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THE CLASSIC AND THE CHRISTIAN:
TENNYSON'S GRIEF AND SPIRITUAL SHIFT FROM "THE LOTOS-EATERS" TO
"ULYSSES"

by

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ABSTRACT

Sacred forms, in the shape of doctrines and creeds, constituted a large part of Tennyson's childhood religion. This is reflected in "The Lotos-Eaters," written in 1832, as Tennyson cautions against increasingly popular ideas of secular materialism; Tennyson's mariners parrot the ideas of Epicureanism, but their arguments mirror that of Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* character Despair. In putting Despair's words in the mariners' mouths, Tennyson warns against forgetting religious ritual, as this leads to suicide and eternal damnation. However, with the death of Arthur Henry Hallam in 1833, Tennyson's religion shifted dramatically. *In Memoriam* gives us the final version of Tennyson's beliefs as a fluid faith in a God of Love. Written before *In Memoriam*, "Ulysses" does not provide the same clarity of faith but instead captures Tennyson's realization that religious change is needed in order to cope with sorrow. By creating poetic tension between the two facets of Homer's and Dante's Ulysses, Tennyson reveals the consequences of his belief in forms: the Homeric version of the character underscores the poet's determination to live, not yielding to despair, and the Dantesque figure highlights the dangers of Tennyson's faith in forms, as holding on to it will only lead to death.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Alfred Tennyson's life shattered with the death of Arthur Henry Hallam. Struck down in 1833 by a sudden stroke, Hallam had been Tennyson's closest friend; his death shook the poet's religious beliefs to the core and inspired the elegy of *In Memoriam*, which works through Tennyson's grief. Published in 1850, *In Memoriam* shows the light beyond Hallam's death. Throughout the poem, critics have noted a religious shift in Tennyson's thinking, moving from the uncertain morass of his childhood Anglican, Evangelical, and Calvinist form-based worship to a more fluid faith in a God of Love.¹ While starting work on *In Memoriam*, Tennyson also wrote "Ulysses," and the shorter poem deals with the same grief and the need for spiritual change. However, as "Ulysses" was written in 1833, almost immediately after Hallam's death, the poem deals with Tennyson's sorrow in a much more stricken, raw form, and only hints at the beginnings of a transformation in belief.²

¹ Cf. E. D. H. Johnson, "'In Memoriam': The Way of the Poet," *Victorian Studies* 2.2 (1958): 139–148; Carlisle Moore, "Faith, Doubt, and Mystical Experience in 'In Memoriam,'" *Victorian Studies* 7.2 (1963): 155–169; Irene Hsiao, "Calculating Loss in Tennyson's 'In Memoriam,'" *Victorian Poetry* 47.1 (2009): 173–196.

² James Nohrnberg, "Eight Reflections of Tennyson's 'Ulysses,'" *Victorian Poetry* 47 (2009): 120.

Nohrnberg is skeptical of the claim that Tennyson wrote "Ulysses" within ten days of receiving word of Hallam's death.

Tennyson was famously closemouthed about his childhood, owing perhaps to his father's epilepsy, depression, and alcoholism, so it is difficult to precisely define the poet's earliest religious beliefs.³ However, the biographies of Hallam Tennyson, Charles Tennyson, and Robert Martin detail the influences that young Alfred absorbed. George Tennyson, Alfred Tennyson's grandfather, forced his son Dr. George Tennyson into a religious career at the age of thirteen, having negotiated the benefice of Benniworth for the young boy.⁴ Charles Tennyson, the biographer and grandson of Alfred Tennyson, noted that the Church was "a calling for which young George felt himself very ill-suited and which throughout his life he found most uncongenial."⁵ Nevertheless, "he strove conscientiously to do his duty as a parish clergyman, though his views and habits were not altogether orthodox. He would never read the Athanasian Creed and was stoutly opposed to the doctrine of eternal punishment."⁶ On the opposite end of the piety spectrum was Alfred's Aunt Bourne,

Who would weep for hours because God was so infinitely good. "Has he not damned," she cried, "most of my friends? But *me, me* He has picked out for eternal salvation, *me* who am no better than my neighbours." One day she said to her nephew, "Alfred, Alfred, when I look at you, I think of the words of the Holy Scripture – 'Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire.'"⁷

Sitting quietly in the middle of the family's contrasting religious values was Tennyson's mother Elizabeth. According to Charles Tennyson, Elizabeth was a woman of "profound, instinctive and unquestioning Evangelical pietism, which contrasted strongly

³ John Batchelor, "Alfred Tennyson: Problems of Biography," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 36.2 (2006): 79.

⁴ Robert Bernard Martin, *Tennyson: The Unquiet Heart* (Oxford: Faber and Faber, 1980), 7.

⁵ Charles Tennyson, *Alfred Tennyson* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949), 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁷ Hallam Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by his Son, Vol 1* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1897), 15.

with the more matter-of-fact attitude of her husband, to whom any excess of emotion or pietism in religion was distasteful.”⁸ Martin suggests that Elizabeth was considerably more religious than her husband, and she “passed on to Alfred her spirit of reverence, although he early deserted her strict Evangelical beliefs.”⁹

With no clear version of faith to cling to, religion, intermixed with memory, obviously plagued the poet’s formative years. Later in his life, Alfred recounted to his son Hallam his boyhood fear that he would not be able to remember the Lord’s Prayer while at school in Louth, which eventually did occur: “‘The masters jeered at me remorselessly’ he said, ‘and I have never forgotten their injustice. A little kindness would have saved me.’”¹⁰ All of these influences – Dr. George Tennyson, Aunt Bourne, Elizabeth Tennyson, and the masters at Louth – create an image of a Tennyson with no clear belief system, but instead a murky idea of what it meant to believe. There was a God that required some form of worship through organized religion; for every devout authority listed above, forms constituted a great deal of devotion. This uncertain format carried a fearful undercurrent of remembering, and thus potentially forgetting, the practices that defined the jumble of Tennyson’s boyhood doctrines.

