

“Presumed Dead: Tennyson’s Impact on the Cinema” [SL 1]

Dr. Rebecca Umland, University of Nebraska at Kearney

Alfred Lord Tennyson, *poet laureate* of England from 1850 until his death in 1892, composed poetry that continues to resonate with modern audiences, but what may be surprising is his impact on the cinema, namely through his famous narrative poem, *Enoch Arden* (1864). [SL 2] The titular character, marooned on an island after a shipwreck, is rescued a decade later, only to discover that his wife has wed his best friend. What accounts for the continued popularity of this modern odyssey? *Enoch Arden* shares with earlier poems, *The Lotos-Eaters* (1832), *Ulysses* (1833.1842) and the *Morte d’Arthur* (1842), a focus on the uncertain fortunes of the sea; Tennyson’s preoccupation with time and death; and a simultaneous fear of and fascination with dispossession. They all include memorable visual images and an elegiac—at times even nihilistic—view of life more contemporary than Victorian, even though the Victorian Age was an elegiac one, feeling separated from a personal and cultural past of greater certitude.

Tennyson’s friend, the sculptor Thomas Woolner, provided the idea for *Enoch Arden* (*Memoir*, II, 7). Many of the *literati* admired this work; more important, however, was the fact that the poem enjoyed wide popular appeal. Robert W. Hill, Jr. for instance, comments, somewhat contemptuously, that it “established Tennyson as ‘The Poet of the People’” (*Tennyson’s Poetry* n.1, 251). [SL 3] Bearing a superficial resemblance to Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), *Enoch Arden* is one of several Tennyson poems, as we shall see, that owes a more remarkable debt to *The Odyssey*, the archetypal story of dispossession. Tennyson coaxes out of Homer’s text latent elements in his belief that “myth should be modernized” (Culler, *The Poetry of Tennyson* 92). Homer’s quest narrative, in which the hero returns to find his house and wife about to be inherited by the suitors, is surely why Tennyson found it so compelling, and which in turn makes his own poetry resonate with modern audiences. A version of this

problematic delayed homecoming recurs in Tennyson's early verse, and in *Enoch Arden*, helping to explain its impact on modern cinema.

In "The Lotos-Eaters" (1832) and "Ulysses" (1833, 1842) Tennyson uses Homer's epic as a point of departure to voice his conflicted self, and that of his Victorian audience, dramatizing the struggle between duty and desire, external obligations to family and community as impediments to the pursuit of personal happiness. [SL4] "The Lotos-Eaters" opens with a single utterance by Ulysses, "Courage!" as he urges his mariners to continue their quest home after a decade in Troy, but the rest of the poem consists of a "Choric Song" in which Ulysses' companions, under the influence of the "mild-eyed melancholy Lotos-eaters" (l.27) and their narcotic, counter: "We will return no more . . . Our island home / Is far beyond the wave; we will no longer roam" (ll.43-45). Their ensuing argument to ignore a duty to their wives and homeland consists first of an assertion that death and oblivion are both natural and even seductive, but the most compelling reason, for them, at least, is their own sense that time has passed them by, that they have been relegated to an existence of ghostly memory. "Dear is the memory of our wedded lives, / And dear the last embraces of our wives / And their warm tears; but all hath suffered 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" (ll. 114-119). James Richardson observes that Tennyson knew "dispossession begins with the living, and death can be his metaphor for pastness and powerlessness" (*Vanishing Lives* 92). The mariners, though still alive, feel the deadness of their former selves, and are thus resolved to remain on the island of oblivion, a disconnectedness both the poet and several of his characters express: "When Tennyson identifies with his ghost he finds a vehicle for his feelings of dispossession . . . sadly fascinating" (Richardson 93).

In “Ulysses,” Tennyson shows a disenchanted Greek hero, after his return to Ithaca, tired of his domestic and social responsibilities. Ulysses urges his companions to set out on a final twilight voyage, a metaphor for death. In this companion poem to “The Lotos-Eaters,” Ulysses recognizes that it is not Ithaca but rather *he* that has changed, a result of his experiences at Troy and after: “I mete and dole / Unequal laws unto a savage race, / That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me” (ll.3-5). He cloaks himself in ghostly attire: “And this gray spirit yearning in desire / To follow knowledge like a sinking star / Beyond the utmost bounds of human thought” (ll.30-32). Turning over his scepter and domestic hearth to his son, Telemachus, Ulysses rallies his “mariners” stating that although “you and I are old . . . Some work of noble note might yet be done, / Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods” (ll. 49-54). Ulysses avers he and his mariners may seek a “newer world,” (l. 57) although it may be that “the gulfs will wash us down” (62). In this poem, Richardson detects the autobiographical element of Tennyson’s grief for the loss of Arthur Hallam, feeling “imprisoned in a jagged, unalterable present” (80). And “Like his poet in the aftermath of Hallam’s death, Ulysses has lost his past” (80). What he urges on his men is a reach “not toward the intractable present, but toward the future” (81) imparting a vague hope in a bleak present.

