

Grace Note: The Manuscript Evidence for a Christological "Crossing the Bar"

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The purpose of this essay is to corroborate the critical verdict that the familiar "Pilot" image in Tennyson's popular eschatological lyric "Crossing the Bar" bears directly on Christ as head of the Church, not merely upon his principal deputy, Peter. Thus, the navigational image has its main literary antecedent plausibly enough in the Miltonic "Pilot" of *Lycidas* (l. 109), although the net effect of a general metaphysical abstraction is operative as well. In any event, the full meaning of the "Grace" in the essay's title is meant to convey an ecclesiastical and not merely tonal aura. On yet another level, the "Note" points in symbolic and paronomastic terms to the need for further archival research, specifically for closer reading of the manuscripts of the poem and determining how then that should affect our overall interpretation. Thereby an early draft published by Jerome Hamilton Buckley in his *Tennyson*¹ reveals changes in several details from the final text, ones which in some key respects, according to Paul F. Baum, are "retrograde" (116).

When the question of whether Tennyson's Pilot was either Peter or the Savior Himself was first registered in print,² the main notion submitted was that the guiding light, in the person of the navigator, derived from the most familiar previous allusion of this kind in English poetry, namely that in Milton's elegy, to "the Pilot of the *Galilean lake*" (according to the original type-setting). A certain precedent for such a link is to be found in Dryden's own adaptation of the Miltonic image in *The Hind and the Panther* ("the same vessel which our Saviour bore / Himself the pilot" [131-32]), Dryden having been noticeably indebted to Milton already elsewhere, as is common knowledge.

But that dual seventeenth-century association did not fully convince certain readers, those who principally felt that Milton's *Pilot*, when conceived of as Christ rather than as His disciple Peter, turned out to be a critical identification simply of later vintage. Yet the standard or orthodox Christian conception of the fisherman Peter being what he was only through the Savior, who compared His followers to fishers (Mark 1:17) (even as Peter literally had to gather seafood), validates such a view and even in terms of the earliest references in English literature—regardless of whether the Puritan in Milton would have been fully aware of this. Hence, in support of such a proposition, I later adduced the notion in print that hidden iconographic symbolism provided a fitting key: as a secretive "Cross-" symbol appears already, paronomastically, in the first syllable and in the very title-play of the lyric, so in the final line a common British spelling ("crost") fulfills what Tennyson's titular label already implies (cf. the manuscript as printed below). In short, the crossing of the "t" in this somewhat antiquated British orthography (as opposed to the more common, modern variant of "crossed") inaugurates the implicit rite of making a "sacramental" effect, namely that of the Sign of the Cross.³ Hence the textual reading can lead to a promising and reverent subtextual meaning.

Curiously enough, though, the earlier spelling of "crost" is not reflected in modern texts I have used (though the manuscript spelling does appear in *Demeter, and Other Poems* [1889]), nor for that matter even in that of a familiar Protestant hymn which is clearly based on the lyric. The rationale evident in the last case is that the slightly longer orthography of the modern past-tense form can lend itself more easily to prolonged utterance at the hymn's finale, thereby producing, as it were, almost a quasi-mystical effect of its own. To the obvious contention that Tennyson himself might not have readily condoned so close a reading, a counter-argument can now be adduced: that an author's own overt signification or intent is, in universal terms, of lesser import than that of inner or archetypal meaning—or especially that of divine intent itself, presuming that that can be determined. In any event, the author's true signification could well have been subliminal in this case as well. The relevance of the common critical term *Mehrdeutigkeit*, or *pluri-signification*,⁴ applies here. In any event, the British "crost" spelling works

very nicely, not merely because it fits neatly into place but because it conveys further, relevant spiritual meaning by implication.

More evidence worth citing in support of the final "crost" manuscript spelling as textually worthy of being once again transcribed can be found in the greater spontaneous intensity it can generate—*intensity* itself being such a key term in Tennyson criticism. Because this Victorian Poet Laureate, in his late Romantic fervor, became an acclaimed follower of such a recognizably intense Romantic as Keats, let us closely correlate here yet another line, again, it so happens, a final one. Keats's lyric "Why Did I Laugh Tonight? No Voice Will Tell" contains a likewise crucial spelling at the tail end, namely in terms of the intense effect of death transmogrified as life's "high mead." In a recent article, Eve Leoff has contended that the original textual spelling, "mead" (rather than the more commonly used variant form, "meed"), is in fact preferable and not merely as an acceptable variant, but because it better describes "the intensity of the experience Death brings," whereby it relates to the poet's referring also to an "endless fountain of immortal drink" in his *Endymion* (23), likewise to the plural form ("meads") in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" (13), and finally to "the bedded grass [mead] of 'Ode to Psyche' where the poet discovers Cupid and Psyche" (121). Leoff made reference then, in passing, to the same term as having reverberated, once more, in Milton.⁵

