

Analyse in some detail two of the following passages, discussing in what ways they are representative of their authors and of the Victorian period. Take account of such things as tone and style, and, where it seems appropriate, comment on any lines of comparison or contrast between the passages you have selected.

Standing in the midst of the grandeur of a Brazilian forest, Darwin once wrote in his journal, "it is not possible to give an adequate idea of the higher feelings of wonder, admiration and devotion which fill and elevate the mind"¹. Later, upon looking back, he remarked "I well remember my conviction that there is more in man than the mere breath of his body. But now the grandest scenes would not cause any such convictions and feelings to rise in my mind"².

This transition between one awareness of the world and another epitomises the struggle of the Victorian consciousness with religion. Both Tennyson and Hopkins were faced with serious and troubling doubts about their Christian faith. I will examine how each in turn responded to their concerns and I place this within the wider context of the Victorian crisis of faith. In doing so, I shall also analyse to what degree Tennyson's *In Memoriam* and Hopkins' *The Candle Indoors* are characteristic of their authors' work and their preoccupations.

Tennyson's *In Memoriam* was written over seventeen years and published in 1850, nine years before Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Nonetheless, it manages to address some of the principle concerns raised by the growing clamour of evolutionary thought. Chambers' *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, had been one of the larger waves to rock Victorian Christianity

1 ¹From extracts of Darwin's autobiographical writing; Harold Y. Vanderpool; *Darwin and Darwinism*; first edition; (USA; D. C. Heath and Company; 1973); p64.

2 ²Ibid.

in 1844, but the flood had long mounted eroding not simply of the sanctity of faith, but also the entire conception of the Victorian self-image. Lyell's *Principles of Geology* not only undermined the assumed Biblical truths about the age of the earth, but, by kindling the so called "uniformitarian-catastrophist"³ debate it confronted a whole way of thinking. In *The Victorian Crisis of Faith*⁴, Robert Young's essay⁵ explains that Lyell asked a question implicitly opposed to orthodox thought: "How, he asked, could science proceed unless the course of nature in the history of the earth was considered to be uniform, without miraculous catastrophic interventions?"⁶. Lyell found himself in a Gallilean position with respect to traditional Christian methodologies of thought, he struggled against the ingrained self-affirming bias of faith. How could these ideas be true if their logical extension contradicted the Yahweh, the self-authoring "I am" of God's Word? From the traditionalist perspective, these ideas involved thinking the unthinkable. Meanwhile, in Germany, historians such as Niebuhr, Strauss and Feuerbach were alarmingly applying a scientific methodology to the Bible thereby reducing it to a historical document to be analysed as any other - and shown to have factual discrepancies.⁷

British society in the Victorian age could scarce have been less psychologically prepared to deal with this barrage of new ideas. Its strong Christian foundations, its delicate notions of propriety, its proud advances in engineering skill, in its industrial prowess, its elevated ideal of civilised humanity as embodied in the proper Victorian gentleman - a stark contrast to the

3 ³ *The Victorian Crisis of Faith*; first edition; Anthony Sydmundson; (UK; Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; 1970); p15.

4 ⁴ Ibid.

5 ⁵ Robert M. Young; 'The Impact of Darwin on Conventional Thought'; *The Victorian Crisis of Faith*; first edition; Anthony Sydmundson; (UK; Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; 1970); pp. 13-36.

6 ⁶ Ibid.

7 ⁷ *The Victorian Crisis of Faith*; first edition; Anthony Sydmundson; (UK; Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; 1970); and 'Note on the New Science in Victorian England'; Department of English handout.

inferiority of the uncolonised savages which the Beagle's crew encountered⁸; all this was to receive what Young in his essay *The Impact of Darwin on Conventional Thought*⁹ describes as "the greatest single blow to man's self-esteem"¹⁰. It was to be told, with increasing credibility, that it was descended from the monkeys. Adam Sedgewick's review of Chamber's book shows the full atrocity of this assault:

If the book be true, the labours of sober induction are in vain; religion is a lie; human law is a mass of folly, and a base injustice; morality is moonshine; our labours for the black people of Africa were the works of madmen; and man and woman are only better beasts! When I read some pages of the foul book, it brought Swift's satire to mind.¹¹

