

# Ulysses in Space: Ray Bradbury’s “Rocket Man” as a Tennysonian Traveler

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“To be happy at home is the ultimate result of all ambition.”

- Samuel Johnson

## Introduction: An Unlikely Confluence

At first glance, the poet laureate of Victorian England, Alfred Tennyson and the American “poet of pulp,” Ray Bradbury do not seem to invite comparison. Bradbury wrote little about Arthurian lore, and Tennyson, so far as anyone knows, never thought much about space travel. And yet, upon close inspection, it becomes apparent that two of their works—Tennyson’s poem “Ulysses” (1842) and Bradbury’s short story “The Rocket Man” (1951) share several striking similarities. Both works feature a restless traveler who finds his home life and domestic duties unbearably dull and sets out on one final adventure. They each leave behind a wife, who suffers greatly as she wonders if he is dead or alive. And both entrust their domestic duties to their sons, and explicitly forbid them from following in their father’s footsteps.

This essay is segmented into five parts. The first section explores the chief literary predecessor of the Rocket Man, the seafaring hero Ulysses, who proceeds from the pen of Homer in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and is then taken up by Dante in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The second section draws comparisons between the home life of Ulysses and the Rocket Man, examining the roots of their discontent and their desire for adventure as a means of personal salvation. The third part explores

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the metaphor of space-as-sea, particularly in relation to the identities of both Ulysses and the Rocket Man, each of whom sees the dark expanse as an integral part of themselves. The fourth section examines the intersections between Ulysses' family—Penelope and Telemachus—and their Bradburian counterparts, Lily and Doug. The final section investigates how both men perceive death as the natural conclusion of their travels—whether through sea or space. Embracing death, in essence, is to embrace their authentic selves. The conclusion presents some thoughts on the Rocket Man as an enduring figure in popular culture, by briefly examining how he has been reinvented.

### 1. The Rocket Man's Literary Lineage

It is Ulysses (Latin for Odysseus) who came up with the idea to pack a wooden horse full of soldiers and offer it as a "gift" to the opposing Trojans. They fell for it. With victory secure, Ulysses and his crew set sail for their home in Ithaca. Unfortunately, the sea god Poseidon curses the voyage by sending an array of obstacles in his path—amnesia-inducing lotus plants, a man-eating cyclops, seductive sirens, and a six-headed Scylla. Ulysses takes ten years to make it home. Throughout his odyssey, Ulysses says that his home and family were never far from his mind: "I long—I pine, all my days," he wails, "to travel home and see the dawn of my return."<sup>1</sup> And yet, homesick as he is, Ulysses is occasionally overcome by another obsession. The man is a committed thrill-seeker. Directly following the heartfelt speech quoted above, he shakes his fist at the sky and dares the gods to stir up more trouble:

And if a god will wreck me yet again on the wine-dark sea,  
I can bear that too, with a spirit tempered to endure.  
Much have I suffered, labored long and hard by now  
in the waves and wars. Add this to the total—  
bring the trial on!<sup>2</sup>

It is clear from this passage that while Ulysses wants to get home, he is not opposed to taking a few exciting detours along the way. He insists, for example, that he hears the legendary sirens' song, even as he is warned that their seductive voices erase memories of home. And let us not forget that he spent an entire year lolling in the arms of the goddess Circe until his men grew impatient and finally persuaded him to lift anchor and leave. Yes, Ulysses wants to get home to his family, but he occasionally takes the scenic route.

Subsequent writers did not view Ulysses with the same admiration as Homer. Sophocles presented him as a self-serving opportunist and Virgil does not hesitate to call him a liar. One of Ulysses' most famous appearances takes place in the 26<sup>th</sup> Canto of Dante's *Inferno*. Here, he is chained up in the eighth circle of hell to answer for the crime of deception. But Ulysses has less to say about his penchant for trickery than he does about his glory days as dauntless seafarer. Dante places a long speech in Ulysses' mouth in which he declares that neither his love for his son, nor even for Penelope can

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<sup>1</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1996), 159.

<sup>2</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, 159.

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overcome the fervor that was mine  
To gain experience of the world  
And learn about man's vices and his worth."<sup>3</sup>

In Dante's version, Ulysses barely has time to unpack before he gathers his men together and sets off again. This time he ventures into the forbidden region where "no one lives,"<sup>4</sup> sailing past the Pillars of Hercules and witnessing a majestic vault of stars yet unseen by human eyes. But God is displeased by his trespass and stirs up a whirlpool that swallows his vessel and crew, unceremoniously putting an end to the world's most celebrated mythopoeic explorer.

Tennyson follows Dante's lead. The opening lines of "Ulysses" place the hero back in Ithaca many years after his return. Although he has reunited with his wife and son, he is unhappy. He finds domestic duties absurd, his subjects a bore, and he worries that more days lie behind him than ahead. Refusing to accept his fate as sedentary sovereign, Ulysses declares:

'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.  
Push off, and sitting well in order smite  
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds  
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths  
Of all the western stars, until I die  
[...]  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.<sup>5</sup>

The rest of the poem is a monologue in which Ulysses boasts about his heroic exploits, recalls the exotic places he has visited, and urges his former companions to suit up for one last adventure. Typically, "Ulysses" has been described as an anthem to masculinity, a salute to the never-say-die action hero who has dashed across stage, screen, and page adaptations ever since.<sup>6</sup> Supporters of this view tend to celebrate the lusty lines about discovery and perseverance, and overlook the fact that for all his chest-beating bravado, Ulysses is boasting about being a derelict ruler, an unfaithful husband, and a dead-beat dad.

