Transcendental Sonnets

on poems by Jones Very (1813-1880)

For SATB Chorus,
Soprano and Tenor Soloists, and Orchestra

by Kyle Gann (2001-2)
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Love 45

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Score is in C

Duration: 35 minutes
Jones Very (1813-1880) was the son of two cousins who never married: his father a roving sea captain, his mother an outspoken atheist. This was a difficult beginning for a young man in 19th-century Salem, Massachusetts, and Very compensated by becoming intensely religious, and by enrolling at Harvard, where he won the distinguished Bowdoin prize for his essays, graduated second in his class, and was afterward hired as a Greek tutor. In September of his third year as tutor, 1838, he began telling his students that the Holy Spirit was speaking through him. The President of Harvard immediately removed him, and Very was placed in an asylum for a month, released when his caretakers confirmed that he was harmless. In the next year and a half, Very wrote over 300 poems of an ecstatic nature, some of them written from the points of view of God, Christ, and the Holy Ghost. "[N]one can hear," he wrote with touching poignancy, "the man grown silent in the praise of God."

Luckily, before the onset of his madness - if madness it was - Very had been befriended by several members of the Transcendentalist movement, including especially Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott, and Elizabeth Palmer Peabody. His supporters were struck with the insight with which Very dissected and deconstructed the souls of the people he met and harangued, prominent ministers among them. As the redoubtable Transcendentalist scholar Perry Miller puts it, "By 1839 insanity was a hazard the Transcendentalists were prepared to run.... The Transcendental theory of genius practically demanded one or two mad poets; most Transcendentalists were not quite prepared to sacrifice themselves, and Very vindicated the theory by proving a willing victim." In 1839 Emerson collected and edited some sixty of Very's poems and essays and had them published in book form.

Very's poetic output from this period comprises a little-known and fertile fount of Western mysticism. As a poet he has been aptly criticized for the narrowness of his range and the monochromaticism of his tone - and yet the elegantly natural concision of his language and the penetrating power of his metaphors result in many unforgettable passages. The intensity of his ecstatic state sometimes melts away syntax, leaving behind passages worthy of a post-Calvinist Gertrude Stein. Very foresaw that his ecstasy would last not much more than a year. In late 1839 it faded, and although he was finally licensed to preach, he had retired by 1843, and lived out his last four decades in shadowy obscurity, still writing poetry that by then, devoid of the Holy Spirit's infusions, had become mechanical and pedestrian.

A regular pilgrim to Walden Pond since the early 1980s, I have nurtured a lifelong fascination with Transcendentalism; this is not the first time I have set its poetry. All of the poems by Very I chose for Transcendental Sonnets are from the 1838-39 period, and all of them are sonnets - overwhelmingly Very's favorite genre, and the one in which he did his most eloquent work. "The Son" is one of his best-known, most widely reprinted verses. Many of his finest poems are dark portrayals of an earth peopled by the walking dead, those who live outside daily communion with God: I felt that I should impose on the audience no more than two of these, "Enoch" and "Faith." I was touched by "Enoch"'s sad image of a lonely God walking on the earth, and its quintessentially Transcendentalist point that the true temple of God isn't churches of stone and wood, but the human soul. "Love" appealed to me for its very musical image of a long journey.
brought around again to its starting point. The final song is made up from two of his most mystical sonnets, both titled "The Word"; I omit the last six lines from the first poem, which paint too contrasting a mood.

In setting texts I always allow the text to lead, and to suggest the style of the music, with the result here that the songs suggest historical idioms more directly than anything else I've written. The project, as I saw it, was to find within the context of postminimalism a style, or several styles, of contrapuntal choral singing which would be gratifying to sing. The first movement, "The Son," was drawn very much from the structure of the poem, with the addition that the four parts of the choir each introduce their lines of text independently, in echoing but contrasting melodies. The remaining four movements follow - though always within a postminimalist context, with its limitation of harmonic materials - a stylistic progression from the music of Very's youth to the present day. "Enoch" represents the 18th-century American hymn and fuging tune (one might say a "Stravinskyized" William Billings); "Love" a 19th-century romantic choral style; "Faith" a more dissonant, modernist relationship of harmonies; and "The Word" a postmodern conception fusing aspects of minimalism with the rhythmic ideas of Henry Cowell and Conlon Nancarrow, attempting more than the others to capture Very's ecstatic state. I hope that this symphony of American psalms will be a testament to our native, Yankee brand of spirituality.

