“DOVER BEACH”: THE EVOLUTION OF A TRAGIC HERO

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Abstract

Arnold’s “Dover Beach” has often been read as a testimony of the historical phenomenon of loss of faith rather than as the speaker’s personal experience of historical change, which was one of the formative forces of the Victorian Age. Read with this new emphasis, the poem will lend itself to an interpretation on the basis of the speaker’s discovery of the essential law of transitoriness in his personal life and of his movement toward an objective confirmation of the law, culminating in an enlightened awareness of his malaise and that of his society. Parallel to this movement is the psychological process of sublimation whereby love replaces sex. Having come to a fuller consciousness of his condition in a world without faith, the speaker decides to act in the manner of Arnold’s “aliens.” Thus, he emerges as a tragic hero, demonstrating Arnold’s conception of the difference between the painful and the tragic, a fact which might explain the soothing effect of the poem in spite of the dark realities it portrays.

That Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” remains one of his most often anthologized poems can hardly be disputed. Faverty’s seventeen-year-old judgment that it is “Arnold’s most famous lyric” and Norman Holland’s twenty-year-old appraisal that it is “the most widely reprinted poem in the language” have, I believe, equal validity nowadays. However, the scholarly explications suffer from a surprisingly narrow range, which does not accord well with the greatness of the poem. The central issue on which most interpretations converge, with minor variations and secondary emphases, is the theme of loss of faith. To the best of my knowledge, Holland, almost alone, contends that the poem is typically Victorian in dealing with sexuality and defense mechanisms. He poses a question which may serve as a clue and a challenge to our understanding: why should a poem about disillusionment, loss of faith, and despair “seem peaceful and satisfying”? In general, the movement of the poem as the objective correlative of the speaker’s mind has not received due emphasis in scholarly study. I believe that a closer analysis of this movement as an integrated whole will contribute a great deal to our appreciation of the poem, and specifically of the speaker’s tragic situation, as Arnold may have envisioned it, though in the sphere of everyday life.

The opening lines set the tone and impressionistically sketch the scene.

The sea is calm tonight.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair

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Upon the straits—on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.

One cannot, without a willful act of repression or an excess of propriety, ignore the sexual side of the poem, particularly in the first stanza, even if all we have to go by is circumstantial evidence. The various aspects of the poetic situation, the symbols, images, and connotations, individually and collectively, suggest sexuality, without our having to dramatize the tryst in the way Anthony Hecht did in "The Dover Bitch: A Criticism of Life." In fact, the suggestiveness of the poem in this regard is quite in line with Arnold’s education and character, both of which may have been responsible for its suppression for about sixteen years. And it is this suggestiveness that needs to be stressed to indicate the effect of Victorian prudery on its composition and to explain its fascinating elusiveness as it plays on our subliminal sentiments and instincts. In a way, this quality of the poem, regarded as a defense mechanism, is to be taken as evidence of its concern with sexuality as a literal and symbolic experience in man’s life.

As the poem opens, the speaker is standing alone at the window, watching the scene. His sexuality has apparently died down, thus bringing about his alienation from the girl. He has also received signals all tending to impinge upon his soft mind the law of the temporary nature of individual experience and in particular of sexual ecstasy. This is his initial problem. His awakening with its attendant melancholy evokes Keats’s life-long lamentation in this respect. It is this transitoriness of earthly phenomena, and specifically of beauty and pleasure, that defines melancholy for the Romantic poet.

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth slips:
Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veil’d Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
Though seen by none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy’s grape against his palate fine;
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.