“The Lotos-Eaters” uses as its imaginative point of departure a brief episode from Book IX of *The Odyssey* in which Odysseus and his men encounter the Lotus-eaters, after which he coerces his men to resume their quest, to explore his own conflicted self, torn between personal gratification and restraint. The near-nihilism and sensual indulgence of the mariners belongs to a later age; it is an alien concept in the heroic literature of the classical Greek past. The same is true for “Ulysses,” the dramatic situation of which has no true antecedent in *The Odyssey*, in which the hero is the only one who returns to Ithaca, the others all having perished on the journey home. Instead, Tennyson uses as a point of departure Canto XXVI of Dante’s *Inferno*,

which contains the condemned shade of Ulysses, now assigned to the circle of false counsellors, for having led his men to their deaths by deceiving them into sailing past the margin of the known world. A. Dwight Culler also points to its modern sentiment: “It is certainly a voyage into Death, for all Romantic heroes, from Werther on, have known that this is the ultimate experience . . . [that] includes the ‘last curiosity’ of death” (*The Poetry of Tennyson* 97).

In his 1842 poem, the “Morte D’Arthur,” Tennyson once again presents a character whose past vanishes before his eyes, leaving him isolated in an uncertain present. [SL 5] The titular character, a moribund King Arthur, prepares to sail off to the Isle of Avilion, leaving his only surviving knight, Bedivere, alone after the fall of Camelot. Culler reads this poem not only as an instance of “a kind of symbol of a dying god” (102) and therefore as a parabolic loss of religious certitude in the 19th-Century, but also as another expression of the loss Tennyson incurred from Arthur Hallam’s death, himself Bedivere to Arthur in the poem. “Ah! My Lord Arthur, whither shall I go? / Where shall I hide my forehead and my eyes? / For now I see the old true times are dead, / When every morning brought a noble chance / And every chance brought out a noble knight. . . But now the whole ROUND TABLE is dissolved / Which was an image of the mighty world; / And I, the last, go forth companionless, / And the days darken round me, and the years, / Among new men, strange faces, other minds” (ll. 227-238). Bedivere is estranged from his own personal and cultural past; isolated in the present, he despairs about the future he cannot even imagine without Arthur after the dissolution of the Round Table, “an image of the mighty world.” Like two earlier poems—and *Enoch Arden*—water journeys can signal both danger and change. The poem concludes: “Long stood Sir Bedivere / Revolving many memories, till the hull / Looked one black dot against the verge of dawn, / And on the mere the wailing died away” (ll.269-72). Bedivere, like the Lotos-eaters, Ulysses, and Enoch, all reflect Tennyson’s

own fear of and preoccupation with dispossession, a keen awareness of a past self that no longer exists.

Enoch Arden begins with a reckoning of the three principle characters who have been friends from childhood: “Three children of three houses, Annie Lee, / The prettiest little damsel in the port, / And Philip Ray, the miller’s only son, / And Enoch Arden, a rough sailor’s lad / Made orphan by a winter shipwreck” (ll. 11-15). The childhood rivalry for Annie’s love ends when they grow up and Annie chooses Enoch, so Philip “like a wounded life / Crept down into the hollows of the wood” (ll. 75-76). For seven years Enoch increases his financial security as he and Annie have three children, the youngest of which is sickly, but his fortunes plummet when an injury prevents him from providing for his family; hence when offered a position as a boatswain on a ship that is “China-bound” (l.122) Enoch accepts. Though Annie implores him not to leave, Enoch’s resolve remains firm; Annie clips a lock of hair from the sick infant, which Enoch wears around his neck until the end. Annie, grieving long over her husband’s absence, and perhaps even suicidal, is pressed by the well-meaning Philip to marry him. Uncertain, Annie partakes of a divination method that consists of randomly opening a page of the Bible for advice, and reads: “Under a palm tree,” (l. 403) of which she can make no sense. However, in a dream that immediately follows, she envisions Enoch “sitting on a height / Under a palm-tree, over him the sun” (ll. 407-408), which she in error interprets to mean he has died and is in heaven. She then weds Philip and the two have a child together.

