

## The Same Dull Round: On Tennyson's "The Voyage"

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Tennyson said concerning "The Voyage" that "Life is the search after the ideal," and the poem is discussed (infrequently and briefly, I should add) as if it is indeed a serious and sincere poem celebrating the need to go forward and the life of action.<sup>1</sup> I would like to offer a contrary reading: Tennyson's comments on the poem are ambiguous and ironic, and the poem can be (perhaps should be) read as a criticism of the "search after the ideal" and of the ideal of "action" itself. Although it is true that Tennyson felt the need for and wrote about the positive necessity of moving forward, he also criticized that very impulse and subjected it to critical scrutiny. The earnest Victorians are sometimes the ironic Victorians. It is my contention that poems like "Locksley Hall" and "The Voyage" are critical of this oh-so Victorian need for action. Action can be a substitute for thought and "truth," an illusory anodyne that is as much a disease as a cure. This need for action can itself become a cause of the disease, of error: it can lead to error as well as "truth."

"*Action will furnish belief, --but will that belief be the true one?*" asks Claude in Arthur Hugh Clough's *Amours de Voyage*. In one of the canceled epigraphs to the same poem, Clough had quoted Thucydides: "You hanker after an ideal state, but you do not give your minds to what is straight before you" (*Arthur Hugh Clough: Selected Poems*, McCue's Notes 240). This could well apply to Tennyson's poem as well. Tennyson may have commented on the poem that "Life is the search after the ideal." But what is "the ideal"? And is it illusion. This is, I think, one of the problems that "The Voyage" places before the reader. The mariners "hanker" after the ideal, but what they miss in doing so is: life. This is the reason Tennyson does not allow them to stop anywhere or meet with anyone. Their world is the forward moving ship, solipsistic, self-referential only, isolated from the rest of the "world" they think they are actually travelling around. They may as well be living in a monastery. Or, to use some of Tennyson's own metaphors, they may as well be living in a palace of art, or on an island, or in a moated grange.

Tennyson originally drafted the poem around 1835-36 but revised and added to it

over a period of about thirty years, publishing it finally in 1864. As Linda K. Hughes observes:

“The Voyage” was begun in 1835 or 1836, and the early draft incorporated only the first five stanzas of the published poem, plus two variant stanzas. In other words, this initial draft embodies no allegory. The poem in this form, if it is “about” anything, is about the voyage of life (or the imagination) through time, confronting a flood of sensory images that course by, here for a moment and then gone. Only in an intermediary version (Harvard Loosepaper 257) did Tennyson add stanzas VI to IX and XII, where the voyage becomes a quest after an ideal “Vision.” And only in a late hand, presumably near the 1864 publication date of the poem, did Tennyson add stanza X, which describes the cynic who “shrieked in spite, / ‘A ship of fools’” and who “overboard one stormy night . . . cast his body.” The poem, that is, became increasingly allegorical and sententious as it approached its 1864 publication date, until the text’s “pleasures of the journey” became subordinated to the destination of the ideal in life (versus the barren emptiness of cynicism--which, it appears, is always a kind of self-murder). (207-208)

I wish to focus my reading of the poem on these intermediate and late additions of Tennyson’s. Although I agree that the poem becomes more allegorical, I disagree with Hughes’ fundamental opposition of idealism versus cynicism. And, although it may be accurate to say that in the later drafts the “‘pleasures of the journey’ became subordinated to the destination of the ideal of life,” this leaves unanswered the very serious concerns about what this destination is and indeed what this “ideal of life” really means.

My contention is that there is no “real” destination or telos in the mariners’ voyage. This is Ulysses and his mariners’ journey taken to absurdity, or nowhere, or “evermore.” The quest for the ideal is here “utopian” in its negative or pejorative sense. What seems to have made this difficult to see is that the absence of meaning or of any “real” purpose is disguised by the energy of action, the journey itself, which is, however, solipsistic, hedonistic (as in, sailors take the greatest pleasure in sailing) in the extreme: art for art’s sake, journey for journey’s sake. It is, if you will, Tennyson’s version of *Amours de Voyage*.<sup>2</sup>

“Ulysses” (1833) is usually paired with “The Lotus Eaters,” companion poems we suppose that explore the need for action (to move forward) and the desire for escape

respectively. I would like to propose a different pairing, one more sequential than "dialectical." Given Tennyson's penchant for sequels or tails (A. Dwight Culler uses the word "pendants" (43)) to his own poems, this should not be surprising. I wish to examine Tennyson's poem "The Voyage" as a sequel or companion piece to "Ulysses," one that radically challenges and undermines the idea that action or even movement "forward" is necessarily positive. Edward Albee wrote that sometimes you have to go a long way out of your way to come back a short way correctly. Well, sometimes people keep going a long way out of their way, like Tennyson's mariners.

