

Nostalgia in Tennyson's 'Ulysses'

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The central predicament of Tennyson's dramatic monologue 'Ulysses' betrays an ironic *nostalgia* – originally and literally, an 'ache for home'. Without reference to Homer's *Odyssey*, however, the force and significance of this irony is too easily lost. Admittedly, Tennyson is careful to include enough circumstantial details to make sense of the lyric in relation to its epic parent and it might be protested that Tennyson's Ulysses is not Homer's Odysseus. But the poem's conscious positioning as an afterword or tailpiece continuous with the *Odyssey* precludes any neat divorce.

In the absence of a strict statute of limitations on intertextual reference, we can only proceed with caution and an informed common sense. The precise period of Odysseus' 'roaming with a hungry heart' (l.12)¹ before finally returning home to Ithaka and Penelope – ten years, on top of the ten years at war with Troy – is probably irrelevant; that his 'roaming' is prolonged by the gods to a point of distraction and despair beyond normal (*unheroic*) endurance, and that Ithaka and Penelope focus his yearning and drive as an intense nostalgia throughout the journey, I hold to be crucial. To quote from the discussion between the goddess Kalypso and the enthralled Odysseus/Ulysses in the Homeric original:

The talking was begun by the shining goddess Kalypso:
 'Son of Laertes and seed of Zeus, resourceful Odysseus,
 are you still all so eager to go back to your own house
 and the land of your fathers? I wish you well, however you do it,
 but if you only knew in your heart how many hardships
 you were fated to undergo before getting back to your country,
 you would stay here with me and be the lord of this household
 and be an immortal, for all your longing once more to look on
 that wife for whom you are pining all your days here. And yet
 I think I can claim that I am not her inferior
 either in build or stature, since it is not likely that mortal

1 Tennyson quotations are from the Longman edition, *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London 1969).

women can challenge the goddesses for build and beauty.'

Then resourceful Odysseus spoke in turn and answered her:
 'Goddess and queen, do not be angry with me. I myself know
 that all you say is true and that circumspect Penelope
 can never match the impression you make for beauty and stature.
 She is mortal after all, and you are immortal and ageless.
 But even so, what I want and all my days I pine for
 is to go back to my house and see my day of homecoming.'
 (*Odyssey*, V, 202-220; trs. Lattimore)

Hence the high-handed and brutal irony of Tennyson's Ulysses' denying Penelope even the respect, let alone the tenderness, of a name:

It little profits that an idle king,
 By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
 Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole
 Unequal laws unto a savage race,
 That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.
 (II.1-6)

Once the object of 'a hungry heart', Penelope is now associated by a subtle ambiguity with 'barren crags'. (Is the 'idle king' or are 'these barren crags' – or is 'this still hearth', for that matter – 'Match'd with an aged wife'?) To the injury to her individuality sustained by the anonymous reference is added an insult to her femininity in the suggestion of infertility and withered sexuality.

More important than this, however, is the informing irony of his chafing impatience with precisely this once-coveted 'still hearth'. What his monologue reveals, with Ulysses himself only partially understanding what is going on, is that his ache or hunger neither is nor ever has been for 'home' in any simple, nationalistic or domestic sense. His attaining it has destroyed its value, and 'home' is now construed as emasculating in the context of a newly developed nostalgia for life with all the the charge and challenge of action and anticipation played out against the unknown; for the life, ironically, from which his 'own house and the land of [his] fathers' and 'that wife for whom you are pining all your days' had originally represented a desired escape:

How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
 To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!

As tho' to breathe were life! Life piled on life
 Were all too little, and of one to me
 Little remains; but every hour is saved
 From that eternal silence, something more,
 A bringer of new things; and vile it were
 For some three suns to store and hoard myself,
 And this grey spirit yearning in desire
 To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
 Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.
 (ll. 22-32)

Behind this 'heroic' impatience, 'mixing memory and desire', one glimpses the sordid details of the primitive, masculinist culture of the soldier/adventurer, with its confusion of war, violent sexuality, and death suggested in the images of the unsheathed, phallic sword and of 'life piled on life' (rape?; the heaped casualties of battle?). Life piled on life; death piled on death.

Two points emerge from this reflexive substitution of one home for another. One is that the real ache or hunger that Ulysses suffers is for the aching or hungering itself; whatever the desired 'home' – place or person, a life or 'knowledge' (l.31) – its infinite displacement or postponement is vital to sustain his 'heroic' enterprise. The second point is that Ulysses' aspiration to maintain his quest or questing betrays an even deeper, more primal nostalgia: a paradoxical drive towards death itself; towards the dissolution of that 'deep' that 'Moans round with many voices' (l.56); towards the 'eternal silence' (l.27).