The ideology of forms, potentially because of the poet’s inability to articulate a clear sense of religion, failed Tennyson when he most needed a religious anchor. Religion through ritual became untenable for Tennyson after Hallam’s death, and *In Memoriam*, written in fragments and pieced together, details the struggle Tennyson experienced after the death of his friend. The stages of grief, intermingled with

⁸ Charles Tennyson, 14.

⁹ Martin, 18.

¹⁰ Gordon W. McCabe, “Personal Recollections of Alfred, Lord Tennyson,” *Century Magazine*, March 1902, 734.

Tennyson's questioning of God and Nature, are laid out in a slow procession, and doubt, intermixed with and then trumped by faith, takes center stage. The prologue to *In Memoriam*, thought to be one of the last pieces written, makes it clear that Tennyson's previous beliefs, as well as his doubts, were the products of an unrefined faith: "Forgive these wild and wandering cries,/ Confusions of a wasted youth"; the confusions became doubts with the death of Hallam, and Tennyson searched for a new clarity, breaking free from the dogmatic creeds that tied faith to forms.¹¹

Alan Hill points out that *In Memoriam* avoids explicitly advocating for accepted Christian doctrines; instead, faith in God, not religious ritual, saves the poet:

As *In Memoriam* movingly demonstrates, however, Tennyson has followed his own light to the end, and his own conception of the Christian verities, deliberately skirting round the traditional ways in which believers have shaped their understanding of the Gospel, so that the legitimate place of forms in religious experience is left largely unresolved.¹²

Jerome Buckley describes Tennyson's poem as going "behind the dogmas of his own broad Anglicanism to discover the availability of any religious faith at all and finally to establish subjective experience as sufficient ground for a full assent to the reality of God."¹³ Tennyson wrote to his son of *In Memoriam*: "'The different moods of sorrow as in a drama are dramatically given, and my conviction that fear, doubts and suffering will find answer and relief only through Faith in a God of Love.'"¹⁴ The poet reiterated this

¹¹ Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, ed. Susan Shatto and Marion Shaw (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), Prologue 41-42.

¹² Alan G. Hill, "Tennyson, Wordsworth, and the 'Forms' of Religion," *Tennyson Society Monographs*, No. 13 (1997): 34.

¹³ Jerome Buckley, *Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 27. Howard Fulweiler, in his own article "The Argument of 'The Ancient Sage': Tennyson and the Christian Intellectual Tradition," calls Buckley's words "broadly representative of the twentieth-century opinion" of Tennyson's religion (203).

¹⁴ Hallam Tennyson, 304-305.

faith to Hallam Tennyson in the summer of 1892, exclaiming, “‘Yet God is love, transcendent, all-pervading! We do not get this faith from Nature of the world.’”¹⁵

Many critics have focused solely on *In Memoriam* as reflecting Tennyson’s change of faith, and the elegy indeed reveals the entire spectrum of the poet’s move from doubt to trust in a formless love. However, “Ulysses” holds the beginning of this transformation, manifesting Tennyson’s recognition that his formulaic religion is inadequate in the face of Hallam’s death. In this essay I will examine how Tennyson uses the character Ulysses to articulate the understanding that his belief in religious forms must be released. First, I offer a reading of “The Lotos-Eaters” to show how Tennyson borrows Ulysses as an advocate for a formulaic Christian worship, shadowing the mariners’ secular materialism with the arguments of Spenser’s *Despair*. Second, I analyze “Ulysses” itself as Tennyson uses Ulysses to stand in for his previous beliefs. The poet creates a tension between Homer’s and Dante’s depictions of Ulysses to show various reactions to Hallam’s death: the need to go forth and brave life, while also letting go of former beliefs lest they drown the poet.

¹⁵ Hallam Tennyson, 314.

CHAPTER TWO
“THE LOTOS-EATERS”

During the later years of his life, Tennyson said, “This is a terrible age of unfaith... One can easily lose all belief, through giving up the continual thought and care for spiritual things.”¹⁶ Illustrating this point in “The Lotos-Eaters,” Ulysses’ men give up spiritual thought when they reach the island of the Lotos. In 1832, before the death of Arthur Hallam, Tennyson creates his own version of Homer’s tale that can be used as a benchmark for Tennyson’s Christian beliefs during this period.

The use of a classical character to represent contemporary ideologies, such as Tennyson’s religious doctrines, was not a new idea. A.A. Markley comments on this at length:

Nineteenth-century poets, philosophers, cultural critics, and politicians hoped to find inspiration in the ancient history for counteracting the effects of such modern phenomena as the rise of democracy and the doctrine of utilitarianism, rapid scientific and industrial developments, the spread of secular materialism, and widespread colonial expansion. For Tennyson, poems that embodied the English character and English values would become a means of counteracting the dehumanizing aspects of the profound social-cultural changes that the Victorians experienced...¹⁷

What I will focus on is the idea of “secular materialism,” which proliferated due to some of the scientific and social advances of the time. Many people, when confronted with

¹⁶ Hallam Tennyson, 309.

¹⁷ A.A. Markley, *Stateliest Measures: Tennyson and the Literature of Greece and Rome* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 5.

new scientific theories, began to question whether or not God existed, or even cared about his own people; this thought process led some to the search for other avenues of comfort.¹⁸ Within “The Lotos-Eaters,” Tennyson gives this ideology a voice. However, the poet simultaneously warns against following this method of security by shadowing every argument for secular materialism with that of Edmund Spenser’s Despair.

The island of the Lotos seems a paradise: “always afternoon,” filled with “languid air,” a gleaming river, snow-topped mountains with “the charmèd sunset...in the red West.”¹⁹ Grateful to find land after braving the seas, the sailors meet “the mild-eyed melancholy Lotos-eaters,” who offer up their flowers and fruit to the stranded mariners (27). The effect, as first Homer and then Tennyson describes it, was one of languid melancholy: “...if his fellow spake,/ His voice was thin, as voices from the grave;/ And deep-asleep he seemed...” (33-35). Immediately after their meal, the former sailors, now Lotos-eaters, proclaim, “We will return [to Ithaca] no more” (16).