In a poem like "Mariana" or even "The Lotus Eaters," the subjects are passive, are acted upon, defined or constructed more by the "world" than by themselves. In a poem like "Ulysses" or "Locksley Hall," on the other hand, the subjects are presented as active, or at least as desiring action. Indeed, both poems, and particularly "Ulysses," can be read as Victorian calls to action, and this in itself obscures the ambiguity and indeterminacy of the poems and conflicting readings of the text. The traditional or standard interpretation of "Ulysses" is that it sounds the Victorian bugle call to action. A contrary reading is given by Robert Langbaum, who sees in it Tennyson's longing for oblivion (*The Poetry of Experience*). If we remember that Ulysses is a trickster, then we see that he is leading his mariners off to their death as well.<sup>3</sup> Another reading is to say that the longing for action *is* the longing for oblivion. Ulysses wants to lose himself in action, to leave behind the boring world of everyday life in Ithaca, including the "common duties" and the responsibilities of family and state, which he leaves to Telemachus. This is hardly the Carlylean "Do the duty which lies nearest thee." His action is, as he says, "to sail . . . until I die." From this perspective, the poem is not about participation in, but isolation from, society, which deconstructs the very concept of action that the poem ostensibly holds out.

From another perspective, Ulysses defines *his* society as the fellowship with his mariners, a society far from the domestic hearth, emptied of the domestic-feminine (but not necessarily of the erotic-feminine, as his earlier voyages attest). Action is thus the heroic action of men (one might smile, thinking of Monty Python's rather humorous song--"Men Men Men Men"). One might argue that, from this perspective, action which is separated from and emptied of the feminine is doomed to failure--it is sterile, leading to death. Hence the absent values traditionally associated with women--love, home, caring, etc. --which have been displaced by Ulysses' androcratic valorizing, become significant (by their absence).

I am less concerned, however, with how “The Voyage” casts back on “Ulysses” and suggests a more negative reading of the “hero” than on how certain ambiguities and concerns in “Ulysses” are clarified and made sharper in “The Voyage.” Problems of action, of following an ideal (heroic or otherwise)<sup>4</sup>, of the absence of the feminine--all seem to me to be more clearly presented as problems in “The Voyage.” The ambiguity of this poem is not created so much by Tennyson’s skillful handling of the dramatic form, as in “Ulysses,” where behind the strong and unified front of argument, rhetoric, and tone a darker meaning seems to lurk, as by the weakness (indeed, absence, really) of argument, a weakness made clearer by the disparity between tone and content in the speaker’s narrative. One might say that whereas Ulysses is trying to persuade his mariners to sail with him, the speaker in “The Voyage,” who I am identifying as one of Ulysses’ mariners, is really just trying to persuade himself.

Ulysses exhorts his mariners, saying that he desires “To follow knowledge like a sinking star,” and ultimately aims “To sail beyond the sunset . . . until I die.”<sup>5</sup> In between he sandwiches some heroic bait, the possibility that on the way to the indefinite infinite “Some work of noble note, may yet be done.” “The Voyage” takes Ulysses’ statement that he will “follow knowledge like a sinking star” as its basic premise and expands on it, turning the image into one of absolute absurdity. The mariner speaker, a spokesperson for the other mariners, has taken Ulysses’ bait and celebrates Ulysses’ ideal of sailing “beyond the sunset” until he dies.

“The Voyage” begins optimistically enough, the speaker reporting how he and his fellows felt at the start of the voyage: the sailors’ hearts “madly danced . . . with joy” (3), “madly” being perhaps an ironic indication of things to come. The voyage seems full of promise and potential which also promise to go on indefinitely:

How fresh was every sight and sound  
On open main or winding shore!  
We knew the merry world was round,  
And we might sail for evermore. (5-8)

Once at sea, they “seemed to sail into the sun!” But, they are just sailing around and around the world. They have no destination, purpose or goal--they just keep sailing past every land without ever stopping. This hardly affords much opportunity of doing “Some work of noble note.”