Both of these aspects of Ulysses' ambivalent 'yearning in desire' – at once prospective and retrospective, seeking life and seeking death – are seen by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as characteristic of a 'persisting tension' of the species. Freud's discussion of the ramifications of his recently hypothesized instinct or urge for death offers by far the best commentary on 'Ulysses' – as 'Ulysses', conversely, offers an excellent commentary on the Freud:

The hypothesis of self-preservative instincts, such as we attribute to all living beings, stands in marked contrast to the idea that instinctual life as a whole serves to bring about death. Seen in this light, the theoretical importance ... of self-

assertion and of mastery greatly diminishes. They are component instincts whose function it is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death ... We have no longer to reckon with the organism's puzzling determination ... to maintain its own existence in the face of every obstacle. What we are left with is the fact that the organism wishes only to die in its own fashion.

Thus Ulysses' stubborn insistence, given that 'Death closes all', upon performing some 'work of noble note' that is 'Not unbecoming men who strove with Gods' (II.51-3); not unbecoming one who, like himself, has 'become a name' (I.11). After all, 'that which we are, we are' (I.67).

What appears in a minority of individuals as an untiring impulsion towards further perfection can easily be understood as a result of the instinctual repression upon which is based all that is most precious in human civilization. The repressed instinct strives for complete satisfaction, which would consist in the repetition of a primary experience of satisfaction.

Accordingly, Ulysses desires to turn the clock both forward and back simultaneously: "'Tis not too late to seek a newer world' (I.57).

No substitutive ... formations and no sublimations will suffice to remove the repressed instinct's persisting tension; and it is the difference in amount between the pleasure of satisfaction which is *demande*d and that which is actually *achieve*d that provides the driving factor which will permit of no halting at any position ...

'I cannot rest from travel; I will drink/ Life to the lees' (II.6-7); later: 'How dull it is to pause, to make an end' (I.22).

The backward path that leads to complete satisfaction is as a rule obstructed.... So there is no alternative but to advance in the direction in which growth is still free – though with no prospect ... of being able to reach the goal.²

2 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trs. James Strachey, in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, The Pelican Freud Library, comp. and ed. Angela Richards (Harmondsworth 1984), vol.11, pp.311-12; 315.

So Ulysses seeks 'that untravell'd world' – untravelled and untravellable – 'whose margin fades/ For ever and for ever when I move' (ll.20-1).

Both Tennyson and Freud anatomize the heroic/ Romantic quest, Freud in the interests of psychopathology, Tennyson as part of his own quest for a personal, articulate form at once faithful to his own inspiration and appropriate to the conditions in which he wrote. Both, in short, participate critically in the Romantic tradition which they inherit. Behind the Freud passage lies Goethe's Mephistopheles – '*ungebändigt immer vorwärts dringt*' ['presses forward unsubdued'] – confirming his reiterated insistence that the poets had anticipated most of his work in psychoanalysis. Behind Tennyson's 'Ulysses', on the other hand, loom the English Romantics; Wordsworth's *Immortality Ode*, for example, with its 'moments in the being/ Of the eternal Silence' (ll.155-6), its 'mighty waters rolling evermore' (l.168), but most importantly its pervasive nostalgia. It was Wordsworth who also wrote that

Our destiny, our being's heart and *home*,
Is with infinitude, and only there;
With hope it is, hope that can never die,
Effort, and expectation, and desire,
And something evermore about to be.

(*The Prelude*, VI, 604-8)³

This and similar passages of Romantic poetry, many or most of them figuring a yearning for home paradoxically balanced by the dispossession or homelessness inevitable to the human condition, are invoked in the aspiring, rhythmic infinitives of that final line of Tennyson's 'Ulysses': 'To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield'. Shelley, too, comes to mind, from the poet of *Alastor* who, like Ulysses,

left

His cold fireside and alienated home
To seek strange truths in undiscovered lands
(ll.75-7)

3 1850 version, my italics. I use this as illustrative; Tennyson could not have seen this specific passage when he composed 'Ulysses'.

to Demogorgon's final exhortation to Prometheus (with similarly charged infinitives):

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
 To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
 To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
 To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates
 From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
 Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;
 This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
 Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
 This alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.

(*Prometheus Unbound*, IV, 570-8)

Ulysses, then, functions in Tennyson's poem as the archetypal Romantic quester who, having glimpsed an 'untravell'd world' (l.20), is compelled to pursue it – betraying a radical self-ignorance, incidentally, when he resolves, not just 'to seek', but actually 'to find' what he seeks. Archetypally Romantic also is the impulse to create out of the void or in the face of the void. Ulysses' 'that which we are, we are' echoes the self-affirming act of God (central to Coleridge's philosophy of the Imagination, for example⁴): 'I am in that I am'.

