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Tennyson and the Church Bells

In Victorian England, church bells were a link between private lives, parish routine, and the national course of events. They announced critical events in all three spheres, pealing for a wedding, tolling for a funeral, calling the faithful to service, or ringing to announce a royal birth or coronation. The mere percussive force of sound on a versifying boy gave the bells deep significance for the young Tennyson:

“What sound was dearest in his native dells?
The mellow lin-lan-lone of evening bells
Far - far - away.
What vague world-whisper, mystic pain or joy,
Thro' those three words would haunt him, as a boy,
Far - far - away?¹ (11. 4-9)

The young poet would draw on this mystic significance in the most interesting of his early productions, “The Lover’s Tale” (1827). He would use bell sounds again and again in his poetry, notably in “The Gardener’s Daughter” (1842), “In Memoriam” (1850), and “The Ring” (1889). To analyze any one of these references - as I propose to do with “In Memoriam” - is to heighten one’s respect for Tennyson’s poetic technique. To follow the whole sequence of references is to perceive a chain of change in Tennyson’s life and thought, and in his times.

“The Lover’s Tale” first roused the excited admiration of Tennyson’s college friends because of its “exquisite modulation of harmonious words and cadences to the swell and fall of the feelings expressed” (Hallam’s phrase).² In this early poem, the hollow tolling of a death-bell becomes to the lover in a delirium of loss “four merry marriage-bells”:

By slow degrees the sullen bell
Toll’d quicker, and the breakers on the shore
Slop’d into louder surf . . . I thought
Four bells instead of one began to ring,

Four merry bells, four merry marriage-bells.
 In clanging cadence jangling peal or peal -
 A long loud clash of rapid marriage-bells.
 (Part III, 11. 13-23).

Certainly the manipulation of sound sequences (sullen - bell - toll; shore - sloped - surf; jangl'd - clanged - crashed - shingle: and bells - bells - peal - peal - bells - sole) represents a boyish *tour de force*. But in retrospect the fragment is more significant because it introduces three motifs which will echo in later references to bells: the confusion of marriage and funeral bells, the linking of bell-song and crash of surf; the suggestive landscape trio of bell-tower, encircling leafy bower, and bier:

...Again the bells
 Jangl'd and clanged: again the stormy surf
 Crashed in the shingle: and the whirling rout
 ...rush'd into dance, and fled
 Wind-footed to the steeple in the woods,
 Till they were swallowed in the leafy bowers,
 And I stood sole beside the vacant bier.
 (Part II, 11. 53-59).

The young Tennyson set "The Lover's Tale" aside. It was written around 1827,³ but not published till 1879. In the poet's earliest published verse we find only peripheral references to bells. The bells that ring for the poet in his "Palace of Art" (1832) are bells of abstraction and isolation, "...great bells that swung,/Moved of themselves, with silver sound." (11. 129-130). For the moment, while the poet dallied with life and with art, those great heralds of society swung aimlessly, speaking neither of marriage nor of death.

In his 1842 volume, Tennyson moved to the vale of community life and found there, among many reasons to "mourn and pray", the ugly spectacle of modern marriage. Money, parental authority, or family pride conquer youthful aspiration and romance in "Walking to the Mail" and "Locksley Hall". When wedding-bells ring out in "Dora" a harsh father rejects his son (11. 39-43). The same volume introduces the theme of romance outside marriage. "Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere" presents the perfection of adulterous dalliance, fresh, spring-like, in a green and gold world of song and jingling bridle-bells.

In "The Gardener's Daughter", bells ringing from the "grey cathedral towers" focus all the young poet's confusions of feeling about

marriage, romance, the church, society, art, and family life. The artist has found a garden,

Not wholly in the busy world, nor quite
 Beyond it
 News from the humming city comes to it
 In sound of funeral or of marriage bells.
 (11. 33, 36).

Here he lingers, with the gardener's daughter. The sound of wedding-bells drifts from the city. These bells signal the central theme in the story: the antithesis between the grey tower of the church and the leafy fecundity of the garden of love.

Over many a range
 Of waning lime the grey cathedral towers,
 Across a hazy glimmer of the west,
 Reveal'd their shining windows: from them clash'd
 The bells; we listened; with the time we play'd
 We spoke of other things. (11. 212-217).

Every phrase dims the force of the cathedral, while the rhythm suggests the unstructured freedom of the lovers. Yet the conclusion is equivocal: the artist is left with only a "veil'd picture" of his Rose, "now the most blessed memory of mine age".

In other poems of the 1842 volume, bell sounds are used to signal a possible movement from desolation to hope: the fragment "Morte d'Arthur" ends with a peal of Christmas bells, and "The Two Voices" presents a final vision of the sweetness of family union, to the accompaniment of Sunday church bells.