The Choric Song turns the poem over to the voice of the mariners, who have no wish to wander longer, even for the purpose of returning home. Their justification is immediately foregrounded in the pursuit of joy and pleasure; even though the narrator described this island previously, the mariners take pains to give their own description, lovingly lingering over how beauty of their new home affects them: “There is sweet

¹⁸ Cf. Timothy Larsen, “The Regaining of Faith: Reconversions Among Popular Radicals in Mid-Victorian England,” *Church History* 70.3 (2001): 527–543; Frank Turner, “The Victorian Crisis of Faith and the Faith that was Lost,” in *Victorian Faith in Crisis: Essays on Continuity and Change in Nineteenth-Century Religious Belief*, eds. R. J. Helmstadter and Bernard Lightman (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), 9-38; Edward Royle, *Victorian Infidels: The Origins of the British Secularist Movement, 1791-1866* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974).

¹⁹ Alfred Tennyson, “The Lotos-Eaters,” in *The Works of Tennyson*, ed. Hallam Tennyson (New York: AMS Press, 1907), 4, 5, 19-20.

music here that softer falls / ... Music gentler on the spirit lies, / Than tired eyelids upon tired eyes; / Music that brings sweet sleep down from the blissful skies” (46, 50-52).

Their goals are no longer an outward projection, returning to Ithaca and the doctrines that home stands for; instead, all endeavors turn inward for purely personal gratification.

Expanding on their thoughts of pleasure versus pain, the mariners claim that, “hateful is the dark-blue sky / Valuted o’er the dark-blue sea. / Death is the end of life; ah, why/ Should life all labour be?” (84-87). To sail back to Ithaca, with the hopes of one day being reunited with home and family, means work and pain.²⁰ Returning home, and potentially finding happiness there, is not assured. Rather than working for hypothetical gains, the sailors would rather focus on immediate happiness; to remain on the beautiful island achieves that goal. The sailors reject the sea and the sky, or rather, Heaven; that Promised Land only comes from constant toil, and thus is not worth the end result as it brings no happiness to those still living.

The mariners ask, “What pleasure can we have/ To war with evil? [...] Give us long rest or death, dark death, or dreamful ease” (93-94, 98). Pleasure here becomes the crux of the matter. MacLaren makes the point that the mariners sound extremely Epicurean in this text: “Convinced that they would become involved in struggles with evil if they should depart and seek to re-enter their familiar world, the sailors reject this course of action because it would give them no pleasure.”²¹ Even death is preferable to the struggle against evil, and the pain of a hard life. Instead, the mariners drift into the hedonistic ideals of secular materialism, also described as a simplified Epicureanism; if

²⁰ Howard W. Fulweiler, “Tennyson and the ‘Summons from the Sea,’” *Victorian Poetry* 3.1 (1965): 31.

²¹ Malcolm MacLaren, “Tennyson's Epicurean Lotos-eaters,” *The Classical Journal* 56.6 (1961): 262.

something gives no pleasure, then it is rejected. Instead, ““There is no joy but calm!”” (68). The acceptance of death occurs because of the eating of the Lotos, thus yielding to Epicureanism: their voices seem “as voices from the grave”. To imbibe the Lotos is to believe only in one’s own pleasure. To die is to avoid any unpleasant struggle.

Tennyson does not depict the sailors committing suicide; they stay on the island, which is tantamount to such an act. In giving up labor in favor of their own gratification, the mariners anticipate several counterarguments that hypothetical listeners may make. Returning to family is no longer the sailors’ ultimate goal as the men claim they “all hath suffered change;/... we should come [into our houses] like ghosts to trouble joy” (116, 119). Instead, let those who believe they are dead continue believing so, as “‘Tis hard to settle order once again./ There *is* confusion worse than death” (126-127). Settling back into that life that they had left so long ago, readjusting to civilian existence, would only “trouble joy” for themselves; to stay on the island avoids all of that confusion and emotional pain, and releases the mariners from all forms of responsibility.²² A return to home life means a return to a life of selflessness, with family taking precedence over personal gain. To be bound to family is to be bound to forms; Ithaca, with its promise of the sailors’ former life, becomes also the promise the religion and rituals that dominated life before. Embracing secular materialism is a rejection of the worship that defined the mariners’, and readers, former lives, and the formulaic worship that accompanied that life.²³

²² Maclaren, 262.

²³ James R. Kincaid, “Tennyson’s Mariners and Spenser Despair: The Argument of ‘The Lotos-Eaters,’” *Papers on Language and Literature* 5.3 (1969): 280.

However, refusing to leave the island also means giving up the life that would have been theirs had they reached Ithaca. Instead of departing, the sailors ask each other to “swear an oath.../ In the hollow Lotos-land to live and lie reclined/ On the hills like Gods together, careless of mankind” (153-155). The drug of indulgence allows the sailors to care no longer about their fellow men and families. With this mindset, the struggle of looking outside oneself and acting selflessly is eliminated; ignoring the outside world, even if this means death, is infinitely preferable.

As evidence for their own viewpoint, the new Lotos-eaters catalogue the toils that they as hedonistic men will no longer have to undergo. People that are not on the island endure “Blight and famine, plague and earthquake, roaring deeps and fiery sands,/ Clanging fights, and flaming towns, and sinking ships, and praying hands” (160-161). Those still in the world “sow the seed, and reap the harvest with enduring toil,/... Till they perish and they suffer – some, ‘tis whispered – down in hell/ Suffer endless anguish, others in Elysian valleys dwell” (166-169). To sow and reap is the endless toil that the mariners have so railed against throughout their justification for their own bliss. The idea that one must stay above the blight and famine, the belief that those who are evil will pay and those who are good will be rewarded: this is the work that the sailors can no longer endure as it ensures no immediate pleasure. Some suffer agonies in the flames of Hell, even after the lifelong struggle of belief and doubt; the act of forgetting work, both physical and spiritual, to focus on oneself is much easier than continuing such a battle until the end of life. To “sow the seed and reap the harvest” is to stay strong within the faith and practice religious worship. The mariners, instead of relying on forms, list them

among the terrible catalogue as “praying hands,” a clear rejection of any form of physical devotion.

