Thoughts on texts that Ralph Vaughn Williams Used in Dona Nobis Pacem

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Doug Hesse (B1)
Professor of English and Executive Director of Writing
The University of Denver
dhesse@du.edu

- Notes about Walt Whitman and about Vaughan Williams’s affinity to him
- Whitman and the Civil War
- John Bright’s “The Angel of Death” speech
- A quick observation about Biblical sources

Photograph of Whitman from around 1862, probably taken in New York by Alexander Gardner or Mathew Brady.

“Whitman should be kicked from all decent society as below the level of a brute.”
The Intelligencer, 1855.

“The greatest of our poets... the American bard, our Homer and our Milton.”
Harold Bloom, 2005.

I appreciate the invitation to comment on some texts in Vaughn William’s Dona Nobis Pacem, especially because a couple of them have puzzled me. For example, the second movement’s “Beat! Beat! Drums!” struck me as pretty enthusiastic for a cantata whose main thrust is toward peace. And what’s going on with that line in “Dirge for Two Veterans”: “O strong dead-march you please me”? After reading and thinking about Walt Whitman’s poems and, briefly, other texts that Vaughn Williams used, I suggest that all of these seemingly discordant elements make sense in light of the whole piece. Whitman’s stance can be reduced, however crudely, to this: regret and mourn the war (even when its cause is just and necessary, as he surely thought was true of the Civil War) but honor and love the soldier.

One key to this interpretation is the opening to early editions of Drum Taps, his Civil War poems (image at left), which in four lines makes a transition from naïve enthusiasm to quiet, practical reflection. Interestingly, he cut this opening from later editions. Possibly he thought it forecasted too much. Possibly he found that as the war faded into memory, this sentiment was too somber.
Brief Background on Whitman and a reference to Vaughn Williams
—Which You’re Free to Skip

As I mentioned a couple of years ago in relation to the Sea Symphony (and as many of you no doubt know), Walt Whitman emerged as probably the preeminent American poet of the 19th century (though Emily Dickinson is clearly in the running)—and certainly the most innovative. The epigraphs above make clear that people either loved or hated him. Whitman was born on Long Island in 1819 and died in 1892. As a young man, he taught school a bit and worked as a journalist and editor at several newspapers, which means that he left behind lots of writing in addition to his favorite poems. In midlife he worked as a civil servant in Washington, DC, agencies, and in older age he hit the lecture circuit, where he talked about Lincoln. Publicity from his two famous poems after Lincoln’s death, “O Captain, My Captain” (which he claimed later to have regretted writing) and “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed,” assured him audiences.

Of course, by then he’d also been publishing Leaves of Grass. I say “had been publishing” because Leaves is a curious and ever-expanding volume of poems. He published the first edition in 1855 and was lucky enough to get a positive response from Ralph Waldo Emerson. Over the next 36 years he published five additional editions, each longer than the rest. Whitman’s strategy was to publish a book of poems (the ones in Dona Nobis Pacem come from Drum Taps, 1865), then incorporate them into the morphing Leaves. Part of this process was to realize an artistic vision but part, no doubt, was also to achieve a marketing strategy—not unlike all of the versions of the Lord of the Rings films that emerged over the years.

There are several characteristics of Whitman’s poems, but three might be particularly salient. First are his long, free-verse lines of irregular length. Second is his use of what came to be called catalogs—lists of things, people, events, etc.—often in a parallel form. Third, and most important, is his passionate exuberance for common things, especially “common” people. You can see all these elements compactly in “I Hear America Singing.”

I HEAR AMERICA SINGING

[1860]

I HEAR America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deck-hand singing on the steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,
The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning, or at noon intermission or at sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

Note in particular the catalog of occupations: mechanic, carpenter, mason, boatman, mother, young wife, and so on. He insisted on not only the dignity but, even, unique nobility of each person, no matter his or her occupation or status. After all, “Each [is] singing what belongs to him or her and to none else.”

