
ULYSSES IN DANTE AND TENNYSON

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In a critical essay entitled *The Dilemma Of Tennyson* W.W. Robinson says of Tennyson's Ulysses:

“... although he speaks with the accent of Tennyson, the speakers is unmistakably the Ulysses of Dante.” Further on he says: “Tennyson's Ulysses is Homer's Odysseus felt through Dante”¹ Both of these statements are misleading in that they imply Tennyson's poem and its *persona* are wholly derived, a mere translation of a passage from Dante. Nothing, in fact, can be farther from the truth, for, although Tennyson's poem was inspired by a passage from Dante's *Divina Commedia*², indeed in spite of the fact that lexical elements are 'borrowed' by Tennyson from Dante, the theme of the English poem is completely different. There are, moreover, other differences apart from the thematic one which contribute towards rendering Tennyson's poem an entirely original work.

Considering the minor differences first, one should instantly realise that Dante's Ulysses is a narrator in a quasi-narrative poem, whilst Tennyson's *persona* is not. Dante's Ulysses has, as his *raison d'être*, the telling of a story which amounts to an original version of his own death; Dante ap-

parently desired to give Ulysses a more fitting death than the pathetic one ascribed to him by Homer.³

The inference to be drawn here, then, is that the culmination of Dante's passage is Ulysses's death, whilst this is not so in Tennyson, in whose poem a *future* death is merely mentioned and dismissed.

The chronological setting of both poems is also very different. In Dante, Ulysses is dead, and is describing past events, whilst in Tennyson he is debating a *future* course of action. This of course has direct bearing on the matter of tone, for whilst the Dantesque passage has a tone of narration that of Tennyson, relying as it does from the tension arising from self-debate, from the impassioned examination of a personal situation, is dramatic.

In Dante, too, the Ulyssean episode forms part of a much larger entity, the *Inferno*. Being an episode, its importance lies in relation to other episodes, and although it can be considered on its own, it has far greater meaning when considered as part of a larger pattern. Being part of a whole, it is inferior to the whole, a molecule in a sea. Tennyson's poem has impact precisely because it exists in a void. It im-

1. W.W. Robinson “The Dilemma Of Tennyson”, *Critical Essays On The Poetry Of Tennyson*, ed. J. Killham (London, 1969), pp.155-6.

2. *Inferno* Canto XXVI, ll.90-142.

3. According to Homer, Ulysses was killed in error by Telegonus, his son by Circe, who was shipwrecked on Ithaca, Ulysses's island.

poses its presence upon us with the same force as Rodin's *Thinker* would project, if we were to see it as the only illuminated object in a large dark hall. This 'splendid isolation' naturally strengthens the dramatic quality issuing from the tone, and indeed makes the whole poem much more memorable and striking. What is particularly strange is that in spite of its having no kind of 'main body' to which it can be attached, it does not have the 'feel' of a fragment. It is a soliloquy which does not need a play, an island entire unto itself.

The two poets visualised the protagonist in very different ways. In Dante, Ulysses is fully identifiable, with the common attachments of common men:

ne dolcezza di figlio, ne la pieta
del vecchio padre, ne il debito amore
lo qual Penelope dovea far lieta
(ll. 94-96)

— even though Ulysses is here stating that his 'ardour' for discovering the world ('divenir del mondo esperto', 1.98) was stronger than his love for his family, he acknowledges this love with adjectives which express its strength and warmth.

Tennyson's Ulysses may seem, by contrast, a much 'colder' man. He is 'match'd with an aged wife': His words express his marital relationship clearly. It is a match, a matter of conven-

ience now rendered even more desultory and devoid of attraction by the onset of old age. As to his son, Telemachus, 'He works his work, I mine'. His relationship to his son is the same we reserve for passers-by in a busy street: We merely acknowledge their existence. His son, moreover, is described by him with condescension and even subtle contempt⁴. He has 'slow prudence', he is enamoured of common duties, he is 'decent' and 'tender', he is meticulous in that he does not simply adore his gods but does so in 'meet' fashion. His gods are as pedestrian as he is, being but 'household' deities. Telemachus's chief aim is that of subduing people to 'the useful and the good': a glorified chief-constable. Quite clearly, Ulysses is disdainful of a son who has not taken after him, and who does not share his vision. Ulysses is not 'cut out' to be a king, and he is attracted by his people; they are, to him,

..... a savage race
That hoard, and sleep, and know
not me.

Being these people's king is unpleasant since it forces him to "..... mete and dole/Unequal laws"

If there is nothing at home which attracts him, what does this man sigh for? Adventure certainly, as is clear from even a cursory reading of the poem. Most critics have maintained

4. I am indebted to E.J. Chiasson for his perceptive analysis of the Ulysses-Telemachus relationship in Tennyson's poem in his essay "Tennyson's 'Ulysses' — A Re-Interpretation", J. Killham (ed.) *op. cit.*, p.1.

that adventure is the mainspring of his soul, but further analysis may indicate that this is too simplistic.