I offer my inexpressible thanks to James Bagwell and the Indianapolis Symphonic Choir for making the composition and performance of this work possible. While working on it, I had a feeling that I was born to write this piece: that the spirit of Jones Very had been following me for many years, impelling me toward Walden Pond, to Emerson's house, to the bookstores of Concord, Massachusetts, endlessly asking, When are you going to write my songs? I can dedicate the piece to no one more appropriate than my father, who has sung in choruses his entire life, and who especially loves music for chorus and orchestra.

- Kyle Gann
August, 2001
Lewisburg, PA

The Son (November 1838)

Father, I wait thy word. The sun doth stand
Beneath the mingling line of night and day,
A listening servant, waiting thy command
To roll rejoicing on its silent way;
The tongue of time abides the appointed hour,
Till on our ear its solemn warnings fall;
The heavy cloud withholds the pelting shower,
Then every drop speeds onward at thy call;
The bird reposes on the yielding bough,
With breast unswollen by the tide of song;
So does my spirit wait thy presence now
To pour thy praise in quickening life along,
   Chiding with voice divine man's lengthened sleep,
While round the Unuttered Word and Love their vigils keep.

Enoch (November 1838)

I looked to find a man who walked with God,
   Like the translated patriarch of old;
Though gladdened millions on his footstool trod,
   Yet none with him did such sweet converse hold;
I heard the wind in low complaint go by
   That none his melodies like him could hear;
Day unto day spoke wisdom from on high,
   Yet none like David turned a willing ear;
God walked alone unhonored through the earth;
   For him no heart-built temple open stood,
The soul forgetful of her nobler birth
   Had hewn him lofty shrines of stone and wood,
And left unfinished and in ruins still
The only temple he delights to fill.

Love (November 1838)

I asked of Time to tell me where was Love;
   He pointed to her foot-steps on the snow,
Where first the angel lighted from above,
   And bid me note the way and onward go;
Through populous streets of cities spreading wide,
   By lonely cottage rising on the moor,
Where bursts from sundered cliff the struggling tide,
   To where it hails to sea with answering roar,
She led me on; o'er mountain's frozen head,
   Where mile on mile still stretches on the plain,
Then homeward whither first my feet she led,
   I traced her path along the snow again;
But there the sun had melted from the earth
The prints where first she trod, a child of mortal birth.

Faith (late 1838-early 1839)

There is no faith; the mountain stands within
   Still unrebuked, its summit reaches heaven;
And every action adds its load of sin,
   For every action wants the little leaven;
There is no prayer; it is but empty sound,
That stirs with frequent breath the yielding air,
With every pulse they are more strongly bound,
Who make the blood of goats the voice of prayer;
Oh heal them, heal them, Father, with thy word.--
Their sins cry out to thee from every side;
From son and sire, from slave and master heard,
Their voices fill the desert country wide;
And bid thee hasten to relieve and save,
By him who rose triumphant o'er the grave.

The Word (1838-9)

There is no voice but that which speaks in Thee;
For This the world created and creates;
This was, before it bade the light to be;
It is; and is to come; it knows no dates;
By it, spring forth the time-born sons of earth,
That as the grass before the mower falls;
In it, are born the sons of heavenly birth,
And to itself their weary feet it calls;....