Calmer counsels were at hand. Tennyson was a member of The Metaphysical Society, a forum for discussion which brought together "eminent thinkers, churchmen editors, men of affairs, writers and scientists of the period"¹² from 1869 to 1880. The diverse constituent elements of *In Memoriam* must partly be a result of its long gestation period, but the poem also demonstrates how Tennyson could not write an elegy to his beloved Hallam without reflecting upon mortality, and thus upon faith, thus upon science - such was the interplay of these themes in their contemporary prominence. Young elucidates how "the Metaphysical Society shows how highly integrated the debate in the nineteenth century was. The social and intellectual milieu in which these men moved extended beyond science, philosophy, and theology to include politics and literature"¹³. Tennyson's cast of mind has been described in terms such as "slow, ponderous, brooding"¹⁴ - and it is this quality of deliberating but inexorable progress which can be observed in *In Memoriam*, even within the extract - stanza

8 ⁸ Article on the Chilean natives abducted and forcibly assimilated by the crew of the Beagle; published in advance of a book concerning the events; *Independent on Sunday Magazine*; 27th February 2000.

9 ⁹ Robert M. Young; *Darwin's Metaphor: Nature's Place in Victorian Culture*; first edition; (UK; Cambridge University Press; 1985).

10 ¹⁰ *Ibid.*; p5.

11 ¹¹ *Ibid.*; p6.

12 ¹² *Ibid.*; p151.

13 ¹³ *Ibid.*; p192.

96. He is faced by the proposition that "doubt is devil-born" and his response is "I know not". Faced with this unknowable impasse, Tennyson progresses by means of anecdotal and allegorical reference to Hallam's life and to the Israelites at Mount Sinai¹⁵. It is by relating these seemingly irrelevant fragments that Tennyson is able to tease out the inspirations that doubt can be a spiritually healthy struggle and that darkness - and times of darkness - need not be associated with distance from God. In response to the knee-jerk reactionism of "a woman of simple faith"¹⁶ who condemns all doubt as "devil-born", Tennyson is arguing for a sensible examination of belief, a considered re-assessment; and for Tennyson such a process involves the accretion of experiential evidence - such as this witness of Hallam's mode of spiritual advancement - rather than of experimental evidence. It is as though in his early poem *The Kraken*¹⁷, Tennyson has laid out the mode of operation which he would employ to resolve one of the dominating questions of his later life: "unnumbered and enormous polypi / Winnow with giant arms the slumbering green"¹⁸. Tennyson advances by slowly shifting, sifting ideas in the depths of doubt. He does not reject natural selection out of hand, and this is tacitly acknowledged here. The woman he addresses apparently grows tearful at the sight of "drowning flies", and as her reactionary position on doubt is deconstructed, her sentimentality over the life of a fly is implicitly made more absurdly trivial. The implication

14 ¹⁴Introduction to Alfred, Lord Tennyson'; M. H. Abrams; *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*; sixth edition; (USA; W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.; 1993); volume two; p1055.

15 ¹⁵*The Holy Bible: New International Version*; second edition; (UK; Hodder and Stoughton; 1980); Exodus 19; pp. 76-77.

16 ¹⁶Notes to; *In Memoriam*; M. H. Abrams; *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*; sixth edition; (USA; W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.; 1993); volume two; p1119.

17 ¹⁷Tennyson, Alfred, Lord; *The Kraken*; M. H. Abrams; *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*; sixth edition; (USA; W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.; 1993); volume two; p1056.

18 ¹⁸*Ibid.*

is that to cling unquestioningly to a benevolent God is to sentimentally hide from certain aspects of that selective Nature which is "red in tooth and claw"¹⁹.