Given these details, some critics are reluctant to see "Ulysses" as a hymn to heroism. The haughty language seems overstated, almost like parody. The stanza quoted above seems to mock the quiet acceptance of death found in Shakespeare's famous Sonnet 73:

In me thou see'st the twilight of such day  
As after sunset fadeth in the west [...]<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Dante, *Inferno*, trans. Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander (New York: Random House, 2003), lines 97-99.

<sup>4</sup> Dante, *Inferno*, 98.

<sup>5</sup> Tennyson, "Ulysses," *Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Jerome Hamilton Buckley (Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Co, 1958), 66.

<sup>6</sup> There are far too many critical essays on "Ulysses" to list here. For an excellent digest on much of the available scholarship I suggest *Critical Essays on the Poetry of Tennyson* ed. John Killham (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1960).

<sup>7</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co, 1998), 73.

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T.S. Eliot called “Ulysses” a “perfect poem,” but he does not say what he found so flawless.<sup>8</sup> There is some suggestion that a few lines in his “Gerontion”—“I am an old man, / A dull head among windy places”—are intended as a playful swipe at Tennyson’s boastful verse.<sup>9</sup> The first major scholarly challenge to the conventional reading was issued by Paull F. Baum in 1948. Baum does not see “Ulysses” as a defiant blast “against the dying of the light” (to borrow Dylan Thomas’ phrase). Instead, he viewed the poem as an elegy for a Byronic hero who “raises his voice so that he might quiet his conscience.”<sup>10</sup> By the early 1950s, just as Ray Bradbury was publishing *The Illustrated Man*, Baum’s explanation had become the leading view among scholars. As we shall see, Baum’s “ironic interpretation” is key to understanding “The Rocket Man” as a story in conversation with Tennyson’s “Ulysses.”

What can we say of Bradbury’s literary influences? Despite his lack of formal education, he read extensively. One can easily lose count of the number of literary influences that he named as well as those identified by others. In *Zen in the Art of Writing* he implores aspiring writers to read deeply and widely.<sup>11</sup> His recommendations range from the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society to the poetry of William Carlos Williams. “Ideas lie everywhere,” he states. Indeed, and they pop up sometimes unexpectedly throughout his writing. In *Dandelion Wine* alone, critics have discerned the mark of Plato, Shakespeare, Dickens, Whittier, Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, Whitman, and Twain.<sup>12</sup> Bradbury explains how ideas are like seeds that later sprout into stories: after finishing Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, he said, “Someday I would like to write a novel laid on the planet Mars, with somewhat similar people.” And he set to work. Years later, *The Martian Chronicles* was off to the publisher.<sup>13</sup>

To my knowledge, Bradbury never offered a similar statement connecting “Ulysses” with “The Rocket Man.” In fact, we cannot even say with certainty that he ever read “Ulysses.” Therefore, to declare “Ulysses” a primary source for “The Rocket Man” is a bit of a stretch. However, given the breadth of his reading, I would bet that Bradbury knew of the most anthologized poem in the English language and I would wager further that he had read it. Nevertheless, efforts to uncover the smoking-gun are likely to disappoint. Much less can we demonstrate that he read *The Odyssey*, than “Ulysses,” and purposefully set out to write his own adaptation. Given what he said in *Zen* about how he develops his ideas, I doubt he would even approve of such a process. And yet, in many instances “The Rocket Man” compares so well to these earlier works that it is difficult to deny their genetic heritage. When taken collectively, they appear as distinct voices within a Great Conversation. Therefore, “The Rocket Man” is best seen

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<sup>8</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), 248.

<sup>9</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Poems: 1909-1925* (London: Faber & Faber, 1934), 49.

<sup>10</sup> Paull F. Baum, *Tennyson Sixty Years After* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1948), 300.

<sup>11</sup> For an excellent article on Bradbury’s familiarity with the classical tradition, and especially the “philosopher hero,” I recommend Camilo Peralta, “The Philosopher Hero in Ray Bradbury’s Science Fiction,” *The New Ray Bradbury Review*, (7), 77–86. <https://doi.org/10.18060/26463>

<sup>12</sup> See Marvin E. Mengeling, “Ray Bradbury’s ‘Dandelion Wine’: Themes, Sources, and Style,” *The English Journal*, 60:7 (October 1971), 877-887.

<sup>13</sup> Ray Bradbury, *Zen in the Art of Writing* (New York: Bantam), 26-27. Bradbury’s *Leviathan ’99*, sometimes dubbed “Moby Dick in Space,” further illustrates this point. First published as a 1968 radio drama in which Bradbury converted Herman Melville’s Great White Whale into a Great White Comet, and Captain Ahab and crew into astronauts, *Leviathan ’99* was later published as a novella in Bradbury’s book *Now and Forever* (2007). Significantly, it showcases Bradbury’s “space-as-sea” metaphor that had already taken root in “The Rocket Man.”

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as an archetype, as Carl Jung would say—a universal symbol buried within humankind’s collective unconsciousness which appears throughout world literature. He appears and reappears throughout the western canon, fighting the same battles and asking the same questions about adventure, family, aging, and finally death.