The Word (1838-9)

The voice that speaks when thou art in thy tomb,
And spoke before thou sawst the morning light;
This is the Word! of all that is the womb,
Of all that see the never failing sight;
Speechless yet ever speaking, none can hear
The man grown silent in the praise of God;
For they within him live to hope and fear;
They walk and speak, but he the grass-green sod;
Its presence round them calls them hence to It,
A Voice too great for murmur or reproof;
A sun that shines till they are of it lit,
Itself the utterance of Eternal Truth;
Perfect, without a blemish; never found
Save through the veil that wraps thy being round.

to my father

Transcendental Sonnets:
The Son

Commissioned by the Indianapolis Symphonic Choir

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Jones Very
1838

Flute
Oboe
Clarinet in Bb*
Bassoon
Horn in F*
Trumpet in Bb*
Harp
Soprano
Alto
Tenor
Bass
Glockenspiel
Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Violoncello
Contrabass

*Score in C

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Transcendental Sonnets: The Son
Transcendental Sonnets: The Son
Transcendental Sonnets: The Son
The tongue of time abides the appointed hour
Till on our ear its so-

Transcendental Sonnets: The Son
Transcendental Sonnets: The Son
Transcendental Sonnets: The Son
Transcendental Sonnets: The Son
with breast un-swollen by the tide of song

Transcendental Sonnets: The Son
Transcendental Sonnets: The Son
So does my spirit wait thy presence now.

Transcendental Sonnets: The Son
To pour thy praise in quick'ning life a long

To pour thy praise in quick'ning life a long

Now

To pour thy praise in quick'ning life a-

Spirit wait thy presence now

Transcendental Sonnets: The Son
Transcendental Sonnets: The Son
While round the Unuttered Word and Love their vigils keep

Mysterious

Transcendental Sonnets: The Son
Fl.
Ob.
Hp
S.
Vln I
Vln II
Vla
Vc.
Cb.

vi-gils keep

and Love their vi-gils keep

vi-gils keep_

Word and Love their vi-gils keep_

Transcendental Sonnets: The Son
Transcendental Sonnets: The Son
Fl. ritard........ a tempo div. slight ritard.
Ob. 
Cl. 
Bsn 1. pp
Hp B - Bb B - Bb E - Eb D# - D
S. pp
A. 
T. 
B. ritard...... a tempo slight ritard. July 1-14, 2001 Lewisburg, PA
Vln I Vln II
Vla mp
Vc. pp
Cb. pp

Transcendental Sonnets: The Son
I looked to find a man who walked with God,
Like the translated patriarch of old; Though glad dened
Like the translated patriarch of old; Though glad dened
Like the translated patriarch of old; Though glad dened
Like the translated patriarch of old; Though glad dened
millions on his footstool trod, Yet none with him did such sweet...
Transcendental Sonnets: Enoch

I heard the wind in low com-

verse. hold.

Verse: I heard the wind in low com-

verse. hold.

Verse: I heard the wind in low com-

verse. hold.

Verse: I heard the wind in low com-
Transcendental Sonnets: Enoch
Transcendental Sonnets: Enoch
day spoke wisdom from on high, Yet none like David

Transcendental Sonnets: Enoch
God walked alone unho- nored through the earth

Transcendental Sonnets: Enoch
For him no heart built temple open stood

The soul forgetful of her nobler birth

Had hewn lofty shrines of stone and wood,

And left unfinished and in ruin still

The on-ly tem-ple de-lights to fill.

Transcendental Sonnets: Enoch
walked alone unhonored through the earth alone unhonored

God walked alone unhonored through the earth

Transcendental Sonnets: Enoch
Fl.

Ob.

Bsn

T.S.

S.

A.

T.

B.

Vln I

Vln II

Vla

Vc.

Transcendental Sonnets: Enoch

God walked un-

- nored on the earth, a-
lone un-

- ho- nored

walked a-

- lone un-

- ho- nored through the earth

walked a-

- lone un-

- ho- nored through the earth

God walked a-

- lone un-

- ho- nored through the earth,

fl.
Transcendental Sonnets: Enoch

For him no heart-built temple o-pen stood; no heart-built temple o-pen stood.

For him no heart-built temple o-pen stood; no heart-built temple o-pen stood.

For him no heart-built temple o-pen stood; no heart-built temple o-pen stood.

For him no heart-built temple o-pen stood; no heart-built temple o-pen stood.

