

The Sea, the Sea!

Ariel Wagner Parker

I don't think I shall be going to the sea this year so I'm bringing the sea to me.

The need for the sea surges up in me each year when summer starts like an emotional thirst, a vague aching dissatisfaction of the senses.

Even grey sea, with the suck and hiss of water scraping down shingle and the bursting roar as waves crash back on pebbles, with outbreaks of gull-hysteria overhead.

This was the sea I grew up with. In London it was always an irrevocable presence, the Thames its initiatory path and the crying gulls its prophets. You knew it was there, not far away.

Like home, you could go there if you had to.

But I really long for sea of more southerly colours: green, turquoise, blue, aquamarine, cobalt, purple; the liquefied light, the world beneath the looking-glass, the sun straking and quivering over the stirring water, self-absorbed, gently rocking.

And rocking you as you float spread-eagled on the warm soft surface, feeling the liquid solidity of the vast deepness below you, the warming sun above.

Return to the waters of the womb. *Notre mère la mer*.

The sea that Xenophon's soldiers greeted with the famous cry, *Thalassa! Thalassa!*

The ringing ecstasy of the cry is better known than the story surrounding it, which Xenophon tells in his *Anabasis Kyrou*, the disastrous *Cyrus Expedition*, which he knew from personal experience. Athenian Xenophon, soldier, poet, historian, friend of Socrates.

In 401 BC, Cyrus the Younger organises an expedition to the Persian Empire, in an attempt to wrest the throne from his brother, King Artaxerxes II. Xenophon joins him, along with ten thousand Greek mercenaries.

But Cyrus' plan goes horribly wrong. He himself is killed in battle at Cunaxa on the Euphrates and the "Ten Thousand" are left leaderless on the alien plain between the Tigris and the Euphrates. The armies of Artaxerxes are after them and they are over 1,600 kilometres away from home.

Xenophon is appointed as one of the generals in command who are to lead the retreat from Cunaxa. He and his soldiers battle their way through various hostile peoples in the valleys of the Tigris and upper Euphrates, north-westwards across the mountains toward Trapezus (now Trabzon) on the Black Sea.

Exhausted and despairing of ever reaching the sea, they finally come to a mountain about 50 kilometres inland from the

coast, which Xenophon calls Theches.

The men of the vanguard clamber up to the top of the mountain – and there it is before them, shining and shimmering in the distance.

"*Thalassa! Thalassa!*"

"Thereupon they began running, rearguard and all, and the baggage animals and horses came galloping up. But when they had reached the summit, then indeed they fell to embracing one another – generals and officers and all – and the tears trickled down their cheeks."

In their joy, the Greeks did not forget their duty and built a great stone cairn, to thank the gods for their safe delivery.

Ten years ago, British scholar Timothy Mitford thought he had identified Xenophon's Theches as Deveboyu Tepe, 50 kilometres south of Trabzon.

From the top of the mountain, Mitford found "... a stupendous vantage point where perhaps 400 men could stand and gaze down on the distant sea" ... and the circular base of a huge stone cairn.

For the record, the shining moment of the cry was only the high point and not the happy end of the campaign. Most of the "Ten Thousand" did manage to return to Greece, but the political chaos they encountered when they crossed the Bosphorus left them just as isolated and defenceless as they had been in Mesopotamia ...

Yet the famous cry went up and the moment has come down to us over nearly two and a half millennia, continuing to raise our spirits and fire our imagination.

And fuel discussion.

There is a longstanding dispute among scholars about whether the cry was uttered in Attic or Doric, "*Thalassa! Thalassa!*" or "*Thalatta! Thalatta!*".

James Joyce's amused comment on the subject was, "The latter! The latter!" And his pun inspired him to some verbal shenanigans in *Finnegans Wake*:

"The letter! The letter!"; "ye sea! that lub ye lassers, Thalassae"; "kolassa! Kolassa!"; "Galata! Galata!"; "tha lassy! tha lassy!"



The Sea, the Sea!

Joyce makes his own homage to *notre mère la mer* at the beginning of *Ulysses*, when "stately, plump Buck Mulligan" mounts to the parapet of the Martello tower and gazes out over Dublin Bay.

"God, he said quietly. Isn't the sea what *Algy* calls it: a greysweet mother? The snot-green sea. The scrotumtightening sea. *Epi oinopa ponton*. Ah, Dedalus, the Greeks, I must teach you. You must read them in the original. *Thalatta! Thalatta!* She is our great sweet mother. Come and look!"

Forty years on, in his poem called *Thalassa*, Louis MacNeice hails the sea as the element that makes men pure, strong and free.

It ends:

*"Put out to sea, ignoble comrades,
Whose record shall be noble yet;
Butting through scarp of moving marble*

*The narwhal dares us to be free;
By a high star our course is set,
Our end is Life. Put out to sea."*

The Sea, the Sea! It is there and you can go to it if you have to.

I can "run out the boat" with MacNeice, gaze out over Dublin Bay with Buck Mulligan ... or even recall a moment of total contentment, floating on my back in the eastern Mediterranean, late one warm afternoon, with only Turkey separating me from the Black Sea – over which the cry of Xenophon's "Ten Thousand" echoes still...