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in Alfred Tennyson's *Ulysses*

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## Exploring New Ways of Poetic Expression in Alfred Tennyson's "Ulysses"

Alfred Tennyson's "Ulysses" has often been considered as one of the very first examples of the dramatic monologue, a new poetic form which emerged in the Victorian epoch. It was written in 1833, a few weeks after the death of the poet's friend, Arthur Hallam, but not published until the second volume of *Poems* in 1842. In the poem, the dramatic persona, Ulysses, a well-known Greek character drawn from Homer's *Odyssey*, has been shown in unusual circumstances as he is delivering a speech to his mariners in order to encourage them to leave Ithaca, the destination of their famous journey, and set out on yet another quest. Thus, the novelty of the poem lies both in its genre and its treatment of the well-known Greek myth. The aim of this paper is to present Tennyson's creative approach to the literary traditions in the poem and to analyse the way it both reflects the poet's personal experience and is characteristic of the nineteenth-century poetics.

The dramatic monologue may be seen as a Victorian reaction to the self-centredness of the lyrical 'I' in Romantic poetry. The multi-facetedness of this new poetic form has been summed up by Slinn, who defines the genre as a "lyrical-dramatic hybrid" (2007: 80), encompassing "an emotional expressiveness from lyrics, a speaker who is not the poet from drama, and elements of mimetic detail and retrospective structuring from narrative" (80-81). The roots of the genre can be traced back to the ancient rhetorical figure of *prosopopoeia* or impersonation, which was widely used as a common school exercise in learning to prepare effective speeches by adopting a register that would be appropriate for a character in a given imaginary situation. It also proved useful in practising the art of writing letters and was considered valuable for future poets and historians (Dixon 1990: 45). The practice of writing *prosopopoeiae* was present in the school curriculum well through the Renaissance up to the nineteenth century, and, as Culler observes, the form was not unknown to Tennyson in his school days (1977: 85).

In fact, Tennyson's indebtedness to the art of rhetoric is clear in the construction of Ulysses' speech. What Culler describes as "moving through four phases of emotion: the rejection of the barren, sterile life on Ithaca, the memory of his earlier heroic life when he followed knowledge like a sinking star, his recognition of the validity of Telemachus' more prudential way, and his final setting out upon the quest freighted with all these thoughts" (1975: 383) may be reinterpreted in terms of the arrangement of a speech according to the rules of rhetoric enumerated by Dixon. The monologue starts with a narrative, an introduction of the case in question, here, the present situation of Ulysses trapped in the state of idleness on his island as contrasted with his active life in the past. This should be followed by the proposition, "in which the orator either states succinctly the concern of his speech, or sets a definite issue or problem before his audience" (Dixon 1990: 29), which can be found in Ulysses' assertion of the need to embark on a journey, already signalled by his "I cannot rest from travel"(6). The next element, the refutation, in which "the orator attempts to answer or

discredit the arguments which are likely to be (...) advanced against him” (Dixon 1990: 30) here has been substituted, as if in anticipation of the charge of irresponsibility, by Ulysses’ introduction of his son Telemachus as a legitimate and worthy successor to the throne:

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 through 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. (33-43)

Finally, the conclusion or peroration should include an amplification or a “an emphatic statement of the speaker’s position” and “an appeal to the tender feelings of the audience” (Dixon 1990: 30), both of which appear in the final part of Ulysses’ speech as he addresses his mariners to follow him “to seek a newer world” (57), and, in order to strengthen his argument, makes use of some *commonplaces* or maxims such as “Death closes all” (51) and “Though much is taken, much abides” (65).

The rhetorical aspect of the dramatic monologue has been pointed out as a crucial distinctive feature of the genre by Pearsall, who labels it as “rhetorical efficacy” (2000: 68). In her essay on the dramatic monologue she observes that the major goal to be achieved by the speaker in the poem is to win their audience over to their side and thus to effect “a host of transformations – of his or her circumstances, of his or her auditor, of his or her self, and possibly all those together” (71).