There are no bells in *The Princess* (1845). Neither is there much development in Tennyson's thought about love and marriage, flesh and spirit, romance and reality. The tensions implied in early poems culminate instead in the wedding scene at the end of "In Memoriam", with its implied subsuming of private passion in public ritual, synchronized with the turning from grief to hope. The unreal capitulation of Ida to the Prince is usually seen as a serious flaw in the thematic development of the poem. We look in vain for some mystique of marriage as fulfilment and resolution.

II.

The epithalamium which concludes "In Memoriam" has puzzled critics from the time of publication till the present day.⁴ It deals explicitly, and in realistic detail, with the wedding-day of Edmund Lushington and Cecilia Tennyson, but it reflects also the emotions stirred by thought of two other wedding-days: Hallam's to Emily Tennyson, prevented by the death of Hallam, and Tennyson's own wedding to Emily Sellwood, long desired, long postponed.

The wedding scene provides a strange climax to the elegiac movement of the poem. Yet it does focus all the poet's meditations on the sources of meaning in the individual life. It contributes also the poet's consideration of the loss and gain of individual passion through ritual forms by exploring in a mood directly antithetical to that of mourning the human power of controlling private emotional stress through public formal action. It achieves all these values, I believe, largely through the climactic reference to the wedding bells that peal out near the end of the poem:

Overhead
 Begins the clash and clang that tells
 The joy to every wandering breeze.
 The blind wall rocks, and on the trees
 The dead leaf trembles to the bells.
 (CXXXI, II. 72-76).

This bridal peal echoes and concludes a series of bell-lyrics very carefully placed earlier in the poem. To list these bell references is to gain some idea of the richness of suggestion in the final peal. We begin with the submerged reference, in the opening prayer, that

. . . mind and soul, according well
 May make one music as before,
 But vaster. (11. 27-29)

After the first pang of grief comes the vignette of the lover standing before the wall of a house, symbol of the isolating body. The deserted lover rings, futilely, the gateway bell. Next, "the bell struck in the night", the ship's bell, rings the bier home. There is no tolling of funeral bell "when he in English earth is laid." The next bells are those of Christmas, in a time of troubled faith:

The Christmas bells from hill to hill
 Answer each other in the mist.

(XXVIII, 11. 3-4).

These "merry merry bells of Yule" have power to reach the mourner because of their links in memory with the *joy* of childhood Christmases in the family. "They my troubled spirits rule," he says. (XXVIII, 11. 17, 20). But mourning deepens into hopelessness, and at this point "one set slow bell will seem to toll . . . I hear it now, and o'er and o'er." (LVII, 11. 10, 13). For the second Christmas there are no bells.

The mystic experience which provides the next emotional climax of the poem, however, is expressed in terms suggesting the clammering of a vast bell: "deep pulsations, shocks of chance", "blows of death", the hammering of experiences on "the tranced soul" "in Aeonian music." (XCV). This leads to an extension of the bell movement, in the trees and flowers:

the breeze...
 Rock'd the full-foliag'd elms, and swung
 The heavy-folded rose, and flung
 The lilies to and fro.

(XCV, 11. 54, 58-60).

Christmas bells sound again, linked with the move away from the boyhood home:

A single church below the hill
 Is pealing, folded in the mist.

A single peal of bells below,
 That wakens, at this hour of rest
 A single murmur in the breast
 That these are not the bells I know.

(CIV, 11. 3-8).

Then a final movement begins with New Year bells, "wild bells," "happy bells" ringing in "sweeter manners, purer laws." . . . "the larger heart, the kindlier hand." (CVI).

From this peal we rise to the surprise of the Epithalamium. We are now ready to accept the bell-sound as climax to the reference to bridal flower, bridal bower, blissful eye, ring, "sweet 'I Will'", "named sign'd for times in hope." The crucial stanza runs:

Overhead

Begins the clash and clang that tells
 The joy to every wandering breeze.
 The blind wall rocks, and on the trees
 The dead leaf trembles to the bells.

Linked with all the previous bell sounds, this stanza focuses their meanings into a cluster of significance which illuminates Tennyson's vision of marriage, and also the reason for his choice of wedding scene as a resolution of the elegy.

