

Translated Identities in Britten's *Nocturne*

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"It won't be madly popular because it is the strangest and remotest thing—but then dreams are strange and remote."¹ Benjamin Britten is speaking here of his *Nocturne*, a song cycle from 1958 for tenor, seven obligato instruments, and string orchestra, written for Peter Pears and dedicated to Alma Mahler. In this piece, Britten gathers poems and poetic fragments on the themes of night, sleep, and dreams. It is the idea of "remoteness," however, that intrigues me and offers a point of entry into my speculations. First, in an expressive dimension, it suggests a spatial expanse, or a distance to be traversed, both of which elements are important to the experience of the piece. In certain crucial ways, as we shall see, the *Nocturne* exploits and extends the romantic trope of *wie aus der Ferne*—distant voices overheard. Second, in a rhetorical dimension, "remoteness" suggests a complication in the relation of composer to audience. In contrast to a "popular," broadly accessible mode of expression, Britten aims for subtler effects, conveyed only in undertones. This implies a corresponding shift in position of the musical persona from a foreground expressive figure to a presence at some greater remove. One is led to expect some kind of filtering or abstraction of the composing voice, an element of reticence or inaccessibility to which listeners must adapt in their own ways. My discussion of this piece will explore such rhetorical issues: matters of self-presentation, perspective, and musical address, specifically a form of multivalent

1. Benjamin Britten to Marion, Lady Harewood, 20 August 1958, Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (New York: Scribner's, 1992), 385.

address in which different audiences are imagined simultaneously.

As is well known by now, Britten's homosexuality significantly shaped his career. In the translation from private identity to public bearing, certain tensions exercised a defining influence. Britten's desire for widespread acclaim, and thus his recognition of the need for discretion, warred with a longing for the more assertive mode of self-presentation advocated by other gay men, such as his mentor and collaborator W. H. Auden. The struggle between the assertion and the elision of sexual identity played out to a remarkable degree in the music itself. Britten found different ways of working with a homophobic content while making it safe for a general audience.² Early in his career, he veiled the love sonnets of Michelangelo for his *Cavaliere* by leaving them in the original language. The same was true for *Les Illuminations* of Rimbaud, from whose steamy visions Britten also excised an explicitly homosexual reference.³ Many of his operas cast the central energizing agency of male-male love as a deeply ambiguous symbol, poised midway between fear and desire; this is true, for instance, in *Billy Budd*, *The Turn of the Screw*, and *Death in Venice*. The representation of an alternative love destroyed by a powerful taboo provides a cathartic experience which straddles differences within the audience, whose members are both spellbound and uncomfortable for different reasons. In the *War Requiem*, the political implications of the piece help distract from the love of male youth which lies at the heart of its moral stance.

In the *Nocturne*, however, as well as in other pieces from the period, such as the fairy-tale ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas* and the opera *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Britten finds

2. I use "homophilic" as a term that does not merely reduce to sex or desire (as in "homosexual" or "homoerotic"), but encompasses the sense of an identity based on same-sex love. It is roughly analogous to "gay," but without the latter's political connotations.

3. "Catamites...rigged out in revolting luxury." Carpenter, *Britten*, 138.

another solution. Instead of hobbling homoerotic desire with a fearful ambiguity, he sublimates that desire, translating it into dreamy, twilight pleasures and magical, rarefied soundscapes.⁴ He fashions an intermediary place on the threshold between public and private realms. The blurred, suspended quality he creates accommodates a multitude of individual fantasies by dissolving or veiling their exact objects. This makes it safe for all sorts of listeners to entertain phantoms which would be disturbing or self-betraying if brought forth into the daylight.

Britten has chosen to visit the dream-world to make this possible. In the *Nocturne*, night and twilight are accorded special status as liminal or threshold realms, where everyday influences are submerged, leaving the way open for uncanny forces and strange insights. Four of the songs evoke pastoral scenes: Shelley's paean to the poetic imagination (no. 1); the moonlit Eden of Coleridge (no. 3); Middleton's band of nightly noises (no. 4); and Keats's breezy lullaby (no. 7).⁵ Amidst these pastorals appear more troubling intrusions: the underwater monster of Tennyson (no. 2); Wordsworth's insomniac tremors in the wake of the French Revolution (no. 5); and Wilfred Owen's eerie pacifist statement, with its vampiric Britannia-figure (no. 6). Shakespeare's love sonnet, with its dense conceit on night and day, shadows and light, brings the cycle to a close.

