IDIOMS FROM 19th CENTURY ENGLISH POETRY

Ildikó Gy. ZOLTÁN[1]

Abstract

The growing popularity of poems, aided by the spread of literacy and of the printed word, meant that some of these literary works became widely known and frequently cited. Some of their lines and phrases began an independent life at a certain point and have since then been used as idioms both in spoken and in written language. The present paper traces a handful of these to their origins in 19th century English poems in order to better understand how they acquired their present meaning as idioms.

Keywords: idiom, poetry, language

The words 'poet', 'poem', 'poetry' were all adopted into Middle English during the 13th century via Latin equivalents of the original Greek words formed from the stem of *poieîn*, to make, to create, to compose. This kind of 'creation', this 'poetry-making' is an art form whose beginnings are lost in the mists of time, but it is definitely much more ancient than writing: it was the chant surrounding the cradle of humankind from those stages of evolution where language itself originated. The earliest forms of 'poetry' were spoken, intoned or chanted to accompany and aid the rhythm of certain collective work processes, to ensure the success of the hunt, to bring good harvest, to heal the sick, to keep away evil spirits or invoke good ones, or to entreat the supernatural powers that might be. In prehistoric and ancient societies oral transmission was the only way to hand down genealogies, the stories of significant events (history), myths and even laws – the poetic form aided memorisation and facilitated transmission from one generation to the next.

Since then, with the advent of writing, the spread of literacy and of the printed word, poetry has become not only more structured and varied, but also ever more popular. This popularity of poetical works made it possible for some of their lines and phrases (that were considered eminently fit to convey the essence of a situation, render emotions or describe certain human traits) to enter the main flow of language as idioms in their own right. A handful of them are here traced back to their respective sources in 19th century English poetry and presented in their original context in order to better understand how they acquired their present meaning as idioms.

[1] Teaching Assistant, "Petru Maior" University of Târgu-Mureş

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the child is father of the man = the character, personal traits, attitudes and views of a fully grown person are all determined by childhood influences; childhood is the beginning of adulthood

"My heart leaps up when I behold / A rainbow in the sky: / So was it when my life began; / So is it now I am a man; / So be it when I shall grow old, / Or let me die! / *The Child is father of the Man*; / And I could wish my days to be / Bound each to each by natural piety."

'My Heart Leaps Up'/ 'The Rainbow' was written by William Wordsworth in 1802 and published five years later in *Poems, in Two Volumes*. It is a short poem simple in structure and language. The sight of a rainbow gives the author the same pleasure and joy he felt as a child; and he hopes to keep and cherish until the end of his days this unbroken connection with nature's and life's simple things as well as with his 'inner child'.

a Roman holiday = an event providing entertainment, pleasure, satisfaction derived from watching the suffering or degradation of others; advantage or profit gained at the expense of someone else's affliction or discomfort

"He reck'd not of the life he lost nor prize, / But where his rude hut by the Danube lay, / There were his young barbarians all at play, / There was their Dacian mother – he, their sire, / Butcher'd to make *a Roman holiday* – / All this rush'd with his blood – Shall he expire / And unavenged? – Arise! ye Goths, and glut your ire!"

The lines are from the fourth and last part of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, a lengthy narrative poem by George Gordon Noel, Lord Byron, describing the experiences and reflections of a disillusioned young man travelling in foreign lands looking for distraction. ('Childe' is a medieval term for a young man seeking a knighthood.) When his journeys take him to 'the Eternal City' he contemplates the ruins of a once great civilisation and recalls that a gladiator's death, butchered in the arena in order to provide entertainment for the populace, was a regular occurrence in ancient Rome, where these 'games' also meant a day off for the citizens.

red in tooth and claw = involving violent conflict, savage opposition or merciless competition

Alfred, Lord Tennyson wrote *In Memoriam A.H.H.* after his beloved friend and closest confidante (also his sister's fiancé) Arthur Henry Hallam died suddenly of a stroke at the age of 22. Its original title was *The Way of the Soul* in the series of short poems composed over the course of seventeen years; these were eventually woven together and published as a single poem in 1850. The elegy is a requiem for a lost loved one, but besides the feelings of grief and loss it also meditates upon philosophical problems that deeply preoccupied Victorian society, mainly those concerning the conflict between religion and science, and the question of immortality. The first controversial ideas of early evolutionary theories had already appeared in several scientific works by the middle of the 19th century (preparing the ground for Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859);

