

A Mind as Broad as the Ocean: A Few Thoughts on Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's "The Ocean"

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Abstract As a lyricist, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson often expresses his strong feelings in his poetry about his love of nature, of Norway and of life. "The Ocean" is one of those typical poems in which he describes in emotional terms the vastness of the ocean and the courage of his people as "riders to the sea". From the vivid lines, we may find the unique characters of the country and the Norwegian people who never feel daunted in the presence of foes both natural and human. Death for them is only a pause in the whole process of being. A reading of the poem also reveals to the readers a sense of musical quality. This shows that Bjørnson cares much about the rhythms of the poem which help intensify the tension in the poem and vivify the turbulence and tumult of the ocean. Apart from the technical excellence, Bjørnson also displays his profound philosophical ideas about life and death and his mind moves with the undulating waves in the boundless ocean. The poem transmits to the readers a heroic note and a stoic attitude towards death.

Key words Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson; ocean; heroism; death

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As a great lyricist, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson is enormously popular among his readers in Norway. His poetry, together with his plays and novels, are well received in his country. One cannot but feel emotionally touched by his deep love that he has expressed in his poetry for nature, life and his own homeland. "The Ocean" is one of those typical poems in which the poet exhibits in emotional terms the vastness of the ocean and the courage of his people as "riders to the sea". From the vivid lines, we may discern the unique characters of the country and the Norwegian people who never feel daunted in the presence of foes both natural and human. Death for them is but a pause in the whole process of being, a starting point for regeneration.

The poem this article refers to comes from the collection *Poems and Songs* published by Bjørnson in 1870 and translated into English by Arthur Hubbell Palmer in 1915. The translator paid due attention to all the important details in the process of translation and faithfully kept the style and rhythm of the original poem.

The poem contains eight stanzas which are so divided that the description of the power of the ocean and the expression of the poet's thoughts about life and death alternate with the undulating waves of the ocean. The whole poem reminds the readers of the Viking period when the warriors fearlessly weathered the storm onboard the long-ships and confronted the hazards head-on with great courage, moving heaven and earth with their heroic deeds.

In the first stanza, the speaker begins by directly expressing his great longing for the ocean which rolls forward forever. He marvels at the grandeur and the persistence of the ocean and its enigmatic strength which urge him to set out on a journey with it. To eulogize the character of the ocean and its unyielding spirit, the speaker employs very expressive and descriptive lines to construct the image of the ocean as a person. "In nights of summer, in storms of winter, its surges murmur the self-same longing." These wonderful lines find an echo in the words of the great Chinese philosopher Confucius who stood alone by the riverside and sighed loudly seeing the water running non-stop to the distance. "The passage of time is just like the flow of water, which goes on day and night." The stanza clearly shows that Bjørnson's art is romantic and the imageries, the tone and the cadence may remind us of the poems by Shelley and other romantic poets. His love for Goethe's poems can well explain his own choice of a romantic style.

The speaker describes the ocean in the second stanza as a giant who "lifted its broad, cold forehead!" The shadow of the world and the ocean reflect each other, making a great contrast. The warmth of the sun brings joy to life while the ocean "ice-cold, changelessly melancholy, It drowns the sorrow and drowns the solace." The speaker, from his experience at sea, reveals another aspect of the ocean, dark, melancholy and even merciless, thus adding a sense of mystery to it. This makes people think of the sea in Nordic regions in the long winters and the depressing mood which goes with it.

The speaker continues his appreciation of the power of the ocean in the next stanza which shows his dexterous handling of the theme. The images of the moon, the tempest and the landscape help enlarge the poetic scope and the range of vision, contributing greatly to the intensity of the emotion and the gradually built-up tension which reaches its climax in the finishing stanzas.

The ocean roars past the lowland and the mountains with increased momentum and vigor, engulfing everything on its way to eternity. The speaker finds it hard to "interpret" the mystery of this great supernatural power but feels happy in its presence. It is better to be carried forward by the waves than to try to know the truth. Thus determined, the speaker wishes to move further out on the ocean to experience something he can never get on land, a journey on which he will have a chance to meet face to face with death. This urge is strongly felt in the fourth and fifth stanzas in the poem when the speaker talks about the "solemn sadness" without fear but with a sense of expectation. For him, this is a great lesson to learn and he will learn it the hard way. With an unflinching determination, the speaker decides to "prepare my spirit for death's dark dwelling." At this point, the speaker has turned from a person of desire to a person of action, ready to make his physical sacrifice in return for ever-last-

ing freedom of the soul.

The six stanza strikes a heroic and stoic note with a very happy and uplifting beginning when dawn comes and the speaker is in a very happy mood:

Then comes day's dawning! My soul bounds upward
 On beams of light to the vault of heaven;
 My ship-steed sniffing its flank is laving
 With buoyant zest in the cooling billow.
 With song the sailor to masthead clammers
 To clear the sail that shall swell more freely,
 And thoughts are flying like birds away
 Round mast and yard-arm, but find no refuge ...
 Yes, toward the ocean! To follow Vikar!
 To sail like him and to sink as he did,
 For great King Olaf the prow defending!¹

This stanza is marked off by a superb balance of both sound and sense. The use of alliteration in lines three, four, five and ten creates a sing-song like effect and the employment of expressions such as "day's dawning, beams of light, buoyant zest" and the metaphor "the vault of heaven" provides the readers with a rich poetic savor pleasant to the senses. The image of "thoughts flying like birds away" will no doubt please every reader with its originality and implication. And also the reference to the great heroes Vikar² and Olaf³ in sagas as well as in history forms a picture which is epic in scope. It won't be an exaggeration to say that this stanza alone will meet the test of all great poetry.