I suspect this worldview appealed strongly to Vaughn Williams, as did the vibrant, comparatively raw and energetic American perspective, the untamed push of the long lines. But I suspect Vaughn Williams also saw in Whitman something of a kindred spirit, one signaled by the fact that Whitman volunteered in hospitals during the Civil War and Vaughan Williams
volunteered as an ambulance driver during World War I. It was a brutal experience for both. I have to think that Vaughn Williams was drawn to another artist with keen sensibilities who was able to render grim experience into art, able to find and portray the nobility in the common man caught in the middle.

On April 13, 1861, Whitman was leaving a performance of a Donizetti opera in New York City when he heard the news of the attack on Fort Sumter that started the Civil War. He captured the immediate excitement—both the city’s and his own—in the first poem in *Drum Taps*. I’ve reprinted it on page 6. (About the title’s “drum taps”: you can think of this two ways, as the stirring drive to battle or as the somber accompaniment to a funeral cortège; folks of my generation might recall, on black and white televisions, the muffled drums of JFK’s funeral procession across the Memorial Bridge to Arlington Cemetery.) War seems exciting, and in the lines I’ve underlined in stanza 1, Whitman is a fairly convincing army recruiter, noting how “soft opera-music changed, and the drum and fife were heard in their stead.” Stanza 3 offers a characteristic catalog of recruits from all walks of life (anticipating a similar list in *Beat! Beat! Drums!*), along with some of his familiar over-the-top affection: “How I love them! how I could hug them, with their brown faces, and their clothes and knapsacks cover’d with dust!” But this celebratory has a cautionary note further in the third stanza, which refers to hospital preparations, as women “arm” themselves (Whitman’s word) with bandages.

This first poem is prophetic, of course. The draft became controversial, spawning riots in New York, which have been rendered in movies like *The Gangs of New York*. For $300, a man could buy his way out of service—or he could send someone else in his place. Whatever excitement there was about the war, whatever heroic prospect, there was also its consequences.

**Whitman During the War, in Washington, DC**

When one of Whitman’s brothers was reported wounded in the early part of the war and was reportedly hospitalized in Washington, Whitman left New York in search of him. (The brother later turned up as a POW.) Whitman went to work for government agencies in clerical positions. Crucially, he also volunteered in hospitals as a wound dresser for injured soldiers. Given some developments in armaments, especially the variety of things that could be shot from cannons, Civil War wounds were especially grim.

Whitman kept several extraordinary notebooks, a combination of notes on patients and notes on stories he heard from them, and these notebooks (which have been preserved), furnished some of the stuff of his poems. I’ve reprinted a few pages on pages below. Pages 8-10 show, for example, notes he took from a soldier after the battle of White Oaks church, with wounded “horrible beyond description” lying around the churchyard, waiting for surgeons to operate in half darkness, often on planks. Pages 11 and 12 provide brief notes on patients’ conditions (one of them only 15), their homes and families. Whitman wrote hundreds of letters to families on behalf of soldiers unable to write, either because of schooling or their wounds.

From these sources and others, Whitman composed the poems in *Drum Taps*, which he published in spring of 1865, right when Lincoln was shot. The assassination made him scramble to write some additional poems about the dead president in subsequent months to include in the volume; you can see from *Leaves of Grass* that Whitman had a particularly flexible notion of what constituted a book.

**II (Beat! Beat! Drums!)**

Stirring patriotic call to arms or sly ironic caution? That’s my main interpretive question as I read this famous poem. Ultimately, I think its genius is being a sober portrait of how war shatters everyday life, a portrait wrapped in exuberant seeming celebration.

The urgency of war disrupts everything, from church services and classes to fieldwork, plays, concerts, and wedding nights. It’s clear that not everyone is convinced. Old men warn young; children and women plead with fathers and husbands. Yet the logic of war is for action now.
There’s no time for deliberation, protest, timidity, weeping, or prayer. “Make no parley—stop for no expostulation.”

