously catastrophist:

Below the thunders of the upper deep;  
Far, far beneath in the abysmal sea,  
His ancient, dreamless, uninvaded sleep  
The Kraken sleepeth: faintest sunlights flee  
About his shadowy sides: above him swell  
Huge sponges of millennial growth and height;  
And far away into the sickly light,  
From many a wondrous grot and secret cell  
Unnumbered and enormous polypi  
Winnow with giant arms the slumbering green.  
There hath he lain for ages and will lie  
Battening upon huge sea-worms in his sleep,  
Until the latter fire shall heat the deep;  
Then once by man and angels to be seen,  
In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die (ll.1-5; Ricks 2007, 17).

The titular sea monster, cocooned in his ‘ancient, dreamless, uninvaded sleep’ (l. 2) is an amalgam of creatures, derived from folkloric beliefs, eye witness accounts of seafarers and Sir Walter Scott’s fiction (Ricks 2007, 17; Moore 20017, 164-67). It also resonates, as a number of scholars have noted, with the figure of Leviathan from the Jewish scriptures and one of the monsters prophesied in Saint John’s Revelation: ‘And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and

ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy' (Revelation 13. 1) (Ricks 2007, 17). James Donald Welch argues that Tennyson's appropriation of biblical apocalypse is 'not in the service of dogmatic or didactic ends' but is used, instead, as 'an image, a legend for something both private and universal' (Welch 1976, 202; also cited in Moore 2017). Religious discourse is, in this way, subtly displaced from the limits of orthodoxy: this does not empty the poem of theological meaning but is indicative of the appeal of apocalyptic imagery in the popular imagination, even beyond the interpretative boundaries of orthodox Christian doctrine.

'The Kraken' might also be read as a poem of incipient apocalyptic grief: the creature's alien physicality and sense of threat distances the reader from the poem's quietly empathic language of affect. John Batchelor, for example, connects the eponymous creature's bleak destiny with that of two of Tennyson's other isolated figures, Mariana and The Lady of Shalott: 'The Kraken's fate is the universal fate of any living thing that seeks to fulfil its own needs, it seems' (Batchelor 2012, Location 2484). The 'universal' potential of the 'The Kraken' is visible in the poem's long creative afterlife in twentieth and twenty-first century Gothic and speculative fiction: Moore, for example, cites the H. P. Lovecraft's terrifying Cthulhu mythos of the 1920s (one much revisited by later generations of writers and artists); John Wyndham's *The Kraken Wakes* (1953) and China Miéville's *The Kraken* (2010) as narratives that wrestle with the imaginative legacy of this early Tennyson poem (Moore 2017, 164-7).

This 15 line, irregular sonnet - not reprinted in Tennyson's lifetime until 1872 but now widely anthologized - is characterized by ambiguous menace as the apparent threat of the vast creature is 'far beneath in the abysmal sea', at a great distance from the everyday reality of Tennyson's readers. Humanity itself is erased from the sonnet and the

warning of violence is deferred until an unknowable future, resonant with the troubling eschatological visions of the **Book** of Revelation. Richard Maxwell observes that Tennyson describes the great sea monster ‘obliquely and by inference’, a mode of writing that ‘creates opportunities for hazy empathy or identification while effecting an indefinite postponement of the moment when the creature will burst into view’ (Maxwell 2009, 14). The final revelation is partial, distant and uncertain. As Maxwell notes, ‘The Kraken’ ‘anticipates this moment of display’ but ‘it does not precisely reach it, except, perhaps, in its final five words, and then only by anticipation’ (Maxwell 2009, 14). The poem encodes a peculiar sadness: the apparent monstrosity of the eponymous creature is connected with a recognisably human sense of lonely isolation; the Kraken is disconnected from all other forms of life, gifted only millennia of unconscious life before a brief waking moment. Indeed, in his biography of Tennyson, Christopher Ricks emphasizes the ‘depth of feeling’ in the poem that derives from the poet’s ‘fascination with the thought of a life which somehow is not a life at all’ (Ricks 1989, 41; 1972 edition of Ricks cited in Moore 2017, 165). For Ricks, the slumberous Kraken is like Tennyson’s ‘the Lady of **Shalott** in that he will awake only to death’ (Ricks 1989, 41). Ultimately, following this reading, the poem is subtly orientated towards the experience of melancholy mystery rather than a morbid or voyeuristic spectacle of monstrosity. The otherness of the subject matter, its sense of alien strangeness, is superficially very different from *In Memoriam* but ‘The Kraken’ shares with the long elegy its awareness of the connection between revelation and sadness. ‘The Kraken’, perhaps, anticipates the ‘calmer grief’ of the poem that Tennyson would begin, in the tragic circumstance of Arthur Hallam’s death, three years later (XI, l.2).