However, the dramatic monologue appears to be something different from just a mere school exercise in the art of rhetoric. In the case of Tennyson’s “Ulysses”, the message that the mythological hero is delivering to his mariners acquires a new meaning. It seems that it is the Victorian poet that is speaking with the voice of the mythological persona and that he is trying to persuade himself in the first place. As we learn from Hallam Tennyson’s *A Memoir*, “Ulysses” was written “soon after Arthur Hallam’s death” and expressed the poet’s “need of going forward, and braving the struggle of life perhaps more simply than anything in ‘In Memoriam’” (1897 Vol. 1: 196). Thus, while adopting a mythological speaking persona, the poet imbues his speech with another meaning, which transcends the given literary situation in the poem, and, though indirectly, reaches out to the wider audience of the poet’s contemporaries.

This seeming indirectness, as opposed to the Romantic confessions of the lyrical ‘I’, in the Victorian dramatic monologue has been achieved by means of adopting a ‘mask’ as a way of distancing the speaking persona from the identity of the poet behind his work. “Ulysses” represents one of the many speaking personas Tennyson has drawn from what he found to be a rich source of material for literary exploration, that is, classical mythology. As his son observes,

He purposely chose those classical subjects from mythology and legend, which had been before but imperfectly treated, or of which the stories were slight, so that he might have free scope for his imagination, "The Lotos-Eaters," "Ulysses," "Tithonus," "Cenone," "The Death of Cenone," "Tiresias," "Demeter and Persephone," "Lucretius." A modern feeling was to some extent introduced into the themes, but they were dealt with according to the canons of antique art. The blank verse was often intentionally restrained. (1897 Vol. 2: 13-14)

Thus, while Tennyson was undoubtedly well-versed in classical tradition, he nevertheless sought to adapt both the form and the theme to his own imaginative aims.

His "Ulysses" may be perceived not only as an example of an innovative poetic form; it should also be distinguished for its original way of treating an already familiar subject matter. It seems that Tennyson's poem takes up the myth after the point at which the traditional narrative has ended, namely after Odysseus' return to Ithaca and his regaining of the throne. Even though the motif of the final journey of Odysseus, after he has reached Ithaca, is already prophesied by the seer Teiresias in the *Odyssey*, and the main source of Tennyson's monologue, as acknowledged by the poet himself, is a later medieval account from Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Tennyson 1897 Vol. 2: 70, 464), in the Victorian poem this endeavour has been presented in a new, positive light. The Dantean Ulysses is found in the flames of the eighth Circle of Hell, condemned there for the ambush of the Trojan horse. Enquired by Virgil about his death, he relates the story of his final voyage beyond the Pillars of Heracles, his reaching the Mountain of Purgatory and his subsequent death in a whirlwind at sea. Apparently, this account includes all the major elements to be later incorporated into Tennyson's poem. After many years of travelling only with a small band of his faithful mariners, though "Tardy with age" (Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXVI: 104), Ulysses still encourages his companions to cross the westernmost landmark of the familiar world claiming that they "were not form'd to live the life of brutes, / But virtue to pursue and knowledge high" (116-117). In their daring enterprise they manage to arrive within the sight of the Otherworld, yet, being alive, they are forbidden to proceed any further. In fact, these lines have their parallel in Tennyson's dramatic monologue, as the speaker claims that even though they have been "Made weak by time and fate" (69), they still are "One equal temper of heroic hearts" (68), "strong in will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" (69-70). Yet, the Ulysses as presented in Tennyson's poem is no longer condemned to Hell for his excessive curiosity and cunning. Conversely, he has become an epitome of a questing hero, a pursuer of knowledge at all costs. This view is also corroborated by the poet Aubrey De Vere, who comments that the poem "shows us what Heroism may be even in old age, though sustained by little except the love of knowledge, and the scorn of sloth" (Tennyson 1897 Vol. 1: 505).