As I noted above, Whitman believed the war, however unfortunate, was necessary. Slavery was evil, and the union should be preserved; after all, he had a grand democratic vision of America’s promise. You do catch some of that necessity in his strong rhythmic lines, the excitement of the drums and bugles. Surely, it’s the case that if one truly contemplated all that war entailed, very few would go except out of a strong sense of duty and assurance that it was a dramatic and noble act. Whitman gets that.

But action without reflection—without, even prayer—seems hardly an ideal. The drums in the first stanza are simply “you drums;” they pound. In the second, they’ve become “heavier drums;” they rattle. In the third, they’re “terrible drums;” they thump. The progression is from exciting to foreboding. The key line is “Make even the trestles to shake the dead where they lie awaiting the hearse.” These are the already dead waiting burial in city funeral parlors. However, there’s an ominous foreshadowing of war casualties. Of course, the same bugles and drums that rally to battle also accompany to the graveyard in “Dirge for Two Veterans.”

III Reconciliation

This poem is the heart of the cantata for me, enough so that I wonder why Vaughn Williams set it as early as he did. I suspect that he immediately wanted to temper the bombast of the previous song. After all, his dead enemy is “a man divine as myself.” Whitman is cautioning against demonizing others, even when they’re on the “wrong” side, insisting that each life is sacred. That divinity remains and stands against time even as war’s carnage is “utterly lost.” “Reconciliation” is the “word over all,” though “Word” at the outset echoes the Gospel of John’s “In the beginning was the word.”

A profound image comes in the description that “the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly, softly wash again and ever again this soiled world.” Death and Night are women and doing the most unglamorous women’s work, gently and without complaint. Rather than death being a powerful and terrible force to fear, it is a caretaker: a sister. Again and again we make a mess of the world and night and death—as women—stoically and endlessly restore things, knowing the work will be there again tomorrow, next year, and beyond. Beyond the sense of cleaning floors and doing laundry is also a sense of women washing the body before burial, a role traditionally left to them, the counterpart at life’s end to bathing infants.

This would easily be a powerful text to conclude the entire work. Musically, it perhaps fits best here, but I’ll leave that to expert musicians like Duain to sort out. I think additionally that Vaughan Williams wanted to insist even more poignantly on the losses of war, which he does in the fourth movement.

| Word over all, beautiful as the sky,         |
| Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage must in time be utterly lost,  |
| That the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly, softly, wash again and ever again this soiled world; |
| For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead, |
| I look where he lies white-faced and still in the coffin—I draw near, |
| Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin. |

IV Dirge for Two Veterans

This remarkable poem, one of Whitman’s rare regular compositions (4-line stanzas, with shorter first and fourth lines), has been set to music by lots of composers, including Kurt Weill as part of his “Four Walt Whitman Songs,” which also featured Beat! Beat! Drums! The poem creates a clear narrative: a funeral procession of a father and son killed in the same battle, from the
distance to the cemetery. I haven’t researched funeral customs at that time, but dusk/evening strikes me as an odd time for a funeral—though it does lend itself to the spectacular image of the moon as a mother’s face looking down on everything. She’s the counterpart of the sisters in the previous poem, now shining over the dead men. Women did not fight and die, true; however, they suffer expectantly, even practically and tenderly, moving forward in the aftermath, cosmically above everything in this scene.

Other elements are discordant. It’s a pretty noisy procession, with drums both small and great, pounding convulsively, and with bugles. Imagining this isn’t some New Orleans-style sendoff, what’s going on? At the very least, Whitman’s trying to represent his own emotion at this scene, something bordering on ecstasy. This might strike readers as unseemly, especially culminating in the line I mentioned earlier, “O strong dead-march you please me!” That might almost seem to make the whole affair into a kind of inappropriate entertainment or spectacle.