The popular culture of 1850s Great Britain uncannily foreshadows our own more ostensibly secular historical moment. Apocalyptic anxiety, in that secondary sense, with particular focus on individual salvation as part of imminent divine judgement, was widespread. In 1851, one Anglican clergyman, the Reverend Daniel Wilson, exhorted his fellow Christians to reorient their ministries towards the apparently forgotten primacy of saving the souls of unbelievers:

souls are perishing all around. What are we doing for them ? Have we a due sense of the value of a soul - of a single soul ? What is a lost soul ? What efforts ought not to be made to save a soul ? A revival of spiritual religion would produce a great change in this respect. There would be a general longing after the conversion of souls, a travelling in birth again till Christ be formed in them; other matters would be deemed of secondary moment (Wilson 1851, 8).

Evangelical voices were in positions of considerable influence in Britain during this period. The Reverend James Garbett was one such clergyman: the somewhat surprising successor to John Keble as Professor of Poetry at the University of Oxford, a role in which he served between 1842-52. Garbett, an anti-Tractarian with no substantial literary-poetic status, virulently opposed the developing liberal, mythic reading of scripture. His view was very different, for example, from that of one of his most famous successors, the liberal, quietly agnostic Matthew Arnold, who was elected to the role in 1857. For Garbett, in keeping with conventional Evangelical teaching, the Bible was nothing less than the Word of God, inspired and inerrant:

When you open the Word, which, like Himself is not dead but living, and shooteth life from it into the dead, do not separate it from Him. Treat it not as words in a book, or as issuing from



the lips of man . . . The words of *the Book* are no more *mere* words, than the promises or the threats of men like ourselves. And as the one make known to us the thoughts and purposes of the human spirit, which we see not, any more than we see God, so do the other unfold the Almighty. They are God speaking, inviting, loving, justifying (Garbett 1849, 50).

Belief in the imminence of God's judgement, as foretold in the Bible, also had an impact on the visual arts. The most famous apocalyptic art works of the nineteenth century are John Martin's eschatological triptych, *The Last Judgement* (1851-3), produced shortly after the publication of *In Memoriam*: three vast narrative paintings that visually recreate the end of the world as foretold in Revelation. The most famous – and most commonly reproduced – of the series is *The Great Day of His Wrath* (1851) which envisions the ending as a (super) natural disaster marked by cataclysmic terror as the damned of the earth disappear into an abyss. The bombastic terror of the painting has a long legacy in popular culture as a visual paradigm for apocalypse in its secondary – but most frequently used – sense as spectacular, civilization ending destruction. The catastrophist dream vision of Section LXIX of *In Memoriam* is, perhaps, the closest that Tennyson comes to the hellish landscapes of both Martin's paintings and

I dream'd there would be Spring no more,  
    That Nature's ancient power was lost:  
    The streets were black with smoke and frost,  
They chatter'd trifles at the door:

I wander'd from the noisy town,  
    I found a wood with thorny boughs:  
    I took the thorns to bind my brows,  
I wore them like a civic crown ( ll. 1-8)

This nightmare, in which 'Nature's ancient power was lost' resonates with twenty-first century narratives of ecological disaster in which nature, and its cyclical rhythms, are

ruined. It is another moment of quiet apocalypse, less spectacular than Martin's painting but with a distinctive visual language.

