

"Crossing the Bar"

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Robert F. Fleissner begins his "Grace Note: The Manuscript Evidence for a Christological 'Crossing the Bar'" with a call for a "closer reading of the manuscripts of the poem" as a guide to interpretation. He then cites the early version reproduced by photostat in my *Tennyson* (1960), but he makes no use of its "evidence," nor indeed offers any reason to believe that he has even seen it, for his reference to my book comes only at second hand from a 1963 note by Paul F. Baum regretting that the published text seems to him in some respects inferior to that early draft. Despite his demand for manuscript study, Fleissner draws only on the final version, of which he offers his own odd typescript, based on his reading of a facsimile obtained from the Tennyson Research Centre at Lincoln.

As "evidence" for his Christological "Crossing the Bar," Fleissner renders four ampersands in the manuscript not by *ands* but by plus signs (+), which he regards as encoded signs of the Cross. He admits to not having checked any other Tennyson poetic manuscript and so to having no notion of how frequently the poet made use of the ampersand in either religious or secular contexts. All Tennyson manuscripts, however, are available in the edition assembled by Christopher Ricks and Aidan Day in thirty-one volumes, published by Garland, 1989-1993. I have examined this great archive and have found, as I expected, Tennyson's use of the ampersand habitual throughout his career. There are only two extant versions of "Crossing the Bar," the Harvard manuscript (which I reproduced in 1960) and the final manuscript from Trinity

*Reference: Robert F. Fleissner, "Grace Note: The Manuscript Evidence for a Christological 'Crossing the Bar,'" *Connotations* 5.1 (1995/96): 23-33.

College, Cambridge. Each uses the ampersand four times, and neither gives the slightest warrant for reading that symbol as a cross or plus sign. The manuscript "evidence" to which Fleissner appeals, therefore, surely does not support his argument. And I know indeed of no instance elsewhere in English literature where an ampersand connotes a cross.

Nonetheless, Fleissner finds similar Christological significance in the spelling "crost" (in the last line of the poem), which provides in his argument "the crucial crossed 't.'" (In this connection he complains that the modern texts he has used "curiously" replace "crost" with "crossed," which to him has less spiritual value. Yet a quick check of my own Tennyson shelf shows eleven recent editors, including Christopher Ricks in his definitive text, still preferring "crost," though none comments on the poet's crossed "t." Tennyson himself used "crost" in a number of other poems; but "crossed" to denote the religious gesture, as in "The Lady of Shalott," where the knights "crossed themselves for fear.")

With such visual clues as "evidence," Fleissner extends his argument. He now detects in the crossing-boat a "subliminal" linkage with the biblical Ark, the symbol of the Church, and finds the association reinforced by the rhymes *dark* and *embark* and the assonantal recurrence elsewhere of the *ar* sound. The steersman Noah hence becomes "a type of the Christ-Peter-Pilot fusion." Moreover, the actual crossing of the boat at right angles over the sandbar seems to trace the pattern of a cross, "a cruciform image," and that in turn readily recalls the Crucifixion. The moaning of the bar then evokes the suffering of the crucified Christ, and the proscription of future moaning may signify "the true Christian's stalwart obligation to bear his own cross daily and without complaint."

To our likely demur that Tennyson would not have "condoned so close a reading," Fleissner replies that "an author's own overt signification or intent is . . . of lesser import than that of inner or archetypal meaning—or especially that of divine intent, presuming that that can be determined." But not all readers will presume to make that determination or even, on a far lower level, to fathom the poet's unconscious motivation. I do not question the strong religious overtone of "Crossing the Bar" or the identification of the Pilot with a figure of the Divinity, perhaps best to be defined in Tennyson's own general terms as "That Divine and Unseen Who is always guiding us" (*Memoir*, II,

376, a source which Fleissner fails to consider). But I am not convinced that what seems to me to be a labored search for some hidden secret code, "clandestine" or "subliminal," has provided any substantial "evidence" for a dogmatically Christological reading of "Crossing the Bar."

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