Adding to this strife are the gods that live above the toiling humans, depicted as uncaring creators who smile at the pain of the people below:

For [the Gods] lie beside their nectar, and the bolts are hurled
Far below them in the valleys, and the clouds are lightly curled
Round their golden houses...
Where they smile in secret, looking over the wasted lands. (155-159)

Reviews of “The Lotos-Eaters” took note of this rendition of the gods, with James Spedding pointing out, “The gods of the Lotos-eaters ... are altogether Lucretian.”²⁴ Here, Tennyson references another aspect of contemporary secular materialism, as the idea of a detached God became popular.²⁵ Yet while Lucretius argued that “pain is produced by the operation of the natural, so it is childish to blame the gods who are indifferent to human affairs,” the Victorians interpreted Lucretius in a very different way, “outraged by the very notion of an indifferent deity reveling in his separated felicity, amused by the world’s pain”.²⁶ The mariners, in supporting this latter view, argue that if the gods do not care about their supposed charges, why should the sailors toil for an afterlife? A lifetime of work, according the sailors, may not even grant them the reprieve of the Elysian Fields, as some believers are still banished to Hell. Assurance of current, instant gratification through the pursuit of pleasure is a better option than laboring with

²⁴ Quoted in Maclaren, 261.

²⁵ A comment by Aubrey de Vere, as edited by Hallam Tennyson: “I remember the poet’s pointing out to me the improvement effected later by the introduction of the last paragraph setting forth the Lucretian Philosophy respecting the Gods, their aloofness from all human interest and elevated action, an Epicurean and therefore hard-hearted repost, sweetened not troubled by the endless wail from the Earth” (*Memoir*, 504).

²⁶ Margot K. Louis, “Gods and Mysteries: The Revival of Paganism and the Remaking of Mythography through the Nineteenth Century,” *Victorian Studies* 47.3 (2005): 343.

no guarantee of reward in the afterlife.

After listing the horrors of struggle, the mariners proclaim that they shall fight no more: “Surely, surely slumber is more sweet than toil.../ Oh rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more” (171, 173). A rejection of the world of suffering, spiritual and physical, results in the search for joy, which is paired with rest. A belief in Epicureanism comes with the consumption of the Lotos, and a refusal to leave the island leads to refusal of any former tenets or beliefs; Tennyson builds an environment that encapsulates the results of embracing secular materialism. Alan Sinfield sums up the mariners’ seductive argument: “Victorian culture and the whole western tradition suggest that we should disapprove of the intoxicated indolence, but the imagery, sound and rhythm all tempt the reader into acquiescence.”²⁷

In creating the mariners’ argument, Tennyson was not writing in a vacuum. The words of the mariners, put in the mouths of Homer’s characters, stem originally from Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, published in 1590 and 1596.²⁸ The purpose of the poem, according to Spenser, is “to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline” and so each main character in of Spenser’s books journeys through hardship and trials to become the representation of a Christian virtue. The protagonist of the first book is a human knight by the name of Redcrosse, who acts as the virtue of Holiness.²⁹ When Redcrosse comes across the figure of Despair, the creature

²⁷ Alan Sinfield, *Dramatic Monologue*, Critical Idiom Series 36 (London: Methuen, 1997), 60.

²⁸ Aiden Day, *Tennyson’s Skepticism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 35.

²⁹ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. by Thomas P. Roche and C. Patrick O’Donnell (New York: Penguin Classics, 1978), 15.

tries to convince the knight to give up said Holiness.³⁰ The spiritual toil of the soul and the work of devotion to God are not worth a lifetime of struggle, Despair insists:

He there does now enjoy eternall rest
And happie ease, which thou doest want and crave,
And further from it daily wanderest;
...Is not short paine well borne, that brings long ease,
And layes the soule to sleepe in quiet grave?
Sleepe and toyle, port after stormie seas,
Ease after warre, death after life does greatly please. (1.9.352-360)

Such rest only comes with giving up a faith in God, and forgetting continual thought and care for spiritual things. The rest that Despair so gloomily presses upon Redcrosse does not come with happiness; a corpse of a man whom Despair persuaded lies nearby, still bleeding, as the allegory attempts to convince the knight of Holiness (1.9.319-324).

Foregoing God means to give up on life, and spiritual care keeps Redcrosse alive.

Despair's words echo uncannily in the remarks of Tennyson's mariners:

All things have rest: why should we toil alone,
We only toil, who are the first of things,
And make perpetual moan,
Still from one sorrow to another thrown... (60-64)

While the words of the sailors are Epicurean, the labor with no guaranteed satisfaction that the mariners protest also carries the undercurrent of Despair's spiritual toil. James R. Kincaid states, "Both the mariners and Red Cross are led by a process of rhetorical arguments and rhetorical appeals into a conclusive Satanic irony."³¹ The sailors use Despair's words to advocate for personal joy, but in doing so, also advocate for giving up the spiritual struggle that comes from faith in God. Religious belief starts at the

³⁰ James R. Kincaid argues that Despair's argument is rhetorically divided into four parts: stanzas 40, 42, 43-45, and 46-47. These same four points emerge in the even-numbered stanzas of the Choric Song within "The Lotos-Eaters" (276).

³¹ Kincaid, 280.

beginning of people's lives and lasts until the end; why, the mariners question, should they toil for their entire lifetimes? It is easier to rest, both spiritually and physically while garnering mortal gratification. The sleep after toil, the island that the sailors have landed on after braving the seas, the relaxation on the beach after "ten years' war in Troy" all stem from the words of Despair himself (122). However, according to Despair's formula, that rest only comes with death in suicide. Someone who kills himself (both spiritually and physically) "there does now enjoy eternall rest" while those that still believe in the Christian faith "further from it daily wanderest." Despair and the mariners advocate suicide, saying that "Death is the end of woes" (1.9.423); after all, "short paine [is] well bourne, that brings long ease."