The manuscript of the final version of "Crossing the Bar" in the Tennyson Research Centre in Lincoln, England, contains some further textual evidence in favor of the "crossing effect" of the "t" at the end as being inherently symbolic of making the sign of the Christian cross, not necessarily in any specific denominational sense, though some sort of Catholic usage stands out. The additional proof in the manuscript is in its frequent use of a scribal form of the ampersand device, which, in terms of strict paleography at least, offers in context the subtle nuance of further, even complementary, small cross effects. That scribal device occurs no less than four times in the written text: already in the opening line and then once in each of the succeeding stanzas as if serving as a reminder there. Hence the final effect of the crucial crossed "t" at the tail end actually amplifies the hidden symbolic overtones as witnessed earlier. Such outspoken reverberation of the ampersand amounts to more

than mere circumstantial proof, pictorial though the net effect may be. Because I have not had the privilege of examining Tennyson's other manuscripts in detail, I am unable to determine whether his use of the ampersand was particularly characteristic of his style in general, whereas it does pointedly stand out here, as the published transcript from the Tennyson Research Centre reveals. True, I did gain access to *some* archival material at Cornell University whereby I learned how Tennyson was prone to the use of this device in a short letter from the Isle of Wight (the setting of the poem) to Jennie McGraw Fiske (undated), the transcription of a four-line lyric at the end containing another example thereof. (I cite this with the permission of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.) But that hardly dispells the value of the particular usage in "Crossing the Bar."

Other, more clandestine hints of the cruciform image also emerge. For example, the third line, "And may there be no moaning of the bar," presents a subliminal resonance, one pointing not only to a ship crossing the perilous sandbar, that being the obvious occasion of the poem (at least in its final form), but also to simply crossing a vertical in forming a cruciform image. The restraint related to "moaning" in the line could then reflect on the physical suffering commonly associated with the Crucifixion yet, in context, also point therewith to the true Christian's stalwart obligation to bear his own cross daily and without complaint. Such a clear-cut, neo-Stoical maxim (in more obvious Tennysonian terms) is then reiterated, clearly enough, in stanza three.

More intriguingly yet, the term "bourne" in the manuscript (13) represents still a further echo, but this time not from Tennyson's own work (or from Milton); it goes further back and even to Shakespeare, specifically to Hamlet's most popular soliloquy, notably the following lines which point to his fundamental predicament:

But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered Countrey, from whose Borne
No Traveller returns, Puzels the will . . . (3.1.78-80)⁶

Because Tennyson is known for having been poetically enraptured with Shakespeare, referring to him so often that he is even, again in somewhat

picturesque terms, frequently cited for having died with a finger deftly inserted in the playwright's *Works*,⁷ we can virtually imagine how he "anticipated" his own demise with a distinctive echo in his requiem, for he had insisted that "Crossing the Bar" should always be positioned at the very end of his collected poems in all editions and for obvious symbolic reasons.⁸

On the surface, true, such a Hamletian recollection may appear to detract from a more specifically Christian nuance in this poetic context, for clearly the very problematic point of the famed soliloquy is that the Danish Prince has apparently witnessed the Ghost of his father (unless the specter is a devil in disguise), has therefore presumably confronted a returnee from the land of the dead.⁹ So why should he so soon thereafter have recourse to denying any such spiritual message? Was he out of his mind?

Certainly one standard answer has been that what he, in truth, implies is that no traveler definitely returns *for good* from the Land Beyond. Yet further exegesis prompts the verdict that the speaker cannot make up his erratic mind precisely *what* to believe, whether to accept a Catholic, if in this case also folklorish, belief in disembodied souls returning from purgatorial confines, or to disdain this popularized doctrine as mere superstition (possibly owing to his hitherto having made some relevant, learned studies at the university in Wittenberg).¹⁰ Or he might have had in mind Irish folk beliefs, as suggested in his "by Saint Patrick" reference (1.5.136), though that allusion may be mainly to Simon Paterick, who was a translator of Machiavelli's *Il Principe*¹¹ (the issue of whether "the end justifies the means" applies to killing the king being fundamental to this tragedy).—Would Tennyson not have had some of this in the back of his mind?