Ulysses is not a lone wolf, he displays no desire to 'sail to Byzantium' on his own. His nostalgia for his mariners is sharply defined:

..... 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

Ulysses aspires for 'some work of noble note', one 'not unbefitting men that strove with Gods in the company of his mariners. The picture that emerges from a close reading is of a man who hates 'to dole unequal laws', who loves 'to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield', who has 'drunk delight of battle with (his) peers', and who dreams of a last grand 'fling' in the company of his loyal band, with him 'one equal temper of heroic hearts'.

With our legacy of historical fact we can recognise Ulysses for what he is. In the 1920's and thirties Europe brought forth the idea of the 'superman', the military athlete. Tainted as it became through the politics of Italy and Germany, the idea hardly appeals to us, yet it seems to hold a kind of fascination of its own. It is a recurrent one, since it had equal force in Sparta. During the second world war, the Teutonic expansionism of the Third Reich offered ample possibility to young men for savouring the 'heady delights' of braving danger in the company of courageous comrades.

Resourceful, free-style commando warfare waged by small, self-sufficient groups of highly-trained young men actually gave Germany most of her amazingly swift early victories. These men, imbued with the idea of being supermen, relishing a spartan life in an exclusively masculine environment, achieved feats of arms which sound impossible. Ulysses displays the love of danger and the unyielding mentality of these men. Ulysses is intense in his loyalty, in his love of equality adventure and peril. He is not a 'cold' man; he is merely excited by things which lie outside the pale.

The Ulysses of Dante's *Inferno* demonstrates characteristics which are quite different, and issue from the Italian rather than the Nordic *weltanschauung*. Although he is a brave man, he is not beckoned by danger *per se* but by the excitement of discovery: ".....l'ardore/ch'i ebbi a
divenir del mondo esperto." (97-8)

He is an explorer, a geographer, not an unyielding 'striver'. Ulysses's speech in the *Inferno* is replete with geographical names: Gaeta, Spain, Morocco, Sardinia, the Antarctic (L'altro polo). He is not in search of danger but dreams of a new world (diretto al sol, del mondo senza gente). It is quite clear that Dante's Ulysses does not yearn for Valhalla: he has been spawned in the environment which brought forth Marco Polo, Christopher Columbus, Vasco da Gama, even. His talk of stars clearly places him in the tradition of these great navigators and explorers, and in fact lines 124 to 132 (inclusive) deal with navigation. This element is far less conspicuous in Tennyson. Indeed,

Dante's passage is somewhat superficial in the sense that introspection is not a major element. In Tennyson Ulysses bares his soul, and this is possible, as has been pointed out, because of the form of dramatic soliloquy which Tennyson chose. This exposure of the driving force within an identifiably 'great' man cannot but contribute to the thematic element.

In both Dante and Tennyson one detects what may be termed 'moral awareness', and this amounts to a marked similarity. Both *personae* regard the ennobling of human nature through trial as being most important.

Dante's Ulysses tells his men: "fatti non foste a vivere come bruti," and Tennyson describes the common people, who do not have Ulysses's sense of challenge as 'savages' (1.4) and as a 'rugged people' (1.38). In both poems we find the desire to exceed human limitations:

quando venimmo a quella foce stretta
dov'Ercule segno' u suoi riguardi
accio che l'uom piu oltre non si
metta (107-109)

(When we came to the strait and narrow passage where Hercules did mark his limits beyond which no man may go)

And this gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human
thought' (30-32)

In spite of this similarity, which ex-

tends even to linguistic levels, the accent in Tennyson is on different things. His Ulysses is, as we have seen, a warrior-adventurer, and there is nothing submissive about him. Whilst Dante's Ulysses seems to acknowledge (and thereby accept) the supremacy of the gods (com' altri piacque (1.141)), Tennyson's Ulysses thinks nothing of opposing the deities (Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods (1.53)). This 'healthy' disrespect, this arrogant trust in human possibilities is akin to the Medieval concept of *virtù*⁵, but at the same time is reminiscent of the aggressive attitude of the Victorian merchant and Industrialist classes.

Although Tennyson's Ulysses is a thinker (the poem is a ruminative and reflective one) he desires to 'drink life to the lees'; he is a thirster after experience, but the experience he seeks must be exotic.

This, perhaps, is the central idea of the poem. One must live, live to the full, feel life through every pore. There must be danger, bravery, will-power, loyalty and a sense of challenge if man is to deserve his name. Life has to have heroic proportions if it is to have true significance.

As such, the poem is a pagan hymn to life: it ignores any conception of punishment or reward beyond death, and considers the excitement of a 'Ulyssian' life as reward in itself. Written as it was in the poet's worst moments of bereavement it constitutes an attempted establishment of values, wherein 'living to the full' becomes supreme since death is the absolute cessation of existence. The

5. It is ironic that Dante mentions this very word (1.120).

poem has a great sense of urgency.

Tennyson and Dante were both attracted and inspired by the figure of the aged Ulysses, but their creations are basically different since they reflect their creators. Dante was troubled by the fact that the world was not completely known, as Tennyson was troubled by Death. This is why Dante's vision is of a man in

search of geographic erudition, an explorer, a transformer of the unknown into the known, whilst Tennyson's protagonist is an athlete, a man who is driven 'To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield'.

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