However, this physical and metaphysical heroic quest represents only one side of Tennyson's self-debate, Ulysses' side. Is there not a strong hint of hubris in his echoing the deity? We have already noticed one or two details that suggest that, if his desire or quest is heroic or more than human, it is also less than human, if by human we mean to suggest a sensitivity to others. Ulysses' quest to extend, even to dissolve, the self is also (or alternatively) intensely selfish. The existential significance or value of everyone whom he mentions derives exclusively from their relationship to his own past or present needs; their *individuality* is simply never an issue.

This centralization and exaltation of the Self throughout his

4 'The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM'; see *Biographia Literaria* in the *Collected Works*, Bollingen Series LXXV, in 2 vols, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton 1983), I, 304.

plaint is more and less subtle by turns. His contempt for the Achaians, for example, his 'savage race/ That hoard, and sleep, and feed', is less because of their bovine existence than because they are careless of Ulysses himself ('and know not me'); because they 'know not' the man conscious that everywhere else he has 'become a name' (ll. 5-6; 11). Witness also the telling disappointment of the reader's expectations when Ulysses recalls past associations:

All times I have enjoy'd
Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone (ll.7-9)

Not 'both with those that loved me, and those (whom) I loved' as one is led to expect. So with those foreign 'cities of men' in which he cut so important a figure ('Myself not least'), while 'honour'd of them all' he honours none (ll.13-15). When Ulysses extends the effect that he has on others to include the inanimate, Tennyson brilliantly identifies his primitive pantheism as indiscriminate egotism (l.18):

I am a part of all that I have met

These passages serve to stress, not just Ulysses' self-obsession and self-aggrandisement, but also his existential solitariness ('both with those/ That loved me, *and alone*'), even solipsism. All this is crucial to Tennyson's censure of the (extreme) Romantic position that he is considering for himself in the poem as a complex articulation of his own dilemma; of his own – literary – quest.

In the context of this quest, however, it is important not to overlook the obvious appeal of the heroic for the poet, and thus the genuineness of his dilemma. Thus far I have chosen to take it for granted. But that appeal, even fascination, is palpable and inheres in the *mythos* or story itself, past and present and future, only part of which is offered the reader; in the rhetoric of frustrated power; in the calculated lyricism –

on shore, and when
Thro' scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vext the dim sea (ll.6-11)

Tennyson's fascination with the heroic ethos is, in short,

everywhere apparent in his heroic blank verse and in the blank verse of the hero:

'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
 Push off, and sitting well in order smite
 The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
 To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
 Of all the western stars, until I die.
 It may be that the gulfs will wash us down;
 It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
 And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
 Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
 We are not now that strength which in old days
 Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are, --
 One equal temper of heroic hearts,
 Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
 To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield
 (ll.57-70)

Thus Tennyson invokes other traditions and betrays another nostalgia: his own. Tennyson's nostalgia is a qualified yearning for the simpler, masculine world of the classical epic, as well as for the visionary world of the Romantic quest. *Both* heroic 'genres' are characterized by an alien audacity as a formal correlative of their priorities of physical and metaphysical action respectively; by an audacity and action that, as I have suggested, Tennyson felt to be denied to the self-reflexive and self-doubting poetry of his own and of other Victorians.

So often in Tennyson's early poetry his sense of the 'belatedness' of Victorian poetry (to adapt the poetics of Harold Bloom), his apprehension about the redundancy or exhaustion of the art, finds its objective correlative in the extreme old age of his heroes: besides Ulysses, St Simeon Stylites, Tiresias, Tithonus. Out of his apprehension about this exhaustion, and about the 'feminization' that poetry has necessarily undergone – symbolized, in this case, by the incarcerated female: of 'The Lady of Shallot', for example; of 'Mariana'; of 'The Palace of Art' – Tennyson had constructed an art of exhaustion, a highly elaborate (decadent?) poetry preoccupied with inconsequence or paralysis or peripheral existence ('a land/ In which it seemèd always afternoon' – 'The Lotos-Eaters', ll.3-4). That 'slow

clock ticking' in 'Mariana' (l.74) could not be turned back, allowing Tennyson to 'remodel'

the style of some heroic age
Gone like the mastodon ('The Epic', MS draft)⁵

Neither the virile and vigorous certainties of the primitive heroic nor the vigorous quest for existential certainties of a Wordsworth or a Shelley, for example, were alternatives available to him.