Most of the texts are fragments or excerpts, pulled from larger contexts. The Shelley text formed part of his "lyrical drama" *Prometheus Unbound* (1819); Coleridge's verses stem from an unfinished project, "The Wanderings of Cain" (1798); the Wordsworth narrative is excerpted from *The Prelude* (1805); and the Keats lines are taken from the long poem "Sleep and Poetry" (1817).⁶ These fragmentary texts resonate with the

4. See Philip Brett, "Britten's Dream," in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth Solie (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 259-80.

5. See Appendix for the complete texts of all eight songs.

6. Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 371.

need for a larger imaginative surrounding to place or complete them; a ghostly world hovering out of the frame, exerting its own force of fascination. The edges of the songs are thus often unclosed, "live" with the tension of an unfinished thought. Each song is scored distinctly, with its own obligato instrument; yet the various songs are bound together in a continuous flow of music. The lulling, muted strings which provide the connective tissue cast a twilight shade over the piece. The harmonic elusiveness of this sonorous background contributes to the overall effect of an in-between place, opening onto the unknown.

The opening of the cycle is already a problematic border, presenting as it does a speaker whose nature is never revealed, and an ambiguous, unsteady sense of perspective. "On a poet's lips I slept / Dreaming like a love-adept / In the sound his breathing kept." A first-person voice appears, speaking from an unusual position of creative, erotic intimacy with a poet. Without the original sustaining context of the poem, the "I," our first site of identification, remains an enigma: Is it a personification of the poet's uncreated works, an inspiring consciousness, or a projection of the poet's audience? Is it even human? What gives this voice the power to praise the poet? After the first tercet of the poem, however, the mysterious, undefined "I" disappears, as the focus comes to rest entirely on the poet, in the third person. The remainder of the text characterizes the transformative, "immortalizing" powers of his mind.

The music also begins with an unsteady sense of placement (example 1). As the rocking figure falls sleepily down through the strings, the harmony also slips from a C-major collection (violins, violas) through a B^b chord (cellos) to an arrival on A^b (basses). The textural layers maintain a certain harmonic individuality, since each separately implies a diatonic area inconsistent with the others. The brief appearances of the different tonal areas overlap one another, creating a blurry, slippery sense of harmonic place. This fluidity then extends in a sequential repetition (from D through C to B^b). The tenor's two opening

Very slow and soft (♩:♩:48) *p* *freely*

Voice
Oa a po-et's lips..... I slept

Violas I
ppp *very smooth*
div. muted *sim.*
ppp

Violas II
ppp *very smooth*
div. muted *sim.*

Violas
ppp *very smooth*
div. muted *sim.*

Violoacellos
ppp *very smooth*
div. muted *sim.*

Double Basses
ppp *very smooth*
div. muted *pp*

Voice
Dream-ing like a love - a - dept..... In the sound his breath -

Vln. I
ppp *very smooth*
div. muted *sim.*

Vln. II
ppp

Vla.
(*ppp*) *sim.*

Vc.
(*ppp*)

Db.
(*ppp*)

Example 1. *Nocturne*, Shelley, mm. 1-6.

phrases (mm. 1-3, 4-7) both begin in one apparent harmonic context and end in another, having moved there in a brief span of time. Their ends contradict their beginnings. Furthermore, each sinuous phrase seems to seek out its own melodic and rhythmic shape while resisting models of periodic structure, parallelism, or harmonic outlining.

The climax of tonal disorientation occurs in the passage which sets the sixth line of the text: "Of shapes that haunt thought's wildernesses" (example 2a). The music for the two previous lines has clearly established a key (E major) for the first time. At the sixth line (m. 11), there is a gradual addition of textural layers, in which each layer further distorts the key. The violins remain in E major; the violas introduce an incongruous A \sharp , the cellos an E \sharp , and the basses a pedal C \sharp . These overlappings result in a complex harmonic involution (mm. 12-13). At this point the upper strings alternate between two widely spaced but tonally dense chords. The first, stressed chord of the pair contains every note of an F \sharp major collection. The unstressed chord remains within E major (example 2b). The relation between the two chords as they sound, widely spaced and alternating quickly, is difficult to grasp. The harmonic turbulence following the entry of the basses heightens this confusion. The upper strings relinquish the previous harmonies for others equally complex; more transient and elusive, the chords in mm. 13-15 form no stable pattern of alternation, nor do they project any clear tonal direction. Part of the vagueness of the whole passage is due to the use of near-diatonic materials in a fluid harmonic context where no tonal centers coalesce. The registral breadth and tonal density of the passage evoke an image of fullness or vastness. The harmonic vagueness and transience suggest unformed materials, untamed forces, things somehow beyond one's grasp. For a moment the musical horizon opens onto mysterious depths—the wildernesses of the dreaming mind. The evocation of such a threshold experience sets the tone for later occurrences in the piece.

