

Tennyson's Monkey: Squeaky Protestations in "St Simeon Stylites"

Naomichi Tashiro (田代 尚路)

Tennyson's mother had a pet monkey at her house in Cheltenham. One day in 1848, on visiting her, the poet found the primate sitting on a pole in the garden. Much amused by the sight, he called it St Simeon Stylites; the same as a protagonist-speaker of a Tennysonian poem that bears his name as title (Martin 322). He is a so-called pillar-hermit whose vocation is to undertake a life of penance on the summit of a column that rises "forty cubits from the soil" (90). Tennyson might have had no such intention, but the episode, that the poet deliberately took the monkey for the monk, provides powerful commentary on "St Simeon Stylites". The interchangeability of the two indicates that the monk's animality, rather than spirituality, is focused on the poem.

Simeon's interiority, as we find in the poem, is a battlefield of the mind and the body. On the one hand, he hopes that the painful mortification will eventually lead him to sainthood. It reflects his ascetic conviction that the mind must control the body. On the other hand, he is apprehensive that his act of penance would end "all in vain" (10). Fear compels him to create a vision in which diabolical "evil ones" (96) disturb his expiatory acts; the outrageous torment makes the body fight back against the mind. His vacillating psychology between hope and scepticism is not settled down, but the body's counter-attack against the mind becomes a driving force of Simeon's spectacular speech.

Tennyson made intensive investigations into conflicting emotions in poems written in and around 1833. The death of two figures might have influenced the poet's orientation. The loss of his father George in 1831, who had been suffering from fits of epilepsy, gave him comfort and fear simultaneously; comfort of having been released from the father's despotism and fear that the hereditary disease would eventually damage his own sanity as well. On the other hand, the sudden death of his best friend Arthur Hallam in 1833 intensified his hope and doubt on the afterlife. While expecting to see his friend in the next life, the poet could not eliminate the fear that the reunion would not be possible¹. These opposing emotions that occupied the poet's mind would culminate and be synthesized in *In Memoriam*, which, in Tennyson's own words, "begins with death and ends in promise of new life" (Page 96). However, he did not always believe that the vacillation would be settled in the end. In the case of "St Simeon Stylites", there is no reconciliation of the two sides. Obviously, it is to do with a poetic form that Tennyson invented and first employed in the poem; namely, dramatic monologue².

The structure of dramatic monologue only brings an unfulfilling narrative closure. The genre generally focuses on its protagonist-speaker's desire to make something happen, but his/her speech ends before it actually occurs and neither he/she nor reader can witness its outcome. As a single perspective of protagonist-speaker presides over the entire poem, his/her speech can only

spotlight the present circumstance; that is to say, unfulfilling *now* that his/her aspiration has been left unsatisfied. In William Fredeman's ingenious expression, such an ending can be named "the penultimate moment" (72). In "St Simeon Stylites", the monk craves to go to heaven, but the poem ends precisely at this point. The epithet of "saint" in the title-words suggest that the poem has its source in hagiography and his wish for sainthood may be fulfilled, but the monk's mad pursuit prevents us from accepting the consequence openhandedly. Likewise, the termination of his life seems to be imminent—he prophesies that he will "die to-night,/ A quarter before twelve" (217-18)—but it is not possible to know if his prophecy will be realised³.

In other types of narrative poetry, a story's closure is more defined than that of dramatic monologue. The limited perspective of the protagonist, if he/she has a personal voice at all, is often supplemented by other characters' viewpoints and/or the narrative voice. Tennyson composed some narrative poems contemporaneously as "St Simeon Stylites" and in them showed the story's consequence in a multilayered structure. In the 1833 version of "The Lady of Shalott", for instance, the narrator mentions the Lady's death and then goes on to say that the boat that carries her corpse was floating into Camelot. People noticed her name written "below the stern" (170) and read the following words inscribed on a parchment lying on her corpse:

*'The web was woven curiously
The charm is broken utterly,
Draw near and fear not—this is I,
The Lady of Shalott'* (177-80)

She delivers her written voice to the inhabitants of Camelot. The Lady, who led a solitary life in "the silent isle" (17), becomes eerily communicative after death. Like a testament, the voice outlives its holder and reveals her will to the receiver of the message; in this case, the receivers are those who she has never met. Like Simeon, the Lady cannot know how the message would be treated, but at least her wish to be known and remembered is realised. The narrative voice administers the Lady's will. Such a perspective that goes beyond the speaker's eyes cannot be seen in dramatic monologues where, like "St Simeon Stylites", the poem's ending comes simultaneously as the end of the protagonist-speaker's speech.