When Redcrosse expresses doubt in the virtue of killing himself (suicide being an affront to God), Despair attacks both the world and Redcrosse's own actions. He mentions that the world has "Feare, sicknesse, age, losse, labour, sorrow, strife,/ Paine, hunger, cold..."(1.9.393-394). When this argument does not work on the knight, Despair goes after Redcrosse's past actions, saying that the wrong choices he has made will only increase later in his life as "the further [a sinner] doth goe, the further he doth stray" (1.9.387). Instead, "death then, would the like mishaps forestall,/ into the which hereafter thou maiest happen fall" (1.9.404-405). Any problems or sins that Redcrosse may commit in the future will be negated by his death. Redcrosse is already a sinner, Despair explains, and therefore he is already doomed. It is best to rest, and spare the world any further sins through death.

Kincaid argues that Despair speaks through the mouths of the mariners, and while the figure is unsuccessful in convincing Redcrosse, it seems that the Lotos of despair

convinces the mariners.³² Any sympathy that readers may have accumulated throughout the speeches of the sailors vanishes when the origin of the restful sentiments comes to light. To embrace secular materialism, as the mariners do, is to advocate for the relinquishing of Holiness, and the end of a spiritual struggle. While the mariners protest that they wish for rest (which may come through death), the Spenserian undertones of that argument emphasize that the death stems from suicide. To pursue pleasure in one's life, to give up on the tenets of Christianity and reject all forms of religious worship, will only result in eventual despair. Markley remarks that "Tennyson was clearly attempting to write English poems with a modern relevance for an English audience. ... 'The Lotos-Eaters' represent[s] the danger of allowing oneself to be distracted and waylaid by sensual pleasure."³³

Here also we see the fear that so characterized Tennyson's early beliefs; fear of the consequences of forgetting the path to God through the formal creeds of religion. The Epicurean language and Despair's argument emphasize the act of forgetting both the responsibility towards spiritual thought and the practical forms of worship. By aligning the two mindsets, Tennyson creates a hellish future for anyone who would neglect their religious forms. Kincaid puts it bluntly:

The parallels between the situation of Red Cross and that of the lotos-eaters show that Tennyson faces the full moral implications of the mariners' evasion of social responsibility directly and develops them subtly. The pervasive Spenserian allusion and its accompanying Christian framework argue that this evasion is suicidal not only in suggestion but in fact and that its consequences are not only death but damnation.³⁴

³² Kincaid, 281.

³³ Markley, 58.

³⁴ Kincaid, 281.

Yet “The Lotos-Eaters” still provides hope for those that may be tempted. The first words of the poem are: “‘Courage!’ he said, and pointed toward the land,/ ‘This mounting wave will roll us shoreward soon’” (1-2). While this phrase seems to be from Ulysses, calling for the courage to continue braving the sea, the word “courage” takes on a different connotation in the face of the mariners’ and Despair’s message. The bravery that Ulysses calls upon incites the resolve to reject the faithless ideology of the Lotos-eaters. The first word of the poem aids readers as they confront the mariners’ arguments. We as Christians, Tennyson argues, must continue the struggle, holding onto the memory of God and worship, no matter who would try to convince us otherwise. Just as Una (the representation of truth) finally saves Redcrosse from Despair, wandering believers have a savior in Ulysses: the king inspires the readers to hold onto courage as we hear the hopeless words of his sailors.

However, Tennyson makes sure to mention that the godly are rewarded. If the people can fight through horrific things and yet still “sow the seed, and reap the harvest with enduring toil,” then mankind can hold onto the faith which the sailors so easily reject, and find the “Elysian valleys” (166, 169). Those who do not are damned to the eternal hellfire of Tennyson’s Calvinist influences; the mariners, in embracing secular materialism, are condemning themselves to suicide and an afterlife of torment. The last line in which the speakers proclaim, “O rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more,” becomes at once a sad lament for those who have chosen rest and death, and an admonishment to those who reject or forget Christian forms (173).

CHAPTER THREE

“ULYSSES”

In the fall of 1833, Tennyson slowly turned away from Ulysses’ command for courage. With an untended sorrow weighing him down, the poet’s need for relief from grief seeps its way into “Ulysses,” written in 1833. Just as “The Lotos-Eaters” proclaims Tennyson’s faith in (and fear) of dogmatic Christianity, so does “Ulysses” crystalize the poet’s need to find a new version of faith to cope with anguish. However, his subjective faith in God, not bound to religious forms, is not yet set in stone. “Ulysses” was written almost immediately following the death of Hallam, when Tennyson was still struggling with raw misery. While we see the result of Tennyson’s rejection of worshipful rituals in the long conversation of *In Memoriam*, “Ulysses” only contains Tennyson’s understanding that his beliefs, centered on Christian creeds and fear, are insufficient.

Multiple critics have noted the tensions in “Ulysses” between “Ease and rigor, feebleness and energy, life at home and adventure far from home, weary resignation and heroic achievement, weakness of body in age and strength of mind.”³⁵ Tony Robbins correctly attributes at least part of the conflicts to the source materials that Tennyson drew on: Dante’s *Inferno*, and, of course, the *Odyssey* itself. Tennyson himself pointed out the connections between his poem and Dante’s; in the Eversley edition of Tennyson’s

³⁵ Tony Robbins, “Tennyson’s ‘Ulysses’: The Significance of the Homeric and Dantesque Backgrounds,” *Victorian Poetry* 11.3 (1973): 177.

works, annotated by Alfred Tennyson and edited by Hallam Tennyson, the poet prints out half of Dante's account of Ulysses, ending with Ulysses' rousing speech to his sailors.