However, I read this as the poet/spectator celebrating that these two veterans are getting the full measure of attention they deserve, heroes’ sendoffs even if, in truth, they were merely canon fodder. Rather than being discreetly taken away, they are dramatically accompanied through city streets “flooding/as with voices and with tears.” Except for recognizing that they’re father and son, the poet seems not to know them at all. Respect comes not only as attention but also as emotion from someone like the poet, who could just as easily distance themselves from the whole scene. Whitman doesn’t—and neither does Vaughn Williams. “My heart gives you love” may seem like an excessive gesture, but actually that’s all he or any of us can give at such a powerful moment, when a mother loses a husband in son in a sudden flash, when the family’s next generation is extinguished. Love may be enough.

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V (“Angel of Death” and “Is there no balm in Gilead”)

John Bright was a Quaker Member of Parliament who delivered a famous anti-war speech during the height of the Crimean War (1854-56), fought on that same troubled peninsula being contested today by Russia and Ukraine. England entered this war between Russia and Turkey on the side of the Turks. While England’s entry was popular, the war was generally disastrous. It was ineptly commanded, the most famous example being the suicidal “Charge of the Light Brigade,” made popular in Tennyson’s poem, in which cavalry rode headlong into artillery. It was also ineptly supplied, resulting in deaths by starvation and cholera. Florence Nightingale’s hospital and nursing reforms came out of the war.

Vaughn Williams, like many English school boys, likely knew this speech growing up. It remained known up to the time he was composing Dona Nobis Pacem. I’ve reprinted a chunk of it on page 13, the portion directly leading up to Bright’s most famous passage. The reference, of course, is to the Passover, though in Bright’s speech and Vaughn Williams’s setting, the reach of war is all encompassing. No one escapes.

As for the last part of this movement, something in the lyrics seemed familiar until I recalled that these echo a line and sentiment near the opening of Mendelssohn’s Elijah, “The harvest now is over, the summer days are gone.” On page 14 I’ve reprinted three columns: the original verses from Jeremiah, the section from Elijah, and Vaughn Williams. It seems that an appealing image of utter despair was that of a failed harvest: at the height of what should have been the most bountiful and promising time of year, there is nothing, and winter is coming. (And not in a Game of Thrones sense.) Wanting to set up the joyful promises and pledges of his sixth movement, Vaughn Williams needed to go as dark as he could in his fifth.

Of course, he tempers just a bit his conclusion. The animato and fortissimo, climaxing in “Goodwill toward men,” yield to the lento and pianissimo repetitions of the same line, before yielding altogether to Latin, to ppp, and finally to niente. It’s as if Vaughn Williams doesn’t want us
to get swept away in the excitement. People have died, after all, and wild joy and optimism for peace is tempered by memory and pensive reflection.

“Drum Taps” (1865, 1867, and 1871 editions)
“First O Songs for a Prelude” (afterward

FIRST, O songs, for a Prelude,
Lightly strike on the stretch'd tympanum, pride and joy in my city.
How she led the rest to arms—how she gave the cue,
How at once with lithe limbs, unwaiting a moment, she sprang,
(O superb! O Manhattan, my own, my peerless!
O strongest you in the hour of danger, in crisis! O truer than steel!)
How you sprang! how you threw off the costumes of peace with indifferent hand;
How your soft opera-music changed, and the drum and fife were heard in their stead;
How you led to the war, (that shall serve for our prelude, songs of soldiers,)
How Manhattan drum-taps led.

Forty years had I in my city seen soldiers parading;
Forty years as a pageant—till unawares, the Lady of this teeming and turbulent city,
Sleepless, amid her ships, her houses, her incalculable wealth,
With her million children around her—suddenly,
At dead of night, at news from the south,
Incens'd, struck with clench'd hand the pavement.

A shock electric—the night sustain'd it;
Till with ominous hum, our hive at day-break pour'd out its myriads.

From the houses then, and the workshops, and through all the doorways,
Leapt they tumultuous—and lo! Manhattan arming.

