

‘To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield’

In March 2011 the final line of Tennyson’s ‘Ulysses’ was selected as the inscription for a wall in the athletes’ village at the 2012 London Olympic Games. The line, it was hoped, would motivate athletes to strive for success in their events, and would continue to inspire the residents of east London once the village was converted into housing after the games. The poet Daljit Nagra, one of the judges who chose the line, described it as ‘a clarion call to the best parts of our searching, inquiring selves, which is just as suited to a gold-medal winner as it is to an ordinary worker in their daily round’ (Bates, 2011). The adoption of the line as a sort of Olympic epigraph, its subsequent quotation in speeches by David Cameron and editorials in *The Times*, and its possibly coincidental presence (in abridged form) as the subtitle to John Batchelor’s 2012 biography *Tennyson: To Strive, To Seek, To Find*, testify to the enduring resonance of this dramatic monologue and to its importance for twenty-first-century perceptions of Tennyson. There was a danger, though, that the planned use of the line as a lapidary pronouncement of Olympic optimism, isolated from its context within the poem as a whole, might threaten to rob Tennyson’s poetry of its nuance. This danger was mitigated by the subsequent decision to lengthen the inscription to incorporate the final three-and-a-half lines of Ulysses’ peroration:

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. (ll. 67-70)

In this form the inscription restores the characteristic ambivalence of Tennyson’s monologue: it appeals to a collective and communal identity characterised by equality and heroism, but at the same time its acknowledgement of the depredations of ‘time and fate’ raises questions about its efficacy as an inspirational motto. The closing lines of ‘Ulysses’ have been widely quoted (and misquoted), and discussed by critics, throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, and while the history of their reception and appropriation reveals a persistent desire to enlist Ulysses’ speech as a rousing affirmation of undimmed fortitude, it also demonstrates that these lines can be read as an admission of defeat as much as an assertion of will. The tension between these two readings is especially evident in relation to the last two lines of the poem, which raise a series of interpretative questions. Where, for instance, should the expressive emphasis be placed in the penultimate line: on the weary opening of ‘made weak’, the pivotal self-checking qualification of ‘but’, or the rallying cry of ‘strong in will’? And, perhaps most crucially, how can the closing metrical stresses on ‘not’ and ‘yield’ in the final line be reconciled with the stirring triadic infinitives that precede them?

The particular ambiguity of this final line was highlighted by a poignant coincidence of dates in 2012. As well as taking in the London Olympics, this year marked the centenary of the death of Robert Falcon Scott and his team in Antarctica after they were beaten in the race to the South Pole by Roald Amundsen. Before the survivors of Scott’s expedition left Antarctica in January 1913, they erected a memorial cross at the summit of Observation Hill on Ross Island; inscribed on the

cross were the names of the dead and the final line of 'Ulysses': 'To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield' (Scott, 2006, 454-6). Although testifying to the ambition and endurance of the explorers, this epitaph is far from the unambiguous 'clarion call' to aspiration championed by the Olympic judges; instead, it draws attention to the underlying scepticism of Tennyson's line, its awareness that, however strong the will, heroic ambition may result in failure and futility. In this context, Tennyson's words sound similar to Scott's famous statement in his final journal entry, dated 29 March 1912: 'We shall stick it out to the end, but we are getting weaker, of course, and the end cannot be far' (2006, 412). Both Scott and Ulysses acknowledge that seeking and finding might not guarantee success or triumph, and that, in the end, striving against insurmountable odds might be the same thing as yielding to them.

Despite the inherent ambiguity of Ulysses' words, his lines have frequently been quoted, and his eloquence borrowed, by those wishing to voice their own determination not to yield. To give one example from the nineteenth century: Thomas Henry Huxley, in his 1893 lecture on 'Evolution and Ethics', used the final line-and-a-half of 'Ulysses' to gloss his argument that evolutionary theory, rather than promoting amorality, instead encourages a mature realism about the ethical complexities of human nature. 'We are grown men, and must play the man "strong in will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield," cherishing the good that falls in our way and bearing the evil, in and around us, with stout hearts set on diminishing it' (Huxley, 1893, 37). Huxley omitted the phrase 'made weak by time and fate', reformulating Tennyson's lines as a straightforward affirmation of will in the face of adversity, and this editorial and rhetorical sleight-of-hand was also employed by twentieth-century speakers. Senator Edward Kennedy closed his speech at the 1980 Democratic national convention, in which he announced his withdrawal from the race for the Democratic nomination for the US presidency, with a quotation from 'Ulysses' which missed out 'made weak by time and fate', again refiguring the poem as a rousing call to unceasing struggle (Pearsall, 2008, 193). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the sonorous blank verse of Ulysses' monologue has proved consistently popular with politicians: Sir Robert Peel admired the poem, and in 1968 Edward Kennedy's brother Robert quoted the final lines in response to the assassination of Martin Luther King (Tucker, 1988, 448). Other quotations by American politicians have been less edifying: in 2009 the corrupt Governor of Illinois, Rod Blagojevich, impeached for illegally trying to sell the vacant senate seat of newly-elected President Barack Obama, read Ulysses' peroration during a press conference at which he announced his intention to fight the charges. At the time, Stephen Burt noted the irony of a politician in Blagojevich's precarious position 'quoting a poem that amounts to a resignation from executive office' (2009).

