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Little Red Herrings — A Life Now Lived

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

*“Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done.”*

While he may have lost much if not all of his allure in our modern age, **Tennyson’s** works remain a bright exhalation in my mind. I do not recall everything that I have read by him, but I recall some of his more famous lines from time to time, especially *In Memoriam*, a poem I go back to routinely. Frankly, my repastinations in his work are always so richly rewarding I do not know why I ever put him down.

I cannot say that I have read **Tennyson** relentlessly or even annually. But I have read him throughout my career and have always managed to find something applicable to whatever it was I was doing at that time. When I began my career, when I found myself at mid-career, and now as I close it out in a few years. His work always resonates. I have found, too, that when quoted, and my audience doesn’t run (or isn’t capable of doing so in a captive moment), he resonates with them as well.

And so, a case in point is this column, as I count down the days to my retirement in a few years. The lines at the header are from *Ulysses*, perhaps a lesser work but still chockful of crackling spark that irradiates thought. As I pass now my grand climacteric, I see those two lines, coming as they do near the end of the poem, all the more important to reflect upon, not just because I am at the close of my career, but because they are important no matter where you are in your career, its beginning, middle, or its end.

In some ways, it’s appropriate to be so taken with *Ulysses* no matter your age. If you remember your **Homer**, **Ulysses** is **Odysseus** (in its Roman style) in that now neglected epic, the *Odyssey*. **Homer** marked the legendary hero but **Tennyson**, while all but neglecting the epic, enlarges upon it, to any life now lived. I mentioned **Tennyson’s** famed *In Memoriam* earlier. He wrote that about a decade after the great loss of his dead friend and fellow poet, **Arthur Henry Hallam**. But *Ulysses* was written while the sting of that loss still hung in his undried sorrow.

We moderns have a strong aversion to death, and even especially death talk. We don’t like thinking about it at all, and our billion-dollar industries focused on preserving youth are a good case in point that the majority of us are looking for that proverbial fountain. Much in *Ulysses* can be read in a way that would seem to many too depressing for a second thought, too much deathlike gloom and atrabilious doom. But I don’t see it that way as much as I see it as a reflection upon what sort of life you’re building, what “epic” you are writing for yourself right now.

Earlier in the poem, **Ulysses** reflects on his life and his excursions, “drunk [with the] delight of battle of my peers,” a fine phrase and not an uncommon thought of many an ambitious youth. But the lines quickly strike a still finer pose: “I am part of all that I have met/Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough/Gleams that untraveled world, whose margin fades....” While he has surely picked up much from those around him, he also knows that the trajectory of his career has left behind, for better or for worse, bits and pieces of himself. All that experience is but an arc no matter its size that creeps across the sidereal of life to those margins that fade from its lived existence to its coming close. For whatever else it may mean to scholars, can there be any better image of a career, long or short, robust or marginal, that reminds us daily how short our time is, and how quickly it races to the end? “Life piled on life” **Ulysses** says a bit later, as if to remind us that all this living, all these experiences, are but faint phrases, short utterances, in the long dialog of existence that will have its full stop soon enough, its eternal period.

We leave behind our work, whether noble or not, whether known or unknown; we leave it for others to pick up and make it better. It has been, especially for librarians, a “follow[ing] of knowledge like a sinking star” that **Ulysses** later remarks upon. I love that line because it so expresses what it is to see knowledge so close, so clearly, and yet always to be grasping after it, reaching for it as it fades over the horizon of our youth.

Now all of this to this point must sound depressing to some. But if you think about it long enough, how can it be? All things have their end, and the end should be celebrated as much as the beginning. **Ulysses** sees boats in port, the sails folded, but he sees them not so much docked as ready to bloom full again. To touch the “happy isles,” and end his days as he began them, toiling after that which had been placed before him as a duty.

There is always something new, something to look to even in the twilight of one’s career, and “tho’ much is taken, much abides,” as **Tennyson** remarks. We might say that the fire still burns even though it may flicker in the shadow of retirement (or as **Ulysses** puts it, “We are not now that strength which in old days/Moved earth and heaven”). One end is but the start of a new beginning, isn’t it? There is still much to conquer, should we desire to pursue it. **Tennyson** remonstrates those who see nothing but failure and doom in endings with his muscular close, “to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

Tennyson isn’t the easiest poet to read. His syntax isn’t the way we think or write or talk today. And he cannot be condensed to 140 characters, though he has many lines that would serve as profound provocations in whatever the context (I thought to write “profound tweets” but that seemed to mock them unreasonably). For example, the line from among so many in *Locksley Hall* rises to view: “Knowledge comes but wisdom lingers.” Yet, to send **Tennyson** off, piecemeal like that in snippets, would be to show the beauty of a flower, not in a full and glorious color, but one petal at a time.

No, I’m not arguing that everyone rush out to read **Tennyson**, though I cannot think of many other authors one could do better by. To say that much of **Tennyson’s** poetry is melancholy would be something of an understatement. It isn’t the cheery stuff that many favor, nor is it the revolutionary lines that many modern poets bomb us with. You’ll find little politics in him, and very little that excites the excitable. But you will find haunting lines that will cause you to stop in midsentence and think long and hard about what you’ve read. Isn’t that what we ask of all so-called great writers?

So, if you’ve run out of things to do, grab a volume of **Tennyson’s** poetry and read a few pages. He may not strike you in the same manner he does me, but I daresay he will, at least once or twice, give you pause enough to read him all the more. 🌻