### 2. “Among These Barren Craggs”

Tennyson takes Homer’s *Odyssey* as prologue. He presupposes that readers are familiar with Ulysses, his harrowing journey, and his triumphant homecoming. The opening lines of “Ulysses” finds the king on his throne complaining about how his life turned out:

It little profits that an idle king,  
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,  
Match’d with an aged wife, I mete and dole  
Unequal laws unto a savage race,  
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.<sup>14</sup>

Ulysses’ first words, “It little profits” should not suggest economics so much as the Gospels: “what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?”<sup>15</sup> In old age, Ulysses has it all—power, wealth, and security. And yet, the way he sees it, his vitality is slipping away. He worries about ending his days stuck on a lifeless rock with an old woman, governing an ill-mannered people who have no appreciation for him. Beneath Ulysses’ complaining, this stanza contains a bit of muted self-criticism. He brushes off his “aged wife,” but presumably he is the same age—perhaps a bit older? And who is responsible for “unjust laws” if not the king? Finally, if his assessment of Penelope (Tennyson does not bother to name her) is a projection of his own ailing body, can we not say the same of how he regards his lazy and uncouth subjects?

Turning to “The Rocket Man,” we find the protagonist in a similar predicament. He is at the height of professional and material success. He is an astronaut, which is a prestigious and exclusive profession. But at home, he is restless, alienated from his family, and unable to take his eyes off the stars. Like Ulysses, he seems to be the source of his own discontent. His home is a mechanical paradise, recalling the sort of HappyLife Home featured in “The Veldt” or “There Will Come Soft Rains.” His family is served by an automated staff—breakfast makers, housecleaners, “stereo-newspapers,” and self-rocking porch swings. Even the lantern-like fireflies outside are robotic. Ironically, the Rocket Man seems wary of technology and often avoids it. After he returns from space, he prefers walking to taking taxis or helicopters. When he drives, he prefers the challenge of an “ancient car.” He seldom interacts with mechanical gadgets other than to repair them for Lily. He even mows his own lawn. In one instance, he is found reading the automated stereo-newspapers while seated on the self-rocking porch-swing. His inactivity seems to stir up some anxiety which he then projects onto his son: “Why aren’t you out playing kick-the-can, Doug?”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Tennyson, “Ulysses,” 66.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 16:26.

<sup>16</sup> Ray Bradbury, “The Rocket Man,” in *The Illustrated Man*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 100.

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And then there is all that digging! Doug says that he digs to keep his mind off space. But it is interesting to note that the task assigned to keep him immobile comprises the most energetic language in the text: He is “moving swiftly, planting, tamping, fixing, cutting, pruning”—all active participles.<sup>17</sup> The reader knows nothing of what the Rocket Man is attempting to plant and the only viable crop in the story are the Martian sunflowers that Lily angrily uproots in protest of their extraterrestrial origin. We can perhaps see the sunflower massacre as commentary on the Rocket Man’s preference for space florae over Lily, whose name suggests a species of flower.

There is an analogous situation underlying “Ulysses.” During Tennyson’s time, England was Europe’s leading industrial nation. Talk of novelty, efficiency, and mechanical wonders dominated every conversation. Almost overnight, the time-honored place of the muscle-bound hero seemed quite old-fashioned. Swapnil Dhruv Bose observes that in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, the hero “was no longer a necessary character in a world where machines were more efficient.” The limited output of human energy was increasingly seen as obsolete when “the mechanical colossi of the Industrial Revolution were built to last.”<sup>18</sup> Tennyson’s word choice contains faint industrial notes—“unburnished, not to shine in use!”<sup>19</sup> We need not turn Tennyson into the laureate of the Luddites to recognize that “Ulysses” offers readers a powerful antidote to obsolescence. Even in the face of “old age” he urges action, motion, and perseverance—“Old age hath yet his honour and his toil.”

Let us return to Ulysses’ criticism of his subjects. He refers to them as a “savage race” that does little more than “hoard, and sleep, and feed.” Here, Tennyson is alluding to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*:

What is a man  
If his chief good and market of his time  
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.<sup>20</sup>

Ulysses fears that if he remains immobile, he will eventually succumb to his subjects’ allegedly bestial condition. Now, compare Lily’s attempts to keep the Rocket Man at home by connecting him with “real things.” The more she keeps him earthbound, the more she seems to dehumanize him. Echoing Tennyson, Doug compares him to an “animal” when he digs, and again to a “struggling beast” when Lily attempts to entice him with a home-cooked (no machines involved!) Thanksgiving feast. The comfortable lives of Ulysses and the Rocket Man threaten to emasculate them, or so it seems.

### 3. “I Am a Part of All I Have Met”

One of the most oft-quoted lines from “Ulysses” is “I am a part of all I have met.” Here, the adventurer explains that everything he has encountered in his travels has in some way shaped his identity. He has “seen and known” much—cities, governments, climates, and every variety of

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<sup>17</sup> Bradbury, “The Rocket Man,” 100.

<sup>18</sup> Swapnil Dhruv Bose, “Tennyson’s Ulysses as a Metafictional Romp,” *The Decadent Review* (2023), <https://thecadentreview.com/corpus/tennysons-ulysses-as-a-metafictional-romp/>

<sup>19</sup> Tennyson, “Ulysses,” 66.

<sup>20</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (New York: Bantam, 2005), 191.

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human being.<sup>21</sup> But again, an ironic reading of this stanza yields a different conclusion. From his vantage point at home, Ulysses points to the sea as the source of his happiness. If home is where the heart is, Ulysses' heart is scattered. He is a mosaic. We might even say he is fractured being, having left portions of himself all over the world.