Voice

on the a-ë-real kiss-es Of shapes..... that baut..... thought's wild -

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

(*ppp*)

Voice

- er - oes - ses.

Vln. I

(*ppp*)

Vln. II

(*ppp*)

Vla.

(*ppp*)

Vc.

Db.

Example 2a. *Nocturne*, Shelley, mm. 10-15.

Example 2b. *Nocturne*, Shelley, F \sharp -major and E-major collections.

The first song as a whole explores harmonic space by impressionistic gestures of obscuring and emergence. The song begins with references to C, not as a place of stability, but as a tenuous point of departure for evasive maneuvers. Only gradually is there a turn toward the clarification of a tonic. The image of “yellow bees” evokes a dense chromatic cluster swarming around a G center. The return of the opening gesture on C (rehearsal number 2), emerging magically from the confusing cloud of bee-noise, is the first strong signal of a home key. This final section of the song consists of three phrases, corresponding to those of the opening section. But here, instead of following a sequential progression of tonal areas, the beginning of each phrase returns to C. In the final, climactic phrase (“Nurslings of immortality!”), the recurrent harmonic descent by whole tone is abandoned as C major saturates the texture of the orchestra.⁷ After so much obscurity, the effect of this extended celebration of a single diatonic area is dazzling (example 3). Even here, though, the tonal resolution is enigmatically inflected by the chromatic twisting of the tenor line. The final friction between C and D \flat plants a kernel of unexplained musical tension which will extend its influence over the rest of the cycle.

By the end of the first song, the listeners have been pulled toward a transcendent or universal perspective. In Shelley’s words, the imaginative ferment of poetry points us beyond

7. The first chord of each alternating pair consists of a C-major triad; the second chord adds D, F, A, and B, completing the C-major collection.

dying away

Voice
- - - - - lings of im - mor - tal - i - ty, of im - mor - tal -

Vla. I
Vla. II
Vla.
Vc.
Db.
(*ppp*)

Detailed description: This system of musical notation includes a vocal line and five instrumental staves. The vocal line is in treble clef and contains the lyrics "lings of im - mor - tal - i - ty, of im - mor - tal -". Above the vocal line, the instruction "dying away" is written. The instrumental staves are: Violin I (Vla. I), Violin II (Vla. II), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Double Bass (Db.). The Double Bass staff is marked with the dynamic *(ppp)*. The music is written in a common time signature and features a melodic line in the voice and a rhythmic accompaniment in the instruments.

Voice
- - - - - i - ty!

BASSOON OBLIGATO
ppp

Vla. I
Vla. II
Vla.
Vc.
Db.

Detailed description: This system continues the musical score. It includes a vocal line and five instrumental staves. The vocal line is in treble clef and contains the lyrics "i - ty!". Below the vocal line, there is a section for "BASSOON OBLIGATO" with the dynamic *ppp*. The instrumental staves are: Violin I (Vla. I), Violin II (Vla. II), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Double Bass (Db.). The music continues with the same melodic and rhythmic elements as the first system.

Example 3. *Nocturne*, Shelley, rehearsal number 2, mm. 9-13.

“living man,” toward an immortal realm. Correspondingly, in Britten’s music, the modest rocking figure from the opening has become a radiant, cosmic cradle, spanning over five octaves. From the initial ambiguous sense of persona the setting has opened out onto a seemingly limitless horizon. Such a diffusion of our particular identities as listeners into an oceanic perspective is a seductive and highly romantic design which pulses throughout the *Nocturne*.