Included after the quoted Dante is a note from Hallam:

In the *Odyssey*, xi. 100-137, the ghost of Tiresias foretells his future to Ulysses. He is to return home to Ithaca and to slay the suitors. After which he is to set off again on a mysterious voyage. This is elaborated by the author of the *Telegoneia*. My father, like Egeon [the author commonly believed to have written the *Telegony*], takes up the story of further wanderings at the end of the *Odyssey*. Ulysses has lived in Ithaca for a long while before the craving for fresh travel seizes him.³⁶

The works of Dante, Homer, and Egeon each have different endings for Ulysses.

Homer's original epic ended with Ulysses' happy reunion with his wife and son, the wanderer once again the undisputed king of Ithaca. The *Telegony* only survives in fragments, and scholars are mainly dependent on Proclus' summary of the story as detailed in *Chrestomathy*.³⁷ However, the *Telegony* begins where the *Odyssey* ends, and while half of the tale focuses on Ulysses, the other half tells the story of Telegonus, Ulysses' son with Circe. Telegonus ends up on Ithaca, where he unwittingly steals Ulysses' cattle. When Ulysses comes to defend his property, Telegonus stabs him with a mystical spear dipped in stingray poison (thus fulfilling Tiresias' prophecy that Ulysses' death would come by the sea). Dante's Ulysses explains to his listeners that, although he returned to Ithaca, nothing could overcome the longing for more adventure. Gathering up old comrades, he sailed west with his mariners, beyond the Pillars of Hercules, where eventually a storm sank the ship and killed everyone on board.

Aside from the confirmatory note listed above by both Hallam and Alfred,

³⁶ Alfred Tennyson, "Ulysses," in *The Works of Tennyson*, ed. Hallam Tennyson (New York: AMS Press 1907), 339.

³⁷ Ingrid Holmberg, "The Creation of the Ancient Greek Epic Cycle," *Oral Tradition* 456 (1998): 449-470.

Tennyson was clearly well versed in not only these works, but other works of classical literature as well. Markley lists some of the authors in both Dr. Tennyson's library, from which Alfred read as a boy, and Tennyson's adulthood book collection: Lucretius, Horace, Juvenal, Virgil, Homer, Plato, Theocritus, Euripides, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Sappho, and Ovid, among others. The influence of these authors can be felt in the non-Homeric elements of Tennyson's Ulysses. Markley notes that while Tennyson rarely wrote in his books during his adult years, he scribbled a large amount of marginalia during his childhood education.³⁸ One such piece of marginalia comes in Euripides' *Hecube*, perhaps reflecting Tennyson's opinion of Homer's Ulysses: "Ulysses is, as usual, crafty & unfeeling."³⁹ Ulysses is not the prototypical hero of Homeric times; Achilles and Ajax are excellent examples of this mold. Instead, Ulysses lives (partially) by his wits rather than his strength, inspiring a certain amount of distrust in his comrades.⁴⁰ The suspicion of Ulysses, emphasized in Dante, clearly influenced Tennyson's understanding of the character, and because of this ambivalent feeling, Tennyson's "Ulysses" must be read with care.

We find Ulysses by a "still hearth... Matched with an aged wife," having returned to Ithaca years ago.⁴¹ The title character, who calls himself "an idle king" (1), is clearly dissatisfied with this particular situation; bitterness is his prevailing mood as he

³⁸ Markley, 29-31. Much of Tennyson's personal library, as well as that of Dr. Tennyson's, is housed at the Tennyson Research Centre in Lincoln, England.

³⁹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 123.

⁴⁰ Sophocles' *Ajax* is an excellent representation of these two types of men pitted against each other, and the classical suspicious reaction to Ulysses' honeyed words.

⁴¹ Alfred Tennyson, "Ulysses" in *The Works of Tennyson*, ed. Hallam Tennyson (New York: AMS Press, 1907), 2-3.

summarily dismisses the wife he once called “so wise.”⁴² Moreover, the king sits at a “still hearth.” As a representation of Tennyson’s religious beliefs, Ulysses suggests that Tennyson’s Church of England beliefs have worn thin; they fester at the fireside, and exist, as a belief system, in name only. These principles lay idle and unused, as Tennyson cannot apply them to untangle the grief that Hallam’s death has inflicted. Instead, the fire lies dormant, and the flames of passion, for both Hallam and the Church of England, no longer motivate the poet. For Tennyson, his faith no longer shouts, “Courage!” but instead sits before a cold hearth, worn and frustrated.

Expressing his longing to travel once more, Ulysses comments that, “...experience is an arch wherethrough/ Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades/ For ever and for ever when I move” (19-21). While also a statement of Ulysses’ former travels, this line recalls Dante as Ulysses recounts how he and his men sailed far, far west: “...we approached the narrows / where Hercules set up his boundary stones / that men might heed and never reach beyond.”⁴³ To cross that line, as drawn by the Pillars of Hercules, is to go beyond the knowledge of all men; the arch stands as a warning and a challenge for the old adventurer.⁴⁴ As Findlay points out, “By preferring ‘arch’ Tennyson evokes further associations: through architecture with the Pillars of Hercules and the limits of the known world; through Homeric *arche* with the past and the

⁴² Allen Mandelbaum, trans., *The Odyssey of Homer* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 24.362.

⁴³ Allen Mandelbaum, trans., *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri Inferno* (New York: Bantam Classic, 1980), 26.107-109.