The Rocket Man is also inseparable from his occupation. Other than "father," he is an unnamed character. When at home, he keeps quiet about his job, so as to avoid upsetting Lily. He also dodges conversations about space with Doug, who seeks greater intimacy with his father by clandestinely examining his uniform at night. This likens Doug to Telemachus, who spends much of *The Odyssey* looking for clues about his absent father. For Doug, the black uniform is his only clue about his father's whereabouts. He lays out the dark uniform like a map, tracing over his father's voyages through the wine-dark sea of space:

from the opened case spilled his black uniform, like a black nebula, stars glittering here or there, distantly, in the material. I kneaded the dark stuff in my warm hands; I smelled the planet Mars, an iron smell, and the planet Venus, a green ivy smell, and the planet Mercury, a scent of sulphur and fire; and I could smell the milky moon and the hardness of stars.<sup>22</sup>

The litany of celestial seaports—Mars, Venus, Mercury, and so on—echoes the "cities of men [...] manners, climates, councils, governments" of Ulysses' itinerary. For Doug, the uniform is a father-by-proxy, a much more substantial person than the winking and smiling character that drops from the sky every three months. By reducing each of his dad's adventures to their atomic level in his homemade centrifuge machine, Doug can examine each individual particle:

I stared down upon brilliant motes of meteor dust, comet tail, and loam from far Jupiter glistening like worlds themselves which drew me down the tube a billion miles into space, at terrific accelerations.<sup>23</sup>

This is a telling passage. Each bit of celestial residue is now organically linked with the Rocket Man, strongly resonating with Ulysses' words: "I am a part of all I have met." One may also note the sadness under Doug's fascination. His school experiment in centrifugal motion shows that the Rocket Man, like Ulysses, is tragically fragmented, having left pieces of himself scattered throughout the cosmos.

Ulysses also realizes that no adventure lasts forever. The thrill-seeker who desires perpetual excitement is locked in a perpetual cycle of ever-increasing expectations and ever-diminishing reality. Directly following his declaration of solidarity with space, Ulysses confesses:

Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'  
Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades  
For ever and forever when I move.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Tennyson, "Ulysses," 66.

<sup>22</sup> Bradbury, "The Rocket Man," 99.

<sup>23</sup> Bradbury, "The Rocket Man," 99.

<sup>24</sup> Tennyson, "Ulysses," 66.

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Tennyson's "arch" has been much scrutinized. While some critics have understood it as a weight-bearing device, like a keystone, it is perhaps more fitting to see it as a gateway, like a Roman triumphal arch. These were freestanding passages that often celebrated a victory, and forged a symbolic link between the situation before and the brave new world that lies beyond. It is a fitting symbol for the poem. On one side of Ulysses' arch is home. On the other side lies the "untravell'd world" of magic and surprise. But here is the rub: the "margin fades" as he approaches. This is another way of stating that however many beasts he slays or goddesses he lays, he will forever pursue a "sinking star"—an ideal just at hand, and yet always out of reach.

The Rocket Man suffers from a similar addiction. He tells Doug of his plans to retire from space travel and remain on Earth with his family—but after just *one more* mission. The reader may ask: Why one more? Doug does not explain what the Rocket Man does in space. This is one of the story's central mysteries, which heightens the Rocket Man's mystique. Is he something like an interstellar truck driver, or scientist, or cartographer? Doug says only that being a Rocket Man is a rare and prestigious job permitting those who do it to choose when, where, and how often they work. Again, the centrifuge imagery provides a clue. It is mentioned twice in the story—once when Doug is analyzing the content of his father's uniform, and again in reference to the family's whistle-stop rocket tour of California and Mexico. A centrifuge spins endlessly just as the Rocket Man must always stay in motion. We may liken the image to what modern psychoanalysis calls the "hedonic treadmill"—a person's perpetual pursuit of some elusive goal, but without any permanent gain in happiness. The centrifuge does more than spin. It pulls the Rocket Man apart, atomizes him, and merges him with space. The Rocket Man is caught up in ceaseless, circular motion—movement for the sake of movement. The image appears again in *Fahrenheit 451*, where Bradbury presents it as a fascinating but deadly symbol of emptiness. For the Rocket Man, the centrifuge may also recall *The Odyssey's* Charybdis—the giant ship-destroying whirlpool that Ulysses is advised to avoid, but—of course—he cannot resist.

Bradbury leads his readers to conclude that the Rocket Man has no pressing obligation in space, no unfinished work that he must complete. He is not thinking of his family's wishes or happiness, but of his own. Sadly, the Rocket Man must confess with Ulysses, "I cannot rest from travel." Nor does he want to. Even when at home, he attempts to draft his family into his obsession as fellow rocketeers. He is blasting off again not because he *must*, but because he *wishes*. He looks to space as Ulysses looks to the "dark, broad seas." He is lured by promise of adventure, but he is also captive to a dangerous addiction.

### 4. "Centered in the Sphere of Common Duties"

Ulysses' wife, Penelope, is perhaps the most celebrated heroine of antiquity. Homer declared that her name would be sung forever. Perhaps it has. Penelope has been recreated by authors and poets from Horace to James Joyce to Margaret Atwood. She stands in a long line of heroines as an enduring symbol of faithfulness, chastity, and patience. She is also intelligent and every bit as wily as her husband. It is therefore quite a shock when Tennyson's Ulysses unceremoniously brushes her aside as his "aged wife," unworthy of further comment. Ulysses is making a veiled reference to Calypso, the beautiful and eternally youthful goddess who held him captive for seven years. Ulysses' derisive comment tells us more about his youthful trysts with wild women than it does about any fault with Penelope. It also underscores his own preoccupation with old age, which he projects onto his wife. Again, we need not insist that Bradbury consciously created Lily with an



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open copy of Homer on his desk to see that the two women are part of a continuous literary tradition of strong and selfless women.

