

**-THE NATIONAL SPIRIT OF TENNYSON'S POETRY-**

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-INTRODUCTION-

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The patriotic poet praises the deeds, past and present of a nation, but the range of his genius is much narrower than that of the national poet, whose life and work is permeated with devotion to the ideals of a nation. The poetry of Tennyson, more than that of any other British poet is devoted to the portrayal of the ideals of his nation. He is not only patriotic, he is national. This character is stamped on all the poems he wrote, all are devoted to the British ideals, such ideals as freedom, moderation, attachment to tradition, reverence for duty, and morality. All his readers and critics have recognized this fact and it is mentioned, although only indirectly, in all the critical writings on Tennyson's work. "The ideals of the state call forth Tennyson's passionate devotion, and often stir his imagination into the creation of fervent beauty" (a)

Great as is the versatility of Tennyson's genius, there is one voice that seems to dominate all others, the obligato, as it were, of his music, and this is an English voice. In a poem, written at the age of nineteen, which he later included in his drama "The Foresters" he struck the keynote of his whole work.

"There is no land like England  
Where'er the light of day be;  
There is no heart like English hearts  
Such hearts of oak as they be.

There is no land like England  
Where'er the light of day be;  
There are no men like Englishmen  
So tall and bold as they be."

(The Foresters-Act II. Sc 1.)

Tennyson was essentially an Englishman with the qualities that England loves, his whole life as well as his character is English, and his verse reflects the characteristics of the man.

(a) L. E. Gates - Studies and Appreciations, p. 63.

I. THE MAN AND HIS TIME.

## (A) Early Influences.

In order to understand the work of any author, it is necessary to know something of his life, character and the conditions of the age in which he lived. There were many influences in Tennyson's life which conspired to make him a national poet. He was born in an Anglican rectory in Lincolnshire, here he spent his childhood, and here he first felt the stirrings of his poetic genius. "There is something typical of the heart of England in his birth and childhood." (a) His clerical father early instilled into his mind a reverence for ancient traditions and a pride in the achievements of his country. "All that is seemly, gracious and refined in the life of the English gentry and the English Church was gathered up in the stock from which he sprung and enfolded in the home of his early years. The same influences were around him at the University, where he lived in an atmosphere of noble memories and of liberal thought, amid a group of kindred spirits with kindred tastes." (b) The influences of his home and the surroundings of his youth, in fact his whole environment, have had an effect on his poetry.

While his preliminary education was conducted for the most part by his father, his university training was received at the very English University of Cambridge, which had at that time a liberal tendency and which was being influenced by modern thought. A group of exceptionally clever young men, banded together as the "Apostles", took a keen interest in the new ideas of liberty and tolerance. Tennyson's association with this group, constituted one of the strongest influences which made him the typical poet of his age, for from them he received his interest in the political problems of the day. Although he gained but little from the formal teaching given at Cambridge, yet his residence there strengthened him and fused his patriotism with his poetry.

## (B) Political Situation.

It is essential in a study of Tennyson to understand the England of his day, the Victorian Age which he so exactly covers and represents. It was during his childhood that England was engaged in the final struggle with Napoleon

(a)-P.H.More - Tennyson - Shelburne Essays p 64.-

(b)-W.W.McCallum - Tennyson's Idylls of the King and Arthurian Story- p 291. -

in which the world despot was overthrown. The close of the reign of George III. and the reigns of the two succeeding kings were troublesome times in England, when the country was seething with suppressed agitation. The early part of the reign of Victoria was occupied with much political excitement, caused by many drastic reforms at home and wars abroad. England herself was engaged in the Crimean War and in the Indian Mutiny, while the nations of Europe were in the throes of dreadful combat with each other. It was a thrilling age everywhere, filled with exciting struggles and important events, and at this time England particularly needed exhortation and counsel. There was need of someone to pour oil on the troubled waters, a man of moderation such as could not be found among the many great political leaders and reformers of the time. Such a man was Tennyson and he spoke from the realm of literature, not that of politics. He became the acknowledged spokesman, the leader of the people, through that long period of transition.