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and Tennyson struggled almost desperately to reconcile his genuine faith with these new ideas of natural history. In Canto LV, Nature is described as "So careful of the type ... , / So careless of the single life", but in the next Canto "She cries, 'A thousand types are gone: / I care for nothing, all shall go." The line which gave the idiom is from the same place and has been interpreted by some as a reference to the process of natural selection.
"And he, shall he, // Man, her last work, (...) // Who trusted God was love indeed / And love Creation's final law – / Tho' Nature, *red in tooth and claw* / With ravine, shriek'd against his creed – / Who loved, who suffer'd countless ills, / Who battled for the True, the Just, / Be blown about the desert dust, / Or seal'd within the iron hills?"

theirs/ ours/ yours/ mine not to reason why = one has no right to question or criticise an order (issued by a superior), a situation, or a system – even if one does not understand it or it seems unreasonable
"'Forward, the Light Brigade!' / Was there a man dismay'd? / Not tho' the soldiers knew / Some one had blunder'd: / Theirs not to make reply, / *Theirs not to reason why*, / Theirs but to do and die: / Into the valley of Death / Rode the six hundred."
Tennyson's evocative poem: *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1854), was published six weeks after the event itself, praising the bravery and valour (and unquestioning obedience) of the Brigade but mourning the futility of the heavy losses incurred during the charge.
The Crimean War (1853-56) pitted the allied forces of the British, French, Ottoman Empires and the Kingdom of Sardinia against the Russian Empire. The openly declared aim was to take control of the holy places of Jerusalem, but in fact territories of the declining Ottoman Empire were contested, the Crimean peninsula being of vital strategic importance to the commerce and politics of the Black Sea area. In the second year of the war the Battle of Balaklava was fought for the Russian fortress and port of Sevastopol. During the Allied siege, two British units in particular distinguished themselves: the red-coated 93th Sutherland Highlanders steadfastly resisted the repeated attacks of larger Russian forces – giving rise to the expression *'thin red line'*, originally a thinly spread unit of infantry men holding firm against attack, today referring to any small group of courageous people defending a principle.
The heaviest British losses, however, were the result of the near suicidal charge of the Light Cavalry Brigade into what became known as the Valley of Death, one of the most tragic events in British military history, immortalised in Tennyson's poem. The 'blunder' which sent more than six hundred men into this action was a miscommunication, a confusion about a highly ambiguous order that meant one thing to Fitzroy James Henry Somerset, Lord Raglan, commander of the British forces, but another thing to James Thomas Brudnell, Earl of Cardigan and leader of the Light Brigade. Lord Raglan's order to "charge the guns!" was intended to send the Light Brigade to attack and scatter an isolated retreating Russian battery over a slight rise in the valley and in plain sight from his vantage point, an action well suited to such a military unit. However, the only 'guns' visible to the leader of the sable-armed Light Brigade were those of the well-prepared

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Russian battalion at the far end of the valley. The command seemed utter madness, but they dutifully launched the frontal assault nevertheless, riding headlong at the gunners, under devastating direct fire that killed or wounded two-thirds of their strength – a glorious but wasted sacrifice of good men and horses.

a rift in the lute = a small fault in a relationship, bond, arrangement, etc., that betokens the beginning of disharmony; the first sign of incipient dissension; a breach that might in time bring about complete ruin or failure

"In Love, if Love be Love, if Love be ours, / Faith and unfaith can ne'er be equal powers: / Unfaith in aught is want of faith in all. / It is the little *rift within the lute*, / That by and by will make the music mute, / And ever widening slowly silence all."

The lines are from *Merlin and Vivien*, number six in the cycle of twelve narrative poems entitled *Idylls of the King* that Tennyson published between 1859 and 1885. The collection is a romantic rendering of the Arthurian legend and was dedicated to the memory of Prince Albert. Approached as a series of moralising allegories, it can also be interpreted as symbolising the social problems and moral decay undermining the ideal of the perfect British Empire, the slow process of disintegration which Tennyson observed with so much concern in mid-Victorian England. Some of the most memorable passages, however, are his lyrical descriptions of background settings, masterly picturesque portrayals of scenes from nature.

roses, (roses,) all the way = triumphant progress; pleasant or happy; successful, without difficulties or problems

"It was *roses, roses, all the way*, / With myrtle mixed in my path like mad: / The house-roofs seemed to heave and sway, / The church-spires flamed, such flags they had, / A year ago on this very day."