Penelope and Lily are united in their sorrow. Both have suffered through years of solitude while their husbands take long and circuitous routes home. The Rocket Man's brief and occasional appearances on Earth do little to ease Lily's suffering. At the "end of such days," when the Rocket Man was preparing to leave, Doug recalls, "she would always cry" and retire to her bedroom for a sleepless night.<sup>25</sup> The night sky, she explains, is always too bright. In this way, she appears as Homer presents Penelope, whose nights are also robbed of sleep, and who also cries through her waking hours because she does not know if her husband still lives. The American poet Edna St. Vincent Millay may be speaking of Lily when she writes:

I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner of my apron:  
Penelope did this too.  
[...]  
And along towards morning, when you think it will never be light  
And your husband has been gone, and you don't know where, for years.  
Suddenly you burst into tears;  
There is simply nothing else to do.<sup>26</sup>

The chief source of their sorrow is uncertainty. Penelope has heard nothing of Ulysses since the end of the Trojan War. She has every reason to suspect that he did not survive the conflict. Likewise, although the Rocket Man spends a few days a year at home, he maintains radio silence while in space, never letting Lily know if he is alive or dead. If he wanted, he could make an interstellar phone call, but he refuses, saying that he "wouldn't be happy."<sup>27</sup> The source of his happiness, it seems, is the silence of the stars rather than the voices of his family. Furthermore, his desire to maintain his happiness takes an emotional toll on Lily. For her, the night sky is a source of constant torment:

"Ten years ago," said Mother, "I thought, What if he dies on Venus? Then we'll never be able to see Venus again. What if he dies on Mars? We'll never be able to look at Mars again, all red in the sky, without wanting to go in and lock the door. Or what if he died on Jupiter or Saturn or Neptune? On those nights when those planets were high in the sky, we wouldn't want to have anything to do with the stars."<sup>28</sup>

Lily's words directly recall Penelope. Although she was steadfast in her hope that Ulysses survived the Trojan War, she was occasionally overcome by bouts of despair. In the *Odyssey*, when Ulysses at last appears to Penelope in disguise, she flatly tells the imposter, "never again will I embrace him [Ulysses]." And just as Lily says she cannot bear to look at Mars or Venus again, Penelope says of Troy:

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<sup>25</sup> Bradbury, "The Rocket Man," 103.

<sup>26</sup> Edna St. Vincent Millay, "An Ancient Gesture," in *Collected Poems*, ed. Norma Millay (New York: Harper Perennial, 1949), 501.

<sup>27</sup> Bradbury, "The Rocket Man," 104.

<sup>28</sup> Bradbury, "The Rocket Man," 110.

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A black day it was  
when he took ship to see that cursed city ...  
*Destroy*, I call it—I hate to say its name!”<sup>29</sup>

Unlike overlooked Penelope, Ulysses’ son, Telemachus, is given considerable space in Tennyson’s poem. He is not, however, given much of a voice. The eleven lines in which Ulysses speaks to his son are a one-sided lecture. Telemachus is presumably present, but mute. Ulysses appears to speak well of him, praising him for his practicality, his level-headedness, and above all, his devotion to duty:

Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere  
Of common duties, decent not to fail  
In offices of tenderness, and pay  
Meet adoration to my household gods,  
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.<sup>30</sup>

A superficial reading of this stanza suggests a healthy relationship between Ulysses and Telemachus in which a father is proudly passing the torch to the next generation. But the tasks that he assigns to Telemachus are precisely those he is abandoning. From the ironic standpoint, he appears to be dumping a life of dreary chores onto his son and calling it a gift. We must also note that he is also limiting Telemachus’ prospects by denying him the very freedom that Ulysses seeks for himself. Ulysses concludes curtly, “He works his work, I mine.”

No one knows how Telemachus might have responded to his father’s speech. Ulysses gestures to Telemachus, talks *about* Telemachus, and possibly even *to* Telemachus, but he never bothers to hear a response. In Bradbury’s version, the Rocket Man engages in a strikingly similar discussion with his Doug:

“I want you to promise me something.”  
“What?”  
“Don’t ever be a Rocket Man.”  
I stopped.  
“I mean it,” he said. “Because when you’re out there you want to be here, and when you’re here you want to be out there. Don’t start that. Don’t let it get hold of you.”  
[...]  
“Promise me you won’t be like me,” he said.  
I hesitated awhile. “Okay,” I said.<sup>31</sup>

Bradbury’s father-son exchange achieves greater emotional balance than Tennyson’s. He does not appear to be unloading his responsibilities onto Doug before he blasts off. Instead, he seems to express genuine concern. Still, this passage reveals the tension between the Rocket Man’s conflicting desires. He wants to be in two places at once. He acknowledges the inner conflict that

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<sup>29</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, 398-399.

<sup>30</sup> Tennyson, “Ulysses,” 67.

<sup>31</sup> Bradbury, “The Rocket Man,” 106-107.

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Ulysses keeps hidden, perhaps even from himself. By admitting his inner contradiction, he echoes the poet Constantine Cavafy, for whom *The Odyssey* is a metaphor for life's larger odyssey:

As you set out for Ithaka  
hope your road is a long one,  
full of adventure, full of discovery.  
[...]