As much as Tennyson interrogates the ideal of a Christian faith in a divinely ordered world, as much as his doubts encroach upon and at times suffocate his faith, the fact that *In Memoriam* resolves itself towards a tempered realisation of a kind of peace provides suggestion of Tennyson's desire to believe. His hope is that this earnest striving will follow the example of Hallam whereby he "fought his doubts and gathered strength". His enduring persistence to write this poem over a lengthy tract of his life points toward a struggle which arguably Tennyson would not have engaged in were he not yearning for some salvaging of optimism. In this sense, the elegy evinces at its core Tennyson's idealism, which breaks through in works such as *Locksley Hall*, *The Golden Year*, *Ode*²⁰ and *Locksley Hall Sixty Years After*. The recurring leit-motif of these works is that of a belief in a coming time of peace and goodwill. Walters, in his study *Tennyson: Poet, Philosopher, Idealist*²¹, refers to these reiterative passages in those respective poems: "There the common-sense of most shall hold a fretful realm in awe, / And the kindly earth shall slumber, lapt in universal law", "Ah! when shall all men's good / Be each man's rule", "and ruling by obeying Nature's powers", "Earth at last a warless world, a single race, a silent tongue, / ... Robed in Universal harvest up to either pole she smiles"²². The theme is of such reinforced unity as to yield a single strain. Tennyson is at heart an idealist and an optimist. Thus while Tennyson uses Exodus to illustrate the possibility of communion with God even through "the darkness and the cloud",

19 ¹⁹From Stanza 56 of *In Memoriam*; Alfred, Lord Tennyson; *In Memoriam*; M. H. Abrams; *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*; sixth edition; (USA; W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.; 1993); volume two; p1105.

20 ²⁰Sung at the opening of the International Exhibition, but quoted here from: J. Cuming Walters; *Tennyson: Poet, Philosopher, Idealist*; first edition; (London; Kegan Paul, Trench, Truber & Co. Ltd.; 1893); p284.

21 ²¹J. Cuming Walters; *Tennyson: Poet, Philosopher, Idealist*; first edition; (London; Kegan Paul, Trench, Truber & Co. Ltd.; 1893); p284.

22 ²²I have conflated these quotations from their respective poems, retaining the order I listed them in; Ibid.

he falls to invoking the dormant metaphor of science as a contemporary false idol. Tennyson recalls "Israel made their gods of gold, / Although the trumpets blew so loud", even though this positioning of the Other of Christianity implicitly jaundices any impartial approach to a "subtle question". In an inversion of the way that Hallam would "not make his judgement blind" in accepting Christian creeds as gospel, Tennyson here demonstrates that he is not prepared to make his judgement against belief "blind" by resorting to drawing upon the Bible for ideological support of his innately optimistic position.

Tennyson's fondness for "simple strong Saxon words"²³ is visible in the unobtrusive vernacular of *In Memoriam*. It is a fondness mirrored by Hopkins' use of such words as "blear" (which derives from Middle English)²⁴ in *The Candle Indoors* and in *God's Grandeur*. *In Memoriam* displays none of the profusion of Hopkins' style. However, we can observe in the succinctness of Tennyson's words, a compression equivalent to the compound words of Hopkins; a compression which differs in that its effect is of simple expression. Walters tells us of how particularly in the revision of earlier volumes, "for the sake of compactness all words with Tennyson are contracted as much as possible. He was no lover of polysyllables and sesquipedalian adjectives"²⁵. Charles Kingsley's response to the rhyming structure of *In Memoriam* was that "the mournful minor rhyme of each first and fourth line always leads the ear to expect something beyond, and enables the poet's thoughts to wander sadly on"²⁶; and the same can be said of the ABBA form of *The Candle Indoors*, although its shorter final two stanzas give an impression more argumentative and didactically foreclosed than the four-line

23 ²³ J. Cuming Walters; *Tennyson: Poet, Philosopher, Idealist*, first edition; (London; Kegan Paul, Trench, Truber & Co. Ltd.; 1893); p278.

24 ²⁴ *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*; J. B. Sykes; seventh edition; (UK; Clarendon Press; 1982); p94.

25 ²⁵ J. Cuming Walters; *Tennyson: Poet, Philosopher, Idealist*, first edition; (London; Kegan Paul, Trench, Truber & Co. Ltd.; 1893); p278.

26 ²⁶ Quoted here from *Ibid.*; p289.

verses. Tennyson's direction of this speech to the woman with "light-blue eyes" who reportedly criticises doubt, gives it the vestiges of the dramatic monologue form which Tennyson used in *Ulysses*. In the same way, in Hopkins' *The Candle Indoors*, we are unsure as to exactly who this voice is addressing, who it is that is bid to "come home", and in this respect we can mark a resemblance to the Victorian form of dramatic monologue as used by Browning and Tennyson. As the editor of the selection of Hopkins' poems in *The Norton Anthology* writes, "Like the mad speakers of so many Victorian dramatic monologues, he cannot escape a world solely of his own imagining"²⁷.