The spectacle of Martin's paintings has numerous descendants in late twentieth and early twenty-first-century culture, especially in the popularity of disaster movies and television series. The catastrophism of the painting – seen by vast numbers at touring exhibitions throughout the world in the years after Martin's death – is a vivid counterpoint to the quieter apocalypse of Tennyson's poetry. The consolation of the final painting, in which the righteous ascend to heaven, may have been reassuring for devout spectators but this peaceful vision is less memorable than its catastrophist predecessors. Wheeler notes that the 'sharp separation of the saved from the damned in the paintings [ . . . ] invites comparison with popular millenarianism in the mid-nineteenth century, a period in which the hell-fire sermon and the pious volume on the recognition of friends in heaven flourished' (Wheeler 1990, 84). In an indication of the fluctuating nature of both aesthetic taste and religious feeling, John Wolffe notes that 'Martin's reputation quickly evaporated' and in the less Evangelical era of the 1930s the apocalyptic sequence was sold for 'the derisory sum of seven pounds' (Wolffe 1994, 159). The paintings have enjoyed a kind of resurrection of their own: they were eventually returned to the public eye and they are part of the collection at Tate Britain. *The Great Day of His Wrath*, in particular, is often reprinted to illustrate discussions of contemporary apocalypse.

The rise to fame of the nineteenth-century's most celebrated exponents of 'the hell-fire sermon' was contemporaneous with that of Martin's end-times sequence: Charles Spurgeon (1834-92) became pastor of New Park Street Chapel, Southwark in 1854 when he was only 19 years old. Spurgeon quickly became an exceptionally popular preacher and the initially modest congregation expanded into the thousands. Although

his long influence is primarily visible on Evangelicals in a variety of global traditions, Spurgeon's rhetorical gifts prompted a number of the preacher's illustrious peers whose spirituality was decidedly different from his own, to come to hear his sermons, among them Matthew Arnold and William Gladstone. John Ruskin, whose deep Evangelical faith was in a state of flux in the 1850s, admired Spurgeon and argued with him in a lively correspondence (Tate 2001, 27-36).

Spurgeon's theology, a recuperation of Reformed Protestant belief, accentuated what David Bebbington has described as the Evangelical 'quadrilateral of priorities' that have defined the Evangelical tradition from its origins in the 1730s to the present: '*conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross' (Bebbington 1989, 2-3). The first of these priorities was particularly prominent in Spurgeon's ministry: 'Oh! that we might all be converted!,' he urgently exclaimed in one address (Spurgeon 1856-96, 4, 166). His sermons frequently focused on the necessity of repentance and he rarely preached without exhorting undecided listeners to follow Christ in whom salvation alone might be found. Spurgeon was concerned that his rising popularity risked turning services into entertainments rather than acts of public worship. For those who sought diversion, the preacher had severe words of admonishment:

You came to hear me preach to-day, as you would have gone to the opera or playhouse; you thought I should amuse you. Ah ! that is not my aim, God is my witness, I came here solemnly in earnest, to wash my hands of your blood. If you are damned, any one of you, it shall not be because I did not warn you (Spurgeon 1856-96, 3, 191).

Spurgeon expounded a stark soteriology, one in which the choice is between either the hope of heavenly rescue or certainty of eternal damnation: to quote the title of one of his sermons, the options were to ‘Turn or Burn’. Spurgeon was a fierce critic of theological liberalism: he believed, for example, that the descriptions in Revelation of perpetual punishment for the unsaved should be taken literally. His homiletic style, fervent and direct, displays a degree of contempt for moderate or progressive voices. In ‘Turn or Burn!’, ostensibly an exposition of Psalm 7. 12, preached on 7 December 1856, the **twenty-two-year-old** minister asked

of what avail is it to preach mercy unless they preach also the doom of the wicked ? And how shall we hope to effect the purpose of preaching unless we warn men that if they **turn** not, he will whet his sword?**?** I fear that in too many places the doctrine of future punishment is rejected, and laughed at as a fancy and a chimera; but the day will come when it shall be known to be a reality. (Spurgeon 1856-96, 2, 417-18)