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.  
Arriving there is what you're destined for.  
But don't hurry the journey at all.  
Better if it lasts for years [...] <sup>32</sup>

As tender as the Rocket Man appears toward Doug, it is important to note that he ignores or fails to hear Doug's confession about wanting to head to space himself. In fact, Doug is rarely permitted to respond to his father with more than a few words before he is sharply cut off. One possible reading of this text suggests that the Rocket Man is simply trying to keep his son from indulging in the same obsessive trait, thereby safeguarding him from its dangers. But one may also conclude that by forbidding Doug from following his path, he believes he is appointing a surrogate spouse for Lily. His command to Doug, "Promise you won't be like me," must be weighed against his self-assessment: "I'm not there for her."<sup>33</sup> Doug is led to conclude that to become an astronaut is to forsake his mother. Writing of Tennyson's poem, Elaine Jordan observes that Ulysses' speech effectively reverses the roles of father and son in most adventure stories. Typically, a headstrong son must defend his decision to leave home against the protests of his worried father (Think of Uncle Owen, Luke's father-figure in *Star Wars*, or Marlin in *Finding Nemo*).<sup>34</sup> Bradbury adopts precisely the same configuration as Tennyson. Lily's attempt to enlist Doug as an ally in her struggle to keep the Rocket Man grounded, recasts Doug in a protective, even parental, role.

### 5. "If the Sky and Sea are Black as Ink"

Homer gives a single account of Ulysses' death. While visiting the Underworld, Ulysses encounters the blind prophet Tiresias who tells him that he will at last reach home. His final days at Ithaca will come gently and painlessly at a "a ripe old age" surrounded by "all your people in blessed peace around you."<sup>35</sup> Dante rejects Homer's happy ending, preferring to see Ulysses burn in hell. And clearly, Tennyson's Ulysses also takes a very dim view of Tiresias' retirement plan. For Tennyson's Ulysses, death is something to be cheated or outrun, at least for a time. Ulysses admits that he may have one foot planted in the grave, but "Some work of noble note, may yet be done."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> C.P. Cavafy, "Ithaka," *Collected Poems*, trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (London: Chatto and Windus, 1978), 29.

<sup>33</sup> Bradbury, "The Rocket Man," 104, 107.

<sup>34</sup> Eliane Jordan, *Alfred Tennyson* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 70.

<sup>35</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, 253.

<sup>36</sup> Tennyson, "Ulysses," 66.

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Ulysses likens Ithaca to a living death. He observes, “The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs.” While standing on the barren rocks he seems to lack substance, referring to himself like a ghost, a “gray spirit yearning in desire.” He longs to free himself and “follow knowledge like a sinking star.” Significantly, “sinking” modifies “follows,” rather than “star,” suggesting that he is pursuing death. He refers to his companions similarly as “souls” who are preparing to depart “from that eternal silence.”<sup>37</sup> Tennyson scholar Charles Mitchell argues that Ulysses’ “newer” and “untraveled” world can be understood as the realm of death—or at least, a destination that culminates in death.<sup>38</sup> Ulysses’ destination does seem to echo Hamlet’s “undiscovered country.” Also, like Hamlet, Ulysses can only speculate on what lies beyond: the “gulfs may wash us down,” he admits. But if there is something more, “we shall touch the Happy Isles, / And see the great Achilles.”<sup>39</sup>

The Rocket Man occupies an ambiguous space between life and death. As a defense mechanism against trauma, Lily regards him as already dead. He senses her distance and complains that she treats him “as if I were invisible,” by looking directly past him, which likens him to Ulysses’ ghostly self-description. Doug says she has a “film over her eyes,” suggesting partial blindness, while the Rocket Man’s wide eyes reflect the Moon. The Moon may suggest wonder and amazement here, but Bradbury may also be using it as a celestial clock, as does Tennyson, signaling one’s approaching end. Additionally, the Rocket Man’s death is foreshadowed by his garden digging. Not only do his labors produce few plants, but taken symbolically, he appears like a grave-digger. This is not the only instance in which the Rocket Man appears in a subterranean context:

Standing in the doorway, Dad listened to the yellow canary singing in its golden cage.

“Well, I’ve decided,” he said. “Next time I come home, I’m home to stay.”

“Dad!” I said.

“Tell your mother that when she gets up,” he said.

“You *mean* it?”

He nodded gravely. “See you in about three months.”<sup>40</sup>

First, we must notice the deliberate use of the adverb, “gravely.” But more significantly is the sudden presence of a canary. The story contains no other animals other than a tiny holocaust of Mexican butterflies that perished in the radiator of the family’s car. While this can be seen as a comment on how machines insensibly grind up and destroy nature’s beauty, one can also perceive a foreshadowing of the Rocket Man himself—sucked into the sun like the luckless butterfly. The canary recalls the hapless birds that miners once carried underground with them. The birds’ sensitivity to carbon monoxide eventually killed them, thus providing the miners with a morbid but effective early alert system. Used here, the Rocket Man’s association with the canary foreshadows his doom, but also underscores his perceived confinement. The image is therefore paradoxical. If kept below (on Earth), the canary will suffocate, but if allowed to take flight (in space), he will face “a million” ways to die.

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<sup>37</sup> Tennyson, “Ulysses,” 66.