For a further example of the diffusion of identity I turn to the fourth song. This song presents a gathering of midnight sounds, an array of non-human voices. The entire horn obligato consists of mimicry of the nocturnal voices—tolling bell, howling dog, croaking raven, peeping mouse. The tenor part maintains a line of its own, describing the scene without actually becoming lost in a succession of guises. But who is hearing the nightly noises? The song provides no clearly defined angle of identification. The scene’s perspective is left ambiguous, suspended between that of an unspecified, invisible observer (suggested by the voice) and an imaginary projection into the scattered positions of the night creatures (suggested by the horn).

At the climax, the crying of the cats is imbued with an unsettling, enigmatic intensity (example 4). The accompanying strings arrive at F minor in a way that implies both a fullness of that key, and a sense of inner tension. The seven pitches of the F-minor scale are arranged to counterpose elements of three tonal functions at once: the tonic in upper strings (C-A^b-F, reinforced by the horn), the dominant in middle strings (B^b-E-C, reinforced by the tenor), and the supertonic in lower strings (G-D-B^b). The ordinary, domestic “mewing” is transformed into a poignant outcry whose expressive impact overflows its verbal occasion. In its original context, an early seventeenth-century comedy, the song appears to have offered a well-patterned, euphonious tableau of night, in which human and animal spheres naturally intermesh. Britten’s setting unbalances the comfortable pattern by implying disparate, unknowable

spheres of experience and by leaving the listener somewhat lost among the *dramatis personae*.

This song achieves in one condensed image what the whole cycle does on a larger scale—that is, it scatters the lyrical voice into multiple perspectives. The horn's mimicry is reflected in large by the tenor's migration from one dream scenario to another. Britten sometimes chooses stylistic mimicry for his orchestral voice as well: neo-Baroque passacaglia for the Tennyson song, "English pastoral" style for the Keats, and Mahlerian expansiveness for the final sonnet. The disjunction of perspective is emphasized by the fragmentary nature of the various tableaux. It is articulated musically by the introduction of a distinct obligato instrument, and thus a new sound world, for each song. The succession of solo instruments, acting as counterparts to the tenor, reinforces the sense of a change of identity from song to song.

I have highlighted three ways in which the *Nocturne* offers a diffusion of identity: by staging gestures of liminal space; by pulling toward a transcendent perspective; and by a promiscuous scattering of the lyrical voice. Such diffusion carries a vague, generalized tinge of eroticism, in the invitation to dissolve oneself, to set oneself free from individual moorings, to be translated from "mortal blisses" to "aëreal kisses." The invitation is extended in syntactic terms by the use of a liquid, indefinite harmonic language, in spatial terms by the disclosure of charged musical expanses, and in cognitive terms by images of the unknowable and enigmatic.

The erotic has already been signaled in the opening lines of the first song, with their dreamy and densely-packed images of physical intimacy. The text then begins its movement from physical to spiritual, from mortal to immortal, from individual to indefinite—but only after having planted a particular erotic image. For Britten's specification of a tenor solo lends a homoerotic orientation to the transient first person, whose muse-like passion for the male poet serves as the *Nocturne's* point of departure. Under cover of a generalizing, transcendental perspec-

tive, Britten smuggles in images rooted in his own contingent, minority experience. Throughout the *Nocturne*, glimpses of a homophilic identity reveal themselves to the attuned ear.

The most overt of these glimpses occurs in the third song. Coleridge's scene of the lovely naked boy combines primal innocence and benevolent nature with the shadowy hint of desire. Britten's swirling harp and spare string effects (harmonics and pizzicato) manage to suggest the sensuous warmth and sparkling filigree of a moonlit night (example 5). In its interlacing around the voice, the harp might also suggest the more intimate caress of the leaves twining about the boy's body. The orchestration, together with the exaggerated simplicity of harmonic motion, creates a delicate, pristine musical world. The diatonic purity is disrupted only twice, before each of the two questions posed by the tenor, at the end of the passage (example 6). These questions mark the moments when the stasis of

9
lightly
Eo - cinc - tured.....

with a twine..... of leaves,

Example 5. *Nocturne*, Coleridge, rehearsal number 9.

Example 6. *Nocturne*, Coleridge, rehearsal number 11, mm. 4-8.

Example 6. *Nocturne*, Coleridge, rehearsal number 11, mm. 4-8.

the poetic image threatens to open out into narrative progression. They also mark the potential emergence of erotic awareness, in the figure who beguiles, the friend who protects. The questions, as well as the musical gestures, are left suspended. The introduction of narrative progression into this atemporal tableau could only lead to the loss of youth; the awareness of vulnerability could only lead to the loss of innocence.

