

## Always afternoon

It is clear from the very first lines of Tennyson's poem, *The Lotos-Eaters*, that the interest of this brief episode from Homer's *Odyssey* lay for him not in Greek myth but in modern life, not in Odysseus but in the state of mind of his weary companions. In the original, the tale is told by Odysseus himself and he, not unnaturally, takes centre stage. After nine days of battling storms at sea, he says, we took refuge on an island. The men he sent out to explore the island failed to return. 'All they now wanted was to stay where they were with the Lotos-eaters, to browse on the lotos, and to forget all thoughts of return. I had to use force to bring them back to the hollow ships, and they wept on the way, but once on board I tied them up and dragged them under the benches.' He goes on to describe at much greater length their arrival in the land of the one-eyed Cyclops and his own cunning defeat of Polyphemus.

Tennyson lets Odysseus begin the story –

*'Courage!' he said, and pointed toward the land.  
'This mounting wave will roll us shore-ward soon.'*

– but then forgets him.

*In the afternoon they came unto a land  
In which it seemed always afternoon.*

What might otherwise have been an exotic adventure in a land far away is brought home, domesticated, by that one word, afternoon, and its associations for us with rest and peace. Imagine if an afternoon nap could last forever!

He goes on to describe the country in which they find themselves in words that are anything but domestic, but the word he planted first in our minds cannot be dislodged. The rhymes themselves keep bringing it back.

*All round the coast the languid air did swoon,  
Breathing like one that hath a weary dream.  
Full-faced above the valley stood the moon;  
And like the downward smoke, the slender stream  
Along the cliff to fall and pause and fall did seem.*

A dozen more lines of sensuous description complete the picture, which he sums up in one of those lines that express both a feeling and a thought.

*A land where all things always seem'd the same!*

A line so surprising, so apt, that it deserves its exclamation mark. There follow three of the most striking lines that Tennyson ever wrote, weaving out of pure sound an unforgettable image.

*And round about the keel with faces pale,  
Dark faces pale against that rosy flame,  
The mild-eyed melancholy Lotos-eaters came.*

The image is developed in the next few lines until, as he does at moments throughout the poem, he brings us to another moment of stillness and finality.

*Most weary seem'd the sea, weary the oar,  
Weary the wandering fields of barren foam.  
Then someone said, 'We will return no more.'*

The drama of the poem, from its first word, through the journey inland and the meeting with the Lotos-eaters, to this moment of decision, is further reinforced by the 'Choric Song' which follows. Third person narration in the past tense gives way to the immediacy of speech in the manner of a chorus in a Greek tragedy.

*Why are we weigh'd upon with heaviness  
And utterly consumed with sharp distress,  
While all things else have rest from weariness?*

The song is a hymn in praise of idleness, or rather a lament for the life of toil to which man, since the Fall, has been condemned. In verse after verse, image after image, Tennyson evokes the sense of deep and lasting peace that comes from simply giving up. The chorus begins by comparing it to music –

*Music that gentlier on the spirit lies,  
Than tir'd eyelids upon tir'd eyes.*

Why is rest denied to us, alone among all living things?

*Why are we weigh'd upon with heaviness  
And utterly consumed with sharp distress,  
While all things else have rest from weariness?*

Better to be a fruit or a flower!

*The flower ripens in its place,  
Ripens and fades, and falls, and hath no toil,  
Fast-rooted in the fruitful soil.*

Please, they beg, just leave us here!

*Let us alone. Time driveth onward fast,  
And in a little while our lips are dumb.  
Let us alone. What is it that will last?  
All things are taken from us, and become  
Portions and parcels of the dreadful Past.  
Let us alone.*

And anyway, they ask, what would be the point in going back?

*Dear is the memory of our wedded lives,  
And dear the last embraces of our wives,  
And their warm tears: but all hath suffer'd change:  
For surely now our household hearths are cold:  
Our sons inherit us: our looks are strange:  
And we should come like ghosts to trouble joy.*

The hymn ends where it began.

*Oh rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more.*

No wonder they wept when Odysseus forced them back. But Tennyson makes no mention of that. In his version, the crew stay where they are.

The poem for which Tennyson now is best known, perhaps the only poem of his which is still read, *In Memoriam*, begins and ends with a disclaimer. In the introductory verses, which were added later, he begs forgiveness of God and, by implication, of the reading public.

*Forgive these wild and wandering cries,  
Confusions of a wasted youth;  
Forgive them where they fail in truth,  
And in thy wisdom make me wise.*

In the epilogue (or epithalamium on the marriage of his daughter, who might have married his friend if he had lived, to someone else) he proclaims himself older and wiser –

*Which makes appear the songs I made  
As echoes out of weaker times,  
As half but idle brawling rhymes,  
The sport of random sun and shade.*

*In Memoriam AHH* was a private poem written by a public poet. It is a collection of short lyric poems written while Tennyson was grieving for the premature death of his close friend, Arthur Hugh Hallam. *The Lotos-eaters*, like all his others poems, is not lyric but epic. It tells a story. Many, like his *Idylls of the King*, are full-blown epics, in length as well as subject and style. Others dramatise a single moment in a longer story. Odysseus has a poem of his own, called by his other name, Ulysses, in which, at the end of his life, he expresses a desire for new adventures.

*Tho' much is taken, much abides; 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  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*

The idea of poetry as the expression of the poet's own feelings has prevailed for so long now that anything else seems false. There are no poets in the so-called 'public square' only 'public intellectuals'. It is a place that poets shy away from, perhaps because they remember what it did to Tennyson when his expression of private grief failed to find favour with a censorious Victorian public.

Today the raw emotion of *In Memoriam* is what we expect from poetry. In poem VII, when the sleepless poet goes out into the London streets to stand outside his friend's house, we share in his sorrow and his despair.

*He is not here; but far away  
The noise of life begins again,  
And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain  
On the bald street breaks the blank day.*

No doubt some Victorian readers sympathised, but many regretted the loss of their poet's stiff upper lip. The fact is that, in writing about himself, Tennyson was most successful, as in the verse quoted, when he wrote as he would if he were writing about somebody else. As a poet, an epic poet, a public poet, his task was to make the story come alive, to make the experience vivid and immediate for the reader. He does this in poem VII by showing us the 'long unlovely street' to which 'at earliest morning' he returns, just as he does in *The Lotos-eaters* by showing us the land 'in which it seemed always afternoon'. Time after time, he surprises us with things that we feel we already know. No writer can do that without an awareness of the public and epic nature of poetry, as well as the private and lyric.

The moments when the lyric and epic strands in English poetry intersect are precisely those when English poets come closest to greatness. Story and song, public and private, coming together. The greatest English epic poem of all, by the greatest English epic poet, ends on a note of pure lyricism.

*The world was all before them, where to choose  
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:  
They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,  
Through Eden took their solitary way.*

© Neil Rathmell