Shakespeare Tercentenary : 1616-1916

The New York Times

Picture Section — March 19, 1916 — Part Four

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Prince Henry putting on the Crown

Lady Macbeth

SHAKESPEARE AND THE SEA: BY ALFRED NOYES

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Viola Allen in Twefth Night. Act I, Scene II.

Viola. Perchance he is not drown'd. What think you, sailors? Captain. It is perchance that you yourself were saved.

England a Prospero's Island in His Day---Music of the Waves Pervades His Poetry

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"Everything that heard him play,
Even the billows of the sea,
Hung their heads and then lay by."

ONE of the secrets of the power of the Elizabethan age in poetry lies in the combination of two facts, the fact that England was a small and solid island and the fact that the sea surrounding her had suddenly assumed an aspect of almost daily deepening mystery. Never before in the history of the world had there been such a combination.

There had been legends and fairy tales of happy islands where men walked with gods as with their elder brothers; but never before had there been such a revelation of miraculous realities. For here was discovery on discovery of unimagined oceans and continents. Veil after veil was withdrawn, only to make more mysterious the veils beyond. It was as if men were sailing out into the vastness of the Eternal.

Never before had it been possible to sit in a tavern and hear from the lips of those who had sailed beyond the utmost limits of the Old World that the fairy tales were infinitely less marvelous than the truth. It was an age of real presences, and England had become a Prospero's Island by virtue of the mighty presence of the sea. Seamen came back like Lazarus from the grave, but their lips were not even sealed and they held the Bread of Life in their hands. It was as if men had suddenly discovered that their earth was, after all, not a thing of make-believe, a dust-bin of customs and creeds, but a real island floating in the real mystery of an infinite heaven.

It was seriously discussed in the little black taverns, "at the latter end of a sea-coal fire," whether men might not sail straight up to the Gates of Paradise. The Bible and the Map, in Hakluyt's phrase, had opened doors for them. But, for the greater intellects of the time, it meant an even more vivid realization of the isolation of their little hearth-fires in an unfathomable universe. It meant a spiritual voyage through an immeasurable abyss of darkness in quest of a spiritual Cathay.

That "strangeness" which Bacon, long before Walter Pater, had proclaimed as one of the qualities of beauty, was nothing more or less than the gleam of the treasure that the galleons of these great spiritual adventurers brought back from worlds beyond the world.

The exquisite poem of Drayton, "To the Virginian Voyage," combines in itself both aspects, the outer and the inner beauty of this fine quest. But if one searches the Elizabethan poets for work dealing directly with the sea as a subject in itself, it is more than a little surprising to find how rarely they approach it in that way. The influence of the sea upon their poetry was as great as its influence upon the City of London. But you do not find either of them very salt.

There is no contemporary work of importance dealing with the Armanda.

There are few poems even remotely connected with the seafaring life of the time. There are songs, of course, like the dialogue in Dowland's "Book of Airs," in which Neptune and the gods of the wind are paraded in what might be called lyrical masques rather than poems. There are innumerable conventional sea-pictures among the sonneteers, many of them imitations of the French and Italian poets rather than original poems of the sea. But there are very few Elizabethan lyrics that deal directly with the subject, very few even so vital as the verses by Surrey—the "complaint of a woman for her absent lover, being upon the sea."

The sea, in fact, has been used by almost all the English poets incidentally, as an image, a symbol, a means of "representing much in little." The function of poetry, as described by Wordsworth in the great passage from which those four words are quoted, has been carried out chiefly by two means of expression—rhythm, which introduces law into chaos and has its counterpart in all the arts and in all creation; and imagery, a means of representing those things which are beyond the direct reach of our minds, representing occasionally even those things which we call divine. The sea, with its tidal rhythms, its measured waves, its immeasurable horizons, has been one of the chief images used by the English poets in the exercise of this great art.

It is in this more subtle way that the sea has most profoundly influenced our island literature and lent some of its deepest tones to the music of our poetry. For though England herself, in almost all her phases—political, social, religious, and artistic—is a daughter of the sea, "lulled with sea-sounds in a thousand caves and lit with sea-shine to her island lair," the physical aspect of the matter would have no vital significance for us in literature if it were not for the fact that her poets have caught sight, across her gray horizons, of a vaster and more significant sea; that sea from which, in a deeper sense than they knew in Greece or Rome, beauty herself was born; that sea which Keats, not Cortez, beheld from the mount of vision. "Hence," cried Wordsworth, child as he was of the inland lakes:

Hence, in a season of calm weather,
Tho' inland far we be,
Our souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither:
Can in a moment travel thither,
And see the children sporting on the shore
And hear the mighty waters, rolling evermore.

