

Re-navigating “Crossing the Bar”*

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Jerome Hamilton Buckley’s response to me in *Connotations* 6.1 commences by pronouncing that I have not considered all the manuscript material of Tennyson’s “Crossing the Bar.” True enough, but my purpose was to cling rather to the final, fully accepted version; if I had wanted to deal also with early draft material, I would have subtitled my note “Evidence of the Manuscripts,” not merely “The Manuscript Evidence” Thus, I saw no need to come to terms with (or even actually see) what Tennyson *originally* wrote, because what was of major concern, in terms of the poet’s *final intent*, would obviously be only the last revision. Why Buckley then finds my typescript of this finished version to be “odd” is beyond me, because if a typed or printed version accurately reproduces a manuscript it would normally have to include such devices as scribal ampersands (or “plus signs,” as he helpfully also calls them), not translate them into conjunctions. If Buckley feels that the earlier manuscript he reproduced is not “retrograde” (which his critic Baum believes), he should show why; as it is, he merely indicates that it has the identical symbol of the ampersand, again four times in the text.

Now, Buckley goes on to imply that the ampersand should not be confused with the cross insignia, though in point of fact by terming the ampersand a “plus sign” in its scribal form, he is himself allowing for this identification. Though he professes he has never found a scribal ampersand connoting a cross elsewhere in British literature, I would

*Reference: Robert F. Fleissner, “Grace Note: The Manuscript Evidence for a Christological ‘Crossing the Bar,’” *Connotations* 5.1 (1995/96): 23-33; Jerome H. Buckley, “Crossing the Bar,” *Connotations* 6.1 (1996/97): 95-97.

like to see his statistical evidence for confirming this. True, in citing a Tennyson manuscript I located at Cornell University, I pointed to an ampersand which did not have this connotation, but because the context there is so different, I saw no need for re-examining Tennyson's other manuscripts (even in the Ricks edition) if only to have to witness further usage but also in irrelevant contexts. So my subtitle should be read as "*The Manuscript.*"

At least Buckley is helpful in providing an explicit example of Tennyson's referring to making "the sign of the cross" in his poetry. (I am duly reminded that the Poet Laureate's favorite portrait of himself has traditionally been known as "The Monk.") This device is probably the most well-known form of the plus sign used to signify the Cross in world literature. And because the main secular signification of the plus sign has been largely an affirmative one (standing for a positive outcome), such an identification strongly aids in our coping with the poem better too, if only in that it shows how the Christian cross is not merely something to be borne, sometimes with pain, but points to the positive outcome of such endurance. This is what Tennyson's hopeful poem is all about.

With regard to my citing the "cros" spelling in the final manuscript, Buckley finds my stress on this antiquated spelling misguided because many editors have already allowed for it, because the poet used the spelling elsewhere too, and because one time when he alluded explicitly to making the sign of the cross (in "The Lady of Shalott") he used the ordinary "crossed" orthography. As to modern editors having allowed for "cros" as well, I have to reiterate that some well-known modern editions, like the celebrated Norton anthology, still modernize the spelling, thus not allowing for any Christian connotation to enter in. Their only justification has been to avoid an archaic (or also Christian denominational?) effect. In general, Tennyson's having used the "cros" spelling elsewhere is like his further use of the plus sign; it need not have a symbolic meaning.¹ What counts for us should be the immediate context in "Crossing the Bar."

When Buckley mentions Tennyson's reference to Divinity in general terms, "That Divine and Unseen Who is always guiding us" (*Memoir II*, 376), announcing that "Fleissner fails to consider" this, he fails to

notice that in my earlier research on the poem (as duly cited in the Bibliography) I specifically do make use of this Calvinistic allusion.² So, in general, Buckley does not appear to sympathize with Christianizing interpretations based on connotative wordplay. For the mere fact that Tennyson *elsewhere* did not mean plus signs as encoded signs of the Cross scarcely rules out their having that significance in the immediate context of "Crossing the Bar," as that title could already connote. Dismissing my Christological reading of the lyric as "dogmatically" offensive is technically off the track. For the plus sign indicating a cross, especially "the sign of the cross," is traditionally recognized as designating *not* a dogmatic sacrament, but rather an undogmatic (that is, unrequired) sacramental. For that reason too, it is sometimes used by Anglicans (and even some other Protestants) as well as Catholics.

Regarding "unconscious" interpretations, Buckley asserts that "not all readers" would want to probe an author's "inner or archetypal" meaning as possibly more significant than his conscious, intended one. In response, let me state, first, that I myself cannot speak for "all readers," nor would I want to; and, second, my implication was not to overrule conscious intent, only to add to it.

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NOTES

¹For my latest discussion of the significance of the "cros†" spelling in the poem, with indirect allusion also to Sir Charles Tennyson again, see my *Frost's Road Taken* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1996) 146. There I consider connotative meanings related to Tennyson's in the title of Robert Frost's poem "Kitty Hawk," whereby the double "t" could, in context, exert also a Christian meaning. (Tennyson was a poet Frost much admired.)

²See again my "Quo Vadis Pedes: Notes on the Liveryman in *Prufrock*," *The American Benedictine Review* 36 (1985): 400. Eliot also admired the Victorian Poet Laureate.