A homophilic perspective also underlies the sixth song, which sets “The Kind Ghosts” by Wilfred Owen. Owen’s sensuous handling of the boys in the poem is conveyed in the images of their “soft breaths” and “red mouths.” But here, desire is the undercurrent to an icy, ironic anger. The boys are dead, having faithfully played a sacrificial role in the Great War. The sleeping woman of Owen’s poem represents the English nation, whose untroubled conscience and golden Victorian dreams are

pillowed by so many deaths. It is the loving authorial voice that is spurred to grief and compassion, and this love impels the sense of outrage at what has been lost.

Thus, while in one sense the cycle moves toward a dispersal of particulars, in another sense a collector's hand is at work. In the naked boy of Coleridge's garden, in the mute sacrificed youths of Owen's complaint, in Tennyson's submerged monster, in Shakespeare's sonnet of seduction, Britten gathers tokens of gay anger, fear, and desire. The *Nocturne* offers two paths of identification at once: one for a general audience, one for a smaller band of listeners hungry for instances of gay representation. The second message is conveyed sotto voce, in discreet glimpses which are never permitted to overwhelm the more general message. This instance of double address is a special example of the tension between testimony and discretion which makes itself felt again and again in Britten's work.

For those attuned to the subliminal erotic channel, the fleeting glimpses of male flesh form a tantalizing promise of meaning. It is not only the gender of these appearances which eroticizes them, but the rhythm and manner of their appearance. I quote Roland Barthes:

Is not the most erotic portion of the body where the garment gapes? ... It is intermittence...which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove and the sleeve); it is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance.⁸

The aptness of this aesthetic statement for the rhetorical effects in Britten's work stems from the fact that Barthes also was a homosexual man conforming to a model of discretion; that he too had something to hide or disclose.⁹ In the *Nocturne*, the

8. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1975), 9-10.

9. See D. A. Miller, *Bringing Out Roland Barthes* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992).

perspective Britten most identifies with is presented in the act of disappearing. He expresses his own identity only in suggestive flashes, as hints thrown out for the initiate. This subtle, allusive, flirting with the taboo can be stylish and exciting in its way; but we should recognize that it depends for its electrifying charge on a lifelong pattern of prevarication and self-effacement.

There is a historical point to be made here. Scholars in gay and lesbian studies have recently begun to examine the dynamics of the closet, by which I mean enforced public silence in matters of identity. The modern problematic of sexual orientation, more or less locked into place by the late nineteenth century, is inseparable from a problematic of secrecy and disclosure. The resulting uneasy accommodations have influenced forms of cultural expression and reception in ways that are still being calculated.¹⁰ For some, this influence has meant capitulation to the pressure for concealment or disavowal. Concealment may then become a thematic structure; the ominous image of a closed room whose secrets remain intact does in fact make appearances in Britten's work, notably in *Billy Budd* and *Owen Wingrave*.¹¹ But Britten's situation cannot be reduced to the exigencies of the closet; in both life and art, he refused to be completely silenced by societal strictures. His personal and artistic struggle regarding self-affirmation, from the 1930s to the 1970s, reflects an emergent claim for a public homosexual identity during this period. While some were

10. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990); Thomas E. Yingling, *Hart Crane and the Homosexual Text: New Thresholds, New Anatomies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); James Creech, *Closet Writing/Gay Reading: The Case of Melville's Pierre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

11. See Barry Emslie, "Billy Budd and the Fear of Words," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 4 (1992): 43-59; Stephen McClatchie, "Benjamin Britten, *Owen Wingrave*, and the Politics of the Closet: or, 'He shall be straightened out at Paramore,'" *Cambridge Opera Journal* 8 (1996): 59-75.

agitating from the margins, Britten expressed resistance from within mainstream musical discourse.

Thus in the *Nocturne* a private identity trembles on the edge of visibility. The metaphor of the protective closet is inadequate to characterize the prevailing aesthetic here, which is more permeable and transitional. Two other metaphors that I have already made use of prove more apt: the veil and the threshold. We have seen how these two symbolic concepts of indistinctness and liminality underlie the surface gestures of the piece. We have also seen how they structure its paths of personal and erotic identification. The veil allows for the suggestive blurring of identity and the objects of desire. Its diaphanous screen can be twitched aside in fleeting moments of revelation. The threshold evokes a magical crossing-place between different states: waking and dreaming, particular and diffuse, public and private. But there is a third level on which these two metaphors operate, namely, a historical dimension. In their emphasis on openness and permeability they embody a desire for liberation from the rhetorical confines of the closet. The threshold in this sense symbolizes stages of historical possibility.

