

David Sinclair

Concluding Essay: “22-23 British and Irish Poetry after 1930: From Auden to Prynne”,  
Department of Continuing Education, University of Oxford

12 Dec 2022 (edited 14 Dec 2022)

The poems discussed here are available at:

Ulysses: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45392/ulysses>

Do not go gentle into that good night: <https://poets.org/poem/do-not-go-gentle-good-night>

Aubade: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48422/aubade-56d229a6e2f07>

### The Inevitability of Death – Friend or Foe of the Poet?

More than 100 billion humans have walked on the surface of the planet. Ninety-five per cent of them have since died. So, it would seem reasonable that the poets in the remaining five per cent would have had seen enough examples of death, to have some handle on how to write about that subject. Since “Poetry is a way of taking life by the throat” (Frost) we might also hope poetry to be similarly pugnaciously about revealing our relationship with death. In investigating this possibility, this essay considers three different poets’ perspectives on death.

In *Ulysses*, Tennyson constructs a poem of contrasts, of indecision, reflection which eventually resolves to a call to action. The form and content of the poem are a sequence of oppositions: far away adventure versus idleness at home, heroic achievement or weary resignation, internal strength of mind, or the external decay of the body with age. Iambic pentameter gives the poem a strong momentum, but this is contrasted and opposed by the trochaic substitutions (e.g., “Much have I seen and known; cities of men / And manners, climates, councils, governments” (ll. 12-13)) and the periodic inclusion of spondees (e.g., “The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep / Moans round with many voices” (Ricks, 2007, ll. 55-56)). This slows and interrupts the rhythm, reinforcing the sense of

reflection and indecision in Ulysses' mind and together with the use of enjambment also adds to the sense of his restlessness (Ostriker, 1967).

Opposition is also found in Ulysses' state of mind. He is shown as being noble and an admirable orator in stanzas two and four, but equally ignoble and indecisive in stanzas one and three. As Pettigrew notes, Tennyson uses a shift from private soliloquy in the first two paragraphs, to public dramatic monologue in the poem's second half (from l. 44) – this also adds a sense of uncertainty (Pettigrew, 1963, p. 42). Trapped by his political and domestic situation, Ulysses is being held in a mental prison on Ithaca, from where he contemplates the potential of physical and mental freedom (“To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths / Of all the western stars, until I die.” (ll. 60-61). Out of the many complex interpretations of Ulysses' state of mind and intent that the poem offers, one plausible interpretation is that Tennyson is expressing his admiration for the heroic qualities of a life of adventure, and that even though we may be fading towards death “made weak by time and fate”, the point of life is in the experiences we gain, so we should always continue “to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield” (ll. 69-70).

Dylan Thomas's work has a strong vein of lyricism and intense emotion that suggests that Thomas has more in common with Tennyson than might be expected. Undoubtedly more modern than Tennyson, Thomas's poetry is nevertheless more difficult to classify. It has a romanticism that seems slightly out of place, compared to the analytical austerity of Auden and the melancholic bluntness of Larkin. In *Ulysses* Tennyson is primarily concerned with what to do in life before death. Thomas, on the other hand, in *Do not go gentle into that good night* is much more preoccupied with the immediacy of death, rather than the past life. Both Thomas and Tennyson recognise the inevitability of death, and both recognise that death can

be challenged, that struggling against death is both a valiant and human reaction. For Tennyson, death should be faced with strength and power like the great heroes of old. But Dylan's poem is more about the act of dying rather than the life before it. This isn't a poem about triumphing, achieving victory over death. Unlike Ulysses who is pondering his final choices for the last phase of his life, *Do not go gentle into that good night*" is not about whether or not to die, but how to face that inevitable moment.

In each stanza of Thomas's poem, a different type of man looks back at his life, often expressing regret at what they did not do. The wise man (stanza two), who is a teacher or scholar, worries that his "words had forked no lightning". Tennyson's *Ulysses* has no such regrets and is happy to pass his domestic responsibilities to his son, and simply seek further exploration and adventure. In a sense, *Ulysses*, simply cannot acknowledge the thing that Thomas is so closed focused on – the inevitable end of all adventures.

While Tennyson has a static speaker, located somewhat ambiguously between soliloquy and dramatic monologue, reflection and rhetoric. Thomas's speaker on the other hand employs a constantly vigorous exhortative style. The choice of the villanelle form, with its inherent repetition, gives great impetus to the poem. The repeated refrains "'Do not go gentle into that good night" and "Rage, rage against the dying of the light" impose a sense of inexorable progression. The repeated pattern of A and B rhymes required by a villanelle, (the A rhymes are "night," "light," "right," "bright," "flight," "sight," and "height"; The B rhymes are "they," "day," "bay," "way," "gay," and "pray") also push the poem forward with increasing momentum. The overall effect is a sense of the inevitable rush towards death. The horror of death is further highlighted by the fact Villanelles traditionally often deals with pastoral, natural, or simple themes. Death too is natural process, but hardly pastoral and the

unusual use of the form highlights the horror of the subject. The repeated refrain echoes the way in which we focus on grief and death. We only die once, but we often think about it throughout our lives.