For him no heart-built temple o-pen stood; no heart-built temple o-pen stood.
Fl.
Ob.
Cl.
Bsn
T.S.
S.
A.
T.
B.
Vln I
Vln II
Vla
Vc.

heart-built temple stood

temple o-pen stood, no temple o-pen stood

stood, no temple o-pen stood, no temple o-pen stood; The soul for-get-ful of her no-bler

For him no heart-built temple o-pen stood, no temple o-pen stood, no heart-built temple

Transcendental Sonnets: Enoch
The soul forgetful of its nobler birth
Hewn him

The soul forgetful of her nobler birth,
Forgetful of her nobler birth Had hewn him lofty shrines of

getiful of her nobler birth, the soul forgetful
Had

birth, the soul forgetful, the soul forgetful of her birth

open stood; The soul forgetful of her nobler birth, forgetful

Transcendental Sonnets: Enoch
Transcendental Sonnets: Enoch
And left un-fi-nished and in ru-ins still, the
On-ly tem-ple he de-lights to fill.

The on-ly tem-ple he de-lights to fill.

And left un-fi-nished and in ru-ins still,
Transcendental Sonnets: Enoch
The transcendent sonnets: Enoch

For him no heart-built temple open stood

Transcendental Sonnets: Enoch
soul forgetful of her nobler birth

Transcendental Sonnets: Enoch
hewn him lofty shrines of stone and wood

Transcendental Sonnets: Enoch
Transcendental Sonnets: Enoch
God walked alone unhonored through the earth; For him no heart-built temple ope

The soul forgetful of her nobler birth Had hewn him lofty shrines of stone and wood,
And left un-finished and in ru-ins still, in ru-ins still

And left un-finished and in ruins still, in ruins still

And left un-finished and in ruins still

And left un-finished and in ruins still

Transcendental Sonnets: Enoch
Transcendental Sonnets: Enoch
Transcendental Sonnets:
Love

Jones Very
1838

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Flute

Oboe

Clarinet in Bb

Bassoon

Horn in F

Trumpet in Bb

Trombone

Timpani

Harp

Solo Soprano

Soprano

Alto

Tenor

Bass

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

Contrabass

I asked of Time to tell me where was Love
tell me where was Love;

I asked of Time to tell me where was Love;

He pointed to her footsteps on the

I asked of Time to tell me where was Love;

I asked of Time to tell me where was Love;

Transcendental Sonnets: Love
Transcendental Sonnets: Love

He pointed to her foot steps on the snow,
Where first snow,

He pointed to her foot steps on the snow
He pointed to her foot steps on the snow
He pointed to her foot steps on the snow

Transcendental Sonnets: Love
the Angel lighted from above,

Where first the Angel, the Angel lighted from above

Where first the Angel, the Angel lighted from above

Where first the Angel, ligh-ted from a-bove,

Where first the Angel, Angel ligh-ted from a-bove

Where first the Angel, ligh-ted from a-bove,

Transcendental Sonnets: Love
Through populous streets of cities spreading wide,
Through populous streets of cities spreading wide,

Spreading wide, spreading wide,

Spreading wide, spreading wide,

By lonely cottage spreading wide,

Spreading wide, spreading wide,

By
Transcendental Sonnets: Love

By lonely cot-tage ris-ing

By lonely cot-tage ris-ing on the moor, ris-ing

By lonely cot-tage ris-ing on the moor,

By lonely cot-tage ris-ing on the moor,

By lonely cot-tage ris-ing on the moor,

By lonely cot-tage ris-ing on the moor,
Transcendental Sonnets: Love
bursts, from sun-dered cliff the strug-gling tide,
To where it
from sun-dered cliff the strug-gling tide,
To where it hails the sea with
the strug-gling tide, the strug-gling tide,
To where it hails the
sun-dered cliff the strug-gling tide,
To where it
sun-dered cliff the strug-gling tide,
To where it

Transcendental Sonnets: Love
Transcendental Sonnets: Love
Transcendental Sonnets: Love
Where mile on mile still stretches on the plain,

f

Where mile on mile still stretches on the plain,

f

Where mile on mile still stretches on the plain,

f

Transcendental Sonnets: Love
S. spreading wide, By lonely cottage rising
A. spreading wide, By lonely cottage rising
T. spreading wide, By lonely cottage rising
B. spreading wide, By lonely cottage rising

