

imagines for himself, and his resounding 'To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield' carries dangerous echoes of the Satanic 'courage never to submit or yield' of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Speaking later about *In Memoriam*, Tennyson asserted: 'There is more about myself in "Ulysses", which was written under the sense of loss and that all had gone by, but that still life must be fought out to the end.' Ricks is perhaps just in detecting in the poem a 'plumped amplitude' of utterance, and in discerning in the picturing of the heroic man of action a Tennysonian undertone of ennui and aimlessness. If Tennyson's characters notably seek rest through oblivion, 'Ulysses' brilliantly dramatizes that search by its adoption of a cult of manly activity and adventure wholly characteristic of its period. Indeed, an early reader of the poem claimed that Ulysses 'intends to roam, but stands for ever a listless and melancholy figure on the shore'. There is a powerful longing in the poem to be able to believe that life consists not only of the past but also of a future, but that future is always hedged about in the linguistic forms of the text: the future is both deeply desired and unimaginable.

The complexities of interpretation provoked by 'Ulysses' are nicely illuminated in a critical exchange published in a useful collection of essays on the poet.⁹ In the view of E. J. Chiasson, 'Ulysses' takes its place in the Tennysonian canon as one of many expressions 'of Tennyson's conviction that religious faith is mandatory for . . . the needs of life'. Countering the view that Hallam's death provides the right context for interpretation of the poem, Chiasson argues that the text expounds the position that 'life without faith leads to personal and social dislocation'. *In Memoriam*, 34, expresses the view that life without a sense of immortality is a monstrous notion, and Chiasson reads the dramatic monologue in the light of this postulate. Analysing the second movement of the poem Chiasson discerns a lack of religious insight: 'Drinking life to the lees, drinking delight of battle with his peers, following knowledge like a sinking star – all render [Ulysses] abundantly lyrical.' There is, in other words, no indication that richness and multiplicity of experience endow Ulysses with wisdom and insight. The grudging respect for Telemachus takes its place within this reading: the hero is content to let his son get on with the duties of religious observance, whilst he strives in company either with, or against, the gods. Thus the comforting reassurance in the final section, that perhaps he and his men will reach the Happy Isles, is 'tonally indifferent'. Ulysses, that is to say, is himself indifferent and impervious to questions of immortality; he is, rather, a spokesman for a kind of 'jovial agnosticism' which would characterize the later Victorian period. W. W. Robson, by contrast,

salutes the Carlylean seriousness he discerns in the poem, but argues that, in this text, the poet is evidently *not* 'at one with an aspiration of his age'. Tennyson's speaker is a 'self-conscious poet', to the extent that there is 'no discrepancy between the strenuousness aspired to, and the medium in which the aspiration is expressed'. The relationship between the poet and his public is thus nakedly exposed in all its contradictions here: the tensions between Tennyson 'the responsible social being' and Tennyson 'the depressed private poet' work to create an ambiguous poetic rhetoric, to the extent, Robson argues, that 'it often looks as if Tennyson the moralist and Tennyson the artist are functioning on entirely separate planes'. In this reading, therefore, 'Ulysses' is a seminally split text which portends, despite or because of its powerful resonance and unity, the breakdown of the relationship between Tennyson's art and his social conscience, a breakdown which Robson detects in such later work as 'Locksley Hall Sixty Years After'.

'Ulysses' may be read as a poem about the will: all is finally transmuted and absorbed into the hero's own ego. He has rejected the values of community and relationship, so that the final lines both exhilarate and sadden the reader.

'St Simeon Stylites' (1842)

Simeon was a fifth-century hermit, reputed to have spent thirty years on top of a pillar sixty feet high. His surname is the Greek for 'pillar'. Escapism is firmly rejected here in one of Tennyson's favourite poems, and one of his earliest experiments in the form of the dramatic monologue. The monologue form enabled the poet to express an imagined other life, to preserve a tension between the voice of the speaker and the overarching voice of the poet himself. Tennyson places his saint, the Eastern ascetic, upon a pillar forty cubits high, but makes the figure prey to some sense of panic about his own salvation. It would appear that the poem embedded a parodic allusion to the Reverend Charles Simeon, the leading Cambridge Evangelical of Tennyson's day, who annoyed many students by the strictness of his view of the religious life. The saint here speaks in tones of deep humility which, like those of Eliot's Becket, denote an overweening spiritual pride. Simeon insists upon his sinfulness, whilst believing himself elevated morally, spiritually (and physically) above his fellow men:

Altho' I be the basest of mankind,
From scalp to sole one slough and crust of sin,