What Britten dramatizes in this piece is a minority voice in the process of emergence from private fantasy into public awareness. It is not merely homoerotic desire that is at issue, but a larger social identity with desire at its core. We have seen how the political anger of the Owen song forms a part of this identity. From another angle, the Tennyson song, with its hideous, ravenous sea creature which must die if it rises to the surface, can be read as a nightmare of internalized oppression. In fact both these songs allegorize the tension between testimony and silence which characterizes Britten's emergent voice. They do this from opposite poles. The Tennyson song imagines with horror the day when the Kraken will leave his "secret cell," and emerge into the sight of humankind. On the other hand, the Owen song rails against the closet, the enforced silence which entombs the ghosts of war. The entire poem focuses on this

fatal silence: the ghosts who do not loom out of the stillness, the shades who keep down, whose blood lies quiet, whose “kindness” lies in remaining mute so as not to disturb the false dreams of their chatelaine. Owen’s ironic voice rails against this acquiescence. Britten has added a pervading irony by capturing the imagined sounds of footfall in the leaden pizzicato of the string accompaniment. In the text, the sacrificial spirits do not roam or make noise; but the music supplies those sounds which well might trouble the woman’s sleeping conscience.

The final song of the *Nocturne* brings together the main issues I have been discussing in one grand *double entendre*. The strong and purposeful first-person speaker of the poem gathers the hitherto scattered and ambiguous sense of identity into a coherent self. The sense of a culminating persona, a gathering of loose strands, is vividly symbolized in the orchestration (example 7). The seven obligato instruments, which previously appeared as soloists, now combine in a unified chordal texture. Their individual timbres are subsumed in a full orchestral color. The rhetorical intent of the sonnet, behind all the virtuosic verbal finery and the impassioned musical gestures, is an act of seduction. The speaker works his poetic magic to create a persuasive invitation, a plea for a meeting of souls. Note how the images of lover and beloved—“I” and “thee”—are verbally intertwined throughout the poem until they are figuratively united in the final two words: “thee me.”

Shakespeare’s sonnets, because of their poetic ambition, their cultural prestige, and the circumstances of their transmittal, stand today as statements of universal love. Divorced from their original narrative sequence, they have taken on an iconic character, generally applicable to suitors of all stripes. The lack of gender markers in this sonnet contributes to the effect of a universal perspective. And yet most of the original sonnet-sequence, the first one hundred twenty-six sonnets in fact, are devoted to an amorous friendship with a young nobleman. This homoerotic cast has been elided and sanitized in various

34

dim. *pp*

all the cheerful eyes That glance so bright - ly at the new sun rise.

Des. Harp *pp* *pp*

rall.

+ Cit. *pp*

+ Fl. R.R. *p*

(pizz.) *pp* *ppp* *imp.* *ppp*

7

35 Slow (♩ = 70-80)

When most I wink, then do mine eyes best see, For...

Str. solos *pp* *express. but marked*

Wind Sharp (- - - - -)

Detailed description of the musical score: The score is for a vocal piece with piano accompaniment. It is in G major and 3/4 time. The first system (rehearsal 34) shows the vocal line starting with a 'dim.' marking and a 'pp' dynamic. The piano accompaniment features a harp section with 'Des. Harp' and 'pp' markings. The second system continues the piano part with 'rall.' and various dynamics like 'pp', 'p', and 'ppp'. The third system (rehearsal 35) is marked 'Slow (♩ = 70-80)' and includes a string solo section with 'Str. solos' and 'pp express. but marked' markings. The score concludes with 'Wind Sharp' and a fermata.

Example 7. Nocturne, Shakespeare, rehearsal number 34.

ways throughout the poems' history;¹² but there has always been a faithful band of readers who cherish the poems for just this subtext. Alongside their history of general anthologization they have seen a more private transmission as one of the central texts of Western homophilic literature. Britten has chosen one of the sonnets addressed to the male friend. He is thus able to use Shakespeare with his two audiences in mind: as vehicle of a universalized love as well as a particular love.