It can be said that the uncertainty about narrative closure in dramatic monologue creates extremely aggrieved feelings in the protagonist-speaker's mind. In Simeon's case, it intensifies his desire to go to heaven all the more for his inability to witness his future state. At the same time, the open-endedness of the poem suggests that Simeon's act of self-punishment has no clear end/aim outside itself. He tells that he endures pain for the sake of sainthood, but his utterance can be incongruent with his objective. Like a spontaneous outcry, Simeon's speech is often uttered aimlessly. In fact, it even goes against his aim as the exhibitionist language simply debases his virtue of humility and seems to keep him out heaven. The enumeration of his discomforts '[i]n hungers and in thirsts, fevers and cold,/ In coughs, aches, stitches, ulcerous throes and cramps' (12-13) not only informs us of his bad health, but demonstrates that the monk's pains are so severe that it is inevitable for him to scream.

The monk knows the presence of spontaneous reaction that comes out from himself and

disturb his high, spiritual aim. Recalling his past life, for example, Simeon tells us that his act of penance became known to “brethren” in spite of his intention to keep silent about it:

In the white convent down the valley there,
For many weeks about my loins I wore
The rope that haled the buckets from the well
Twisted as tight as I could knot the noose;
And spake not of it to a single soul,
Until the ulcer, eating through my skin,
Betrayed my secret penance, so that all
My brethren marvelled greatly. (61-8)

The convent’s colour and location have symbolic meanings; he was innocent (“white”) from ostentatious acts of self-exposure and had humility (derived from a Latin word *humus*, a ground) enough to live “down the valley”. Still not being an exhibitionist, he never talked about the “secret penance” to his fellow monks. Nonetheless, the “ulcer, eating through [his] skin” “[b]etrayed” his intention and made it known to them.

Simeon is a man of the column. His epithet, Stylites, is from a Greek word *στυλος*, pillar. Like the ulcer, the column—his main attribute—depicts his latent psychology; it displays much more about the monk than any of his purposeful explanations and self-introductions⁴. It is, as he says, a “sign betwixt the meadow and the cloud” (14). Its intermediate position, not high enough to reach heaven but still possessing a commanding view over people, is an accurate description of his sentiment. Prior to this expression, he had stated that he was “[u]nfit for earth, unfit for heaven” (3), a similar recognition of in-betweenness. The contrast of “earth” and “heaven” corresponds with that of “meadow” and “cloud”, but the latter group is more concrete in image, and abundant in meanings and double-meanings. The conceptual terms of “earth” and “heaven” are supplemented by the visual images created by “meadow” and “cloud”. The “meadow”, with its pleasant and soft reminiscences, illustrates his nostalgic attachment to an ordinary life that he abandoned for the sake of faith. At the same time, it suggests that he is a self-appointed shepherd of the lamb-like flock of people gathering about the “meadow”. The “cloud”, on the other hand, represents the difficulty in grasping the providence of God. It also indicates a “cloud” or suspicion about his salvation that lingers in his mind. Fredeman even contends that the monk becomes the column itself (77). Indeed, the putrescent thighs (“my thighs are rotted with the dew” (40)) and petrification of his spine (“my stiff spine” (42)) indicate that his body is now turning into a corpse, an inanimate object like the column itself.

Nevertheless, the column is not just a device of prosopopoeia that gives voice to his latent psychology; it is also a spot that torments ruthlessly his flesh and bones. So, it can be said that the column is not a symbol of Simeon’s whole person, but of the spiritual force that brutally represses his body. As he is sitting on the top of the “sign betwixt the meadow and the cloud”, it seems that he is now a consisting part of the surrounding landscape. However, unlike Romantic nature poems in which the speaker becomes harmonious with nature and healthy in body and spirit, he has been exposed to a rough climate that causes physical disorders⁵. All these pains

represents the fact that, even though Simeon wants to die in the process of prolonged suicide, his body is fighting back against the deadly idea that is trying to render him a senseless thing.

Herbert Tucker states that a “desire to be a saint, to have had oneself sanctified, is a desire, in short; to be dead” (129). This desire may be resulted from an internalization of other’s desire. There is a triangular circuit of communication between Simeon, God and the crowd in this poem. On hearing the crowd’s unanimous voice saying “St Simeon Stylites!” (145) and “Behold a saint!” (151), he understands himself to be a saint at least in their view and desires himself to be so in a true sense before the God. It also demonstrates that, for these people, Simeon is nothing more than a statue-like object of veneration to which they “bring ... offerings of fruit and flowers” (126); but what is the use of flowers for the hungry monk?

