



EWA MEYNARCZYK

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Poems by Alfred Lord  
Tennyson and Algernon  
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Ewa Młynarczyk  
Uniwersytet Warszawski

### **The Seer as an *Alter Ego* of the Poet in the “Tiresias” Poems by Alfred Lord Tennyson and Algernon Charles Swinburne**

In the two “Tiresias” poems, both Alfred Lord Tennyson and Algernon Charles Swinburne appropriate the mythological figure of the famous Greek seer as the speaker of their dramatic monologues and set him in the context of an episode from the Theban myth; in Tennyson’s poem it is the self-sacrifice of Menoeceus, son of Creon, while in Swinburne’s work it is the later suicide of Antigone. Moreover, both poems follow the same version of the myth in which Tiresias is deprived of worldly sight and endowed with prophetic power by the angry Athene after he has chanced upon her in her bath. Yet, despite these similarities, it seems that the figure of the seer serves a different purpose in the two cases. The aim of this article is to analyse how, in the two Victorian poems, the figure of Tiresias has been used as an *alter ego* of the poet.

When compared to its classical sources<sup>1</sup>, Tennyson’s dramatic monologue introduces three significant changes into the portrayal of the ancient prophet. To begin with, it seems that Tiresias’s encounter with the divinity was not altogether unintentional. In fact, Tennyson’s Tiresias has since his youth yearned “For larger glimpses of that more than man / Which rolls the heavens, and lifts and lays the deep,” (ll. 20-21)<sup>2</sup>, and he goes wandering on the hill “With some strange hope to see the nearer God” (l. 28). Hence, in Tennyson’s retelling of an episode from Callimachus’s *Fifth Hymn*, the young Tiresias’s search for water to quench his thirst turns into a symbolic quest to quench the thirst for forbidden

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<sup>1</sup> In his edition of *The Poems of Tennyson*, Christopher Ricks enumerates, among other possible sources, Euripides’s *The Phoenissae* and Callimachus’s *Fifth Hymn* (London 1969, pp. 568-569, 570).

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from Tennyson’s “Tiresias” come from *The Poems of Tennyson*. Ed. Christopher Ricks. London 1969, pp. 568-574.

knowledge<sup>3</sup>. His inquisitiveness already predestines him for his future role of a sage.

The second important addition, Athene's curse which renders Tiresias's prophecies ineffective, lies at the very core of Tennyson's dramatic monologue. But in order to see its full meaning in the poem let us first analyse the traditional position of Tiresias. The seer may be perceived as a concretization of a Jungian archetype, the Wise Old Man. Jung observes that "[t]he wise old man appears in dreams in the guise of a magician, doctor, priest, teacher, professor, grandfather, or any other person possessing authority", who "always appears in a situation where insight, understanding, good advice, determination, planning, etc., are needed but cannot be mustered on one's own resources. The archetype compensates this state of spiritual deficiency by contents designed to fill the gap"<sup>4</sup>. Hence, in mythology, the position of the Wise Old Man is defined in relation to the main hero who he provides with invaluable guidance at the crucial point of the hero's quest. Tiresias fulfils this role in Book XI of the *Odyssey* when his ghost emerges from the depths of Hades and appears before Odysseus to advise him on the further course of his journey home. It is also the position the Victorian Tiresias struggles to gain in Tennyson's poem. However, his role as a helper has been thwarted by what seems to be an addition by the poet to his classical sources, probably from the myth of Cassandra<sup>5</sup>; this is the curse Athene has attached to the gift of foresight: "Henceforth be blind, for thou hast seen too much, / And speak the truth that no man may believe" (ll. 48-49).