The sound of that sea is heard in all the greatest poetry of England, whether of the lakes, or the mountains, or the coast. The sea, in that vast, symbolical sense, rolls an infinite horizon round our English poetry, just as the stars round off the three divisions of the Divine Comedy.

The greatest of all poets, Shakespeare, holds that position because he was able to show us more things than any other man in their eternal aspect; and, by doing this, to double the truth, double the reality, of the human pageant that he passes before us. More than that of any other poet his music has caught the very cadence of that unfathomable sea whose waves are years. Of the sonnets it might almost be said that they are themselves waves in that eternal element. They are so much at one with it that we cannot tell the music of the sea from their own.

Like as the waves make toward the pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end:
Each changing place with that which goes before,
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.
Nativity, once in the main of light,
Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crowned,
Crookéd eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,
And Time that gave doth now his gift confound.

"Like as the waves!" The waves themselves are allowed only a single line; but what a sea-picture is this, and how the music of the sea informs every syllable, every cadence; so that the only possible musical accompaniment to the whole would be one played by the ocean. This music is carried on through sonnets in which there is no direct reference to the sea at all, but the cadence is unmistakable.

"When in the chronicle of wasted time," he says, and we see the waves wasting themselves in foam once more. Just as in the end of Arnold's "Dover Beach," when the poet has left the sea for the loftier theme, we hear the clashing of waves in that darker world, "swept with confused alarms of struggle and fight, where ignorant armies clash by night"; so Shakespeare uses the music of the sea to represent those processes of change which make of the whole physical universe a flowing tide of colored shadows. A modern critic has touched this continual vanishing away of ourselves and the universe with something of the morbid beauty of a fever; but only at the price of that cruelty, that injustice to ourselves and the universe which may be said to lurk like a disease in the heart of all the aesthetics of pessimism!

Walter Pater approached this aspect of the universe from the critical side. Shakespeare has the wider and deeper creative view. Over and over again, in his sonnets, we feel that in the midst of all these flowing tides he has within himself some abiding certainty, though even for him it may be inexpressible, too great even for such definition as Shelley could give it. *The one remains, the many change and pass.* He doubts and fears; but these doubts and fears and sorrows are a kingly crown, a divine crown, that he would not resign for all the pleasures that tickle the palate of the modern aesthete. What an ebb and flow, making a sound like thunder, everlastingly, there is in the antiphonal cadences of the following:

When I have seen by Time's fell hand defaced
The rich-proud cost of outworn buried age;
When sometime lofty towers I see down-razed
And brass eternal slave to mortal rage;
When I have seen the hungry ocean gain
Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,
And the firm soil win of the watery main,
Increasing store with loss and loss with store;
When I have seen such interchange of state,
Or state itself confounded to decay,
Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminate
That time will come and take my love away.
This thought is as a death, which cannot choose,
But weep to have that which it fears to lose.

And ever and again in the darkness he kindles some great beacon for storm-tossed mariners like that triumphant hundred and sixteenth sonnet, giving us his answer to their age-long question—*How with this rage shall beauty find a plea, whose action is no stronger than a flower?* For this mightiest of all poets was the tenderest also; but he did not halt there. Beyond the music of the sea, beyond the music of our mortality and the eternal note of sadness that Sophocles heard upon the Aegean, he finds his own answer, his own reconciliation, and utters it in the major key:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments, Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds
Or bends with the remover to remove.
Oh, no, it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

With such music as this in our ears, and with that great sea-mark towering before us, we can understand what Victor Hugo meant by his elaborate comparison of Shakespeare with the sea, and by his conclusion; to look upon the soul of Shakespeare is to look upon the Ocean.

It is in this attitude toward the universe, then, this constant realization of the fact that poetry is concerned with what ear has not heard and eye has not seen, that the greatness of the art of Shakespeare resides. It is in his use of sea music, of sea imagery, to bring his readers into touch with thoughts that would otherwise be beyond the reaches of any soul, that we are to find his greatest sea poetry. He uses the sea sometimes as an image for the universe itself, for all that is outside the bounds of the individual soul. He does this, for instance, in Hamlet, where he debates whether he shall "take arms against a sea of troubles," and in Pericles, where he cries:

Put me to present pain;
Lest this great sea of joys rushing upon me
O'erbear the shores of my mortality,
And drown me with their sweetness.

