A Life Now Lived

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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 repititions 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, perhaps a lesser work but still chockful of crackling spark that irradiates thought. As, perhaps a lesser work but still chockful of crackling spark that irradiates thought. As, perhaps a lesser work but still chockful of crackling spark that irradiates thought.

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 nowneglected epic, the Odyssey. Homer marked the legendary hero but Tennyson, while all but neglecting the epic, ended up leaving 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.

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 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.