Robert Browning's *The Patriot – An Old Story*, published in 1855, is a dramatic monologue of a man who remembers how he was welcomed and celebrated as a hero a year ago, but is now being led along the same streets towards the scaffold as a convicted criminal (traitor?) in order to be executed. Then he was cheered and showered with flowers, this time it is the occasional stone they throw at him as he walks towards his death. In the best tradition of ballads, although he says "Nought man can do, have I left undone" and mentions a "a year's misdeeds", the intriguing obscurity is not dispelled and the reader is left to wonder what might have happened during the course of a year that brought about such a sea change in the attitude of these people and the fortunes of the hero.

movers and shakers = dynamic, energetic people at the centre of events who initiate change; powerful, influential people in important organisations who can make things happen

Originally, however, when he wrote his *Ode* (published in 1874, in a collection entitled *Music and Moonlight*) the author, Arthur William Edgar O'Shaughnessy, imagined that

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poets – always "a little apart from" other mortals – would play this role in the world: "We are the music makers, / And we are the dreamers of dreams, / Wandering by lone sea-breakers, / And sitting by desolate streams; – / World-losers and world-forsakers, / On whom the pale moon gleams: / Yet we are the *movers and shakers* / Of the world for ever, it seems."

bloody, but unbowed = having been wounded in body or spirit during a struggle, yet undefeated and proud of what one has achieved – despite the suffering, difficulties, or losses

be the captain of one's soul = to be in control of one's own destiny or future

"Out of the night that covers me, / Black as the pit from pole to pole, / I thank whatever gods may be / For my unconquerable soul. / In the fell clutch of circumstance / I have not winced nor cried aloud. / Under the bludgeonings of chance / *My head is bloody, but unbowed.* /

Beyond this place of wrath and tears / Looms but the Horror of the shade / And yet the menace of the years / Finds and shall find me unafraid. / It matters not how strait the gate, / How charged with punishment the scroll, / I am the master of my fate: / *I am the captain of my soul.*"

William Earnest Henley's *Invictus* (Latin for 'undefeated'), or *Out of the Night that Covers Me* was first published in 1875, in *Book of Verses*. From the age of 12, Henley had been afflicted with crippling tuberculosis of the bone and at 25 his most severely infected foot had to be amputated at the knee. He wrote the poem from his hospital bed as the response of a strong-willed person to a challenging infirmity and managed not only to keep his other leg intact but also to lead an active, vigorous life until his death in 1903. In spite of the relative simplicity of the poem's structure, however, its open-endedness does allow several other interpretations and in any of them the message is just as powerful.

days of wine and roses = days of pleasure and happiness

"They are not long, the weeping and the laughter, / Love and desire and hate: / I think they have no portion in us after / We pass the gate. / They are not long, the *days of wine and roses*: / Out of a misty dream / Our path emerges for a while, then closes / Within a dream."

The title of Ernest Christopher Dowson's poem from 1896: *Vitae Summa Brevis (Spem Nos Vetat Incohare Longam)* is a quote from *Odes* by Horace and translates into "The brief sum of life forbids us the hope of enduring long" or "The brevity of life prevents us from entertaining distant hopes", which about sums up the message: the whole range of human emotions, from sorrow to joy, from love to hate, however intense, is ephemeral and soon left behind as a dream. This proved only too true for the poet himself. His tuberculosis, in combination with an excessively decadent lifestyle and heavy drinking, led to his early death at the age of 32.

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gone with the wind = evanescent; gone completely; disappeared without a trace

"I have forgot much, Cynara! *gone with the wind*, / Flung roses, roses riotously with the throng, / Dancing, to put thy pale, lost lilies out of mind; / But I was desolate and sick of an old passion, / Yea, all the time, because the dance was long: / I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion."

In the same year E. C. Dowson also wrote *Cynara*, whose full title, *Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae* is another line taken from Horace's *Odes* and translates as "I am not as I was under the reign of good Cinara." The lost love, whose obsessively returning image he is unable to forget despite his best efforts to drown his sorrow in the pleasures of the flesh and drinking, is supposed to have been 11-year-old Adelaide 'Missie' Foltinowicz, who he fell in love with at the age of 23 and courted passionately, but fruitlessly.

In the now-famous line of this poem Margaret Mitchell confessed to have found the "far away, faintly sad sound" she had been looking for and eventually decided to call her novel about the American Civil War (1936) by that title.

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