The prophet's lament about his incapacity to influence his fellow citizens, and thus, his failure as the Jungian Wise Old Man, may also be seen as a comment on the position of the poet in Victorian society<sup>6</sup>. In his essay on "Three Stages of Tennyson's 'Tiresias'", Goslee observes that "The tale of this archetypal outcast could have appealed to him [Tennyson] only after he could no longer either respect society or influence its direction. As Tiresias' social hopes rest only on Menoeceus, Tennyson's in turn may rest on the poem itself"<sup>7</sup>. He then points to a quotation concerning the poem in a letter the poet's wife, Emily, wrote to Edward Lear, "Ally has come to think that the world will receive

<sup>3</sup> Cf. A. A. Markley. "Tennyson's Classical Dramatic Monologues and the Approximation of Greek and Latin Poetry." *Victorian Review*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Summer, 1999), p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> Carl Gustav Jung. *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, vol. 9, part 1 *The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*. Trans. R. F. C. Hull. London 2000, p. 216.

<sup>5</sup> A. Dwight Culler. *The Poetry of Tennyson*. New Haven, London 1977, p. 88.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>7</sup> David F. Goslee. "Three Stages of Tennyson's 'Tiresias'." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 75, No. 1/2 (Jan. - Apr., 1976), p. 164.

lessons thus when it discards them in modern garb"<sup>8</sup>. It is therefore the mythical guise that is supposed to secure the poem's effectiveness.

It seems that it is the undoing of Athene's curse that is the motive force behind Tennyson's dramatic monologue. In her essay on the genre, Pearsall points out that the main objective of the dramatic monologue is persuasion and, consequently, the "anticipated production", "the alteration the monologue is laboring to perform or cause"<sup>9</sup>. In Tennyson's dramatic monologue, this change may be effected by Menoeceus, the addressee of Tiresias's message, who is urged by the prophet to sacrifice his life in order to appease the wrath of Ares and save the city. As Culler rightly observes, Menoeceus, even though removed to the position of the silent auditor, still has a very important role to play: "For to him [Tiresias] Menoeceus is not only the means of the salvation of the city but also the means of the fulfillment of the prophet. (...) It is at this point that the figure of Tennyson's poems whom we have hitherto called the Auditor (...) adds to his role that of Enactor"<sup>10</sup>. Menoeceus is hence the one to turn Tiresias's vision into action and in this way "blunt the curse / Of Pallas" (ll. 149-150) by validating his words as truly prophetic.

Yet, Tiresias could not achieve his goal without a direct confrontation with Menoeceus. The seer's change in attitude towards Menoeceus with respect to Tennyson's classical source constitutes the third major alteration that has been introduced in the poem. In Euripides's *The Phoenissae*, the seer is reluctant to impart to Creon in the presence of his son, Menoeceus the content of his oracle concerning the fate of the city. Conversely, in Tennyson's poem, Tiresias's direct insistence on Menoeceus's suicide does seem rather harsh. The seer verbally pushes him to

[...] let thine own hand strike  
Thy youthful pulses into rest and quench  
The red God's anger, fearing not to plunge  
Thy torch of life in darkness (ll.151-154)

These lines have invited various interpretations from the critics. In Kincaid's view, what he terms "the loud voice of heroism"<sup>11</sup> and "pious exhortations to Menoeceus to slaughter himself"<sup>12</sup> bear sure signs of underlying irony. He argues that Menoeceus's death will only be another bloody act amid the

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>9</sup> Cornelia D. J. Pearsall. "The Dramatic Monologue", in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*. Ed. Joseph Bristow. Cambridge 2000, p. 71.

<sup>10</sup> A. Dwight Culler, op.cit., pp. 88-89.

<sup>11</sup> James Russell Kincaid. *Tennyson's Major Poems: the Comic and Ironic Patterns*. New Haven, London 1975, p. 139.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

plagues, slaughter and confusion, the images of which Tiresias portrays earlier in the poem, and that this state cannot be improved by complying with the demand of the bloodthirsty god of war<sup>13</sup>.