To the drum-taps prompt,
The young men falling in and arming;
The mechanics arming, (the trowel, the jack-plane, the blacksmith's hammer, tost aside with precipitation;) The lawyer leaving his office, and arming—the judge leaving the court;
The driver deserting his wagon in the street, jumping down, throwing the reins abruptly down on the horses' backs;
The salesman leaving the store—the boss, book-keeper, porter, all leaving;
Squads gather everywhere by common consent, and arm;
The new recruits, even boys—the old men show them how to wear their accoutrements—they buckle the straps carefully;
Outdoors arming—indoors arming—the flash of the musket-barrels;
The white tents cluster in camps—the arm'd sentries around—the sunrise cannon, and again at sunset;
Arm'd regiments arrive every day, pass through the city, and embark from the wharves;
(How good they look, as they tramp down to the river, sweaty, with their guns on their shoulders!
How I love them! how I could hug them, with their brown faces, and their clothes and knapsacks cover'd with dust!)
The blood of the city up—arm'd! arm'd! the cry everywhere;
The flags flung out from the steeples of churches, and from all the public buildings and stores;
The tearful parting—the mother kisses her son—the son kisses his mother;
(Loth is the mother to part—yet not a word does she speak to detain him;) The tumultuous escort—the ranks of policemen preceding, clearing the way;
The unpent enthusiasm—the wild cheers of the crowd for their favorites; The artillery—the silent cannons, bright as gold, drawn along, rumble lightly over the stones; (Silent cannons—soon to cease your silence! Soon, unlimber'd, to begin the red business;) All the mutter of preparation—all the determin'd arming; The hospital service—the lint, bandages, and medicines; The women volunteering for nurses—the work begun for, in earnest—no mere parade now; War! an arm'd race is advancing!—the welcome for battle—no turning away; War! be it weeks, months, or years—an arm'd race is advancing to welcome it.

4

Mannahatta a-march!—and it's O to sing it well! It's O for a manly life in the camp!

And the sturdy artillery! The guns, bright as gold—the work for giants—to serve well the guns: Unlimber them! no more, as the past forty years, for salutes for courtesies merely; Put in something else now besides powder and wadding.

5

And you, Lady of Ships! you Mannahatta; Old matron of this proud, friendly, turbulent city! Often in peace and wealth you were pensive, or covertly frown'd amid all your children; But now you smile with joy, exulting old Mannahatta!
scene in the woods on the peninsula—told me by Milton Roberts, ward G (Maine) after the battle of White Oaks church, on the retreat, the march at night—the scene between 12 & 2 o' clock that night at the church in the woods, the hospital show at night, the wounded brought in—previous the silent stealthy march through the woods, at times stumbling over the bodies of dead men in the road, (there had been terrible fighting there

Some pages from Whitman’s hospital notebooks. For more (and for the best source of Whitman materials and scholarship in one place online), see http://www.whitmanarchive.org
that day, only closing at dark)—we retreating the artillery horses feet muffled. orders that men should tread light & only speak in whispers— Then between 12 midnight & 1 o'clock we halted to rest a couple of hours at an opening in the woods—in this opening was a pretty good sized old church used impromptu for a hospital for the wounded of the
battles of the day thereabout—with these it was filled, all varieties, horrible beyond description— the darkness dimly lit with candles, lamps, torches, moving about, but dark but plenty of darkness & half darkness.—the crowds of wounded, bloody & pale, the surgeons operating—the yards outside also filled—they lay on the ground some on blankets, some on stray planks, etc
ward D bed 37 Isaac Livensparger co H. 55th Ohio gun shot w'd left leg admitted June 15th father John Livensparger Lykenston Crawford co Ohio

ward K bed 37 ——— Asbury Allen co D. 27th Indiana diarrhea, bronchitis, & trouble in privates ——— some quince jelly father W Allen Noblesville Hamilton co Ind
ward F. bed 50 admitted Aug 19 Adelbert Dolliver co B 111th Penn ——— mother Mrs. Melinda Morrison ——— Tidioute, Warren co Penn ————————
Fever, (only 15 yr's old 22d Nov.'62)

ward G. H. or I. young man I promised to come in & read to—sick with fever—he cannot read steadily himself—his head swims—take him the paper—
Excerpt from John Bright’s “The Angel of Death Has Been Abroad” Speech
In Parliament, February 22, 1855

