

AN UNDETECTED ECHO OF TENNYSON'S "ULYSSES" IN WHITMAN'S *LEAVES OF GRASS*

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OF THE MORE THAN 400 POEMS in the 1891-1892 edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, only eleven stand-alone couplets exist. One of these is the succinct poem published in 1871 entitled "The Untold Want":

The untold want by life and land ne'er granted,
Now voyager sail thou forth to seek and find.¹

Compressed into these eighteen words is the soul's spiritual yearning for a fulfillment denied to it by time and circumstance. Also contained within them is evidence of the influence of another writer, a contemporary and friend of Whitman's, Alfred Lord Tennyson, England's poet laureate, whom Whitman regarded as "the greatest living poet"² and with whom he had corresponded warmly over the course of two decades.³

In particular, Whitman had greatly admired Tennyson's 1833 poem "Ulysses," which the American poet often recited before audiences and regarded as "about the best Tennysonian poem."⁴ For his part, Tennyson returned Whitman's compliment by calling Whitman "one of the greatest, if not the greatest of living poets, or words to that effect."⁵

In "Ulysses," Tennyson describes what a post-war life of retirement would have been like for an ancient warrior who still thirsted for adventure.⁶ Moldering of domesticity in Ithaca, a senescent Ulysses conceived a grand, new adventure and called upon his former shipmates and join him on one final voyage.

Anticipating the driving spirit Whitman would later articulate in "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" and "Prayer of Columbus,"⁷ Tennyson has his hero Ulysses proclaim:

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.⁸

In “The Untold Want,” envisioning a similarly daring voyage “to seek” and “to find,” Whitman would pay tribute to his fellow poet and friend, Tennyson, who, like himself, though no longer young,⁹ had not surrendered his appetite for life.¹⁰

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Notes

1 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass and Other Writing* (Norton Critical Edition), ed. Michael Moon, Sculley Bradley, and Harold W. Blodgett (New York: Norton, 2002), 420.

2 Herbert Bergman, “Whitman and Tennyson,” *Studies in Philology* 51 (July 1954), 499.

3 John M. Ditsky, “Whitman-Tennyson Correspondence: A Summary and Commentary,” *Walt Whitman Review* 18 (September 1972), 75-82.

4 Bergman, 498; Ditsky, 75.

5 Bergman, 495.

6 Stephen Bertman, “The Heroic Challenge of Retirement,” *The Journal of Aging Studies* 63 (December 2022), article 101080.

7 Charles B. Willard, “Whitman and Tennyson’s ‘Ulysses,’” *Walt Whitman Newsletter* 2 (March-June 1956), 9-10. Both poems were published in 1881, a decade after “The Untold Want” appeared. Lawrence Buell argues that the end of “Passage to India” is a “hyped-up version . . . of the gist of [Whitman’s] favorite Tennyson poem, ‘Ulysses’” in “Walt Whitman as an Eminent Victorian” (in Susan Belasco, Ed Folsom, and Kenneth M. Price, eds., *Leaves of Grass: The Sesquicentennial Essays* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007], 292). Gary Schmidgall offers an extended study of the Whitman-Tennyson relationship, and he emphasizes how Whitman’s “Prayer of Columbus” strikes “a very similar pose” to Tennyson’s “Ulysses” (*Containing Multitudes* [New York; Oxford University Press, 2014], 277).

8 Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *The Complete Poetical Works of Tennyson*, ed. W. J. Rolfe (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1898), 89.

9 At the time of the publication of “The Untold Want” in 1871, Whitman was 52 and Tennyson 62.

10 For an insightful portrait of Tennyson’s psychology see John Batchelor, *Tennyson: To Strive, To Seek, To Find* (New York: Pegasus, 2013).