If the Poet Laureate appropriated any of such Hamletian ambivalence, he could well have thought of it somehow in terms of the capitalized Pilot image. He thereby would have meant one who, in his own capitalized way, so to speak, would indicate Christ, yet at the same time allude to a subordinate like Peter or even, in a round-about Hamletian manner, to a vaguer or more intellectualized guide. This final possibility happened to receive some telling support from my correspondence with Sir Charles Tennyson.¹² The point is that the capitalization of "Pilot"

does not in fact have to suggest any explicitly divine agency, whereby the text supplies good reason for this. For a number of other nouns are noticeably also capitalized, including ones in the final stanza as well, "Time" and "Place." Thereby all three internal capitalizations "Time," "Place," and "Pilot," could signify abstractions of some deep, rather ontological sorts, yet still ones in no way finally at odds with an inherently Christological resonance as well, the limited strength of Tennyson's personal faith perhaps notwithstanding.

Clearly the New Testament is explicitly evident in Tennyson's turn of phrase "face to face" (15) (from 1 Cor. 13:12), even if the more immediate, topical allusion would at first appear to be, as Christopher Ricks at any rate once had it, to Arthur Hallam.¹³ In short, it appears admissible that because the poem was supposedly composed, as is well known, during only a few minutes while the poet was traversing the watery straits in separating the Isle of Wight from the British mainland,¹⁴ he most likely did not intend any single, specific allusion. Yet, at the same time, most probably all of the allusions were on the back of his fertile psyche. This is supported by Paull Baum's finding three separate versions of how the lyric was composed: that stated in Hallam Lord Tennyson's *Memoir* and dealing with composition after reaching Farringford; that by Sir Charles which involves his jotting the lines down on the inside of a used envelope en route; and finally that attributed to Canon Rawnsley involving composition on a long walk.¹⁵ (Baum cites a further source in passing, Kingsley's "The Three Fishers," because of its refrains, "And good-bye to the bar and its moaning," with the drowning of the fishermen, yet that happenstance is of truly minor significance in terms of Tennyson's most famous poem. Still, Tennyson owned this poem and read some of Kingsley's poetry to a friend, as Ricks tells us.)¹⁶

Granted, as Robert Bernard Martin has to remind us, the poem ideally amounts to "a fitting encapsulation of the childlike faith" that Tennyson felt,¹⁷ whereby such an annotation again would summon up for us an inherent allusion to the Christian Savior, His admonition about His followers needing to become again like little children in the simplicity of their faith (Mark 10:15), thereby being able to accept graciously what heaven has in store. Still, Ricks would go further and rather make

something of "Hallam's own line in a poem to Tennyson's sister Emily ('Till our souls see each other face to face')." ¹⁸ In any case, that could represent an acceptable secondary meaning, one also based on the Bible. The final suggestiveness, however, must be in terms of God as Alpha and Omega, the "progress outward which is yet a circling home," ¹⁹ whereby the critical reader nowadays is prone to enlist historically the familiar analogous evidence in John Donne, not to forget the modernist analogy in T. S. Eliot's familiar dictum about coming to terms in the end with our true beginning ("Burnt Norton" V.38), splendid correlations indeed. As a side-note, it can be added that Matthias Bauer finds Eliot's two usages in "East Coker" (the first and last sentences) derivative of a famous "Latin pun which has come down to us in several variants of a proverbial saying or motto in which the two words *oriri* (to rise, to begin) and *moriri* (to die, to end) are juxtaposed." ²⁰ Evidence of this he traces back not only to *Sir Gawayne and the Grene Knight*, but to Augustine's *De civitate Dei* and his *Confessiones*, so it would hardly have been unhistorical for Tennyson as well.

As for any final verdict concerning proof of the true antecedent source of the "Pilot" image in the poem, a broader study of the pilot-helmsman effect now definitely is called for and, by analogy, in terms of another ship, namely the Ark as symbolic of the Church, and thereby of Noah as a *type* of the Christ-Peter-Pilot fusion, yet at the same time in terms of the universal poetic conception of priests as pilots (on which, compare George Herbert's "Priesthood," 32). ²¹ Resorting to Shakespeare once again, we can well enlist in comparison secular-pagan uses of the pilot image in *The Rape of Lucrece* (279) but also Carew's "The Rapture" (88). Then, finally, back in touch with Milton yet once more, we take special notice of his hint of Vane as Religion's pilot in the well-known Vane sonnet, a point generally supported by Herbert's "The Bag," where the Lord explicitly accomplishes the steering (stanza 1). ²²

Therefore, although the proposed "echoing" of Milton in "Crossing the Bar" could be thought of as overly simplistic initially, it nevertheless should readily come first to many a scholarly mind—whether or not the Lycidean Pilot has then to be taken, in historical terms, as a literal surrogate for the Savior as proper Steersman. ²³ So let us continue to see a Christ-like elegiac navigator as a guiding light. In short, the original

orthography of the main manuscript, including the spelling (resonant of the Renaissance) and the ampersands, might best be retained²⁴ for the final, ritualized effect that Tennyson most probably had in the back of his mind.