Transcendental Sonnets: Love
on the moor, Where bursts from sun-dered cliff, the strug-gling tide,
Transcendental Sonnets: Love

To where it hails the sea, with answering roar, She

 Quieter but still intense

She

mf

mf

mf

mf
Transcendental Sonnets: Love
stretches on the plain; Then home-ward whi-ther, first my feet she...
Transcendental Sonnets: Love

led I traced her path along the snow again
But

led I traced her path along the snow again
But

led I traced her path along the snow again
But

led I traced her path along the snow again
But
Fl

Cl

Hp

S

A

T

B

Vln I

Vln II

Vla

Vc

Cb

there the sun had melted from the earth The prints

there the sun had melted from the earth The prints

there the sun had melted from the earth The prints

there the sun had melted from the earth The prints

Transcendental Sonnets: Love
Transcendental Sonnets: Love

Mystical

where first she trod,
A child, of mortal

where first she trod,
A child, of mortal

where first she trod,
A child, of mortal

where first she trod,
A child, of mortal

Transcendental Sonnets: Love
Transcendental Sonnets: Love
Without ritard.

Transcendental Sonnets: Love
There is no faith, There is no faith, There is no faith, There is no faith.
Transcendental Sonnets: Faith
Transcendental Sonnets: Faith

And every action adds its load of sin,
For heaven;

And every action adds its load of sin,
For heaven;

And every action adds its load of sin,
For heaven;

And every action adds its load of sin,
For heaven;

And every action adds its load of sin,
For heaven;
Transcendental Sonnets: Faith

[Music notation with detailed annotations]

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Every action wants the little leaven; There is no faith, There is no faith, There is no faith, The

The

There is no faith, There is no faith, There is no faith, The

The

There is no faith, There is no faith, There is no faith, The

There is no faith, There is no faith, There is no faith, The

There is no faith, There is no faith, There is no faith, The

Transcendental Sonnets: Faith
mountain stands within still unrepented
its summit reaches heaven;

The mountain stands within still unrepented;
its summit

lightly

lightly

lightly

Transcendental Sonnets: Faith
And every action adds its load of sin

And every action adds its load of sin,

reaches heaven;

And every action adds its load of sin

reaches heaven;

And every action adds its load of
Transcendental Sonnets: Faith
breath the yielding air, With every pulse they are more
Transcendental Sonnets: Faith
Transcendental Sonnets: Faith

[Music notation as shown in the image]
Transcendental Sonnets: Faith
Transcendental Sonnets: Faith

That it is but empty sound
That stirs with frequent breath the yielding air;

That stirs with frequent breath the yielding air;

stirs with frequent breath the yielding air;

With every
With every pulse they are more strongly bound,
Who make the
blood of goats

The voice of prayer:

Oh,

Who make the blood of goats

Who make the blood of goats

Who make the blood of goats

The voice of prayer:

Oh,
Transcendental Sonnets: Faith
Transcendental Sonnets: Faith
Transcendental Sonnets: Faith
country wide, And bid Thee hasten
Transcendental Sonnets: Faith
Transcendental Sonnets: Faith

to relieve and save

By him who
Transcendental Sonnets: Faith

rose triumphant o'er the grave

Their voices fill the

Transcendental Sonnets: Faith
Transcendental Sonnets: Faith
Transcendental Sonnets: Faith
Transcendental Sonnets: Faith

By him who rose triumphant

voices fill the desert country wide; And bid thee hasten to relieve and save,

believing and save By him who rose triumphant
By him who rose triumphant o'er the grave.  Their voices fill the desert.