Spurgeon’s mode of Evangelical apocalyptic faith was by no means a peripheral perspective: belief in what he calls ‘the doctrine of future punishment’ remained prevalent. Tennyson, by contrast, rejected the dogma of damnation wholeheartedly as an abhorrent distortion of good faith: in **Ricks’s** words, the poet’s ‘moral and spiritual constitution couldn’t stand it’; he also supported his friend, the Reverend F. D. Maurice who was ousted from his chair at King’s College, London for disputing the widespread creed of eternal torment as ‘superstitious’ (Ricks 2007, xxx-xxxi). **Maurice’s** controversial volume, *Theological Essays* (1853), is dedicated to Tennyson:

I have maintained in these Essays that a Theology which does not correspond to the deepest thoughts and feelings of human beings cannot be a true Theology. Your writings have taught me to enter into many of those thoughts and feelings. Will you forgive me the presumption of offering

you a book which at least acknowledges them and does them homage (Maurice 1853, v; cited in Wheeler, p. 409).

This explanation is indicative of the relatively new Poet Laureate's importance for theology, especially, in this case for risk-taking work which contests religious convention. Tennyson later wrote 'To the Rev. F. D. Maurice' in honour of the maligned theologian, partly in celebration of his role as Hallam Tennyson's godfather. The poem is an invitation to Maurice to visit the family home ('Come, when no graver cares employ,/ Godfather, come and see your boy', ll. 1-2) and one that emphasises unqualified welcome: 'Should all our churchmen foam in spite/ At you, so careful of the right,/ Yet one lay-hearth would give you welcome/ Take it and come to the Isle of Wight' (ll. 9-11). This gesture of hospitality is in radical contrast to the desolate authorized creed that seemed content with the view that God would choose to subject his own creation to unending torment. Ricks also cites draft lines from the Trinity Notebook:

With loathsome, loveless prate of Hell  
Each bigot makes his infidel,  
Claps Calvin in God's chair and bids us  
Honour the Devil and all is well (Ricks 2007, 505).

Section XLI of *In Memoriam* indirectly rejects the doctrine of eternal torment whilst expressing concern ('a spectral doubt', l. 19) about the possibility of reunion in an afterlife:

For tho' my nature rarely yields  
To that vague fear implied in death;  
Nor shudders at the gulfs beneath,  
The howlings from forgotten fields (ll. 13-16).

Tennyson's anxiety is not untypical of his era. Yet it is not the only way that either theology, or indeed *In Memoriam* as a whole, thinks of death and judgement. In his influential reappraisal of eschatology, *Theology of Hope* (originally published in 1967)

Jürgen Moltmann reflects on the ways in a fascination with the 'last day' has perpetuated a misleading division between this sense of eschatological hope and present reality:

Eschatology was long called the 'doctrine of the last things' or the 'doctrine of the end'. By these last things were meant events which will one day break upon man, history and the world at the end of time. They included the return of Christ in universal glory, the judgment of the world and the consummation of the kingdom, the general resurrection of the dead and the new creation of all things. These end events were to break into this world from somewhere beyond history, and to put an end to the history in which all things here live and move. But the relegating of these events to the 'last day' robbed them of their directive, uplifting and critical significance for all the days which are spent here, this side of the end, in history (Moltmann 1993, 16).

This form of eschatology - one in which the Adventist hope, encoded in St John's vision, breaks into quotidian reality - is at play in the work of a number of Tennyson's contemporaries. The rather strange ending of *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë, for example, is a conscious echo of the penultimate verse of Revelation in which St John Rivers, Jane's devout cousin, awaits his own death and cites his biblical namesake: "My Master," he says, "has forewarned me. Daily He announces more distinctly, - 'Surely I come quickly!' and hourly I more eagerly respond, - 'Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus!'" (Brontë 1897, n.p.). *In Memoriam* is an elegy of theological pain and uncertainty but one that because of, rather than despite, its honest recognition of earthly suffering, participates in a similar form of Adventist hope. It is framed by two poems - a prologue and epilogue - which are explicitly connected to eschatological expectation. Indeed, the opening poem, a late addition to the sequence written in 1849, addresses the Incarnation directly:

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 (Prologue, ll.1-4)

The repetition of 'faith' suggests both emphasis and uncertainty, with an allusion to 1 Peter 1.8 ('Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing') (Ricks 2007, 337). Similarly, in stanza six, like the author of the Epistle to the

Hebrews who describes faith as ‘the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen’ (11. 1), Tennyson’s speaker acknowledges ‘We have but faith: we cannot know;/For knowledge is of things we see;/ And yet we trust it comes from thee’ (ll. 21-3). The prologue makes a distinction between the transient wisdom of man and the eternal reality of God:

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.