Thus it was but fitting that he should become Poet

Laureate and in this capacity he achieved an unrivalled popularity. He was widely read by all classes of people, perhaps because he expressed the ideas of the majority of Englishmen, and gave a breadth and freshness of outlook upon all political, social and moral questions. He expressed the thoughts and feelings, the moral and intellectual strivings of the age, becoming its chief representative. He became the exponent of the feelings, thoughts, and actions of that period of national life, so that future historians will turn to him for the most complete poetic exposition of this century.

(c) Religious Faith.

On questions of religion, as well as on social and political questions, was Tennyson the spokesman of his age. His home was an English parsonage so that early in life the Church of England with its historical traditions placed its spell on his imagination. "Throughout Tennyson's work there runs a certain Church of England strain. Tennyson was a very intense Englishman and all the better for it. Like many another of her greater sons, it was the Church as an element in the national life bound up with the hearts and homes of long generations, symbolizing man's aspirations after forgiveness, vision and immortality that he loved." (a) While he never allowed himself to be bound down by the

(a)- Chapman English Literature and Religion.

authority of article or creed yet, unlike Browning, he did not become a non-conformist, notwithstanding the unsettled beliefs of his generation. The discoveries of Darwin, coupled with other startling revelations in the field of science, conflicted with the established creeds, under-mining the faith of the people and leaving them to flounder in a sea of doubt. In "In Memoriam" Tennyson established the minimum of faith which is necessary to life, revealing it in the first stanza.

"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;"

He did not separate religion from science, but reconciled the one to the other by his vision of a Father within the law of Evolution, Who controls our apparently indefinite progress, towards that eternal state when there will be compensation for the waste and sacrifice of the present.

He not only expressed the sentiment of his age but rendered a magnificent service, if not in entirely dispelling the doubts, at least in the establishing for the doubter, the basis of a faith by which he can face untroubled, the mysteries of life, death, and an unknown future.

#### (D) Character.

In spite of his wide popularity, and his great influence in national life, Tennyson was one of the most unassuming and modest of men. He took little active part in public life although he gave much thought to it. He preferred the secluded country life of an English gentleman. He exemplifies that love of privacy and that shyness which are typical English traits, living almost his whole life in the "Haunts of ancient peace". (The Palace of Art) Like the average Englishman he looked upon his home as his castle, and it was difficult to lure him from it, even by the delights of foreign countries. Tennyson travelled little, making but one trip to the Continent. His character is made up of essentially English traits. "I find Tennyson peculiarly and completely English in his cast of thought. He is distinguished in the highest degree by what I regard as the dominant English characteristic, reverence for duty as the Supreme law of life; the subordination of all the ideals to the moral law." (a) He was simple and sincere, devoid

(a)- C.W.Moultain, Literary Criticism, p 109.

(5)

of any vanity, always a man of the people. When he was made a baronet his constant fear was of slighting his old friends on account of his short-sightedness, giving the impression of a pride of station or a conceit of wealth.

## II. POET OF ENGLISH LIFE AND SCENES.

Tennyson was pre-eminently an English gentleman with the characteristics that England loves, who wrote poetry filled with the spirit of England. This poetry is replete with pictures of his own environment, of the people, the habits and customs of England. "He belongs to the class of poets who strike their roots deep in their native soil." (a) In comparison with Burns, the poet of the Scottish cottage, he may be called the poet of the English hearth, while if the cosmopolitan sympathies of Browning are lacking, he touches many aspects of English life which his great rival ignored. In Tennyson "The charm is special and unique, it is made up of many parts, the soft domestic landscapes, the evidence on every hand of rich, ordered, long established civilization, the historical and literary associations, what the well attuned observer feels from without, Tennyson the son of the soil feels from within, his poetry is steeped in it and moves in a pure fine atmosphere of beauty, of dignity, of elevated thought, of noble emotion." (b) Thackeray's daughter, a true Englishwoman says of him, "One must be English born, I think, to know how English is the spell which this great enchanter casts over us, the very spirit of the land descends upon us, as the visions he evokes come closing round, whether it is the moated grange he shows us, or Locklesley Hall, that in the distance overlooks the sandy tracts, or Dora standing in the corn, or the sight of the brimming wave that swings through quiet meadows round the mill, it is all home in its sweetest, broadest aspect," (c) But those who have not seen England and are not English born have no difficulty in recognizing the very English spirit of Tennyson from what they have heard or read of England.