Transcendental Sonnets: Faith
Transcendental Sonnets: Faith
Transcendental Sonnets: Faith

bid thee has ten to relieve and save,

By
hymn who rose triumphant o'er the grave

Transcendental Sonnets: Faith
Transcendental Sonnets:
The Word

\( \text{J} = 40 \)  With quiet, sustained ecstasy

There is no voice but that which speaks

There is no voice but that

With quiet, sustained ecstasy
Thee
For this the world created and creates
is no voice but that which speaks in Thee. For this the world,
There is no voice but that which speaks in Thee;
which speaks in Thee; For this the world created
Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
For this the world
This was be fore it bade

cre a ted and cre a tes This was be fore it bade

world cre a ted and cre a tes This was be fore

and cre a tes This was be fore it bade the

Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
It is; and is to come; It is to come. It knows no dates.

The light to be; It is and is to come. It knows no dates.

It bade the light to be; It is, and is to come. It knows no dates.

It is; and is to come; It knows no dates.

Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
There is no voice but that,
By it spring forth the time-born sons of earth,

By it, spring forth the time-born sons of earth,

Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
which speaks in Thee

the sons of earth That as the grass before the mow

time-born sons of earth That as the grass before the mow-falls

the time-born sons of earth That as the grass before

Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
Fl. 1
Fl. 2
Ob. 1
Ob.
Hn
S.S.
T.S.
S. er falls In it are born the sons of hea-ven-ly birth
A. the mo-mer falls In it are born the sons of hea-ven-ly birth
T. falls the mo-mer falls In it are born the sons of hea-ven-ly birth,
B. the mo-mer falls In it are born the sons of hea-ven-ly birth,
Vln I
Vln II
Vla
Vc.
Cb.

For this the world cre-a-ted and cre-ates

Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
It is, and is to come. It knows no dates

The voice that speaks when thou art in thy tomb,

Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
That as the grass before the mower spoke This is the Word! the Word of all that is the morning light; This is the Word! of all that is the womb, of
In it are born the sons of womb; of all that see the never failing sight Speechless yet ever
all that see the never failing sight Speechless yet ever
is the womb of all that see the never failing light; Speechless yet ever

Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
The man grown silent in the praise of

The man grown silent in the praise of

The man grown silent in the praise of
And to itself their weary feet it calls

God, Silent in the praise of God, For

in the praise of God, Silent in the praise of God, For

praise of God, Silent in the praise of God, For

God, Silent in the praise of God, For

Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
And spoke before thou sawst the morning light

which speaks in Thee; For this the world created and creates, and creates;

which speaks in Thee; For this the world created and creates, and creates;

For this the world created and creates, and creates;

which speaks in Thee; For this the world created and creates, and creates;

For this the world created and creates, and creates;

and creates, and creates, and creates;

and creates, and creates, and creates;
This is the Word! of all that is the Womb.

It was, this was before it bade the light to be

It is, it

This was, before it bade the light to be

It

This was, this was before it bade the light to be

It

Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
Of all that see the never failing sight,
is, and is to come; it knows no dates; By it spring forth
is, and is to come; it knows no dates; By it spring forth
is and is to come. It knows no dates; By it spring forth
is and is to come. It knows no dates; By it spring forth

Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
Transcendental Sonnets: The Word

the time-born sons of earth, of earth,
That as the grass before the
the time-born sons of earth,
That as the grass before the

Speechless yet ever speaking.
none can hear

the man grown

silent in

the praise of

fore the mower falls;

In it are born the sons of heavenly birth;

And

fore the mower falls;

In it are born the sons of heavenly birth;

And

Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
Transcendental Sonnets: The Word

The voice that speaks
Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
Transcendental Sonnets: The Word

the morning light;

morning light

the morning light;

the morning light.
Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
God the praise of God The man grown silent in the praise of God

Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
For they live to hope and fear;
Transcendental Sonnets: The Word

its presence calls them
Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
The utterance of Eternal Truth.

Perfect without a blemish; never

Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
through the veil that wraps thy being round, Save through the
through the veil that wraps thy being round, Save through the
through the veil that wraps thy being round, Save through the
through the veil that wraps thy being round, Save through the

Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
Transcendental Sonnets: The Word
Without ritard.

the veil that wraps thy being round

the veil that wraps thy being round

the veil that wraps thy being round

the veil that wraps thy being round

July 1, 2001 - June 9, 2002
Lewisburg, PA / Red Hook, NY

Transcendental Sonnets: The Word