Our little systems have their day;  
They have their day and cease to be:  
They are but broken lights of thee,  
And thou, O Lord, art more than they (Prologue, ll.13-20).

The admission of epistemological uncertainty underscores the dynamic nature of faith and hope in the poem: its spiritual orientation is not grounded in complacent piety but in a struggle to comprehend and to trust in a logic of love. It might be tempting, from a contemporary secular perspective, to think of the opening of *In Memoriam* with its request for divine mercy (‘Forgive these wild and wandering cries,/Confusions of a wasted youth/Forgive them where they fail in truth’, ll. 41-3) as a way of reassuring Christian readers and diverting attention from the bleak and sometimes brutal ways in which the poem as a whole tests the limits of belief in a sovereign, all-loving God. This would be to ignore the vital significance of theological language, Christian ritual and (sometimes anguished) individual acts of prayer that run throughout the elegy.

In his study of what, with an allusion to Benedict Anderson’s work, he memorably names ‘Christian imagined communities’, Joshua King identifies Tennyson as one of those poets who ‘contribute to the nineteenth-century tendency to identify faith with inwardness by presenting intuitions about God as if they were somehow innate to the soul

and beyond or below the reach of any specific creed' (King 2015, 7). King's reading of Tennyson's elegy critiques what he describes as the 'deceptive impression' that was influential 'among twentieth-century scholars: in modernizing nations, religion is inevitably banished from the public sphere to the realm of private opinion' (King 2015, 15). In contrast to readings that interpret the poet's 'appeal to interior, non-dogmatic faith', King emphasizes what he calls the poem's 'open secret, its convincing location of faith within the private soul through its appeal to public forms, religious and otherwise' (King 2015, 15). His argument emphasizes the vital link between the poem's interiorized 'faith', its non-doctrinaire iteration of spiritual experience with a shared language that means 'its communicability depends on a wide range of public allusions and shared forms—the Christian calendar; hymns and church bells; the Prayer Book and Bible; Christian typology represented as subjective insight; and a regular stanza and meter entangled in a thick net of public religious associations' (King 2015, 15). In an interpretation that may startle theologically-liberal and politically progressive twenty-first-century readers of Tennyson, King argues that

By relying on internalized public forms to validate intuitions of the private soul [. . .] *In Memoriam* ironically facilitated a vague British piety that could sanction imperial expansion, repression of political protest, and sacrifice of one's body for war and economic production as signs of faith in a sacred British community. In pointing to spiritual intuitions that supposedly eluded sectarian warfare, Tennyson's "New Christian Year" could for some inspire a nationalistic and aggressive form of British sanctity (King 2015, 15).

King's vital and illuminating line of argument about the political-ideological work with which the poem becomes complicit is not central to my reading of *In Memoriam* in this particular **essay**. However, his strong case regarding the ways in which the poem connects



apparently private spiritual experience with the discourses of public worship is crucial to the case I wish to make. Similarly, Kirstie Blair emphasizes the significance of liturgy in the poem: ‘Various evocations of formal worship impinge upon the mourner in *In Memoriam*, offering tentative possibilities for consolation and release’ (Blair 2012, 177). Blair identifies, for example, the communion in section X; the burial service in Section XVIII; Christmas bells in XXVIII and CIV-CVI and the marriage in the Epilogue but also ‘the most negative invocation of worship’ in LVI:

Man, her last work, who seem'd so fair,  
Such splendid purpose in his eyes,  
Who rolled the psalm to wintry skies,  
Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer  
(ll.9-12) (see Blair 2012, 178-9).

