

28. Victorian poetry

Alfred, Lord Tennyson *Poems* (1842)

Ulysses 101

The Tennysonian hero

Tennyson's meditations upon the role of heroes are rather pessimistic.

The *Odyssey* and the Arthurian romance still represent a glorious and legendary past for him and for the Victorian reader. However, they evoke ages in which great, heroic deeds were still possible, while contemporary heroes live in an age of transition, in which the decaying and changing world makes it impossible to take effective action. Modern heroes are still full of superior qualities, but they are stuck, paralysed and at the same time obsessed by what they are unable to accomplish. In *Ulysses*, Tennyson takes the epic hero and de-romanticises him, thus turning him into an ordinary man who talks about his life in a conversational, prosaic tone.

Dramatic monologue

A poetic form developing from the Romantic conversation poems, but also indebted to the Victorian novel for its colloquial language and confessional form. In the dramatic monologue a character recounts their life and ideas: he/she may be either invented or taken from history. The second element in the monologue is an implied auditor (narratee), who may often perceive gaps in what is told and therefore has to use inference and imagination. The reader is led to identify with the speaker, and then also automatically adopts the point of view of the auditor; so he/she plays an ambiguous, active role in the construction of the hidden meaning, at times acting as a sort of judge, but often living an interpretative uncertainty. The advantage of this form is to provide a deeper insight into the speaker's feelings and emotions, which is probably the reason why a Modernist poet like T. S. Eliot adopted it (see *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*), imitating also the confessional register of the Victorian monologue. The poem below is one of the great dramatic monologues of the Victorian Age. As typical of this form, a speaker addresses his meditations to an imaginary listener who keeps silent. The speaker's tone is argumentative. The theme of the composition is the desire to reach beyond the limits of one's daily experience.

It little profits¹ that an idle king,
By this still hearth², among these barren crags³,
Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole⁴
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
5 That hoard⁵, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.
I cannot rest from travel; I will drink
Life to the lees⁶. All times I have enjoy'd
Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone; on shore, and when
10 Thro' scudding drifts⁷ the rainy Hyades⁸
Vext the dim sea. I am become a name⁹;
For always roaming¹⁰ with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known, – cities of men

1. **It little profits:** It is not very useful
2. **hearth:** fireplace
3. **crags:** it. *dirupi*
4. **mete and dole:** give (it. *assegna e distribuisca*)
5. **hoard:** collects money (it. *accumula denaro*).
The human race is only interested in the material aspects of life
6. **to the lees:** it. *fino in fondo*
7. **scudding drifts:** violent currents
8. **Hyades:** it. *Iadi*. Seven small stars in the Constellation of Taurus. They are rainy because they appeared when the rainy season started
9. **a name:** famous, I have become popular
10. **roaming:** it. *errando*

And manners, climates, councils, governments,
 15 Myself not least, but honor'd of them all,—
 And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
 Far on the ringing¹¹ plains of windy Troy.
 I am a part of all that I have met;
 Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
 20 Gleams that untravell'd world¹² whose margin fades
 For ever and for ever when I move.
 How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
 To rust unburnish'd¹³, not to shine in use!
 As tho' to breathe were life! Life piled on life
 25 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 vile it were
 For some three suns¹⁴ to store and hoard myself,
 30 And this gray spirit yearning in desire¹⁵
 To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
 Beyond the utmost bound¹⁶ of human thought.
 This is my son, mine own Telemachus,
 to whom I leave the sceptre and the isle,—
 35 Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfill
 This labour¹⁷, by slow prudence to make mild
 A rugged¹⁸ people, and thro' soft degrees¹⁹
 Subdue them to the useful and the good.
 Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere
 40 Of common duties, decent not to fail²⁰
 In offices of tenderness, and pay
 Meet adoration to my household gods,
 When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.
 There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail;
 45 There gloom the dark, broad seas. My mariners,
 Souls that have toil'd²¹, and wrought, and thought with me,—
 That ever with a frolic welcome²² took
 The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
 Free hearts, free foreheads,— you and I are old;
 50 Old age hath yet his honour and his toil.
 Death closes all; but something ere²³ the end,
 Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
 Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods²⁴.
 The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks;
 55 The long day wanes²⁵; the slow moon climbs; the deep²⁶
 Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends.
 'T is not too late to seek a newer world.
 Push off²⁷, and sitting well in order smite
 The sounding furrows²⁸; for my purpose holds
 60 To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths²⁹
 Of all the western stars, until I die.

11. **ringing**: filled with sounds (it. *risonanti*)
 12. **wherethro' ... world**: it. *attraverso cui brilla quel mondo dove nessuno ha ancora viaggiato*. Here Ulysses is complaining about the fact that he is trying to go beyond all limits but he cannot reach the extreme boundary as it disappears when he moves towards it
 13. **make ... unburnish'd**: finish (travelling), to be destroyed by rust like an unused sword (it. *porre fine, arrugginirsi come una spada non usata*)
 14. **three suns**: three years. He thought he would live three more years
 15. **yearning in desire**: full of desire (it. *che brama ardentemente*)
 16. **utmost bound**: farthest (it. *l'estremo confine*)
 17. **discerning ... labour**: sensible enough to accomplish this task (it. *oculato si da compiere questo compito*)
 18. **rugged**: sturdy (it. *rozzo*)
 19. **thro' soft degrees**: gradually
 20. **decent not to fail**: respectable and upright enough to accomplish it (it. *così onesto da non mancare*)
 21. **toil'd**: worked very hard
 22. **frolic welcome**: happy welcome (it. *allegro benvenuto*)
 23. **ere**: before
 24. **not unbecoming ... Gods**: suitable, honourable men that fight against the Gods
 25. **wanes**: fades (it. *declina*)
 26. **the deep**: the deep sea
 27. **Push off**: it. *Prendete il largo*
 28. **smite ... furrows**: hit the waves that seem to produce sounds (it. *percuotete i solchi delle onde muggianti*)
 29. **baths**: where the stars go to have a bath. (The outer ocean where the stars descended according to Greek cosmology) (it. *Quando le stelle tramontano sembrano andare a bagnarsi nel mare*)

It may be that the gulfs³⁰ will wash us down;
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles³¹,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
65 Tho' much is taken, much abides³²; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are,—
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
70 To strive³³, to seek, to find, and not to yield³⁴.

30. **gulfs:** it. *gorghi*

31. **Happy Isles:** mythological islands
located near the Strait of Gibraltar.
The heroes were thought to live
here after their death

32. **abides:** remains

33. **strive:** fight (it. *sforzarsi*)

34. **yield:** give in (it. *cedere*)