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The Final Manuscript Version of "Crossing the Bar" [Derived from a facsimile of the original in the Tennyson Research Center, Lincoln]

Sunset + evening star;
 And one clear call for me.
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
 When I put out to sea.

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
 To[o] full for sound + foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
 Turns again home.

Twilight + evening bell,
 And after that the dark;
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
 When I embark!

For tho' from out our bourne of Time + Place
 The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face,
 When I have crost the bar.

Alfred Lord Tennyson

NOTES

¹Tennyson: *The Growth of a Poet* 257 (not to be confused with Rick's Tennyson, cited later), as cited by Baum 116.

²See my note on "The 'Cross-' of 'Crossing the Bar.'"

³See my "*Quo Vadis Pedes*," which appeared in a journal devoted to ecclesiastical studies, generally of a Roman Catholic sort. This was reprinted with revisions in my *Ascending the Prufrockian Stair* 35-37.

⁴The latter term is credited to Philip Wheelwright's *The Burning Fountain* by William Van O'Connor in his assessment of modern literary criticism, where he states that it means that "a word in a given context may have two or more meanings and . . . these meanings in some way complement each other or one another" (225). As such, the term seems preferable to *ambivalence* and certainly to *ambiguity*.

⁵*Paradise Lost*, 5.343-46.

⁶Reference is to the Norton facsimile of the First Folio for the orthography and punctuation but with line assignments from the revised Pelican ed.

⁷Thus cf. Juliet's line "My bounty is as boundless as the sea" (2.2.133) with the feeling in "Crossing the Bar"—a point made by a critical reader of this article for *Connotations*.

⁸See Ricks, *The Poems of Tennyson* 3: 153.

⁹For a succinct analysis of these problems, see Harold Jenkins's edition of *Hamlet*, especially the section dealing with "Revenge" (153-57).

¹⁰This issue could entail Wittenberg's association with Luther in Shakespeare's time and plausible allusions to Luther's life and Lutheran doctrine in *Hamlet*. Should it be argued that Shakespeare only was interested in that university because of Marlowe's own usage a bit earlier, it could be argued that Marlowe himself was influenced by Lutheranism (as well as Calvinism) when he studied at Cambridge. In any case, speculative though these matters are, they have been broached in detail in a leading article by David Remnick recently in *The New Yorker*, "Hamlet in Hollywood."

¹¹For further commentary on this possible allusion, see my article "That Oath of the Prioress."

¹²This knighted grandson of Lord Tennyson was an acclaimed man of letters himself and an authority on the Poet Laureate. His prized letters to me are dated 16 August and 5 Sept. 1973.

¹³See *The Poems of Tennyson*, first ed., 1459. But in his second ed., he refers to Tennyson speaking of "the absurdity of the 'Pilot' being Arthur Hallam" (3: 254).

¹⁴Although Tennyson said he "began it and finished it in twenty minutes," it had been on his mind since April or May 1889, "when his nurse suggested he write a hymn after his recovery from a serious illness" (Ricks, *The Poems* 3: 253).

¹⁵Baum 115. Peter Levi's rendition is the most recent and has a certain popular appeal worth citing: the idea for the poem was planted by his nurse, who told him to "stop grumbling," for "he might better offer a hymn of praises to God." Then he composed "Crossing the Bar." Levi adds: "When he said it to her, with 'Is that good enough for you, old woman?' she burst out crying, and ran out of the room" (312). Curiously, this reaction would appear to contradict the urging in the poem: "And may there be no moaning . . ." Cf. n14 above.

¹⁶*The Poems* 3: 253-54.

¹⁷*Tennyson: The Unquiet Heart* 570.

¹⁸*The Poems* 3: 254; see also his *Tennyson* 296.

¹⁹Ricks, *Tennyson* 296.

²⁰Bauer 110.

²¹A subliminal piece of paronomasia linking the pilot image also with the biblical ark may be evident in the *dark / embark* end-rhymes. Cf. also "star" (line 1), "clear" (2), "bar" (3), "farewell" (11), "bear" and "far" (14), and "bar" (16). If only one or two of these rhymes were applicable, they might appear far-fetched, but the variations involved suggest subliminal influence.

²²These final suggestions are included with the recommendation and concurrence of J. Max Patrick, Editor Emeritus of *Seventeenth-Century News*; he first proposed them to me in private correspondence.

²³Several arguments in this essay derive from the Tennyson Centennial Conference at Central State University, "Tennyson and the End of Empire," Wilberforce, Ohio, 14 Oct. 1992.

²⁴At the same time an obvious misspelling ("To" for "Too") in line 6 should not be ignored; in the transcription here included, I have indicated the correction in brackets.

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