In the stanzas added in the intermediary version, Tennyson stresses the absence of any real destination and the absurdity of the mariners’ voyage. Although the marin-

ers pass by a "hundred shores of happy climes" (49), they pause neither to enjoy the beauty nor even to pick up food:

At times a carven craft would shoot  
From havens hid in fairy bowers,  
With naked limbs and flowers and fruit,  
But we nor paused for fruit nor flowers. (53-56)

Indeed, Tennyson is careful to point out that the mariners never stop anywhere at any time:

And never sail of ours was furled,  
Nor anchor dropt at eve or morn;  
We loved the glories of the world,  
But laws of nature were our scorn. (81-84)

One might say that their destination really is "evermore," a duration of seemingly infinite time that yet collapses into a static space, the ship which they never leave. And, although it may *seem* noble or heroic to scorn the laws of nature, it certainly *is* foolish.

The final stanza clearly shows the anti-heroic nature of the mariners and their "quest":

Again to colder climes we came,  
For still we followed where she led;  
Now mate is blind and captain lame,  
And half the crew are sick or dead,  
But, blind or lame or sick or sound,  
We follow that which flies before;  
We know the merry world is round,  
And we may sail for evermore. (89-96)

Ha. The journey of the poem is circular, ending where it began (and promising to continue on indefinitely, apparently until everyone is dead). This lame old captain is hardly the noble sounding and heroic Ulysses who strove with Gods. The mariners, whose hearts madly danced with joy, are very clearly fools, blind or lame or sick or sound. Or dead. In terms of the mariners' "action," the poem is not ambiguous. The tension comes from the disparity between the merry tone and the stupidity of their action, action which is emptied of all meaning.<sup>6</sup> And, although the speaker has described so many of his visual experiences, what seems to make the voyage so static is his con-

sciousness, which does not change. Indeed, he seems ridiculously void of consciousness. Things *have* changed--the *freshness* of every sight and sound has been replaced by half the crew being *sick or dead* --but he seems blissfully unaware that anything has really changed: the voyage is everything. As Blake puts it in *Milton*, "How wide the Gulf & Unpassable ! between Simplicity & Insipidity."

As the larger poem is ostensibly (at least from the speaker's point of view) about the valorization of action, so action itself is the original / originary ideal, the meaning or purpose or telos of which is non-existent, the whole argument being tautological: they sail because they can sail: circular argument, circular journey, the same two lines (with only tense variations) closing the first and last stanzas. The closing lines have changed from past to present tense, almost as if the ideal has hardened into belief: they believe in action (sailing for evermore), or say that action is the belief (they may sail for evermore), which is, again, tautological. Their belief at the beginning ("We knew . . . that we might sail for evermore") that action will provide meaning or belief does, it seems, produce the illusory Vision or ideal, which in turn continues to drive them forward (action), for they "followed where she [the Vision] led," they "follow that which flies before." If the poem is an allegory, then, it seems to me, it is an allegory of the belief that action will furnish belief. Let us now turn to this elusive Vision itself, which seems to be drawn from "Ulysses."

Following their Vision like Ulysses would his "sinking star," the mariners, with their "Lady's-head upon the prow," "seemed to sail into the sun!" Moreover, Tennyson seems to have translated Ulysses' "experience like an arch wheretho' / Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades / For ever and for ever when I move" into the Vision that the mariners follow:

For one fair Vision ever fled  
 Down the waste waters day and night,  
 And still we followed where she led,  
 In hope to gain upon her flight.  
 Her face was evermore unseen,  
 And fixt upon the far sea-line;  
 But each man murmured, "O my Queen,  
 I follow till I make thee mine."

And now we lost her, now she gleamed

Like Fancy made of golden air,  
Now nearer to the prow she seemed  
Like Virtue firm, like Knowledge fair,  
Now high on waves that idly burst  
Like Heavenly Hope she crowned the sea,  
And now, the bloodless point reversed,  
She bore the blade of Liberty. (57-72)

As the Vision is marked as feminine, we might also be tempted to connect this with the last alternate reading of "Ulysses" above, that is, the one concerning the absence of the feminine. The mariners' society is completely male, having been emptied of the feminine. By definition, this "society" cannot "reach" the feminine, symbolized by the Vision. And, without the feminine, this society goes around in circles, arriving nowhere, but leaving in its wake madness and death. The ship is, however, graced by a "Lady's-head upon the prow," a figure-head perhaps, perhaps a talisman, but certainly heavily ironic, especially considering they are following a feminine Vision whose "face was evermore unseen."