Both this section and its immediate predecessors feature a pained awareness of death everywhere that might resonate more with what Wheeler names ‘the disastrous end of things’ than with the promise of eschatological hope (199, 265). LIV expresses tentative ‘trust’ in the redemptive teleology of a meaningful, God ordered universe, with purpose embedded in all life forms:

Oh, 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,  
When God hath made the pile complete;  
  
That not a worm is cloven in vain;  
That not a moth with vain desire  
Is shrivell'd in a fruitless fire,  
Or but subserves another's gain (LIV, ll. 1-12)

The hope of resurrection, in section LV, is interrogated as a potential fantasy rather than a deeply held belief:

The wish, that of the living whole  
    No life may fail beyond the grave,  
    Derives it not from what we have  
The likest God within the soul?

Are God and Nature then at strife,  
    That Nature lends such evil dreams?  
    So careful of the type she seems,  
So careless of the single life (LV 1-8)

Isobel Armstrong notes that section LVI ‘begins by refuting the poem prior to it and challenging its argument [ . . . ] Section LV had retrieved comfort from the preservation of the Type but LVI abolishes this. Here Nature gendered as female is in conflict with a masculine God who may have been a fiction of the human species’ (Armstrong 2019, 243). The end of LVI is austere but not quite despairing: ‘What hope of answer, or redress?/ Behind the veil, behind the veil’ (ll. 27-8).

The spiritual pain of these sections is reframed, rather than mitigated, by other cantos in which the promise embodied by reminders of the death and resurrection of Christ punctuate the speaker’s mourning. Joshua King suggests that

The interweaving of ecclesiastical, domestic, seasonal, and personal calendars into a chord seemingly pulled through the central circle of the poet’s feelings reinforces the total impression of moving from the poet’s inward grief to inward faith, all the while making this motion feel collective (King 2015, 194).

Section CVI (‘Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky’) might, as Kirstie Blair notes, be ‘the most positive statement of faith in the poem’ (Blair 2012, 179). The sonorous tone of these New Year church bells signals another Adventist turn, one in which ‘old shapes of disease’, ‘the narrowing lust of gold’ and ‘the thousand wars of old’ are banished: ‘Ring in the thousand years of peace’ (ll. 25-8). The millenarian language suggests the possibility of renewal and the final stanza, like the poem’s prologue, locates its hope in a coming Christ:

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 (ll. 29-32)

The mutable mood of *In Memoriam* means that this exalted, hymn-like tone is not sustained in Section CVII ('It is the day when he was born,/ A bitter day that early sank/ Behind a purple frosty bank', ll. 1-3). Yet the sadness of this day, that is still kept '[w]ith festal cheer', does not undercut the abiding presence of hope in the poem as a whole (l.21). In the poem's epilogue, Tennyson returns, via the happy, if tinged with melancholy, occasion of a family marriage, to the language of Adventist expectation: neither grief nor Hallam have been forgotten ('Nor count me all to blame if I/ Conjecture of a stiller guest,/Perchance, perchance, among the rest,/And tho' in silence, wishing joy', ll. 85-8). The marriage is a foreshadowing of a future union, a connection between all creation and the divine mystery. Valerie Purton argues that '[t]he Christian view of the ideal Other is that officially espoused by Tennyson at the end of *In Memoriam*: in Christ, the Beloved is regained in grander form, beyond individuality' (Purton 2020, 111). The end of the poem is a statement of apocalyptic hope but one that is not determined by a desire for violent or destructive change:

Of those that, eye to eye, shall look  
    On knowledge; under whose command  
    Is Earth and Earth's, and in their hand  
Is Nature like an open book;

No longer half-akin to brute,  
    For all we thought and loved and did,  
    And hoped, and suffer'd, is but seed  
Of what in them is flower and fruit;

Whereof the man, that with me trod  
    This planet, was a noble type  
    Appearing ere the times were ripe,  
That friend of mine who lives in 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 (Epilogue, ll. 129-144)

In a striking reading of the of the final lines of the poem, Angela Leighton observes that to end 'with another intransitive verb, leaves its object still unreached, untouched' (2008, 73). The ending, in this sense, stands on a threshold, not yet resolved:

The verb 'moves' both closes and refuses to close. Its 'event' is no nearer, after all, but still 'far-off'. So Tennyson ends, not with God's or Hallam's love reached, but with the long effort to move towards it, possibly even to move it at all, through the thing he has so touchingly celebrated in all its forms: 'the whole creation' (Leighton 2008, 73).