The shipwrecked Enoch is rescued after ten years and returns to his native land (the same duration of Odysseus’ adventures and water journey after Troy). He is so altered no one recognizes him and he moves about the village freely—this resembles Odysseus’ return to Ithaca in disguise—and learns from the gossip Miriam Lane about his family. Yearning “to see her face again,” (l. 712), Enoch becomes a voyeur of an idyllic domestic scene, his two children

now teenagers, and Annie a new mother, in Philip's drawing room that radiates warmth, happiness and prosperity. This is a terrifying moment of dispossession: "Now when the dead man came to life beheld / His wife his wife no more, and saw the babe / Hers, yet not his, upon the father's knee, / And all the warmth, the peace, the happiness, / And his own children tall and beautiful, / And him, that other reigning in his place. . . [he] Stagger'd and shook, holding the branch, and feared / To send abroad a shrill and terrible cry, / Which in one moment, like the blast of doom, / Would shatter all the happiness of the hearth" (ll. 754-59, 763-66). Enoch, summoning all of his self-control to avoid this demonic shriek, calls on God's help, ultimately sacrificing his own happiness. He confides in Miriam, extracting the promise from her that she only tell of his return after his demise. A year later, Enoch dies of a broken heart, a death he longed for: "There came so loud a calling of the sea / That all the houses In the haven rang. / He woke, he rose, he spread his arms abroad, / Crying with a loud voice, 'A sail! A sail! / I am saved;' and so fell back and spoke no more" (ll. 904-908). Only then does Annie learn of Enoch's heroic sacrifice: "So past the strong heroic soul away, / And when they buried him the little port / Had seldom seen a costlier funeral" (ll. 909-11). Tennyson's verse is replete with final water journeys, real or metaphorical—here, Enoch imagines his salvation as the arrival of a ship. Interestingly, the story of *Enoch Arden* proves to be a very real dilemma that led to legal questions regarding a vanished spouse and an ensuing marriage, resulting in what is still known as the "Enoch Arden Law." [SL 6]

The tragic force of Enoch's catastrophic parting and delayed return, and his heroism at the conclusion of the poem helps to account for why it has been the recognizable source text for both popular music and at least nine films, with varying degrees of fidelity to Tennyson's narrative. [SL 7, 8] The first film adaptation was D.W. Griffith's in 1911, [SL 9] with another silent version, directed by Christy Cabanne appearing in 1915 which featured silent star Lilian

Gish as Annie. [SL 10] Both versions, straight adaptations that employed the poem's title, follow Tennyson in plot and sentiment, casting the three main characters of the love triangle—Enoch, Annie, and Philip—as noble and tragic. No one is to blame for the circumstances that contribute to the unhappy end of Enoch's well-meaning but catastrophic sea journey, and its unexpected consequences. His belated return to find his wife and family now belong to his best friend is one of the significant ways the poem departs from *Robinson Crusoe*; it is also what accounts for its enduring appeal. The artistry and theatricality of the poem recommends it for cinematic adaptation, illustrated by a few singularly powerful moments, but also by Enoch's terrible anguish of feeling dead to his past, with little hope of happiness, and his nearly super-human sacrifice and self-control. [SL 11, 12]

Other film versions of the Enoch Arden story ensued, especially during the 1940s and 50s, but most adapted the plot to suit the formula of either the romantic or screwball comedy, frequently also reversing the gender of the cast away, so that it is the wife who returns to find her husband in another relationship. The 1940 film, *Too Many Husbands*, recreates the love triangle in *Enoch Arden* when Vicky (Jean Arthur) marries her husband's business partner Henry Lowndes (Melvyn Douglas) after the apparent death of her spouse, Bill Cardew (Fred MacMurray) in a drowning accident. [SL 13] After only six months, Bill returns and the dilemma begins. [SL 14] A few months before its release, however, the studio was informed that the 1919 William Somerset Maugham play on which the film was based (*Home and Beauty*) was in violation of the Hollywood production code because of its "apparent lack of any respect for the sanctity of marriage; its farcical treatment of the subject of bigamy; and its very frank and detailed discussion of the unsavory subject of divorce by collusion." (TCM) Moreover, the studio filmed two endings, and solicited feedback from UCLA and USC coeds to determine which its largely female audiences might prefer, but settled on a "somewhat open-ended

conclusion”(TCM). In the end, a judge declares that Bill is indeed Vicky’s lawful husband, the two enjoy a second honeymoon in France, but Henry follows , and the film ends with the three on a dance floor, the issue unresolved. Vicky is in fact reluctant to make a choice, having relished being the object of adoration by her two husbands, this resulting from the change in genre and audience expectations. [SL 15]