Approximately half the lines in *Do not go gently into that goodnight* employ enjambment. Thomas is particularly adept with this technique, using it to add to the pace of the poem (and making us again think of rushing headlong towards death). The sometimes unexpected conclusion of the enjambment as in "Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight/Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay." (ll. 13-14) adds to the drama. The first line suggests that near death we can look back on our lives and see with extreme clarity. But instead of telling us what we may see, Thomas twists the meaning in the next line, suggesting that if you really do lose your physical eyesight in old, this does not prevent the vision of your past being clearly seen in your own memory (such memories "blaze" in our blind eyes).

Turning now to Philip Larkin who has been wonderfully aptly called "Britain's most miserable genius" (Booth, 2015) we find a poet who seems to have a permanent preoccupation with death and this is reflected in much of his poetry:

Larkin's was the purest of lyric sensibilities: always here, always now. He was touched deeply only by the existential fundamentals: love, death, and "being alive, in the flesh": "the million-petalled flower of being here". His fear of extinction is harrowing: "Not to be here, / Not to be anywhere, / And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true." (Booth, 2015),

*Aubade* (Larkin, 1977) is one of Larkin's last poems, and relates how the poet, waking in the morning to "soundless dark", is gripped by the horrifying thought he is "a whole day nearer now" to his own death, even though he cannot say when or where he will die. So

powerful is this thought, it makes his mind go completely blank – the poet’s mind is simply terrified by the thought of his own death and the “sure extinction” it promises.

As in *Ulysses* and *Do not go gently into that goodnight*, *Aubade* is essentially written in iambic pentameter. Its five stanzas of ten lines uses a regular rhyme scheme: ABABCCDEED. Like the other two poems it also makes use of the common devices of enjambment, caesura, simile and metaphor. The iambic metre is broken up - for instance the adjacent unstressed syllables of the anapaestic foot: “Of dying, and being dead,” (l. 9) and the two dactylic feet in “Not to be anywhere” (l. 19). Having analysed the nature of his own fear of death, the poem returns to the dawning of the day. The ‘Aubade’ of the title finally seems justified. A new day is dawning, and the poet returns to the humdrum world of the everyday. None of this sounds particularly unusual or outstanding innovative, but the execution of these literary devices is nevertheless expertly done. Does Larkin’s poem therefore add to our insight into death?

Seamus Heaney, who “recognizes, as perhaps no other critic does, the magnitude of Larkin’s accomplishment[s]” (Cavanagh, 2002, p. 185-186) surprisingly thinks *Aubade* sets a bad example, saying “it reveals a poet in a state of arrested vision: Larkin ... sees nothing beyond nature but an absence. ... he cannot take into sufficient account what human beings have in themselves to counter that void” (p. 187). Memorably, Heaney says Larkin “does not hold the lyre up in the face of the gods of the underworld” (Heaney, 1995, p. 158).

So, we have returned, in a sense, to *Ulysses* and the lyricism of the words of Tennyson and of Homer before him. It seems in writing about death, every poet unsurprisingly takes a different personal perspective, and indeed poets will even happily criticise the value they see in other each other’s perspectives. Perhaps then, when reading their works, we should worry less about what the poet’s personal intentions were, but we should simply concentrate on how

we respond as readers. Maybe it would even be better, from the reader's perspective, if the poet's name as omitted from the poem. Or would that be one death too many?

[1616 words]

## References

Booth, J. (2015), "Britain's most miserable genius", BBC, retrieved at <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20151201-philip-larkin-englands-most-miserable-genius> on 11 Dec 2022.

Cavanagh, M 2009, *Professing Poetry : Seamus Heaney's Poetics*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington. Available at <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/detail.action?docID=3134987&pq-origsite=primo> (Accessed 11 December 2022).

Frost, R. (na) As quoted in: Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence (1960) by Elizabeth S. Sergeant, Ch. 18.

Heaney, S. (1995) *The redress of poetry : Oxford lectures*. London: Faber.

Larkin P. (1977), "Aubade", in *Collected Poems*, London: Marvell Press, 2008, p. 208–9. (First published in *Aubade* [29 November 1977 *Times Literary Supplement*, (23 December 1977)]

Ostriker, A. (1967) "The Three Modes in Tennyson's Prosody". *PMLA*. 82 (2): 273–284 [doi:10.2307/46129](https://doi.org/10.2307/46129). JSTOR 461298

Pettigrew, J. (1963) 'Tennyson's "Ulysses": A Reconciliation of Opposites', *Victorian poetry*, 1(1), pp. 27–45. Available at <https://www-proquest-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/docview/1297947287?&imgSeq=1> (Accessed: 5 December 2022).

Ricks, C. (ed.) (2007) *Alfred Lord Tennyson: Selected Poems*, Oxford, Penguin. p. 49-51.