The first two lines of the stanza suggest that marriage is a social event, broadcast; but the third line invokes the *wall-body* image to suggest the sense of marriage as a personal experience. The bells speak out, but they are encased in a tower: "blind walls" (as in the misty towers of the new home) that "rock" with disturbance. The last line links the fact of marriage to the fact of death: the ritual bells shake the power of death in nature. The stanza carries the full weight of meaning of all previous bell-references in the elegy: from the tower "overhead" a sound of vigour and violence replaces the "set slow" single note of melancholy, a sound of "joy", reminiscent of the bells of Yule, but reaching now through "wandering" nature (contrasted with the sadly "wandering paths" and "wandering cries" of earlier passages), and working through the same soft medium that set the natural bells swinging in the mystic vision of roses and lilies. The concluding phrases similarly form a resumé of major motifs: *blind*, *walls*, and *leaf* serve as reminders of mist, house, and seasonal cycle. The verse movement reproduces delicately the bell sounds. Into the "ding-dong" effect of "*begins . . . the clang*" the poet interjects the *clash* (alliteration interrupting assonance) to suggest the tumbling confusion, so different from tolling regularity—the sound of marriage-bells, not funeral bells. The last two lines reproduce a change of beat, from hammer-blows (*blind walls rock* and *dead leaves tremb-*) to a lessening, pausing movement (*and on the trees* and *-bles* to the *bells*). In the final phrase an onomatopoeic suggestion of bells muffling to silence with a final stroke appears in the half-repetition *-bles* to the *bells*. All this is a new instance of the "imitative harmony" so early mastered.

It seems to me that the stanza in its total pattern also exemplifies imitation of a subtler kind. Beginning with the wedding group on the church porch, our attention moves up to the tower, out to the breeze, back to the encasing walls, out to the leafy trees, and back to the bells.

Our responses swing with the arc of the bell. Professor Frye has pointed out that Tennyson rarely achieves the "oracular rhythm" of associative counterpoint balanced against the metrical and semantic patterns.⁵ In fitting the sound of the bells so subtly to the swing of his thought, Tennyson does achieve here just that kind of evocative power. The sound of the bells concentrates his experience of death and marriage; reproducing their notes, he is able to release his experience, in a suggestive, significant form.

The bells lead us from the porch, past the grave, to the feast and then to the wedding chamber. The final suggestion of a new life reaching into time through generation is expressed in lines which to me convey both in sound and idea a final image of a bell, a form within which movement stirs, to "strike a being into bounds".

Through the bells Tennyson had come into his own best kind of music: resonant, firm in pace, consistent in tone — the kind of work he loved to chant for his friends, exploiting the metrical ingenuities; and he had also achieved an extra dimension of associative pattern for his elegy.

III

But the vision achieved in "In Memoriam" is not sustained in later poems. The love story in *Maud* (1855) is resolved not in marriage or death but in madness and in war fervour. The madman complains, "Not a bell was rung". The certainties of 1850 slide into confusion, and the confusions appear obliquely in new notes in the bell music.

As Laureate, Tennyson could still produce effusions in which bells would peal out, affirming orthodox views. In the humble life of "The Grandmother" (1859), as in the state marriage of Princess Alexandra (1863), wedding-bells "utter their jubilee", in celebration of the Laureate's sanction of married love. In "Enoch Arden" (1864), church bells ring with melodramatic insistence on the indissoluble power of marriage vows:

in the ringing of his ears,
Tho' faintly, merrily — far and far away —
He heard the pealing of his parish bells.
(11, 608-610).

In "The Golden Supper" (1870) revising the boyish "Lover's Tale", Tennyson moves beyond the bell-haunted delirium to hope of a happy

marriage, then scatters the hope by a doubly tragic ending. The Christmas bells that rang as an ending for the earlier version of "Morte d'Arthur" have been deleted from the poem as it appeared in *Idylls of the King* (1870). Instead, a tolling bell-sound dominates much of the final movement of the *Idylls*: the cry that rings out in "The Passing of Arthur", "Hollow, hollow, hollow, all delight" (11. 33, 37). It is this funereal sound that ends the tales of idealism and passion: a curious inversion of the pattern of "In Memoriam".

Beyond the sentiment and the melancholy of the 1870's there remained one last phase of the poet's life and work. In the 1889 poems, he explores new strains of emotion. "Forlorn", for instance, (1889 — though Hallam Tennyson says it was written earlier), is one of a series of hysterical monologues exploring the ugliest aspects of human relations. In "Forlorn" a shamed girl, choosing a false wedding rather than abortion or suicide, hears in the bells an echo of her own frenzy:

Death and marriage, Death and marriage!
 Funeral hearses rolling!
 Black with bridal favours mixt!
 Bridal bells with tolling!
 In the night, O the night,
 When the wolves are howling.
 (11. 67-72).