The readiness of politicians to appropriate Tennyson's lines, often for self-serving ends, invites a sceptical reassessment of the inspirational power of Ulysses' words: Tennyson's speaker is, among other things, a political and military leader trying to persuade his mariners to go along with his plans. Critical readings of the poem's final lines offer a means of interrogating the rhetorical and political uses to which they have been put. Matthew Rowlinson, for instance, has explored 'the connections between Tennyson's poem and an ideology of colonialism', connections which are demonstrated, he argues, by the poem's pervasive presence as a teaching text in schools across the former British empire throughout the twentieth century

(1992, 265). More broadly, critics such as Cornelia Pearsall have emphasised the rhetorical dimension of Ulysses' peroration, identifying it as a performance which, instead of being accepted as an inspirational creed, must be analysed as a piece of arguably coercive oratory. In *Tennyson's Rapture* Pearsall characterises the dramatic monologue as an inherently rhetorical form and asserts that 'Ulysses seeks less the exertion of the expedition than the exertion of the oratory; his concern is less to make one last voyage than to make one last speech'. Pearsall also traces the way in which Ulysses' last-ditch oratory has permeated English-speaking culture, noting its widespread visibility in the form of quotations and allusions and attributing this to the rhetorical virtuosity of the poem and especially of the last lines: 'One can hear the efficacy of the lines, because one may – many do – experience its effects directly' (2008, 197, 199).

Pearsall's reading of the final lines of 'Ulysses' highlights the poem's status as an exemplary dramatic monologue, a text which invites an ambivalent response from readers, poised between critique of Ulysses' rhetoric and sympathetic engagement with his plangent appeal to fortitude and struggle. The intrinsic ambiguity of the monologue has elicited a range of critical interpretations just as diverse as the poem's cultural and political appropriations. Several critics have read the final lines as a triumphant affirmation of determination and aspiration on Ulysses' part, one that fits well with the unending progress invoked in the Olympic motto 'faster, higher, stronger' (and with the runaway success of British athletes, and of the Olympic and Paralympic Games more generally, in 2012). For Herbert F. Tucker, 'made weak by time and fate' is a 'blithely deducted concession to human weakness' which hardly diminishes 'the strength of a will that transcends the self' as presented in the closing line-and-a-half (1988, 236). Linda K. Hughes attends closely and perceptively to the grammar of the final lines, noting that 'the end of the poem [...] with its present-tense "are" and the succession of incompleting infinitives, opens out onto an eternal present, onto infinity'. The grammatical structure of these lines, Hughes argues, empowers Ulysses 'to resist closure and to keep moving', to go on striving against the ravages of time and fate (1987, 98).

W. David Shaw also emphasises 'the timelessness of the closing infinitives', suggesting that endurance and perhaps even immortality are written into the monologue's last words. But Shaw also points out that there is a conclusive finality to these words which Ulysses cannot escape: "'And not to yield" is a resolution not to pause, not to end. Yet these are the last words of the poem. A moment later the monologue, for all its defiance of ends, is over' (1976, 279). In this reading Ulysses is time-bound, inescapably drawing to the end both of his life and of his monologue; his longing for intransitive striving and seeking is checked by the forces of time, fate, and form. The infinitives of the last line might evoke, or seek, infinity, but they do not guarantee that Ulysses has any sort of definite future. It is just as plausible to claim, as Christopher Ricks does, that Ulysses is going nowhere, and that the negative construction of his monologue's closing four words threatens to undermine the aspirational rhetoric that preceded it: 'rippling underneath that final line, striving to utter itself but battered down by will, is another line, almost identical and yet utterly different: "To strive, to seek, to yield, and not to find"' (1989, 115). Ulysses' striving will is without doubt a force in these lines, but it is facing formidable opposition, to which Ulysses might after all yield. As Tennyson himself commented,

resolution and resignation are equal elements of the monologue's meaning: the poem 'was written under the sense of loss and that all had gone by, but that still life must be fought out to the end' (1987, 1, 613). The struggle between the sense of loss and the desire to fight life out 'to the end' remains unresolved at the end of the poem, and although the resulting tension between will and surrender, between progress and stasis, is not straightforwardly in keeping with the Olympic spirit, it is the source of much of the poem's intellectual and emotional power.

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