⁴⁴ Norhnberg, 116. Norhnberg mentions the Pillars of Hercules as part of his argument for reading ‘Ulysses’ as a reflection of Tennyson’s views on colonialism. For more background on this topic, please see Matthew Rowlinson’s “The Ideological Moment of Tennyson’s ‘Ulysses’”, *Victorian Poetry* Vol. 30, No. 3 (1992), 265-276.

onset of death.”⁴⁵

The final lines of the stanza reinforce this idea: “And this gray spirit yearning for desire/ To follow knowledge like a sinking star,/ Beyond the utmost bound of human thought” (30-32). Ulysses, as a Homeric representation of Tennyson’s old beliefs, understands that new knowledge is needed; the character has become idle and static. Instead, questing brings movement into the west, beyond the Pillars, and with that movement comes a potential for a new faith:

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 this gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought. (24-32)

A “bringer of new things” might save Tennyson from his own grief, but his childhood viewpoints are inadequate to cope with the loss of Hallam. A new faith without formulaic ritual, the conviction that an adapted version of the old religion may be better suited than Tennyson’s former views is almost “beyond...human thought”. Also beyond (Tennyson’s) human thought at this juncture is what form this adapted Christianity might take. Hallam’s sudden death was still fresh when Tennyson wrote these lines, and the poet was in the midst of a religious struggle. Tennyson’s faith in the God of Love is still emerging; only a glimmer of the change from a religion of fearful form to a belief of fluid faith emerges in “Ulysses,” and that change is what the title character must chase over the horizon, if only for the author’s sake. In following a potential new ideology away from

⁴⁵ L. M. Findlay, “Sensation and Memory in Tennyson’s ‘Ulysses,’” *Victorian Poetry* 19.2 (1981): 142.

the expected, Tennyson shows his emerging acceptance of the need to create a new personal doctrine. But again, remaining in one place, and thereby never seeking faith through study and doubt, only causes one's beliefs to wither. In order to live again, Ulysses must move beyond the horizon, and Tennyson must "follow knowledge," though he does not yet know what shape his new faith will take.

Yet, while this call to "move" beyond the Pillars of Hercules and beyond human thought sounds heroic and hopeful, we must also balance this with Dante's lurking history of Ulysses. According to Ricks, "The Isles of the Blest were thought to lie beyond the Pillars of Hercules, and it is beyond the Pillars that Dante's Ulysses urges his companions to sail with him."⁴⁶ Through Ulysses' use of reason and his persuasive words, the king convinces his sailors to go with him on one last adventure. Because of his persuasion, everyone, including Ulysses himself, dies, ending up in Dante's hell. Again, tension between the heroic character presented in Homer and the sly orator of Dante creates a conflict in how readers are supposed to interpret Ulysses' call to action. To never give up, never surrender, are admirable sentiments, and necessary for Tennyson's future survival, but they are also balanced with the fact that Tennyson's Ulysses will go west to find new knowledge, perishing in the process.

Telemachus, rather sneeringly dismissed by Ulysses, is to remain home on Ithaca while Ulysses sails off, just as the Church of England shall remain even if Tennyson's beliefs break away.⁴⁷ The mariners of "The Lotos-Eaters" abandoned the idea of returning to Ithaca, just as they abandoned the doctrines of the Church, and Ulysses,

⁴⁶ Alfred Tennyson, *The Poems of Tennyson In Three Volumes, Vol. 1*, ed. Christopher Ricks (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 619.

⁴⁷ John Pettigrew, "Tennyson's 'Ulysses': A Reconciliation of Opposites," *Victorian Poetry* 1.1 (1963): 39-40.

while not succumbing to secular materialism, also finds it necessary to abandon the creeds of Ithaca. “Well-loved of me” boyhood creeds are only “most-blameless...centered in the sphere of common duties” (35, 39-40). This version of Christianity will “pay/ Meet adoration to my household gods,/ When I am gone” (41-43). Even though Tennyson may drift from the Church of England, it still stands as an English institution. It acts “to fulfill/ This labour, by slow prudence to make mild/ A rugged people” and educate the English people on the Church of England’s doctrines (35-37). However, while Anglican creeds may work for some, Tennyson recognizes that he can no longer function within these tenets, and must leave.

In the last stanza of the poem, Ulysses’ tone seems to shift from an internal monologue to direct address: “My mariners.../You and I are old,” Ulysses claims. Yet, he says, “Some work of noble note, may yet be done,/ not unbecoming of men that strove with Gods” (45, 49, 52-53). The rousing words sounds wonderful, especially paired with Ulysses’ famous silver-tongued persuasion: “Come, my friends,/ ‘Tis not too late to seek a newer world” (56-57). Yet while the speech resonates, as one last adventure may be claimed for the old men who currently sit around hearths, the rallying cry takes on a different context when the reader realizes that Ulysses is speaking to two sets of men.

In the twelfth book of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus’ men all die when Zeus’ lightning bolt strikes their ship as retribution for killing the sacred cows of Helios.⁴⁸ Those who had adventured with Ulysses for so long were gone, and yet the title character calls out for his comrades to join him on one last quest. Hallam Tennyson adds another explanation to the “Ulysses” notes: “The comrades [Ulysses] addresses are of the same

⁴⁸ Mandelbaum, *The Odyssey*, 12.404-422.

heroic mould as his old comrades.”⁴⁹ Read in this light, death becomes almost certain, for those who formerly sailed with Ulysses also perished in the ocean, and so must the current sailors. The death of the former comrades is underlined as Ulysses notes that, “the deep/ Moans round with many voices” (55-56). Ulysses clearly remembers that his former companions are dead and drowned, and the rousing words, inspiring men to voyage west with him, become tinged with selfishness. To sail west in one last adventure “stress[es] Ulysses' capacity for enthusiasm, but it also reinforces the impression of a restless wanderer and strongly implies that the enthusiasm is rather for self-gratification than for pursuing knowledge.”⁵⁰

After relying so long on Homer and Dante, Tennyson brings in even more source material when Ulysses references Achilles, saying “It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,/ And see the great Achilles, whom we knew” (63-64). While Ulysses may not have traveled to the Underworld as Aeneas did in the *Aeneid*, he still summoned ghosts and shades to talk to him from the Underworld in the *Odyssey* 11, and he spoke poignantly with the dead Achilles. Homer emphasizes that the killer of Hector resides in the Underworld and not on the Isles of the Blest; Achilles bemoans the fact that he chose an early death and glory rather than living to an old age.⁵¹ Ulysses knows this integral fact, and yet still claims that the great Achilles is in the happiest of all possible deathly places.

While this placement may be a surprise for those who know Homer, Tennyson is relying here on a different source of Achilles' final resting place. In Pindar's Second

⁴⁹ Alfred Tennyson, “Ulysses” in *The Works of Tennyson*, 339. Christopher Ricks, in *The Poems of Tennyson*, also notes that Hallam later added, “Perhaps the *Odyssey* has not been strictly adhered to, and some of the old comrades may still be left” (614).