The final moment or the climax comes when death overwhelms the ship and the sailor with its gigantic power of destruction. The ship is dismantled and the speaker/sailor is drowned. However the speaker is not unhappy about his lot because he has realized his dream of moving with the ocean to its eternity and he has reached the realm of sublimity of soul by stoically accepting his suffering and death.

The poem ends on the lines which, arguably, are very crucial to the interpretation of the sustaining theme underlying the whole poems. The speaker completes his monologue with a note of celebration because he solemnly declares:

And I descend to eternal silence,
 While rolling billows my name bear shoreward
 In spacious nights 'neath the cloudless moonlight!

What the speaker indicates here is the age-long tradition of the Nordic culture which could be traced back to the days of the Vikings who viewed seafaring and death in a very special way as Magnusson explains:

The Vikings represented an ideal of heroism and valor; young men went on Viking expeditions to prove their mettle. The Viking life was a sort of open-air uni-

versity of the manly arts, something of every youngster to aspire to. (Magnusson 9)

This passage, in a way, could help interpret the speaker's desire and yearning in the poem for going out to the ocean in spite of the great danger lying ahead of him on his expedition.

Talking about death, Magnusson says, "The absolute finality of death was inevitable. Even the gods themselves had to face it. And in the end they would face it with the same stoicism, the same heroic fatalism, as the best of heroes. They had only one consolation, that is the 'verdict on each man dead'" which means a kind of fame written in words (Magnusson 29).

Magnusson's words best explain the last three lines of the poem. The reason why the speaker feels so calm and composed is that he is convinced that he will be remembered as the one whose heroic deeds certify his status as a descendant of the Vikings. So in a way this poem is very much like an allegory of the Vikings and the Nordic tradition which was carried forward by the Nordic people in modern times and, in Norway's case, by Fridtjof Nansen and his crew on board the ship *Fram*.⁴ There is obviously a link between the poem and the tradition.

Bjørnson is noted for his technical excellence for his poetry as a lyricist. He is sensitive to music. There is music in "The Ocean" and Bjørnson cares much about the rhythms of the poem which help intensify the tension in the poem and vivify the turbulence and tumult of the ocean. We need to have a prepared ear for his lines, slowly appreciating the subtle and rich musical quality of the rhymes. It is known to all that the rhythm is the essential part of good poetry because "Poetry is different from prose as an art form. The difference lies in the fact that a poem can be best appreciated when it is read aloud. The stress on syllables in reading can stimulate a strong emotion which in turn produces some wonderful artistic effects" (Nie 27). Bjørnson knows the difference very well and what he achieves with "The Ocean" is that he adroitly manipulates the sound, pause, pace, and figure to get a special effect, combining the description of nature with serious musings on the matter of life and death and unfolds a poetic landscape with subtle and complex qualities.

In reading the poem, one never loses the voice of the poet whose character is strongly felt in the expression of the speaker "I". The poem could be read as an ode, a monologue, a confession, a self-statement and an allegory and it is many-faceted. Whatever happens, the self and the personality of the poet exist intensely there, making a poem personal and unique. "Writers use poems to engage their own mental processes so fully they can even lose all sense of themselves as such" (Holland 3).

There are two weather-beaten statues at the front gate of the grand National Theatre in Oslo. They are Ibsen and Bjørnson, the two literary giants standing there as two pillars in modern Norwegian literature. It is arguably true that Bjørnson fails to beat Ibsen as a dramatist because the latter is more powerful in his relentless exposure of the hypocrisy of the moral principles in a capitalist society. But we should do Bjørnson justice by saying that he is the most popular writer among people in Norway and his works, and his poetry in particular, fully demonstrate his talent and genius as

a great writer.

When talking about why the Nobel Committee decided to give Bjørnson the Nobel Prize for Literature by rejecting Ibsen and Brandes, Toril Moi says: "Bjørnson, on the other hand, was lauded for his poetry, his freshness of spirit, and above all for his positive and pure idealism in works nobody, not even in Norway, reads anymore (Moi 98).

Moi is quite right to point out the strong attraction of Bjørnson by referring to his poetry and his freshness of spirit, but probably she is not that accurate to say Bjørnson is buried in oblivion. At least, his "The Ocean" is still worth reading.

【Notes】

1. The poem referred to in this article is taken from Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, *Poems and Songs*. Trans. Arthur Hubbell Palmer (Oxford University Press 1915).
2. Víkar was a legendary Norwegian king who courageously sacrificed his life for the becalmed ships.
3. Olaf Tryggvason was King of Norway from 995 to 1000. He jumped from his great ship the "Long Serpent" into the sea and disappeared during the Battle of Swold.
4. Fram ("Forward") is a ship that was used in expeditions of the Arctic and Antarctic regions by the Norwegian explorers Fridtjof Nansen and others.

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