What is this elusive Vision? Is it the Lady's-head upon the prow? After all, "Her face was evermore unseen," an added irony being that they are sailing for "evermore" which is "evermore unseen." Is it the moon, referred to in the feminine in the poem? After all, the dark side of the moon is also "evermore unseen"; the moon is also referred to as "the silver boss / Of her own halo's dusky shield" (31-32), which in its armament associates with the Vision like Hope which "bore the blade of Liberty"; the Vision fled "day and night," the moon being visible both day and night. Is it the sun, which, however, is referred to in the masculine? After all, the Vision "gleamed / Like fancy made of golden air," and the mariners begin their journey by seeming "to sail into the Sun," and dashing "into the dawn" (16, 24). Is it both sun and moon (and perhaps Lady's-head), confused by the mariners at times? After all, "now we lost her, now she gleamed . . ." could be either the sun or the moon, or both. Moreover, or more importantly, the near-sighted "seer" of stanza X says that their eyes "were all diseased" (76). It is this point of the ambiguity of the Vision that the text (Tennyson) insists upon and that renders any final conclusion indeterminate. We do know that this Vision or "ideal" changes or shifts, and it is this changing and shifting that the poem gives us, and this shifting is itself a function of perspectivism. The mariner misrepresents (albeit in a common way) the land moving by the ship, not the ship by the

land: "O hundred shores of happy climes, / How swiftly streamed ye by the bark!" And does the Vision really "flee," and does she really "lead" them? Is she really "one" vision? After all, she is like many different things, Fancy, Virtue, etc., and these different things that she seems to be like are different because of perspectivism--the relationship of the Vision to the ship, the sea, and the sky (or horizon). In any event, like the Vision itself, all of the ideal constructs--Virtue, Knowledge, Hope, Liberty--are also like Fancy and threaten to dissolve into illusion.

The stanza following the "description" of the Vision, stanza X, was the one added last by Tennyson, and tropes on the idea of vision itself:

And only one among us--him  
 We pleased not--he was seldom pleased:  
 He saw not far: his eyes were dim:  
 But ours, he swore were all diseased.  
 "A ship of fools," he shrieked in spite,  
 "A ship of fools," he sneered and wept.  
 And overboard one stormy night  
 He cast his body, and on we swept.

The mariners' Vision, according to the "cynic," is caused by their faulty or "diseased" vision; that is, their Vision is really a hallucination or illusion. Tennyson is also humorously poking fun at himself, since it seems obvious that the "one among us" is also Tennyson himself, who suffered from short-sightedness: near- or short-sighted, he still sees clearer than the fools whose eyes were all diseased. He sees that they have followed an illusion of their own creation or representation, a gilded Fancy, if you will.

In one sense, the poem traces for us the process of reification: turning the concrete sun/moon/Lady's-head into the abstract concept or ideal of Knowledge or Virtue or Hope or Liberty. In this reading, then, the mariners have taken the Lady's-head, sun, and moon, and by a process of associationism and hallucination ("At times the whole sea burned, at times / With wakes of fire we tore the dark" (51-52)) idealized the concrete real into the ethereal Vision, which they then further reify into abstract concepts such as "Virtue firm" (masculine) and "Knowledge fair" (feminine--the Vision itself is referred to as "fair"). Insofar as the Vision itself *is* the feminine, the mariners have so etherealized and abstracted it as to make it unrecognizable, present only as a wooden figure-head which they "blindly" follow.



