

Poetry Porch: Prose

“When the Sirens Call: A Life Altered by Luck?” **by Bruce Bennett**

Featuring two poems:
“Odysseus Sleeping” by Bruce Bennett
“Ulysses” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Unlike the other presentations you will hear in this Panel this afternoon, my talk will be almost entirely personal and therefore something of an outlier. As a writer, I have — I’m sure like all of us — made use of the Classics in various ways in my work, and I had a pretty Classical undergraduate and graduate education at Harvard from 1957 to 1967, including a semester-long course in Ovid. But when Joyce told me the focus of her proposed session, I saw the opportunity to tell a story which has had enormous meaning for me personally, as well as being one I have never told anyone in detail. I just couldn’t pass up this chance, and I am grateful to be able to share it with all of

you here today, since you may have had somewhat similar, what maybe could even be called, “origin” stories.

It was the Fall of 1961. I had just graduated from Harvard as an English Major, and didn’t know what I wanted to do with my life. Well, I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted live as a poet and write poetry, but I didn’t know how one would go about that.

I loved studying English and American Literature, but I didn’t think I wanted to be an English Professor, since I knew I am not really a scholar and didn’t believe such a career would give me sufficient opportunity to be free to write. Yet what were my alternatives? My father was a lawyer, and, though he never pressured me to attend Law School, he did want me to make what he might have called a “responsible” choice of profession. So I dutifully took Law Boards, and did well in them, possibly even well enough to go to Harvard Law School.

Yet that did not appeal to me in the least, but neither did another intensive year of study to earn a Masters in English. At that point Harvard had accepted me for their Ph.D. Program, which didn’t require a thesis for the Masters. Not having to write a Masters Thesis was very attractive, of course, but, as I said, by then I had had it with full-time study, and I desperately wanted time off to just write.

So what to do? I remember walking the streets of Cambridge and agonizing about my choices, or lack of them. Just one thing would make another year of intense study of English Literature more than bearable. The renowned poet Archibald MacLeish in the Fall of 1961 was about to begin his final semester teaching at Harvard as the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory. His Writing Seminar, English S, limited to twelve advanced students (writers of fiction and drama as well as poetry) was legendary, as well as legendarily hard to get into. Prospective members of the class were invited to submit brief samples of their work (which meant three or four poems for a poet), and on the basis of those samples Professor MacLeish would select the twelve fortunate souls who would be allowed into English S. Well over sixty students that year submitted work for him to look at.

Tremblingly, I left my sample poems at the designated drop-off spot, and then awaited the dreaded outcome, certain that if I didn't get into that class, I would end up having to go to Law School, since obviously I wasn't going to be able to make it in life as a poet. The time came for the announcement. Professor MacLeish began to read off names, and I, like others, kept careful track of the numbers. Seven. Eight. Nine. He was getting very close to twelve. In fact, he read the name of the eleventh member of the class, but then paused. "I did receive a submission of poems without any name attached." Then he said, "Did anyone here write a poem entitled 'Odysseus Sleeping'?"

That was my poem, and my life at that moment was forever changed.

Odysseus Sleeping

With grateful heart he lays aside his bow
and sinks to ignorance upon the breast
of her whose patient fingers now can rest.
She thinks, What is there left for him to know?

The bodies of his comrades on the shore
and all the wreckage of those stormy years
will come to mean as little as the tears
Calypso wept, and trouble him no more.

But when the morning comes and through the hall
she sees him wander, brooding on his past,
she well may wonder where to find a mast
and how to bind him when the Sirens call.

— Bruce Bennett, 1961

And I should add here, although I honestly wasn't aware of it at the time, that I strongly suspect "Odysseus Sleeping," at least subconsciously, was my homage to Tennyson's "Ulysses," which I knew practically by heart and which had long been one of my favorite poems.

I had "Ulysses" reproduced on a handout, but read excerpts from it during my presentation. These were among the excerpts I read:

I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees: All times I have enjoyed
Greatly, have suffered greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone, on shore, and when
Through scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vext the dim sea: . . .

I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
Gleams that untravelled world whose margin fades

For ever and forever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!
As though to breathe were life! Life piled on life
Were all too little, and of one to me
Little remains: but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; and vile it were
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,
And this gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
'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.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are —
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

In English S that term, I met my life-long friend and First Reader, David Berman, then a third year Harvard Law School student. (David, incidentally, was a genuine Classicist, who read Latin fluently and Greek for pleasure.) David passed away in 2017 and is still sorely missed.

To sum up, that recognition by Professor MacLeish and my experience of English S that term was psychologically and logistically crucial for me: it provided vindication for my obsessive desire to somehow go my own way and try to live my life *as* a poet. I got my PhD. at Harvard (after my 1962-3 year living abroad in Paris, since where else would aspiring young writers go, but that's a whole other story), taught for three years at Oberlin College, resigned from that job and went back to Cambridge for a year to write, then got married to my wife Bonnie, an Art Historian who had received a grant to work in Florence, where we lived for two years, before returning to the States where I got a job at Wells College and remained until I retired in 2014. At Wells I ran the Visiting Writers Series, which enabled me over my forty plus years there to bring hundreds of writers to campus for readings and workshops, and I also helped found, and then served as Director of, the Wells College Book Arts Center and the Wells College Press. But, perhaps most important, certainly for me personally, was that I was able to devote myself fully, as I had once dreamed I would be able to do, to my life and work as a practicing poet.

All thanks to this one poem, "Odysseus Sleeping," which I had forgotten to sign.

Here is Tennyson's poem with Bruce's passages in bold:

Ulysses

— Alfred, Lord Tennyson

It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Matched with an aged wife, I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.
**I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees: All times I have enjoyed
Greatly, have suffered greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone, on shore, and when
Through scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vext the dim sea: I am become a name;
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known; cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honored of them all —
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.
I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
Gleams that untravelled world whose margin fades
For ever and forever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!
As though to breathe were life! Life piled on life
Were all too little, and of one to me
Little remains: but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; and vile it were
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,
And this gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.**

 This is my son, mine own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the scepter and the isle —
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and through soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.
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.
 There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail:
There gloom the dark, broad seas. My mariners,
Souls that have toiled, and wrought, and thought with me —
That ever with a frolic welcome took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads — you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honor and his toil;
Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
'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.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
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Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are —
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
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NOTE: Poem typescript is from the Poetry Foundation <poetryfoundation.org> with some punctuation changes according to version in *Poetry of the Victorian Period* by Jerome Hamilton Buckley, Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1965.