The duality of rhetorical address is curiously reflected in the dual tonal orientation of this song. This is most obvious in the final moments, when the harmonies present the same juxtaposition (C-D^b) that was left in unresolved conflict at the end of the first song (example 9). But here there is no conflict. To see how Britten creates such a flexible harmonic orientation, we can go back to the end of the previous song (example 7). This song concludes by rehearsing the closing refrain of the first song, and thus returning to the C-D^b juxtaposition (rehearsal number 34). Here the C major fades away as D^b major grows, as if C is being subsumed into the leading tone for a new key (just as the sleepiness of the Keats passage has issued into a vision of the "new sunrise"). But the entrance of tenor and strings with the melody of the Shakespeare song, moving from C to G, combines in dissonance with the D^b chord, pushing it in another direction; in fact, the opening phrases of the song are more closely aligned with a C-minor center (witness the key signature). After much divagation, the song climaxes with a strong arrival on D^b (example 8; rehearsal number 38). But once again, the arrival is complicated by the melodic emphasis on C and G, keeping the D^b poised in quality between tonic and Neapolitan. Note in retrospect how the climax has been prepared not only by an A^b dominant, but by a G dominant as well in the previous measure. After these Mahlerian strains have died away (example 9), the final couplet comes in on an

12. Joseph Pequigney, *Such Is My Love: A Study of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

When in dead night thy fair in-per-lect shade Through bow-ry sleep

mf cresc *f cresc*

Example 8. *Nocturne*, Shakespeare, rehearsal number 38.

rall. *pp* as at the start

All days are nights to

see till I..... see thee, And nights bright days

mated Str.
Harp
ppp very smooth

when dreams do show thee me.

ppp *pppp*

Example 9. *Nocturne*, Shakespeare, rehearsal number 39.

unambiguous D^b major (rehearsal number 39), whose sway is magically stretched, through a Neapolitan path, by a move to a version of D dominant. D^b returns, but on the way to another magic swerve, now to C major. The tenor has finished; the strings hark back to the piece's opening sonorities, as if closure has been reached in the original key, and D^b has been subsumed into the Neapolitan of C. But then with a wink, D^b has the final delicate stroke. The piece cadences twice; within the flexible harmonic context, both C and D^b are able to project a sense of rest. This can be heard as another example of liminal tonal space, a final crossing-over between night and day.

Furthermore, Shakespeare's text once again allegorizes a tension between public and private realms, and a yearning for disclosure. The poet's daily life lacks focus; he "views things un-respected." It is only in the privacy of his dreaming life, with the radiant thoughts of his beloved, that he gains direction. So much in the first four lines. The remainder of the poem presses on us his fervent wish to bring forth that private love into daylight; to move from sheltered fantasy to public acknowledgment; in effect, to break the twilight spell which has held us for the duration of the *Nocturne*.

Britten has fashioned an integrative vision in which overt and covert elements, special and general meanings, are sustained with equal commitment. But to do this he has had to create "the strangest and remotest thing." The "remoteness" Britten recognized in his song cycle refers on the one hand to the seductive expanses so important to the general experience of the piece, and on the other, to the delicate subterfuge by which it was necessary to encode his highly personal perspective. But is this "minority" voice so remote from a universal perspective? Its confidential undertones of love, anger, and the search for self-affirmation are common enough. They simply require an honest translation.

Appendix: The Texts of Britten's *Nocturne*

1.

On a poet's lips I slept
 Dreaming like a love-adept
 In the sound his breathing kept;
 Nor seeks nor finds he mortal blisses,
 But feeds on the aëreal kisses
 Of shapes that haunt thought's wildernesses.
 He will watch from dawn to gloom
 The lake-reflected sun illumine
 The yellow bees in the ivy-bloom,
 Nor heed nor see, what things they be;
 But from these create he can
 Forms more real than living man,
 Nurslings of immortality!

– *Prometheus Unbound*, Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

2. (Bassoon obligato)

Below the thunders of the upper deep;
 Far, far beneath in the abysmal sea,
 His ancient, dreamless, uninvaded sleep
 The Kraken sleepeth: faintest sunlights flee
 About his shadowy sides: above him swell
 Huge sponges of millennial growth and height;
 And far away into the sickly light,
 From many a wondrous grot and secret cell
 Unnumber'd and enormous polypi
 Winnow with giant arms the slumbering green.
 There hath he lain for ages and will lie
 Battening upon huge seaworms in his sleep,
 Until the latter fire shall heat the deep;
 Then once by men and angels to be seen,
 In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die.

