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Further Reading: F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation*, London, 1936. (Analyses the odes and argues that Keats is 'the great Aesthete—the one Aesthete of genius.') Graham Hough, *The Romantic Poets*, London, 1953. (Traces Keats's poetic development and relates him to the Romantic movement as a whole). Cleanth Brooks, 'Keats's Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes', in *The Well Wrought Urn*, London 1949. (Concentrates on the ironies and paradoxes of the poem.) William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words*, London, 1951. pp. 368-74. (A reply to Brooks reasserting the emotional and personal aspect of the poem.)

ARNOLD P. HINCHLIFFE

Tennyson: 'Ulysses'

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.
I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees: all times I have enjoy'd
Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone; on shore, and when
Thro' scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vext the dim sea: I am become a name;
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known; cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honour'd of them all;
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.
I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.
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 gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

This is my son, mine own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle—
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and thro' soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.
Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods,
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail:
There gloom the dark broad seas. My mariners,
Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me—
That ever with a frolic welcome took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads—you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
'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.

The twentieth century reader tends to be condescending to a poet like Tennyson: he is too moralistic, he rambles, he ruminates—to borrow T. S. Eliot's crushing verb. G. K. Stead, in *The New Poetic* [1964], illustrates the modern view that Tennyson and his audience joined in a pact to deceive themselves about themselves and their society, and used poetry

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to *decorate* the moral law. We mistrust both his popularity and his enormous output, and reduce this vast work to a mere handful of successful poems, of which 'Ulysses' is one. Even a sympathetic critic like Robin Mayhead writes that it would be hard to deny greatness *of a kind* [italics mine] to the author of 'Ulysses' [*The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, Vol 6, p. 242]. The dispute about Tennyson's greatness is not merely modern. Alfred Austin, writing in 1870, asked what Tennyson's faults were and concluded that his only fault was not being great enough to commit any:

> He knows what he can do, and he does it. It is delicate, subtle, pathetic, sometimes even solemn; it is anything else you like; but it is never great.
>
> [*The Critical Heritage, p. 297*]

The volumes of 1830 and 1832 cannot be entirely dismissed as musical Keepsake poetry since they contain poems like 'Mariana,' 'The Two Voices' and 'The Lotos Eaters' and they were generally well received apart from a destructive review in the *Quarterly* by J. W. Croker who hoped to repeat the success of his attack on Keats in 1818. Tennyson was hypersensitive to criticism and this attack may explain the ten year silence between 1832 and 1842, but he also appears to have been extremely reluctant to publish (and expose himself to criticism) and was only compelled to produce the volume of 1842 when threats of publication from America could no longer be ignored. But the years 1833—40 were richly creative and Tennyson wrote 'Ulysses,' 'Tithonus,' 'Morte D'Arthur,' 'Locksley Hall' and sections of *In Memoriam*. The 1842 volume, therefore, contained a judicious selection of early poems and those not yet published but created during the so-called silence.

Tennyson was extremely sensitive: Sir Harold Nicolson, in *Tennyson: Aspects of His Life, Character and Poetry* [1923] finds the essential Tennyson as 'a morbid and unhappy mystic' (p. 27) and he is generally thought of as our most melancholy poet. But considering the circumstances of his early life we might well agree with J. B. Steane [*Tennyson*, 1966, p. 15] in describing him as 'among the strongest and most resilient.' Of the many unhappy events the one that concerns us is the death, in 1833, of Tennyson's close friend Arthur Hallam, since it was this loss which produced poems like 'Ulysses' and *In Memoriam*. Tennyson himself admitted:

> There is more about myself in Ulysses, which was written under the sense of loss and that all had gone by, but that life must be fought out to the end. It was more written with the feeling of his loss upon me than many poems in *In Memoriam*.
>
> [quoted Christopher Ricks, p. 122]

'Ulysses', then, is a fighting poem, and takes the form of a dramatic monologue; surprisingly, since Tennyson wrote bad verse for drama, it is a success, although it lacks the naturalness poets like T. S. Eliot have shown using this form. Tennyson cannot even create that sense of character we feel in the poems of his contemporary, Browning, but he does generate a feeling of confidence. His model was clearly the speeches in Books I and II of *Paradise Lost*, and that source is useful to the reader in more ways than one since Milton's speeches demonstrate the art of political speaking and specious argument.

The word 'profits' in the first line should suggest to us not economics but the Gospel according to St. Matthew (Ch. 16, v. 26): the poem is about right action leading to salvation. The adjective 'idle' nullifies its noun 'king' while the stillness of the hearth suggests stagnancy rather than cosy restfulness; and the crags are 'barren' but we do not pause here to reflect that crags usually are barren. Here it seems yet another burden imposed upon Ulysses just as he is 'match'd' with an aged wife—suggesting firstly that she is not his match and secondly that she is not his choice. She is 'aged', and it is not until the final section of the poem that Ulysses concedes his age too; but then he describes himself as merely 'old'. The verbs 'mete' and 'dole' convey the menial form his actions have to take, which is reinforced by the unequal nature of the laws (but whose fault is that?) and the savage nature of a race whose aims can be summed up in one of Tennyson's sonorous lists: 'hoard', 'sleep' and 'feed'. How could such a people know or understand the Ulysses

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who has travelled far, been honoured among many races and always enjoyed or suffered 'greatly'?