"What hinders?" is the question that Hopkins asks of himself and of others in *The Candle Indoors*. Why is it that he "plod[s] wondering" about the faith of others, what stops him from coming "indoors", from coming "home"? We can observe a displacement, a projection of Hopkins' anxieties about his own faith onto the universalised "Jessy or Jack" whom he imagines in an anonymous "window". When he enunciates "come you indoors, come home; your fading fire / Mend first", it is ambiguous as to whether Hopkins is telling himself to resolve his "fading fire" of guttering faith, or whether he is imploring the declining congregations of the age to return to church. In his own life, Hopkins seems to anticipate his Tertianship - the time two years from now when he will retreat from this outside existence, this plodding of the night, to devote himself "once more to a secluded life of prayer, meditation and reconsideration of the ideals of the Society"²⁸. A key part of the St. Ignatian programme, the Tertianship served as a time of reflection for the Jesuit priest upon the "several years of study or of active ministry"²⁹ which Hopkins was here carrying out until

27 ²⁷Introduction to Gerard Manley Hopkins'; M. H. Abrams; *The Norton Anthology of English Literature; sixth edition; (USA; W. Norton & Company, Inc.; 1993); volume two; p1546.*

28 ²⁸Pick, John; *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Priest and Poet*; second edition; (UK; Oxford University Press; 1966); p98.

29 ²⁹*Ibid*; pp. 97-98.

1881. This forthcoming seclusion is suggested by the words "Come you indoors, come home; your fading fire / Mend first and vital candle in close heart's vault". In this light, "what hinders" is his creeping doubts, he cannot "come home" on this night or in his religious discipline until he has resolved the insecurity which has him "cast by conscience out".

Although in this poem there is none of that glorifying lyricism of the natural world so widely celebrated in Hopkins' early work³⁰ - no depictions of a natural order bathed in flaming glory which implicitly sings praises to God, Hopkins yet still retains his evangelical tone. The dragonflies which "draw flame" in *As Kingfishers Catch Fire* are no more, the *Binsey Poplars* which "quenched in leaves the leaping sun" have long since been felled, *The Windhover's* "Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then" has, like so much of *God's Grandeur*, no dazzling presence in this poem. It is as though "the grandeur of God" which "will flame out, like shining from shook foil"³¹ has become dulled. All that remains in this poem is a candle in someone else's house. A small light of traditionally religious significance in epitomising hope, which burns on beyond the glass. However, even despite its small light, and perhaps even because of this, Hopkins' has not abandoned his didactic spiritual address. A hope that the transcendental vision communicated in his poetry could shed scales from the eyes of others may have had a part in his decision to submit his work to the Jesuit magazine *The Month*³². In *Pied Beauty* he writes: "He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change: / Praise him"³³. This "Praise him" seems consistently to be the softly-spoken and inevitably reached conclusion of Hopkins' early optimistic effusions, and whether it be spoken for

30 ³⁰ Taken here from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*; M. H. Abrams; sixth edition; (USA; W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.; 1993); volume two.

31 ³¹ Ibid. p1546.

32 ³² McChesney, Donald; *A Hopkins Commentary*; first edition; (UK; University of London Press Ltd.; 1968); p33.

33 ³³ *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*; M. H. Abrams; sixth edition; (USA; W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.; 1993); volume two; p1548.

himself or for others to overhear, it finds an echo in *The Candle Indoors*, albeit proportionally diminished with the glory of the luminescence. Whether for himself or for his world it is not clear, but Hopkins here is still evangelising.

Hopkins' sensibility struggles to find its own light within the "blear-all" of his age. Hopkins was a man of high personal standards. He was a man who McChesney describes as suffering by "the unbending tyranny of his ideals"³⁴; A man of legalistic religious integrity, a man prepared to relinquish and disdain sensual pleasure, a man whose abhorrence of dirt tended towards a neurotic snobbery³⁵. As the improvement of the Victorian age transformed and modernised the world around him, Hopkins was embarked upon an inner pilgrimage of self-improvement along the severe lines of the St. Ignacias order - a training made stricter by his rigorously self-disciplined application: "Hopkins strove with fearful rigor to obey this regime to the letter"³⁶. We can see this harsh self-criticism present in *The Candle Indoors* - it bears the stamp of his regimented cast of mind. Hopkins pounces upon his own doubt, demanding of himself "Are you that ... spendsavour salt" and recalling Jesus' words in Matthew 7:4, "How can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?"³⁷. Faith is so intrinsic to his evaluation of worth that when he feels it crumble, his self-esteem is dealt a sharp blow - he would consider himself in Gospel phraseology as like salt "that loses its saltiness"³⁸ - "It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men"³⁹. This self-admonition can be witnessed here