Compared to the Homeric character, Tennyson's Ulysses is again portrayed as a quester, this time, however, it is not a quest out of necessity, as was the case with his long journey back home; the new quest is a spiritual one the hero decides to undertake out of choice, or rather out of the need of his heart "To follow knowledge like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought" (31-32). His yearning for a voyage in pursuit of experience which is "an arch wherethrough / Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades / For ever and for ever when I move" (19-21) is reminiscent of the words of Princess Nekayah in yet another story about the pursuit of happiness

and the search for the goal in one's life, Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759). As she observes, "Such (...) is the state of life, that none are happy but by the anticipation of change: the change itself is nothing; when we have made it, the next wish is to change again. The world is not yet exhausted; let me see something to-morrow which I never saw before" (1960: 150-151). In his quest for the ultimate experience, Tennyson's *Ulysses* is not afraid to cross the final boundary of human existence. He states that his purpose is to embark on the last journey into the night, "To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths / Of all the western stars" (60-61) until he dies. The allusion to transgressing the final frontier between life and death is also present in the suggestion that on their way they may "touch the Happy Isles, / And see the great Achilles, whom we knew" (63-64), thus referring to the Islands of the Blessed or Elysium, the final abode of the favoured Greek heroes (Smith 1996: 170).

Insofar as the speaker in Tennyson's dramatic monologue provides a surprising insight into an already well-known story, this technique may be compared to an innovative approach to the old myths and legends, which can be found in the representatives of the Alexandrian school of poetry of the third century BC. Those poets, including Callimachus and Theocritus, sought to shed new light on otherwise familiar stories drawn from the popular mythological and legendary subject matter and embody them in short but elaborate poetic forms such as the elegy, the idyll, the pastoral or the 'little epic' (Culler 1977: 90-91). It is no wonder then that within both traditions, the Alexandrian epic and the *protopoieia*, one can find Ovid's *Heroides* of the first century BC, one of the major works to be found among the literary prototypes of the dramatic monologue (Byron 2003: 30). Culler points to the influence the Alexandrian poets must have had on shaping Victorian poetry. Writing about the Alexandrian school, he observes that the Victorians "saw an analogy between that exhausted period – so rich in science and criticism but so lacking in true creative impulse – and their own day" (1977: 91).

It seems that Tennyson's poem lends itself to many levels of interpretation. On the most immediate one the poem can be read simply as a response to a personal crisis and an attempt at finding consolation in re-establishing one's aim in life. In a broader, Victorian context, it can be interpreted as a need for the search for truth in a world in which the latest scientific discoveries have shaken the old established tenets, leaving the individual in a state of uncertainty. Finally, the dramatic persona may be seen as expressing the poet's yearning to follow "the higher poetic imagination" (Tennyson 1897 Vol. 2: 366), which apparently accompanied Tennyson until the end of his life, as the theme reappears in the late "Merlin and the Gleam".

The analysis of Tennyson's "Ulysses" has shown that its novelty both as a genre and as a new treatment of a familiar subject does not lie in a complete invention on the part of the poet. It should rather be perceived in terms posited by T.S. Eliot in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1920), with the poet drawing on the already existing literary themes and genres and acting as the catalyst in that he, triggered by a personal experience, reshapes them in order to find a new way of poetic expression. In his dramatic monologue, Tennyson employs the classical rhetorical figure of *protopoieia* and an obscure medieval continuation of a well-known myth from Homer's *Odyssey* in order to voice the feelings of a Victorian besieged by uncertainties about the major questions concerning human existence. Yet, it is also the voice of a poet who is determined to always pursue the gleam, his poetic vision.

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### STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł ten ma na celu ukazanie nowatorskich cech wiersza "Ulysses" autorstwa Lorda Alfreda Tennysona. Jest to jeden z pierwszych wiktoriańskich monologów dramatycznych, formy poetyckiej, która w przeciwieństwie do poezji okresu Romantyzmu wyraźnie zaznaczała dystans pomiędzy poetą a podmiotem lirycznym wiersza dzięki tzw. „masce”. W wierszu Tennysona maską tą staje się postać Ulyssesa, dobrze znana z homeryckiej *Odysei*, jednak tutaj poeta podejmuje mniej znany epilog, przedstawiający bohatera jako wiecznego poszukiwacza, który pragnie wyruszyć w kolejną podróż, tym razem wiedziony potrzebą przekraczania granic poznania. Tym samym wiersz ten jest też wyrazem osobistego rozrachunku poety z losem po śmierci bliskiej osoby.