On the other hand, in "The Ring" (1889) Tennyson creates a strange long poem in which wedding-bells signal a dramatic affirmation of values. Professor Buckley has dismissed "The Ring" as "an improbable ghost story cast in dramatic form", which "virtually exists for a soliloquy" on the evolution of the soul after the enlightenment of death.⁷ Professor Baum further reduced it: a "demi-idyll", he called it, among the "pretentious idylls" of Tennyson's last years.⁸ "The Ring" has rated no serious study even in the last few years of detailed critical work on the late poems.

But "The Ring" has its own haunting quality. It is set in a curious world, neither the late Victorian England of the dialect poems and the domestic idylls, nor yet Camelot, that recurring other-world of Tennyson's imagination. This is a vivid autumn world, where a tower stands

all ablaze
 With creepers crimsoning to the pinnacles
 As if perpetual sunset linger'd there
 And all ablaze too, in the lake below!
 (11. 51-54).

It is a fairy-tale world, where a September wedding will dissolve the icy grief of the past. Marriage bells ring for

(The)Maiden, coming like a Queen, who leaves
Some colder province in the North to gain
Her capital city, where the loyal bells
Clash welcome. (11. 415-418).

The bells are linked in this final passage with ritual and formality, with rebirth in nature and hierarchic harmony in society.

(The) lonely maiden-princess, crown'd with flowers,
Has enter'd on the larger woman-world
Of wives and mothers. (11. 420-422).

When the bells ring at the end of the poem, they are like the magic word in a fairy tale, releasing love from a spell, without explaining any of the riddles of life or death.

These bells are barely mentioned. Indeed, they are cased in a subordinate clause — ringing, as it were, “far-far-away”. But bells have defined and concentrated Tennyson’s attitudes to marriage for so long that he can count now on their suggestive power even in a slight reference. The tomb-tower-flower-bell sequence releases significance simply by the accretion of meanings over the total sequence of poems.

At the end of his publications, Tennyson placed his poem “On the Death of the Duke of Clarence and Avondale” (1892). In it, along with a final reference to the sound of bells on a state occasion, appears a very old man’s last word on bells:

The bridal garland falls upon the bier . . .
The toll of funeral in an Angel ear
Sounds happier than the merriest marriage-bell.
(11. 1; 10-11).

The bells had served Tennyson well. They had suggested the percussive power of his verse. They had led him through a series of experiments with visual-auditory ties in imagery. And in the end they had brought the kindest of gifts — revival of poetic freshness, novelty of effort, even at the extreme end of a productive life unequalled in length and in variety. In the sound of bells ringing for marriage, and for death, life had casually presented him early with a fact available *as fact*, and available also as symbolic reality.

But the symbol which had served this poet so long and so variously had already begun to move out of the realm of available fact. Perhaps no later poet could have exploited this particular phenomenon. The sound which had so stirred Tennyson in boyhood was being muted. As the Victorian years went by, the use of church bells as public heralds or newsbearers was replaced by other agencies, or rendered inappropriate by changes in life. In the new factory cities, the sound of bells was drowned out by the machine beat of mechanized living, and replaced by the blaring headlines of newspapers. The great religious festivals meant little in the agnostic world; church bells no longer marked the turning years in Dickens' "Coketown". No church bell announced neighbourly news to the sprawling urban community, for no ritual of marriage or death could form a meaningful link between dissociated beings. The disruption of Victorian mores is implied in the muffling of the church bells.

The epitalamium of *In Memoriam*, therefore, stands not only as a haunting and mysterious ending to Tennyson's greatest poem, and as a climactic moment in the total movement of his thought on death and life, but also as a poetic exploitation of a soon-to-vanish part of Victorian experience.

NOTES

1. "Far-far-away" (1889). Line references are from the Oxford Standard Authors Edition, *The Complete Poetical Works of Tennyson* (London, 1953).
2. Unsigned review, *Englishman's Magazine* (August 1831). See *Tennyson, the Critical Heritage*, ed. J.D. Jump (London, 1967) p. 42.
3. Hallam Lord Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir* (London, 1911) I, 48. Dates of publication from G.O. Marshall, *A Tennyson Handbook* (New York, 1963).
4. Mrs. Browning began a long stream of criticism: see *Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. F.G. Kenyon (London, 1897) I, 472. For summary of a century of comments see E.B. Mattes, *In Memoriam: The Way of a Soul* (New York 1951).
5. See "Introduction: Lexis and Melos", in *Sound and Sense*, ed. Northrop Frye (New York, 1957), p. xv.
6. Marshall, *Tennyson Handbook*, p. 230.
7. J.H. Buckley, *Tennyson, the Growth of a Poet* (Harvard, 1961), pp. 244, 247.
8. P.F. Baum, *Tennyson, Sixty Years After*, (Chapel Hill, 1948), p. 174.