Throughout the work of Shakespeare, however, we are never very far away from even the material sea; never, one might say, out of earshot of it. There are, of course, the obvious cases like the prologue to "Henry V.," which gives us almost the only contemporary picture of an Elizabethan fleet:

Suppose that you have seen
The well-appointed king, at Hampton pier,
Embark his royalty; and his brave fleet
With silken streamers, the young Phoebus fanning.
Play with your fancies, and in them behold
Upon the hempen tackle ship boys climbing,
Hear the shrill whistle which doth order give
To sounds confused; behold the threaden sails
Borne with the invisible and creeping wind
Draw the huge bottoms through the furrowed sea
Breasting the lofty surge: Oh, do but think
You stand upon the rivage and behold
A city on the inconstant billows dancing;
For so appears this fleet majestical.

More vital, and certainly one of the most vivid, of sea-farewells is the picture in "Cymbeline" of the sailing of Imogen's lover—one of the very few instances of the use of "perspective" in English poetry, or, indeed, in any poetry before the romantic revival. One may hazard a guess that these scenes of waving and farewell from vanishing ships and receding shores—moments that all through the history of England have plucked at the islander's heart-strings—have directly influenced the development both of seascape and landscape in English poetry.

Imogen—I would thou grewst unto the shores o' the haven,
And question'dst every sail: If he should write,
And I not have it, 'twere a paper lost,
As offer'd mercy is. What was the last
That he spake to thee?

Pisanio It was his queen, his queen!

Imo.—Then waved his handkerchief?

Pis.—And kiss'd it, Madam.

Imo.—Senseless linen! happier therein than I!
And that was all?

Pis.—No, madam; for so long
As he could make me with this eye or ear
Distinguish him from others, he did keep
The deck, with glove, or hat, or handkerchief,
Still waving, as the fits and stirs of 's mind
Could best express how slow his soul sail'd on,
How swift his ship.

Imo.—Thou shouldst have made him
As little as a crow, or less, ere left
To after-eye him.

Pis.—Madam, so I did.

Imo.—I would have broke mine eye-strings; crack'd them, but
To look upon him, till the diminution
Of space had pointed him sharp as my needle,
Nay, follow'd him, till he had melted from
The smallness of a gnat to air, and then
Have turn'd mine eye and wept.

Tennyson had undoubtedly very carefully studied the passage from "Cymbeline." He borrows the very phrasing of one line to describe a very different kind of distance, "where all the starry heavens of space are sharpened to a needle's end." It is recalled by the sea distance at the close of the Morte d'Arthur, too, where the hull becomes "one black dot against the verge of dawn"; and again by the exquisite coming and going of sails in the later song:

Fresh as the first beam glittering on the sail
That brings our friends up from the underworld;
Sad as the last that reddens over one
That sinks with all we love below the verge * * *

This is not dramatic. It is not concerned with the "moving accident." It bears the burden of no moral or political revolt or acquiescence. It is "art for art's sake," the very thing that the age pretends to require, and in this case it is simply quiet and beautifully painted seascape, developed from the earlier seascape of Shakespeare. The passage in "Cymbeline" has a less vivid parallel in the second part of "King Henry VI.," this time a picture from the deck of a ship:

As far as I could ken thy chalky cliffs,
When from thy shore the tempest beat us back,
I stood upon the hatches in the storm,
And when the dusky sky began to rob
My earnest-gaping sight of thy land's view,
I took a costly jewel from my neck,
A heart it was, bound in with diamonds,
And threw it towards thy land: the sea received it,
And so I wish'd thy body might my heart;
And even with this I lost fair England's view
And bid mine eyes be packing with my heart
And call'd them blind and dusky spectacles,
For losing ken of Albion's wished coast.

But the influence of the sea upon Shakespeare is least shown by the passages in which he deals directly with it. Far more is it shown in the exquisite lines with which Florizel woos Perdita, lines that seem to reveal some subtle correspondence, some law of beauty that is common to this child of the sea and the waves that had refused to harm her, lines that seem in their exquisite movement to share the secret of the waves, the tides, and the pulsing of the human heart; in short, the secret of rhythm itself:

—What you do
Still betters what is done. When you speak, sweet,
I'd have you do it ever: When you sing

I'd have you buy and sell so, so give alms,
Pray so; and, for the ordering your affairs
To sing them, too: when you do dance I wish you
A wave of the sea, that you might ever do
Nothing but that; move still, still so,
And own no other function.

There is the essence of sea poetry, an essence not to be found in the mere fact that Shakespeare elsewhere used this or that nautical phrase. This is the music which, as I said above, is to be heard through many of the sonnets and plays where no mention of the sea is made at all.

(Continued on Following Page)