Ulysses now recaptures that glorious past: his fame, exploits, his expansive greatness which recognises—we are appealed to here—that the present stagnation is death to a man who has, in the haunting phrase, 'drunk delight of battle with my peers,/Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.' Tennyson shifts dullness (i.e. boredom) swiftly into its sense of not remaining bright, with the cluster of images about rust, burnishing and shining that recollect the gleaming world seen through the arch of experience. We have a sense of wasteful neglect; merely to breathe is *not* to live, to live is, surely, to 'follow knowledge', even if this is compared to the pursuit of a sinking star. Thus Tennyson shifts his argument from one emotional point to another with all the appearance of reasonableness: Ulysses finds his domestic context dull and boring; it is inappropriate to that gloriously active past which made him a man of action for whom inaction is both wasteful *and* wicked; therefore he must do what he has been destined to do, which is to find out new things: the pursuit of knowledge—which is hardly what, in retrospect, he could be seen as doing on those windy Trojan plains. But what of his duties as a king?

Fortunately this responsibility can be shifted. If Ulysses is not at home at home there is his son Telemachus who is not merely 'Well-loved of me' but also has the right qualities to 'subdue' patiently this rugged people to 'the useful and the good'. Conveniently for Ulysses Telemachus is 'centred in the sphere/Of common duties': *his* horizons are, therefore, fixed, and *his* character is limited to those fixed horizons by the same process which make Ulysses' horizon an arch 'wherethro'/Gleams that untravell'd world' whose margin fades as one approaches it. Telemachus, moreover, is decent and will not fail in the small, ordinary emotions, like tenderness to loved ones, and ordinary respect for the gods—that is the household gods, with a small 'g'. Such gods are inappropriate to one who 'strove with Gods' who have, by now, got a capital G! Thus the division of labour between father and son is satisfactorily arranged to employ the talents of each and Ulysses can now look down to the port where the vessel 'puffs her sail'—a suitably ample image to introduce those 'broad seas' which, ominously, 'gloom' and are 'dark.' Nevertheless this is the context for 'free hearts' and 'free foreheads' which have ever enjoyed or suffered sunshine and thunder. Something, Ulysses suggests, may yet be done to complement the past before death puts an end to him; for death is common to all and would take him from the still hearth. Until that time life is movement, and Ulysses' purpose is to move until stopped. We might notice—but only fleetingly—that Tennyson has shifted the yearning, desire, the 'hungry heart' to the will: if the body is made weak by time 'and fate' (presumably Penelope is merely aged by time?) the will remains strong and the final line has four verbs to confirm the busy, heroic endeavour. But also, noticeably, Ulysses is lonely. He is not understood by his savage race; he is matched by a wife who cannot understand his desire to go on roaming, and though he may love Telemachus he cannot understand a man whose sphere is centred on common duties. Ulysses misses not merely the action but the society of other active men, his peers, and by gathering his antique mariners together he will once more find himself in a society that thinks like him, whose hearts are 'one equal temper' and who will not be indifferent to those memories of the past which compel an escape from this present dullness, which insist that one does not give in or give up, but continue:—'to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield.'

It was this wholesome impression of fighting the good fight which struck the readers of the 1842 volume: Tennyson had emerged into the daylight to inspire a generation with hope and faith in progress whatever the difficulties. Sir Robert Peel, for example, read the poem with approval and arranged a State pension! Hallam, in his essay of 1831, discussing the 'five distinctive excellencies' of Tennyson listed, as the second, his power 'of embodying himself in ideal characters, or rather moods of character, with such extreme accuracy of adjustment . . .' [quoted Ricks, p. 75] and 'Ulysses' has never lacked praise for its power,