A few months later, RKO released *My Favorite Wife*, introducing the role reversal in which the wife, not the husband, is the cast away who returns. [SL 16] After a seven-year absence, Nick Arden (Cary Grant) has his missing wife Ellen (Irene Dunne) declared dead so he may marry a new love, Bianca (Gail Patrick). Ellen returns on the eve of Nick’s honeymoon and insists he tell Bianca, something he lacks courage to do, even though guilt makes it so he cannot consummate his second marriage. A complication occurs when Nick discovers Ellen has been marooned with another man, Steve Burkett (Randolph Scott) and that, on the island, they referred to each other as “Adam” and “Eve.” [SL 17] Jealous Nick demands to meet the man, and Ellen substitutes the real Steve for an unattractive shoe salesman, but in the end, the same judge who had declared Ellen dead and married Nick to Bianca annuls the second marriage, and Ellen and Nick are reunited. A popular formula, this was remade in 1963 as *Move Over, Darling*, starring James Garner, Doris Day, Polly Bergen, and Chuck Connors. Comic treatments of the Enoch story may well have been motivated in part by the problem of a missing spouse, to which audiences in war time would have been especially sensitive. In addition, the rise of what Stanley Cavell named the “remarriage comedy,” a popular subgenre of the romantic comedy that enabled films to feature risqué material without violating the Hollywood Production Code (1934-1968) that prohibited any positive portrayal of adultery or illicit sex, was probably also a contributing factor to the rash of comic adaptations of Tennyson’s foundational poem (*Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* 1981).

The return to a serious dramatic adaptation of Tennyson's poem is best represented in the 2000 film, *Cast Away*, which understands that the tragic circumstances that inform the titular character's life and final choice in the poem is the source of its enduring cognitive power and aesthetic appeal, as early filmmakers had clearly discerned. Tom Hanks stars as Chuck Noland, a FedEx systems analyst (obsessed with delivering packages on time) who disappears in a plane crash over the Pacific and is presumed dead. Kept alive through his own resourcefulness, Chuck also engineers his own rescue, and returns to his former life after a four-year absence. *Cast Away* features the love triangle, which lends the poignancy to its last act, but avoids the complication of invoking the Enoch Arden Law, as he and his love interest, Kelly Frears, (Helen Hunt) are not yet married when he vanishes. When he returns, the contemporary setting makes it impossible for him to do so *incognito* as had Enoch. Chuck soon learns his family and friends, seeking closure, declared him dead and conducted a funeral for him; he also discovers that Kelly has married his dentist, Jerry Lovett (Chris North) with whom she has a child; hence a love triangle similar to that in Enoch Arden. [SL 18] The poignant scene between Chuck and Kelly (one that does not occur in Tennyson's poem) serves to renew their love for each other, an important and necessary moment for Chuck to resume his life. Time has passed him by; his chance for a future with Kelly—despite their mutual and enduring love—is gone, and he knows he must depart so as to not destroy her family. Affirming their love seems to give him the resolve to do this, sacrificing his own happiness for hers. [SL 19] He returns the watch she had given him, a family heirloom, a token of her that had kept him going when he was missing, like Enoch's necklace with the lock of his sick child's hair, and departs in his vehicle Kelly had preserved.

Three items had provided Chuck the fortitude and hope to survive—the aforementioned watch (Kelly's token), a Wilson soccer ball that soon became Chuck's alter ego (and which floats away when he is on his rescue voyage), and an undelivered package with a pair of angel

wings etched on it, a symbol of hope. Leaving Kelly, the film concludes with his decision to return the package to its sender. When he arrives at the address, no one is home, so he leaves it with a note: “This package saved my life. Thank you. Chuck Noland.” [SL 20] Once he departs this rural Texas address, Chuck hesitates at a crossroads, when a woman in a pickup pulls up, observing that he “looks lost.” After reciting where each road will take him, she departs and he sees the wings on her truck, showing this was the same Bettina Peterson (Lari White) to whom he has just returned the package. [SL 21] Chuck’s fate is thus more hopeful than Enoch’s and is left open, but the disconnectedness from his prior life— despite the somewhat positive ending— and the painful knowledge of what he has lost, provides the same moving heroism with which Tennyson’s *Enoch Arden* concludes.

Fellow Victorian, Thomas Hardy, once confessed: “For me, if there is any way of getting a melancholy satisfaction out of life it lies in dying, so to speak, before one is out of the flesh . . . when I enter a room to pay a simple morning call I have unconsciously the habit of regarding the scene as if I were a spectre not solid enough to influence my environment” (*The Life of Thomas Hardy* 209-210). This strange imaginative dispossession also pervades Tennyson’s poetry, as this paper has attempted to show. Hardy’s sentiment, and those of other Victorians (Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* comes to mind) shows that Tennyson’s is both individual (the loss of Arthur Hallam) and cultural (a rapid severing of the past), but why does its appeal continue, as *Cast Away*, for instance, clearly demonstrates? Tennyson displayed the uncanny ability of “looking before and after,” (*Hamlet* IV.iv.37), with a mature self-awareness that scrutinized a dispossessed, younger version of himself. It is this acute sensibility of both the continuity of and break with the past that lends a modern tone to his verse.