His persisting life, even though its end is near, still struggles to continue itself. The body’s desire to preserve itself can be clearly seen in the following scene:

Devils plucked my sleeve,
Abaddon and Asmodeus caught at me.
I smote them with the cross; they swarmed again.
In bed like monstrous apes they crushed my chest:
They flapped my light out as I read: I saw
Their faces grow between me and my book;
With colt-like whinny and with hoggish whine
They burst my prayer. Yet, this way was left,
And by this way I ’scaped them. Mortify
Your flesh, like me, with scourges and with thorns;
Smite, shrink not, spare not. (168-78)

Simeon gives the mask of a devil to his instinctive desire to preserve himself and announces that these devils disturb his penitentiary acts. They are not coming from outside, but from within. His further acts of mortification in response to the devils’ call testify to their carnal origin. They look like sexually charged succubi as they pursue in ‘bed like monstrous apes’. They also try to make physical contact with the monk—“plucked [his] sleeve” and “crushed [his] chest”—as if they reminded him of the significance of the body that he always suppresses. Their disturbing assault is, indeed, his body’s counter-attack against the suicidal mortification.

Tennyson had written about similar conflicting emotions that run in human psychology even before composing “St Simeon Stylites”. In “The Two Voices”, for instance, “the silent voice” (22) recommends the speaker to commit suicide and the two exchange a discussion as to pros and cons of the idea. These voices, like Simeon’s, represent two opposing ideas that are inherent in the speaker’s sentiment. Still, there are two differences in the treatment of psychology. Firstly, while the devils in “St Simeon Stylites” advocates his sensual desire to preserve himself, “the silent voice” in “The Two Voices” encourages the speaker to commit suicide and thus tries to destroy his life. Secondly, the devils are not given human faces whereas the voice that supports suicide is a personification of the speaker’s soul. Simeon’s devils with their uncanny and animal-like characteristics (they are “colt-like”, “hoggish”, “ape”-faced devils) take possession of

Simeon's mind with their gripping, diehard force⁶. The monk, who mainly follows what the mind tells him, intermittently becomes a mouthpiece of his body and utters protestations in support of the latter with his spontaneous, squeaky outcry. Simeon is simian at this point.

Notes

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* All the quotations of Tennyson's poems are from Christopher Ricks, ed., *The Poems of Tennyson*, in 3 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

¹ For further details of two deaths, see Tennyson's biography by Robert Bernard Martin. Arthur Hallam's death is usually given more attention in studies of Tennyson's poems published, like "St Simeon Stylites", in 1842, but in arguing the poem, we should note that it was written just before Hallam's death and Simeon's hysteric speech might have influenced by George Tennyson's delirious state.

² As Glennis Byron notes, "Tennyson invented [dramatic monologue] first, reading 'Saint Simeon Stylites' to a group of friends in 1833 (published 1842)" though "Browning was the first to publish, with 'Porphyria's Lover' and 'Johannes Agricola in Meditation' appearing in the *Monthly Repository* in 1836" (32-33). In a larger perspective, however, the genre bears a long tradition of "complaints, the epistle and the humorous colloquial monologue" (Sinfield 42); it was not created *ex nihilo*.

³ Christopher Ricks suggests that "'A quarter before twelve' is itself a fine epitome of the penultimate moment" (111).

⁴ It is, in fact, one of the chief characteristics of dramatic monologue. M. H. Abrams maintains that the "main principle controlling the poet's choice and organization of what the lyric speaker says is to reveal to the reader, in a way that enhances its interest, the speaker's temperament and character" (48).

⁵ Referring to Wordsworthian poems, H. M. McLuhan notes "the notion of [the] pre-established harmony between the individual mind and the external world is the key to the eighteenth-century passion for landscape" (76). He goes on to say that Tennyson's poems, unlike those by Wordsworth, reflect "the re-awakening of the individual ego after the self-forgetful plunge into landscape that produced both the social optimism and the personal melancholy" (80). In my view, Simeon's body and speech that go against the context (landscape as well as religious context) reflect, what McLuhan says, his "personal melancholy" if not "social optimism".

⁶ In *In Memoriam*, the menagerie-like emotion is denied for the sake of the advancement of spiritual values. In section CXVIII, for instance, the speaker expresses "Move upward, working out the beast / And let the ape and tiger die" (27-28).

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