I have titled this paper "The Same Dull Round," and drawing on Blake may help clarify Tennyson's poem. The mariners' voyage is one of repetition, in which nothing is learned, nothing gained--all that is registered, besides a sort of sensory delight in hallucinatory images, is loss, of which the speaker-narrator is unconscious. This is like Blake's "dull round" of mechanical repetition: "The bounded is loathed by its possessor. The same dull round even of a univer[s]e would soon become a mill with complicated wheels" ("There Is No Natural Religion" [b]). This is not like Blake's repetition in or of the eternal moment: "whenever any Individual Rejects Error & Embraces Truth a Last Judgement passes upon that Individual" ("A Vision of The Last Judgement" 562). As Lorraine Clark remarks in her discussion of Blake and Kierkegaard:

This true as opposed to false synthesis is . . . repetition--it is the repetition of what one already is (a synthesis of the finite and the infinite in the realm of potential) in a dynamic, higher, truer form (the same synthesis in the realm of actuality). This is again why repetition is a leap, and why it is so difficult. . . . there is a qualitative distinction between the two syntheses--the difference between potential and actual, non-existence and existence, the difference between spiritual life and death. (103)

There is no overcoming of error in "The Voyage," unless it be by the "cynical" near-sighted seer who yet can see what is straight before him, and who literally "casts off" error when he throws himself overboard, out of the world of potential and into existence (paradoxically into what the mariners would see as death). The Vision is like Blake's *Satanic Spectre*, an elusive and illusory projection of the mariners themselves, their solipsistic ego or selfhood.

"Reason is the bound or outward circumference of energy," says Blake (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell*). As Clark observes, "life consists of energy, the expanding factor, and reason the limiting factor, in dynamic synthesis" (67). To indulge in a pun, the mariners do not really have any reason for their journey, are not really bound for anywhere. In love with the love of travel, they never cast off error. For Blake and Kierkegaard, "Life is always the center or most important thing," says Clark. They "want to rescue 'actuality' or 'life' (what Kierkegaard also calls 'existence') from its formalist abstraction within idealist dialectics" (3, 10). Tennyson's mariners are caught up in an endless loop of following after the ideal. Caught up only in a world of potentiality, what they everywhere miss is life itself, and so sail on for evermore.

## Notes

1. Jerome H. Buckley groups "The Voyage" with those poems of Tennyson's (in the 1860's) which "affirm the importance of the neverending quest and the deathfulness of retreat and passivity. 'The Voyage,' reminiscent in temper and imagery of 'Ulysses,' though much thinner in texture, is the proud chant of mariners who sail forever in pursuit of 'one fair Vision' . . . And, sailing, scorn the ease of the tropic Lotus-lands . . ." (152). I also read the connection with "Ulysses," but what Buckley reads as affirmation I see as negation or satire, as I argue in this paper. Paul F. Baum, reiterating Victorian estimates and Tennyson's own comment, calls the poem a "'brilliantly descriptive allegory' of 'Life as Energy, in the great ethical sense of the word, --Life as the pursuit of the ideal. . . ." This pleased Henry Sidgwick. 'What growth there is in the man mentally! How he has caught the spirit of the age in *The Voyage* !'" (258).

2. One wonders how much Tennyson's poem was indeed influenced by Arthur Hugh Clough's *Amours de Voyage* and perhaps by conversations with Clough. Clough's poem, certainly one of the most brilliant of the period, was itself deeply concerned with the valorization of action as some sort of ideal, some sort of anodyne for the malaise of spirit during the Victorian age.

3. Or, as many have pointed out, "Ulysses" is based more on Dante's than on Homer's account, Dante stressing the more evil aspects of Ulysses. In Cary's translation of the *Inferno*, which Tennyson probably used, Ulysses speaks of the mariners who will attend him on his last voyage as "the small faithful band / That yet cleaved to me," and then exhorts them to come with him: "'Ye were not formed to live the life of brutes, / But *virtue to pursue and knowledge high*" (my italics). His followers obey him enthusiastically, if we may believe his report, for after his brief speech, he says, "With these few words I sharpen'd for the voyage / The mind of my associates, that I then / Could scarcely have withheld them" (quoted in Ricks' introductory notes to "Ulysses"). It is not beside the point that Tennyson has the mariners in "The Voyage" follow a Vision which is "Like Virtue firm, like Knowledge fair.

4. Put another way, is searching after the ideal really or always so heroic? It might be rather stupid, in fact. Hawthorne, for example, seems to like to explore that topic in his writing quite a lot.

5. All quotes from Tennyson's poems are from *The Poems of Tennyson*, edited by Christopher Ricks.

6. I also read "Locksley Hall" as a negative commentary on the idealization of "Action." The tension and ambiguity in "Locksley Hall" come from an entirely different source from that in "The Voyage": the apparent consonance of tone and action, or the speaker's desire for action to produce consonance out of the dissonance of his mind (his life, memories, desires, and perception of people and society).

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