⁵⁰ John Pettigrew, 38-39.

⁵¹ Mandelbaum, *The Odyssey*, 11.612-734.

Olympian Ode, Achilles appears on the Isles of the Blest. Aware that he was going against Homeric precedent, Pindar adds that Achilles' mother Thetis persuaded Zeus to bring Achilles to the Isles. Solmsen points out the precedent from *Iliad* 1: "If her pleadings succeeded in securing for Achilles his τιμή among the living she would be able to win him also a place of honor among the dead."⁵² Also consider the character of Achilles, as related to Tennyson. Achilles, hailed as the greatest warrior in the Trojan wars and often given the epithet "godlike Achilles," becomes here a stand-in for Hallam, the man considered by Tennyson to be mortal perfection.⁵³ Regardless of Tennyson's beliefs, whether they be of strict forms or of a more secular faith in love, Hallam is in paradise; to condemn Hallam to the Underworld not only insults the dead man but also would invalidate the Christian afterlife. Tennyson is not refuting all of Christianity, just those jumbled creeds of his childhood; in order to make this clear with the death of Hallam, Tennyson utilizes Pindar.⁵⁴

In the last stanza, the tension between the heroic adventurer and the sly orator increases. Ulysses makes sure to point out that "some work of noble note, may yet be done" (52). Regardless of the age, some things can be changed and perhaps for the better. Again, "'Tis not too late to seek a newer world" (57). There is still glory to be won, no matter the cost, and Ulysses is willing to seek it out even unto death. His determination in the face of death is inspiring:

Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;

⁵² Friedrich Solmsen, "Achilles on the Islands of the Blessed: Pindar Vs. Homer and Hesiod," *The American Journal of Philology* 103.1 (1982): 21.

⁵³ Robert Fagels, trans., *The Iliad* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1990), 1.154.

⁵⁴ Interestingly, Dante also places Achilles in his Hell, in the Second Circle of Lust.

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. (65-70)

While Hallam may be gone from this life, there is still life left to live; even though Hallam's death may have made Tennyson weak (by "time and fate"), he remains steadfast in his search for a new doctrine of belief. The struggle to stay focused on life instead of succumbing to grief and depression culminates in Ulysses' wish for adventure until death, and kindles Tennyson's hope that a new faith in the later titled God of Love will guide him away from his devastating loss.

Yet, this speech sounds very similar to Ulysses' speech as he recounts it to Dante and Virgil:

"Brothers," I said, "o you, who having crossed
a hundred thousand dangers, reach the west,
to this brief waking-time that still is left
unto your sense, you must not deny
experience of that which lies beyond
the sun, and of the world that is unpeopled.
consider well the seed that gave you birth:
you were not made to be brutes,
but to be followers of worth and knowledge." (112-120)

These words are also inspiring, and they indeed rouse the men to eagerness, but that eagerness leads to the death of all those aboard. The potential selfishness of Ulysses at once dooms those who sail with him, but also inspires. Tennyson's "crafty & unfeeling" Ulysses reemerges with this portrait, as he does not care whom he condemns so long as he can wander in search of self-satisfaction. As the Ulysses of Dante does not care who drowns with him, Tennyson's beliefs as Ulysses reflect the need to release said beliefs; Tennyson can no longer hold onto those principles, lest he drown alongside them.

As Findlay aptly states, "'Ulysses' is a richly ambivalent poem, nor would one

wish to reduce its meaning to one narrowly programmatic reading.”⁵⁵ Tennyson was obviously aware of the ambiguity of the poem and said himself that, ““The poem was written soon after Arthur Hallam’s death, and it gives the feeling about the need of going forward and braving the struggle of life perhaps more simply than anything in *In Memoriam*.””⁵⁶ The combined depictions of Ulysses are meant to be understood as different influences; religious belief is a complicated issue, and Hallam’s death made it even more so for Tennyson. The feelings of braving life and continuing forward are intermingled with the sense that Tennyson’s ritualistic beliefs are potentially “crafty & unfeeling.” To move forward, Tennyson must follow Ulysses and move on in life, while letting go of the potentially fatal faith of religious forms.

⁵⁵ Findlay, 147.

⁵⁶ Hallam Tennyson, 196.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

Arthur Hallam's influence on Tennyson's life can hardly be underestimated. Charles Tennyson called Hallam "the prop, round which [Tennyson's] own growth had twined itself for four fruitful years."⁵⁷ The questions of faith and doubt raised by Hallam's death haunted Tennyson's poetry for the rest of his life. "The Lotos-Eaters," which was written in 1832 and exposes the consequences of succumbing to a secular materialism, underscores Tennyson's adolescent beliefs: a confusion of formulaic religious worship as mixed with fear. This ideology was inadequate to deal with the depths of Tennyson's sorrow, and the poet sought more sustaining religious principles. By the close of *In Memoriam*, Tennyson has discovered a more fluid idea of faith in a God of Love; forms of worship are no longer necessary, and instead Tennyson accepts "the broad outline of the Gospel message while remaining skeptical... about the creeds and forms of worship of organised religion."⁵⁸

"Ulysses," written so quickly after Hallam's death, crystallizes Tennyson's realization that his childhood religious rituals may drown rather than save him. With Tennyson's use of both Dante and Homer, he captures the conflict between the motivational and potentially lethal forms of Ulysses. However, throughout the entirety of

⁵⁷ Charles Tennyson, 145.

⁵⁸ Hill, 27.

the poem, Ulysses remains motionless. Tennyson gives no indication that the king ever leaves his still hearth; instead the character remains where he is throughout his dramatic monologue. Just as Ulysses remains still, so do Tennyson's beliefs; yet the poem represents the moment of understanding that formulaic worship cannot help Tennyson cope with his sorrow. Written on the precipice of Tennyson's great change, "Ulysses" allows the reader to glimpse the beginnings of the poet's spiritual journey.

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