On the other hand, some critics interpret Tiresias's message for Menoeceus within the context in which the poem was first written. Ricks points to the fact that Tiresias repeatedly addresses Menoeceus as "my son", which may be perceived as a foreshadowing of Christianity and which may thus provide a deeper meaning for Menoeceus's self-sacrifice. He also relates the import of the poem to the death of the poet's friend, Arthur Hallam: "Tenuously adumbrated here is the sacrifice of God and His Son. The poem's origins in 1833 suggest that T[ennyson], after Arthur Hallam's death, looked to a classical story for an insight into mortality"<sup>14</sup>.

Goslee traces an even more complex relation between Tennyson, Arthur Hallam, Tiresias, and Menoeceus. Again, he points out that the mythological frame may serve to provide the meaning for the meaningless death of Arthur Hallam. He states that Tiresias's "arguments for suicide are harsh only because they are after the fact – after the death they are attempting to rationalize", and he adds that "In this attempt the classical setting offers Tennyson some much-needed freedom" which allows him to give Hallam "a real social mission"<sup>15</sup>. However, he also posits that the glory and heroism Tiresias sees in the act of self-sacrifice may stem from his own "interminable, lonely, meaningless existence"<sup>16</sup>. This argument can be supported by Tiresias's exclamation "Fairer thy fate than mine, if life's best end / Be to end well!" (ll. 126-127), backed up by the final part of the monologue, in which the seer envisions his long-awaited rest among the illustrious ones in the underworld.

The sense of loneliness of the now solitary ancient poet-seer is even more painfully brought into focus against the final frame of the poem, namely, that of the death of yet another long-time friend of Tennyson, Edward Fitzgerald, to whom the poem is dedicated. Thus, the figure of Tiresias, who may be interpreted as an imaginary projection, an embodiment of the emotional state the young Tennyson found himself in after the death of Arthur Hallam, in 1885 once again proved an appropriate *alter ego* for the Victorian Poet Laureate.

In Swinburne's poem the sense of alienation also seems to be the main theme of Tiresias's monologue. Yet, unlike Tennyson's seer, Swinburne's Tiresias exults in his prophetic power. His extraordinary position has been achieved through a series of seemingly paradoxical oppositions:

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Ricks (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 569.

<sup>15</sup> David F. Goslee, *op.cit.*, p. 159.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

I prophesy of life, who live with death;  
 Of joy, being sad; of sunlight, who am blind;  
 Of man, whose ways are alien from mankind  
 And his lips are not parted with man's breath;  
 I am a word out of the speechless years,  
 The tongue of time, that no man sleeps who hears. (ll. 129-134)<sup>17</sup>

This feeling of solitude and not-belonging is magnified by the time at which the prophet delivers his monologue: "It is an hour before the hour of dawn" (l. 1). Just as Tiresias is "a soul outside of death and birth" (l. 55), so he prophesies at the liminal moment which belongs neither to the night nor yet to the dawning day. While he does not partake in the lot of his fellow human beings, he is attuned to the rhythms of time, metaphorically presented as the seasonal rhythms of nature:

I hear the low sound of the spring of time  
 Still beating as the low live throb of blood,  
 And where its waters gather head and flood  
 I hear change moving on them, and the chime  
 Across them of reverberate wings of hours  
 Sounding, and feel the future air of flowers. (ll. 115-120)

His alienation from his fellow men has also been rendered by means of spatial distance. He lives "where men are not, / In the high starless air of fruitful night / On that serenest and obscurest height" (ll. 159-161), where he is granted insight into higher knowledge about "dead and unborn things" as "one in thought" (l. 162), and "whence the live unconquerable springs / Feed full of force the torrents of new things" (ll. 163-164). This sense of isolation from one's contemporaries, along with exceptional insight and closeness to nature, may be seen as characteristics that have often been ascribed to the Romantic poet-visionary. Suffice it to mention such figures as the mysterious and awe-inspiring poet-prophet in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan".