34 ³⁴McChesney, Donald; *A Hopkins Commentary*; first edition; (UK; University of London Press Ltd.; 1968); p147.

35 ³⁵From Lecture given: Hanley, Keith; 'Hopkins' Poetry'; 14th March 2000; Lancaster University.

36 ³⁶McChesney, Donald; *A Hopkins Commentary*; first edition; (UK; University of London Press Ltd.; 1968); p147.

37 ³⁷*The Holy Bible: New International Version*; second edition; (UK; Hodder and Stoughton; 1980); Matthew 7: 4; p971.

38 ³⁸*The Holy Bible: New International Version*; second edition; (UK; Hodder and Stoughton; 1980); Matthew 5:13; p969.

39 ³⁹Ibid.

as an early imprint of that key-note of his terrible sonnets, a self-doubt which culminates to an extreme degree in Hopkins' private notes of 1 January 1888. Here Hopkins wrote:

What is my wretched life? Five wasted years almost have passed in Ireland. I am ashamed of the little I have done, of my waste of time, although my helplessness and weakness is such that I could scarcely do otherwise ... All my undertakings miscarry: I am like a straining eunuch.⁴⁰

That Hopkins is looking through the window at this conjectured couple sharing the candle

which "puts blissful back" the night he plods alone, is emblematic of the mental outlook, and

perhaps the social reality of Hopkins' life. Hopkins here, is the outsider. In a poem found

after his death but written four years previously in 1885, Hopkins' titular surmise is that *To*

*seem the stranger lies my lot, my life*⁴¹. McChesney observes that "Hopkins had always been

"the stranger", curiously remote from himself and from his environment, and frequently at

frustrating odds with both"⁴².

Hopkins' linguistically experimental poetry is uncharacteristic of the Victorian period. The

lucidity of his flowing-distinct style is more abundantly visible in his earlier poems than it is

in *The Candle Indoors*. Yet the alliteration, if not the assiduous assonance with which

Hopkins is commonly associated, does make its presence felt in the more lyrical moments of

the first stanza, where "to-fro tender trambeams truckle at the eye". Although "blear-all" and

"spendsavour" are examples of Hopkins' techniques of compounding and conflating words;

the focus of this poem is not conducive to the exploration of inscape or the exploitation of

instress, because from the end of the first stanza it shifts into the more discursive, prosaic

voice of the "terrible sonnets". Hopkins' use of his system of sprung rhythm contributes

irregular stresses to the irregular number of syllables in each line of this sonnet, and carries

40 ⁴⁰Quoted here from McChesney, Donald; *A Hopkins Commentary*; first edition; (UK; University of London Press Ltd.; 1968); p178.

41 ⁴¹Ibid. p155.

42 ⁴²Ibid.

the lilting tension of this poem in "counterpoint"⁴³ to its natural rhythm. The stress in the second stanza, which Hopkins has added onto the second syllable of the word "aggrandise" is compounded by the preceding pause denoted by the forward slash, and thus Hopkins emphasises in the very structure of the poem, the importance he confers upon aggrandising God.

To conclude, the Victorian understanding of man's place in the world was thrown into disarray by developments in the fields of biology, geology and historiography. Whereas Tennyson was prepared to explore his doubts in the idealistic hope that his struggle would make "a stronger faith his own", Hopkins the Jesuit priest chastened his doubts with harsh self-criticism. Whereas Tennyson found reassuringly that there was darkness even at the top of Mount Sinai, Hopkins grasped in terror for the texts that accused him of hypocritical weakness. And whereas Tennyson's development was that of gradual accretion, Hopkins' characteristically relied upon an anxiously straining dogmatism, both in their styles of poetry and in their approaches to faith.

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