To return then to our main narrative: the other side of Tennyson's self-debate in 'Ulysses' besides Ulysses' own – the other side of Tennyson's quest for meaning and form as a poet – is represented, if only obliquely, by the social and political priorities of Telemachus. We have on one side, then, the personal, anti-social, apolitical search of the heroic Ulysses beyond the emasculating realities of the everyday; and on the other the public, social, political abilities of the domestic, 'effeminate' Telemachus:

centred in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods (ll.39-42)

Both Ulysses and Telemachus can be seen as archetypal images of the poet, representing two aspects of Orpheus, the classical mythological figure of the divine poet. One is the Orpheus whose untimely gaze upon Eurydice is said to represent

Orpheus' ultimate gift to the work [of art], a gift in which he rejects the work, in which he sacrifices it by moving towards its origin in the boundless impulse of desire, and in which he unknowingly moves towards the work, towards the origin of the work...*it is a nostalgic return to the uncertainty of origin.*⁶

In this, Maurice Blanchot's reading of the parable, Orpheus' gaze represents precisely the shift evident in Romantic theorizing about poetry: the poet looks through the work as artefact to its

5 *Poems*, ed. Ricks, p.584.

6 Maurice Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays*, trs. Lydia Davis (New York 1981), pp.102-3. My italics.

origins in inspiration, and to his own initiation into the mysteries which is in some way responsible for his being torn apart (figured as the retributive frenzy of the Thracian women as they celebrated the orgies of Bacchus). So Ulysses would 'follow knowledge like a sinking star/Beyond the utmost bound of human thought' (ll.31-2).

The other aspect of the mythological poet Orpheus is his civilizing charm, and the wild beasts he is reputed to have quelled may be compared with the 'savage race' (l.4) or 'rugged people' (l.37) that Telemachus makes mild and subdues to usefulness and goodness. It is worth comparing the 'art' of Telemachus with the cultural and political programmes to 'furnish the people liberally with literature' drawn up by Victorian propagandists as different as Matthew Arnold and the utilitarian William Johnson Fox. Fox is worth quoting on the power the poets have over the people to 'subdue them to the useful and the good' (l.38):

They can influence the associations of unnumbered minds; they can command the sympathies of unnumbered hearts; they can disseminate principles; they can give the principles power over men's imaginations; they can excite in a good cause the sustained enthusiasm that is sure to conquer ... they can act with a force, the extent of which it is difficult to estimate, upon national feelings and character, and consequently upon national happiness.⁷

It is *Ulysses*, not necessarily Tennyson, who insists (surely disingenuously) that the difference between the two styles – his own and Telemachus' – is irrelevant, implying that he and his son merely represent 'two ways/ Of moving about your death/ By the grinding sea', to quote Dylan Thomas.⁸ Instead, for Tennyson's purposes, Telemachus' priorities are, unlike his father's Romanticism, the 'people' or the audience and the work itself – 'He works his work' indeed, while the ageing, garrulous Ulysses ('I mine') is ironically idle, at least in Ithaka (l.43). The poem 'Ulysses' represents a crucial and complex episode in

7 As quoted in Isobel Armstrong ed., *Victorian Scrutinies* (London 1972), p.83.

8 'This Side of Truth', ll.13-15.

Tennyson's endeavours to accommodate personal desires and public responsibilities; metaphorically and more generally, to find a home.

These are the symbolic co-ordinates, as it were, within which and with which Tennyson in 'Ulysses' interrogates his art and his age, reflecting simultaneously upon his literary heritage. It was an age demonstrably sordid and philistine, characterized by a limited imagination and frequently by ingratitude towards its poets, and one from which Tennyson was tempted to take refuge.⁹ But whether that meant that Tennyson should make his 'heart and home' – as Wordsworth at least momentarily does – 'with infinitude and only there', or whether he should choose a poetry of public responsibility that limits itself to 'the condition of man in the world'¹⁰ and is ever mindful of the reading public to which it is addressed, remain open questions in a poem that movingly yet subtly renders his dilemma and considers its alternatives in all their complexity. In so doing, ironically, Tennyson found an articulate form able to keep faith at once with his art and with his age.

9 On Victorian attitudes to art, see, for example, the fifth chapter in Walter E. Houghton *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (New Haven 1957), esp. p.115, and chapter VIII of Richard D. Altick, *Victorian People and Ideas* (New York 1973).

10 The advice of Tennyson's friend James Spedding in an 1843 review of his *Poems*; see Robert W. Hill, Jr ed., *Tennyson's Poems*, Norton Critical Edition (New York 1971), pp.568-73 (p.569).