<sup>38</sup> Charles Mitchell, “The Undying Will of Tennyson’s Ulysses,” *Victorian Poetry*, Spring, 2:2 (1964), 92.

<sup>39</sup> Tennyson, “Ulysses,” 67.

<sup>40</sup> Bradbury, “The Rocket Man,” 109.

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Mitchell observes that Ulysses' travels symbolize the innate human desire to transcend boundaries. "Because Ithaca is finite," Mitchell writes, "it is not the unlimited goal toward which Ulysses needs to direct his will if it is to remain active."<sup>41</sup> In this way, "Ulysses" is the antithesis of Tennyson's "The Lotus-Eaters" in which the weary mariners pledge that if they ever make it back to Ithaca, "we will no longer roam."<sup>42</sup> It is not safety and security that interests him. Ulysses wants to experience eternity. He wants to touch the limitless expanse of the sea and travel "Beyond the utmost bound of human thought." If the cost of the experience is death, bring it on!

my purpose holds  
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths  
Of all the western stars, until I die.<sup>43</sup>

The Rocket Man expresses a similar desire to experience, and even participate with, eternity, even if death is the consequence. Space is like the sea: mysterious, dark, and limitless. The Rocket Man speaks of space travel in superlatives: the "best thing in a lifetime of best things."<sup>44</sup> This line directly echoes Ulysses' description of his sea voyages as "Life piled on life." But if space is endlessly thrilling, it is also endlessly perilous. When Doug asks about dying in space, his father lists the "million" ways it can happen:

"The meteors hit you. The air goes out of your rocket. Or comets take you along with them. Concussion. Strangulation. Explosion. Centrifugal force. Too much acceleration. Too little. The heat, the cold, the sun, the moon, the stars, the planets, the asteroids, the planetoids, radiation..."<sup>45</sup>

This list is meant to be suggestive, not exhaustive. And one cannot help but notice that "centrifugal" appears again in connection with space travel. The fact that this list shoots from the Rocket Man's mouth with such specificity suggests that he is accustomed to imagining his end, and perhaps, even hoping for it. It is not hard to picture him sharing the fate of the screaming astronauts in Bradbury's short story "Kaleidoscope" (1949), whose exploding spacecraft left them adrift in a "dark sea" like "silverfish."<sup>46</sup> Doug's follow-up question, "do they bury you?" visually recalls the earth again, and perhaps the barren grave-garden in the yard. But not even death can keep the Rocket Man on (or in) the Earth. He tells Doug that even as a corpse, he would "become a meteor or a planetoid traveling forever through space." He may not be expecting to reach the heavenly "Happy Isles" that Ulysses hopes for, but there is an aspect of divinity in his quest. As Bradbury once stated, "I believe that the flesh of man contains the very soul of God" and "that we shall carry this seed of God into space."<sup>47</sup> The Rocket Man is not on a suicide mission. He is

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<sup>41</sup> Mitchell, 92.

<sup>42</sup> Tennyson, "The Lotus Eaters," *Poems of Tennyson*, 51.

<sup>43</sup> Tennyson, "Ulysses," 67.

<sup>44</sup> Bradbury, "The Rocket Man," 102.

<sup>45</sup> Bradbury, "The Rocket Man," 108-109.

<sup>46</sup> Bradbury, "Kaleidoscope," *The Illustrated Man*, 26.

<sup>47</sup> Bradbury, *Conversations*, 81.

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purposefully reaching for eternity. In an arresting stanza that could be easily said by Ulysses or the Rocket Man, the French poet Charles Baudelaire writes:

O, Death, old captain, it is time! Let us raise anchor!  
This country bores us, O Death, let us equip ourselves!  
If the sky and sea are black as ink,  
Our hearts, as you know, are filled with rays!

Pour us your poison so that it might comfort us!  
We want, so much does this fire burn our brains,  
To plunge into the depths of the abyss, Hell or Heaven, what does it matter?  
Into the depths of the Unknown to find *something new!*<sup>48</sup>

The Rocket Man meets his end when his ship collides with the sun. His fate compares to that of Icarus, the mythological aviator whose hubris led to his fiery demise. In the larger context, it also invites comparison to Dante's Ulysses, whose ambitions to reach forbidden territory provoked the wrath of God. Is this how Bradbury intends for us to see the Rocket Man's end? Is he just another tragic hero whose ambitions led to an inglorious death? I doubt this is the case. The Rocket Man is a much more sympathetic character than arrogant Ulysses, whose strutting machismo may make contemporary readers wish he would sail over the edge of the Earth. But Bradbury inspires much less ill will for the Rocket Man. This is in part because his inner struggle is heightened by Lily and Doug, whose human presence contrasts with the static and mute foil characters invented by Tennyson. Without a family to anchor him, the Rocket Man surely would have met with some cosmic catastrophe much sooner. Another endearing characteristic of the Rocket Man is the fact that he may reflect some aspect of Ray Bradbury himself. Bradbury told his young interlocutor in the preface to the *Illustrated Man* that even at the age of seventy-six, he must keep moving forward. He was not speaking about space flight, but about writing, which he said he must continue because he does not "want to be dead."<sup>49</sup>

And what is death in Bradbury's universe? Bradbury did not go to church or claim to believe in any traditional notion of God. When asked about the immortality of the soul or the possibility of the afterlife, he expressed a hope like that of Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*: his soul would live on in his daughters and grandchildren. "That's the only immortality I care about," he stated.<sup>50</sup> The Rocket Man has surely achieved this sort of immortality. Lily and Doug will never forget him. In fact, they cannot forget him. As long as the sun shines, they will have a constant and painful reminder of how the Rocket Man lived and how he died.

