

THE SEA AND THE SOUL

A REFLECTION ON THE SEA POEMS OF WALT WHITMAN

By Adrian Roger

Behold the sea itself,

And on its limitless, heaving breast, the ships;

See, where their white sails, bellying in the wind, speckle the green and blue,

Walt Whitman's sea poems have inspired the composition of choral/orchestral settings of great vision and beauty, in particular Frederick Delius, who captured their essence in a major work entitled *Sea Drift*, and Vaughan Williams who set four of them in his *Choral/Orchestral Sea Symphony* in 1910; so what was it about Whitman's verse that inspired these composers? To understand that, read some of them out loud then pause to reflect. By read I mean recite, as though performing to an audience, not vocalizing mechanically as if one was reading a billboard. Not too difficult a task surely for anyone who knows how to speak properly, one who understands that words have rhythms which must be reflected in the way they are uttered. Now I wonder how many of our radio and television presenters would pass that test in an audition.

Today a rude brief recitative,

Of ships sailing the seas, each with its special flag or ship signal,

Of unnamed heroes in the ships – of waves spreading and spreading as far as the eye can reach,

I commented in an earlier essay on Whitman's mastery of the long line, something best brought to life by the speaking voice. To recite the above quotation well is to perceive that the verse has an overall pulse, and within that pulse various cross rhythms like figurations in music, where melody, harmony and counterpoint interplay over or under the basic pulse. I do not say beat, because that can have purely mechanical overtones, whereas pulse implies a living entity.

At the head of this essay I quoted those words “Behold the Sea itself”; but these poems are not just about the sea. For Whitman the sea is a stage upon which the drama of human existence is played out, and this is reflected by those composers who set his work to music. But with space limited I will move on to consider the last of those poems, wonderfully evoked as the finale of Vaughan Williams’ Sea Symphony, and entitled The Explorers. It begins in a state of almost preternatural, meditative stillness;

*O vast Rondure, swimming in space,
Covered all over, with visible power and beauty,
Alternate day and night and the teeming spiritual darkness,*

The poet goes on to consider humanity in the context of this mystery, but soon making a statement which, if one thinks about it is startling in its implications,

Yet soul be sure the first intent remains, and shall be carried out,

Now what is happening here? We are accustomed to the metaphor of a poet’s soul talking, as some stimulus elicits his or her responses, but this is different, not the poet’s soul talking, but the poet talking to his soul.

*O we can wait no longer,
We too take ship O soul,
Joyous we too launch out on trackless seas...*

So Whitman is considering the sum total of human existence, and he asks us to think through it with him. In that context I quote from the writings of a modern day Gnostic, Richard Smoley, considering what he has to say about being human, and then relating that back to Whitman, who said it in his own way one hundred and fifty years ago;

...you can say that the physical body is the sum total of your experience of the world through the senses. The soul, or psyche is the sum total of the world of your inner experience. That's it.....except for one thing.

There is something in you that is conscious, that is aware. It is not your body, nor is it evens your thoughts and feelings, because you can step back inwardly and observe all these things as if from a distance...

This then is the poet's theme, the totality of what it means to be human, and to where that understanding can lead us. Whitman in the nineteenth century and Smoley in the twenty first remind us that we are body, soul, and that which is conscious, which can—so to speak step back and observe both body and soul, namely spirit or consciousness. They know that through understanding our triune nature we can break all boundaries, exploring not only the worlds of sense and mind, but spirit/consciousness itself, from the lowest to the highest levels and beyond, that we may find, to quote another poet John Masefield, that "The horizon is a promise, not a bound". Whitman has nothing to offer the timid, but to those prepared to look beyond the everyday material world, he has much to say. I will finish with the concluding lines of his poem The Explorers, which makes this point better than I ever could.

*Away O Soul! Hoist instantly the anchor!
Cut the hawsers—haul out—shake out every sail!
Reckless O Soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me
Sail forth; steer for the deep waters only
For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,
And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all,
O my brave Soul!
O farther, farther sail,
O daring joy, but safe! Are they not all the seas of God?
O farther, farther, father sail!*

REFERENCES

Poems of Walt Whitman, as taken from the programme notes to the recording of Vaughan Williams' Sea Symphony, as performed by The London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, with Yvonne Kenny, Brian Rayner Cook, and conducted by Bryden Thomson. CHANDOS RECORDS, CHAN 8764

Richard Smoley—How God Became God, published by Random House.

Bio by author

My name is Adrian Cedric Rogers; I was born in England, trained as a teacher in Ireland, teaching in that country, then in Scotland, The Shetland Islands, England, Australia, and Papua New Guinea, before retiring in 2005, thereafter devoting much of my time to writing. I have six fantasy novels in print, four published by Double Dragon in Canada, and two by Mountain Mist in Australia. I also have two novels issued (also by Double Dragon) as e-books. I have contributed poetry, articles, and short stories to numerous periodicals and anthologies. I have two collections of poetry published by Ginninderra Press, Port Adelaide, Australia, plus a third collection just issued, to be launched in October.