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persuasiveness and moral, uplifting tone, what R. H. Hutton called, in 1888, the 'friendly picture of the insatiable craving for new experience, enterprise, and adventure, when under the control of a luminous reason and self-controlled will' [*The Critical Heritage*, p. 356]. That Tennyson intended this impression is suggested by the omission of the poem 'Tithonus'. The first version 'Tithon' was written in 1833 (but not published until 1860) and shows another way of looking at Hallam's death. To say that Tennyson faced up to it would be too positive a description of his response. In 'Tithonus' he argues that immortality is not a blessing and where Ulysses longs for life piled on life in grandiloquent manner Tithonus yearns for death amidst hypnotically beautiful nature and decay. But is 'Ulysses' really a fighting poem? As with Satan's speeches in Hell there are doubts on the first reading and these doubts grow on any second reading. Ulysses complains of idleness, yet being king of a savage race ought to keep him busy; he is contemptuous of his wife and yet Penelope's history is always at the back of our minds. Ulysses wishes to drink life to the lees but the lees of wine are best left un-drunk. And the speaking voice, in spite of what it says, sounds very much like the voices in 'Tithonus' and 'The Lotos Eaters': it is weary, particularly in a line like 55 which slides slowly into the 'Moans' of line 56. How convenient it is to find one's character above subduing a race to the useful and the good, which are hardly negligible qualities though their achievement requires patience and rather unglamorous industry; and how condescending of him to recognise that Telemachus is fit for such industry—and, by implication, little more. For, in spite of that phrase 'Well-loved of me' the tone is distant and probably dismissive. From line 52 onwards there is a frequent use of 'may': it may be, it may be . . . which rather contradicts the note of strong will on which the poem ends; and strong will itself, like restlessness, is not exclusively a good thing. Ulysses may be meeting a challenge or avoiding it, and his call to action may be a more insidious form of escapism than lotos-eating: the refusal to be that dull person who is good and useful. This is not simply a modern response. Goldwin Smith, in an article of 1885 on 'The War Passages in *Maud*' wrote:

> Even the Homeric Ulysses, the man of purpose and action, seeking with most definite aims to regain his own house and that of his companions, becomes a 'hungry heart,' roaming aimlessly to 'lands beyond the sunset,' in the vain hope of being 'washed down by the gulf to the Happy Isles,' merely to relieve his *ennui*, and dragging his companions with him. We say he roams aimlessly—we should rather say, he intends to roam, but stands for ever a listless and melancholy figure on the shore.
> [*The Critical Heritage*, p. 188]

But Tennyson's subject is not the Homeric Ulysses. Homer gives no account of the last voyage or death of his hero though other poets say that he was killed by his son Telegonus, whose mother was the enchantress Circe. Tennyson's debt, which he acknowledged, was to Dante, who meets Ulysses in Canto 26 of *The Inferno* among the Counsellors of Fraud, reminding us that it was Ulysses who suggested the stratagem of the Wooden Horse at Troy. Virgil compels Ulysses to tell the story of his last voyage which appears to have been Dante's invention and which, although it actually took place, was brief since God's whirlwind strikes the ship and sinks it. There is, therefore, interplay between this poem and the known outcome of the last voyage just as Penelope's history is known and gives the poem resonances beyond its intentions. Christopher Ricks suggests that the recurrent argument about how much Ulysses is admired or endorsed (much like Milton's Satan) may be neither a matter of ambivalence nor technical clumsiness. He points to the awkward passage about Telemachus and suggests that this awkwardness may derive from Tennyson's inability to write about father-son relationships with any conviction: the material is recalcitrant. But the poem is ambivalent. Basil Willey, in *More Nineteenth Century Studies* [1956], includes Tennyson in his group of 'honest Doubters' and shows how an early poem like 'The Two Voices' reveals a basic conflict between science and religion, a conflict that produces

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the pressures which make this poem and a poem like 'Ulysses' so compelling. The unconscious troubles the conscious utterance; Hallam's death was the catalyst for Tennyson to write about his personal dilemma and the general problem of the time. This is not a conspiracy to deceive, rather an attempt to synthesize or make sense of the two voices in the Victorian age. Tennyson lived as much as possible in solitude, a melancholy private man, yet he was also Poet Laureate, a public figure and, as Gladstone saw, too intimately and essentially a poet of the nineteenth century to separate himself from its leading characteristics—the progress of science and a vast commercial, mechanical and industrial development. [*The Critical Heritage*, p. 248]. Whitman praises him in a suitable metaphor of voyaging:

> His very faults, doubts, swervings, doublings upon himself, have been typical of our age. We are like the voyagers of a ship, casting off for new seas, distant shores. We would still dwell in the old suffocating and dead haunts, remembering and magnifying their pleasant experiences only, and more than once impelled to jump ashore before it is too late, and stay where our fathers stayed, and live as they lived.

It is a dilemma that seems curiously appropriate to our times.

Further Reading: Tennyson: The Critical Heritage, London, 1967, edited by John Jump, is a handsome collection of contemporary reviews and comments about Tennyson. Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson*, London, 1972, deals with the 'black blood' of the Tennysons in detail as well as looking at the poetry critically. Unfortunately this volume has no bibliography. This deficiency is remedied in J. B. Steane, *Tennyson*, London, 1966, a short and readable account of the poet. *The Pelican Guide to English Literature* Vol 6, 'From Dickens to Hardy' has a chapter on Tennyson by Robin Mayhead and there is a useful chapter in Basil Willey, *More Nineteenth Century Studies*, London, 1956.

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