[lengthy remarks precede]

. . . There is one subject upon which I should like to put a question to the noble Lord at the head of the Government. I shall not say one word here about the state of the army in the Crimea, or one word about its numbers or its condition. Every Member of this House, every inhabitant of this country, has been sufficiently harrowed with details regarding it. To my solemn belief, thousands—nay, scores of thousands of persons—have retired to rest, night after night, whose slumbers have been disturbed, or whose dreams have been based upon the sufferings and agonies of our soldiers in the Crimea. I should like to ask the noble Lord at the head of the Government—although I am not sure if he will feel that he can or ought to answer the question—whether the noble Lord the Member for London has power, after discussions have commenced, and as soon as there shall be established good grounds for believing that the negotiations for peace will prove successful, to enter into any armistice? ["No! no!" and "Hear, hear!"]

I know not, Sir, who it is that says “No, no,” but I should like to see any man get up and say that the destruction of 200,000 human lives lost on all sides during the course of this unhappy conflict is not a sufficient sacrifice. You are not pretending to conquer territory—you are not pretending to hold fortified or unfortified towns; you have offered terms of peace which, as I understand them, I do not say are not moderate; and breathes there a man in this House or in this country whose appetite for blood is so insatiable that, even when terms of peace have been offered and accepted, he pines for that assault in which of Russian, Turk, French, and English, as sure as one man dies, 20,000 corpses will strew the streets of Sebastopol? I say I should like to ask the noble Lord—and I am sure that he will feel, and that this House will feel, that I am speaking in no unfriendly manner towards the Government of which he is at the head—I should like to know, and I venture to hope that it is so, if the noble Lord the Member for London has power, at the earliest stage of these proceedings at Vienna, at which it can properly be done—and I should think that it might properly be done at a very early stage—to adopt a course by which all further waste of human life may be put an end to, and further animosity between three great nations be, as far as possible, prevented?

. . . I cannot but notice, in speaking to Gentlemen who sit on either side of this House, or in speaking to any one I meet between this House and any of those localities we frequent when this House is up—I cannot, I say, but notice that an uneasy feeling exists as to the news that may arrive by the very next mail from the East. I do not Suppose that your troops are to be beaten in actual conflict with the foe, or that they will be driven into the sea; but I am certain that many homes in England in which there now exists a fond hope that the distant one may return—many such homes may be rendered desolate when the next mail shall arrive.

The angel of death has been abroad throughout the land; you may almost hear the beating of his wings. There is no one, as when the first-born were slain of old, to sprinkle with blood the lintel and the two sideposts of our doors, that he may spare and pass on; he takes his victims from the castle of the noble, the mansion of the wealthy, and the cottage of the poor and the lowly, and it is on behalf of all these classes that I make this solemn appeal.
Hesse notes on Whitman

Mendelssohn, *Elijah*

1 The People

Help, Lord! Wilt though quite destroy us? The harvest now is over, the summer days are gone, and yet no power cometh to help us! Will then the Lord be no more God in Zion? The deeps afford no water; and the rivers are exhausted! The suckling's tongue now cleaveth for thirst to his mouth: the infant children ask for bread, and there is no one breaketh it to feed them.

You who are my Comforter[2] in sorrow, my heart is faint within me.

Listen to the cry of my people from a land far away:

"Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King no longer there?"

"Why have they aroused my anger with their images, with their worthless foreign idols?"

"The harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved."

Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me.

Is there no balm in Gilead?

Vaughan V

Dona Nobis

We looked for not good came time of health trouble! The his horses w from Dan; th trembled at the neighing ones; for the and have dev land and tho therein. The past, the sun ended, and w saved. Is the Gilead? Is the physician the then is not th daughter of r recovered?