

CHAPTER XXIX

ON ROSSETTI'S "SEA-LIMITS"

. . . THE things that we think the most simple and common are the very hardest of all to express satisfactorily in verse or in prose. The poem which we are going to study together is a grand example of such common difficulty overcome.

I presume that all of you have heard the sound of the sea—are quite familiar with it; and I presume that all of you have experienced particularly strange feelings when listening to the sound of the sea, either as children or as men. When we are all alone on the sea-shore, anywhere; and that we hear the sound of a great tide rolling in, we do not feel particularly merry. We do not want to laugh and shout,—not at least after the first pleasure of pure air and of looking at the vast space has been satisfied. On the contrary you will acknowledge, I think, that we feel a little serious, perhaps a little sad. It is not exactly that the sea makes us afraid; it is a feeling far too complex to be explained by anybody; we can, only by psychological analysis, discover a part of the elements composing it. Yet how many would think of trying to express it in words?

Of course the whole of it cannot be so expressed. We can only utter some of the feeling and some of the thoughts that are awakened within us by the sound of the sea. One of these thoughts or rather ideas, is of enormous antiquity. Any person whose mind has become at all mature is apt to think of the sea in relation to time; and to be put in mind by its roar of the innumerable thousands of years during which that sound has never ceased. That is a very common idea; and it is an idea that touches a chord of melan-

choly in most of us, because it leads us to think how very brief human life is.

Anybody who thinks out these thoughts,—about the cause of them,—and about the cause of feeling relating to them,—is almost certain to obtain, through personal experience alone, some further knowledge respecting the psychical effect of the sound of the sea. It is not by any means the only sound that produces in the mind that vague melancholy of which I have been speaking. The sound of a wind in a great forest, especially in a forest of pine trees, very much resembles the roar of the sea, as heard at a distance—and it is just as melancholy. Again, in the time of some great festivity, when we are moving about in the streets of some great city, crowded with rejoicing people, we do not notice anything peculiar about the vast noise. We are too near to the noise to estimate it properly. But, if we hear the noise of the crowd, the tumult of that city at a distance of half a mile or thereabouts, we suddenly think, “How much like the roar of the sea!” Now it is about these three forms of sound,—of the sea, of the forest, and of the city,—that Rossetti’s poem has been composed; and you will find that, old as the subject is, and old as the thoughts are, the result is in the true sense sublime.

THE SEA-LIMITS

Consider the sea’s listless chime:

Time’s self it is, made audible,—

The murmur of the earth’s own shell.

Secret continuance sublime

Is the sea’s end: our sight may pass

No furlong further. Since time was,

This sound hath told the lapse of time.

No quiet, which is death’s,—it hath

The mournfulness of ancient life,

Enduring always at dull strife.

As the world’s heart of rest and wrath,

Its painful pulse is in the sands.

Last utterly, the whole sky stands,

Grey and not known, along its path.

Listen alone beside the sea,
 Listen alone among the woods;
 Those voices of twin solitudes
 Shall have one sound alike to thee:
 Hark where the murmurs of thronged men
 Surge and sink back and surge again,—
 Still the one voice of wave and tree.

Gather a shell from the strown beach
 And listen at its lips: they sigh
 The same desire and mystery,
 The echo of the whole sea's speech.
 And all mankind is thus at heart
 Not anything but what thou art:
 And Earth, Sea, Man, are all in each.

Listen to the restless musical sound of the sea. That is the very sound of Time itself,—time made audible to our ears. Or we may say that it is the sound of great shell of the world—heard as we hear a murmuring in a shell when we put it close to our ears. You cannot see where the sea ends; the mystery of its extent is in itself a sublime thing. We cannot see even one furlong,—one eighth of a mile beyond the apparent horizon—and the line is an illustration to our sight. Since the beginning of time, the sound of the sea has marked the passing of time: and yet it will continue to mark the passing of time through innumerable years to come.

By the sea there is no silence, no stillness. Silence and stillness belong only to death and the sea is not dead, but alive. And the sound of its unrest reminds us of life. Ancient life, always striving, always suffering, always enduring. Like the life of man, this life of the sea too is of the earth,—belongs to it, animates it, beats through it with a beating as of hearts. Hearts suffering silently in anger. And again it is surrounded everywhere by the mystery of the grey sky,—just as the life of man is everywhere bounded by the mystery of the infinite.

If you stand alone on the sea-shore and listen to the

sound of the waves; and if you afterwards stand in some great forest alone, and listen to the wild moaning through the trees,—you will find that those two great sounds of sea and forest,—both of those voices of solitude—are almost the same to your ears. You could scarcely tell the difference between one sound and the other. And, again, if you go to some great city and listen to the roar of its life,—the sound of thousands of footsteps, thousands of voices, thousands of vehicles,—you will find that this sound of a great city life is very much like the sound of the sea. It is not steady; now it is louder, now lower,—just like the sound of the sea with its waves, or of the wood with its winds. It is a sound of surging,—of waves; though these are waves of life, human life, not waves of water or of wind.

Now take a shell from the beach of the sea,—where they are scattered by hundreds,—and hold it close to your ear. In that shell you will hear the same sound,—a melancholy sound, a mysterious sound, a sound as of sorrow and desire. All the voice of the sea is in that shell like an echo. And if you think for a moment—remembering that the sound which you hear in the sea-shell is really the sound made by the beating of your own heart, then you will understand that yourself and all mankind,—that the Earth, and Man, and Sea, are all really but one and the same. Each and all of them represents the mystery of life, the sorrow of Being, the sorrow of infinite desire.

There are a few expressions in this poem, needing explanation—especially because of the extremely condensed form of the utterance. In the first line you have the word “listless chime.” The word “chime” refers particularly to the musical tone of a bell; but as it also conveys the sense of succession of sound, the poet has used it here to signify a continuous musical sound, or succession of sound. “Listless” has many significations, such as idle, indifferent, languid. The last meaning is the meaning here. The poet is talking about the languid, melancholy, ceaseless, but musical voice of the sea. In the fourth line I have para-

phrased the expression "secret continuance" as referring to extent in space; but you are free to consider it as signifying extent of time—so that it gives us not only the meaning of immensity in extension, but also suggests to us the mystery of the enormous age of the ocean.

In the second stanza the fourth line is very difficult—containing, as it does, the seemingly contradictory phrase about the world's "heart of rest and wrath." The states of rest and of anger at first thought would appear to be directly opposed to each other. But the poet is really referring to anger hidden, restrained, sullen anger—the discontent with conditions which must be borne. Again you have the expression about the pulse of the sea in the sand. Of course the suggestion is that of the pulse of man's life also in the sand, or at least in the dust of the earth, from which all human bodies are shapen. It is only another way of saying that the life of the sea and the life of man and the life of the world are really, in a certain sense, one and the same.