### Conclusion: "A Timeless Flight"

It is difficult to speak of Bradbury's "The Rocket Man" without involuntarily humming a line or two of Elton John's triple-platinum 1972 hit of a similar title ("Rocket Man"). This is no

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<sup>48</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "The Voyage," in Kathryn Oliver Mills, *Formal Revolution in the Work of Baudelaire and Flaubert* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2012), 173.

<sup>49</sup> Bradbury, "Dancing, So as Not to be Dead," *The Illustrated Man*, v-vi.

<sup>50</sup> Steven L. Aggelis, ed., *Conversations with Ray Bradbury* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2004), 169.

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coincidence. Recently, Bernie Taupin, the song's lyricist, publicly acknowledged Bradbury as the inspiration for his work,<sup>51</sup> which was not much of surprise to Bradbury fans, given the song's direct references to the story:

I miss the Earth so much I miss my wife  
It's lonely out in space  
On such a timeless flight.<sup>52</sup>

Elton John was not the first musical artist to adapt Bradbury's story. In 1970, the psychedelic folk rockers Pearls Before Swine released another song titled "Rocket Man." Unlike Elton John's version, which includes elements *inspired* by Bradbury, Pearls Before Swine's rendition adopts Bradbury's plotline precisely:

My father was a rocket man  
He loved the world beyond the world, the sky beyond the sky  
And on my mother's face, as lonely as the world in space  
I could read the silent cry  
That if my father fell into a star  
We must not look upon that star again.<sup>53</sup>

Bradbury himself noticed possible "adaptations" long before Pearls or Elton John. In 1952, he gently suggested to Bill Gaines and Al Feldstein, the editors of *Weird Fantasy*, that they had borrowed portions of his story for their comic strip, "Home to Stay." Bradbury said he would drop the matter should the editors kindly send him the customary \$50 honorarium. Gaines and Feldstein denied any plagiarism, but quietly sent Bradbury a check anyway, citing no desire to "quibble" with a writer of his reputation.<sup>54</sup>

The examples above demonstrate that the Rocket Man stands in a long line of adventurers, beginning with Homer in the eighth century BCE, and re-appearing in the works of Sophocles, Euripides, Horace, Dante, Shakespeare, Pope and now (if I have made my case), Ray Bradbury. And his story is not yet complete. Most recently, the Rocket Man was reincarnated in the 2006 film *The Astronaut Farmer*. Billy Bob Thornton plays an astronaut forced into early retirement so that he can tend to family obligations. But, true to his character, he cannot get the stars out of his head, and he vows to blast off on one final mission.

Nor can our culture get the wing-clipped adventurer out of our collective heads. Still, we must stop short at declaring him a "symbol." Bradbury said he "never consciously" placed symbolism in his writing, as it would be an assault on the creative process.<sup>55</sup> The Rocket Man certainly does not "symbolize" Ulysses in the sense that the former is interchangeable with the

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<sup>51</sup> Tyler Golsen, "Elton John just learned the true inspiration behind 'Rocket Man'", *Far Out Magazine*, March 22, 2023, <https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/elton-john-just-learned-the-true-inspiration-behind-rocket-man/>

<sup>52</sup> Elton John, "Rocket Man," track 5, *Honky Château*, (Uni Records, 1972).

<sup>53</sup> Pearls Before Swine, "The Rocket Man," track 3, *The Use of Ashes* (Reprise Records, 1970).

<sup>54</sup> Jerry Weist, Bradbury: *An Illustrated Life: A Journey to Far Metaphor* (New York: William Morrow, 2002), 90-91.

<sup>55</sup> Bradbury cited in Kathleen Stock, *Only Imagine: Fiction, Interpretation, and Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 76.

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latter. As I stated at the outset of this essay, the Rocket Man—in all his incarnations—is a fluid character. His story is broad enough to reflect the concerns of the storytellers, whoever they may be, and whatever concerns compel them to write. What kind of vessel he will pilot next and to what destination is anyone’s guess. Whatever the case, we can be sure that the Rocket Man will continue his “timeless flight.”

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### Abstract

This essay addresses the yet unexplored parallels between Ray Bradbury’s “The Rocket Man” (1951) and Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s dramatic monologue, “Ulysses” (1842). Each features a restless adventurer, dissatisfied with domesticity, who finds his duties absurd. He is alienated from his family, which he neglects to pursue his desire to explore new worlds, or in the case of Bradbury’s astronaut, blast off into outer space.

I argue that in Bradbury’s universe, outer space functions like the wine-dark sea in “Ulysses.” It represents the call to adventure and the thrill of discovery. But it is also fraught with dangers—both physical and emotional. For both explorers, space/sea is a destination, an obsession, and an intrinsic aspect of their identity. Space/sea is a part of their nature, but also the source of their isolation and despair. Where Tennyson gestures to Ulysses as a tragic figure, Bradbury fully develops his astronaut as a deeply conflicted man.

I further contend that while Bradbury parallels much of Tennyson’s narrative, he intends “The Rocket Man” as more than mere analogy. By giving voice to characters that Tennyson silences, Bradbury underscores the “ironic interpretation” of “Ulysses” which frames the poem as less a celebration of dauntless adventurers, and more a lament for aging men who cause their loved ones to suffer by refusing to accept mortality.

**Keywords** The Rocket Man, Tennyson, Ulysses, astronaut