We may or may not share Tennyson's belief in 'one far-off divine event/To which the whole creation moves' but popular narrative still seems to demand the hope of future restoration (ll. 143-4). This is a radical alternative to Spurgeon's 'Turn or Burn', one that rejects the punitive logic of damnation and favours a hope that creation will be transfigured by the love of God. These rival versions of apocalypse, of revelation and destruction, beginnings and endings, are points of connection between people of faith and sceptics who regard notions of prophecy as, at best, the product of intelligent human anticipation. Tennyson's apocalyptic legacy is, in part, his creation of a language for hopeful grief.

#### *Works Cited*

Armstrong, Isobel, 2019. *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*. Second Edition. London: Routledge.

Bebbington, D.W., 1989. *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*. London: Unwin Hyman.

Blair, Kirstie, 2012. *Form and Faith in Victorian Poetry and Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Batchelor, John, 2012. *Tennyson: To Strive, To Seek, To Find*. London: Chatto & Windus.

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*. London: Service & Paton, 1897.

Eagleton, Terry, 2018. *Hope Against Optimism*. New York: Yale (Ebook edition).

Fiddes, Paul S., 2000. *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Garbett, James, 1849. *Modern Philosophical Infidelity; or the Personality of God: A Sermon Preached before the University of Oxford on Sunday January 28th 1848*. London: Hatchard.

King, Joshua, 2015. *Imagined Spiritual Communities in Britain's Age of Print*. Ohio State University Press.

LaPorte, Charles, 2011. *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

Leighton, Angela, 2008. *On Form : Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mangina, Joseph L., 2010. *Revelation*. London: SCM Press.

Maxwell, Richard, 2009. 'Unnumbered polypi', *Victorian Poetry*, 47:1: 7-23.

Mills, Kevin, 2007. *Approaching Apocalypse: Unveiling Revelation in Victorian Writing*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press.

Moltmann, Jürgen, 1993. *Theology of Hope*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Moore, Jessie, 2017. 'The Kraken', *Supernatural Literature*, 3: *Monsters and Beasts*: 1647.

Purton, Valerie, 2020. 'Tennyson, Lacan, and the Raising of Lazarus' in *The Figure of Christ in the Long Nineteenth Century*, edited by Elizabeth Ludlow. Houndmills: Palgrave: 99-114.

Ricks, Christopher, 1966. 'Tennyson: "Armageddon" into "Timbuctoo"'. *The Modern Language Review*. 61.1: 23-24.

Ricks, Christopher, 1989. *Tennyson*. Second Edition. Berkley: University of California Press.

Ricks, Christopher, 2007. Editor. *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*. Harlow: Longman.

Ricks, Christopher, 2007. Editor. *Alfred Lord Tennyson: Selected Poems*. London: Penguin.

Spurgeon, Charles Haddon, 1856-96. *The New Park Street Pulpit and the Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, containing Sermons preached and Revised by the Rev. C.H. Spurgeon*, 42 vols. London: Alabaster, Passmore.

Tate, Andrew, 2001. 'Evangelical Certainty: Charles Spurgeon's "Calls to the Unconverted"'. In *Reinventing Christianity*, ed. by Linda Woodhead. Aldershot: Ashgate: 27-36.

Welch, James Donald, 1976. 'Tennyson's Landscapes of Time and a Reading of "The Kraken"'. *Victorian Poetry*. 14: 3: 197-204.

Wheeler, Michael, 1990. *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wheeler, Michael, 1999. *Ruskin's God*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wilson, Daniel, 1851. *A Revival of Spiritual Religion the only Effectual Remedy for the Dangers which now Threaten the Church of England*. London: Hatchard.

Wolffe, John, 1994. *God and Greater Britain: Religion and National life in Britain and Ireland 1843-1945*. London: Routledge.