An affinity with the Romantic tradition has also been established through the form of the poem. While the first part of Swinburne's "Tiresias" may resemble the Victorian dramatic monologue, with its mythological setting and speaker whose main task is that of persuading his fellow men to perform heroic feats of courage and daring, it still lacks one of the important features of the genre, an audience. In Swinburne's poem, the auditor remains obscure or even absent, which is suggested by the words of the seer in the opening lines of the poem,

<sup>17</sup> All quotations from Swinburne's "Tiresias" come from *Selected Poems*. Ed. L. M. Findlay. Manchester 1987, pp. 118-128.

“Set in mine hand my staff and leave me here / Outside the hollow house that blind men fear” (ll.2-3). On the other hand, the second part of “Tiresias” once again brings to mind Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”. Both poems use a similar two-part structure of related dream-visions, joint by the figure of the dreamer-poet. As the first stanza of Part II of Swinburne’s poem reveals, the Greek blind seer musing over the lot of Antigone appears in a dream-vision of the lyrical ‘I’. As the vision flickers and changes, the reader is presented with a greyish landscape at twilight, made desolate with the wailing wind, and “One like a prophet” (l. 266) leans over “A pale and living body full of grace / There lying” (ll. 274-275). What follows is a sequence of visions in which successive mysterious prophet-figures attempt to wake the Antigone-Italy figure from her sleep. Ultimately, the third prophet is successful in breathing “love upon her sealed and breathless mouth” (l. 362), and the poem ends on a positive note, as she is brought back to life at the break of a new day. This has apparently been foreshadowed in Part I where Swinburne’s Tiresias already prophesies the coming of freedom, truth and “death cast out and life devouring death” (l. 142).

Thus, the second part of Swinburne’s poem is important in that it both illuminates the use of Greek mythology in the first part and reveals the purport of the whole poem as related to the spirit of revolution in 19th-century Europe. Greenberg comments that “classical myth proves to be of limited use, and he [Swinburne] must advance beyond it – somehow violate its accepted bounds – to establish its modern viability”<sup>18</sup>. He goes on to quote from a letter of Swinburne’s to William Michael Rossetti in which the poet speaks of “a poem on Tiresias at the grave of Antigone”, with Antigone symbolising “liberty in the abstract (or more especially as incarnate in Italy...)” and the prophet standing for “any prophet, patriot or freethinker you will from Dante to Mazzini”<sup>19</sup>. Swinburne turns the figure of the mythical prophet Tiresias of the first part of the poem into the prophet as an archetype, in this way making it possible to embrace such diverse figures as Dante and his hero Mazzini. Finally, the lyrical “I” himself can also be counted as yet another one in the line of prophets, with the poem as his own prophetic vision.

In 19th-century English poetry, mythological characters often provided the Victorian poets with an *alter ego*, a mask which allowed them to add a universal dimension to their personal feelings and reflections. In the two “Tiresias” poems both Tennyson and Swinburne apparently use the persona of the Greek blind seer as their mouthpiece. In this way, they contribute to the Romantic notion of the poet as prophet, endowed with greater insight into the nature of things, which was

<sup>18</sup> Robert A. Greenberg. “Swinburne and the Redefinition of Classical Myth.” *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn, 1976), p. 181.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.



still popular in the Victorian epoch owing to Thomas Carlyle's series of lectures *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, with the Poet as one of his subjects. Yet, the two "Tiresias" poems function in different ways. Despite some modifications, Tennyson's dramatic monologue is grounded in a particular mythical situation and the main goal of Tiresias's speech is to persuade Menoeceus to follow his advice and thus to break Athene's curse of incredulity. The prevailing mood of the poem is that of acute isolation and loneliness of the seer, which may be seen as reflecting the mood of Tennyson himself at the time of writing. On the other hand, in Swinburne's monologue, Antigone's deed and subsequent death only provide a starting point for a reflection of a more universal nature, which is in turn linked to the particular historical situation of the 19th-century fight for Italian independence. The poet has used the figure of the Greek seer in a truly Romantic fashion to prophesy the forthcoming freedom of the Italian nation embodied in the figure of the waking Antigone.

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