– “The Kraken,” Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)

3. (Harp obligato)

Encinctured with a twine of leaves,
 That leafy twine his only dress!
 A lovely Boy was plucking fruits,
 By moonlight, in a wilderness.

The moon was bright, the air was free,
 And fruits and flowers together grew
 On many a shrub and many a tree:
 And all put on a gentle hue,
 Hanging in the shadowy air
 Like a picture rich and rare.
 It was a climate where, they say,
 The night was more beloved than day.
 But who that beauteous Boy beguil'd,
 That beauteous Boy to linger here?
 Alone, by night, a little child,
 In place so silent and so wild—
 Has he no friend, no loving mother near?

– “The Wanderings of Cain,” Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)

4. (Horn obligato)

Midnight's bell goes ting, ting, ting, ting,
 Then dogs do howl, and not a bird does sing
 But the nightingale, and she cries twit, twit, twit;
 Owls then on every bough do sit;
 Ravens croak on chimneys' tops;
 The cricket in the chamber hops;
 The nibbling mouse is not asleep,
 But he goes peep, peep, peep, peep, peep;
 And the cats cry mew, mew, mew,
 And still the cats cry mew, mew, mew.

– “Blurt, Master Constable,” Thomas Middleton (1570?-1627)

5. (Timpani obligato)

But that night
 When on my bed I lay, I was most mov'd
 And felt most deeply in what world I was;
 With unextinguish'd taper I kept watch,
 Reading at intervals; the fear gone by
 Press'd on me almost like a fear to come;
 I thought of those September Massacres,
 Divided from me by a little month,
 And felt and touch'd them, a substantial dread;
 The rest was conjured up from tragic fictions,
 And mournful Calendars of true history,
 Remembrances and dim admonishments.
 “The horse is taught his manage, and the wind

Of heaven wheels round and treads in his own steps,
 Year follows year, the tide returns again,
 Day follows day, all things have second birth;
 The earthquake is not satisfied at once."
 And in such way I wrought upon myself,
 Until I seem'd to hear a voice that cried
 To the whole City, "Sleep no more."

– *The Prelude* (1805), William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

6. (English Horn obligato)

She sleeps on soft, last breaths; but no ghost looms
 Out of the stillness of her palace wall,
 Her wall of boys on boys and dooms on dooms.

She dreams of golden gardens and sweet glooms,
 Not marvelling why roses never fall
 Nor what red mouths were torn to make their blooms.

The shades keep down which well might roam her hall.
 Quiet their blood lies in her crimson rooms
 And she is not afraid of their footfall.

They move not from her tapestries, their pall,
 Nor pace her terraces, their hecatombs,
 Lest aught she be disturbed, or grieved at all.

– "The Kind Ghosts," Wilfred Owen (1893-1918)

7. (Flute and Clarinet obligato)

What is more gentle than a wind in summer?
 What is more soothing than the pretty hummer
 That stays one moment in an open flower,
 And buzzes cheerily from bower to bower?
 What is more tranquil than a musk-rose blowing
 In a green island, far from all men's knowing?
 More healthful than the leafiness of dales?
 More secret than a nest of nightingales?
 More serene than Cordelia's countenance?
 More full of visions than a high romance?
 What, but thee, Sleep? Soft closer of our eyes!
 Low murmurer of tender lullabies!
 Light hoverer around our happy pillows!
 Wreather of poppy buds, and weeping willows!

Silent entangler of a beauty's tresses!
Most happy listener! when the morning blesses
Thee for enlivening all the cheerful eyes
That glance so brightly at the new sun-rise.

– "Sleep and Poetry," John Keats (1795-1821)

8.

When most I wink, then do mine eyes best see,
For all the day they view things unrespected;
But when I sleep, in dreams they look on thee,
And darkly bright, are bright in dark directed.
Then thou, whose shadow shadows doth make bright,
How would thy shadow's form form happy show
To the clear days with thy much clearer light,
When to unseeing eyes thy shade shines so!
How would, I say, mine eyes be blessed made
By looking on thee in the living day,
When in dead night thy fair imperfect shade
Through heavy sleep on sightless eyes doth stay!
All days are nights to see till I see thee,
And nights bright days when dreams do show thee me.

– Sonnet 43, William Shakespeare (1564-1616)