### (A) His Landscapes.

His poetry abounds in lovely intimate landscapes, peculiar to his native land, landscapes filled with homes, and dewy pastures, and full foliaged trees. He shows a "Home-like love for a land of wide horizons, and low skies fringed with humble hills such as he saw continually in the fen country, that which had endeared itself to him for years, which, amid a thousand varieties of aspect, had unity of sentiment, the landscape of Lincolnshire, the fens and the meres and the sea; the landscapes of Surrey, Kent, Hampshire and of the Isle of Wight; of the chalk and sandstone - this he did to perfection." (d)

- (a)- E.L. Carey - Tennyson - His Homes, his friends and his work, p  
 (b)- A. MacMechan - Alfred Tennyson- University Magazine, Feb. 1908, pp. 57.  
 (c)- Mrs Ritchie - ,Records of Tennyson, Ruskin and Browning, p 26  
 (d)- Stopford A. Brooke - His Art & Relation to Modern Life- Vol II.p 83.



He is most pleasing when he paints his native land but there is a noticeable restraint when he tries to deal with foreign countries. This is particularly striking in his poems "Mariana" and "Mariana in the South" the poem on the English being much superior to the foreign one. In the "Palace of Art" many good pictures of different countries are given, but they are not his best, until he speaks of England the spirit is lacking.

"And on an English home - grey twilight pour's  
On dewy pastures, dewy trees,  
Softer than sleep - all things in order stored,  
A haunt of ancient peace."  
("Palace of Art")

The last line is a strikingly felicitous description of an English country home, a home that he loved, and this love inspired him to his best. It is a remarkable fact that, although his foreign landscapes are not good, yet those he invented out of his imagination are very successful.

To a Canadian much of Tennyson's scenery is strange and unfamiliar, as are also the birds and flowers of the English meadows and woods. Here, the note of the cuckoo, the carol of the lark, and the music of the nightingale are never heard, but they were very familiar to Tennyson, whose birthplace was Lincolnshire, often called the aviary of England, because of the great variety of birds found there. Here, no less rare than the birds are such flowers as the daisy, the primrose, and the daffodil, which grow in such profusion in England, even, "The smell of violets hidden in the green" ("A Dream of Fair Women") is foreign to us as our violets have no perfume.

In the same way all the scenes of Tennyson's poetry are peculiarly English " 'Mariana', 'The Dying Swan', and the 'May Queen', are brimming over with reminiscences of Lincolnshire, Lincolnshire landscape, Lincolnshire skyscape, and Lincolnshire wild flowers." (a) The grange as Tennyson describes it still exists in England -

"Till cold winds wake the gray-eyed morn  
About the lovely moated grange."  
("Mariana")

"On either side the river lie  
Long fields of barley and of rye  
That clothe the wold and meet the sky;"  
("Lady of Shalott")

"This is a picture of England that will stand after the world has been re-afforested for shall we say a thousand peers? or turned into black country to enrich ten thousand plutocrats or cut up into a million snippets as small holdings for the rest of us who are neither peers nor plutocrats." (b)

- (a) - Rawnsley - Reminiscences of the Tennysons, p 195  
(b) - Rawnsley - Reminiscences of the Tennysons, p 289.