Keats’s poetic statement, fittingly sensuous, describes well the speaker’s experience as he now stands at the window as though looking for some comfort or explanation. Nature is set against sex in a significant polarity for somebody who has not yet discovered, or at least recognized, the natural law of temporariness and the naturalness of the sexual act itself. But soon the discovery will strike him, arousing his melancholy but also expediting his awakening. It is true that the scene is half
created by his own subjectivity, but it is also half objective. In line one, for example, only the word “tonight,” which “hints at the transitory quality of this fullness and satisfaction,” is extrinsic to the picture as an immediate presence not a possibility. So, nature has only confirmed his personal experience as the lights on the French coast go on and off in an insistent demonstration of transitoriness. Further, nature is far from being friendly or considerate, a fact which deepens his alienation, at least for the time being. The sea, which now isolates him from the gleaming light on the opposite coast, asserts itself as an instrument of separation, accentuating his keen sense of loneliness. The blend of light and dark is ominous. And, finally, the cliffs of England “stand/ Glimmering and vast,” a tenebrous protrusion of the sublime in nature: the awful, the domineering, and the mysterious. Consequently, he asks the girl to come to the window, ostensibly to enjoy the “sweet” night air not the cliffs, to listen not to see, as if he were seeking some verification of his impressions or the re-establishment of some form of human fellowship. The rest of the scene is more explicitly disappointing.

Come to the window, sweet is the night air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanced land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

It is true that the scene has its inherent distressful elements, but these are greatly intensified by the speaker’s sense of loneliness and growing despair, as if the scene enacts his situation. No doubt, it does. The sexual implication of these lines is too obvious to be overlooked. Here the objective correlative is brought to the foreground since the movement of the waves parallels rhythmically the sexual activity. Arnold himself employs the sea as a symbol of sexuality in “The Forsaken Merman.” So, if the experience is the same in both man and nature, the ensuing feelings must be the same in both cases. It is this solipsistic stance that characterizes these lines. Consequently, in spite of “the tremulous cadence” of the waves, he hears the “grating roar” that suggests the “eternal note of sadness.” Moreover, the sea, which has so far functioned as an instrument of alienation, acquires now other disturbingly unsavory attributes such as violence, indifference, and gluttony. As Stitelman points out, “The Romantic view of the sea as a vehicle toward fusion becomes, in this poem, a symbol of the alienation, dissonance, lack of faith, and struggle of man in this world.”

In this way the poem has come to a point where the balance of objectivity and subjectivity is almost at an impasse. The speaker has projected his feelings on the
outside world, partly receiving but what he gives, to use Coleridge's epistemology, but nature has objectively, though symbolically, reflected his condition, thus forcing upon him the notion of change, of rise and fall, of life and death. Not only in the realm of personal experience, but also in nature does the inexorable law of transitoriness work. He first introduces the idea with "tonight," but it is crystallized by the intermittent light on the French coast and by the sea movement. Furthermore, a sense of recurrence is strongly evoked in all this. There is something like fate in the phenomenon, and the speaker's sadness seems to arise from his being caught in the throes of the temporal flux of man's existence.

More objectification follows with the reference to Sophocles, and, consequently, the speaker's awareness of his plight is greatly heightened. The pattern is well established in the poem and emblematizes his tragic evolution. Sophocles, to whom the grating roar suggested the ebb and flow of human misery, another image of recurrence, gives credence to the speaker's experience. Not only is the note "eternal," having been heard since the Greek playwright and even before, but the interpretation becomes objective and, therefore, real. History is now sought to save him from solipsism as well as to consolidate a feeling of human companionship.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The speaker tries to alleviate his painful feelings of loneliness, loss, and rejection by reaching out for some human hand. Sophocles and he, in spite of the unbridgeable gap between them, become partners, fellow believers, and prophets, sharing the same vision and the same reality. Secondly, the speaker's problem loses some of its corrosive immediateness and distressing individuality by being subsumed in a larger context. It is transformed into a timeless manifestation of the human condition. In this process he gradually realizes that he is a part of the universal scheme of things and that, as we shall see later, his problem is partly social and partly human. This is an important step in his tragic evolution.

But what is the antecedent of "we"? D. S. Neff, who stresses the "argumentative character" of the poem resulting from the speaker's subjectivity and the lover's objectivity, believes that at this point a "merging of perspective occurs." Apart from the fact that the girl's views are completely suppressed, it is the speaker's vision that is objectified. The argument seethes within, and so does the tumult. What happens here is a gradual but persistent attempt on the part of the
speaker, whose objectivity has been greatly corroborated by the reference to Sophocles, to take on the role of a teacher to the girl, his only audience at the time, and to bring their relationship up to a higher plane. We have seen the initiation of this process in the first stanza when he asks her to listen so as to hear the grating roar, at which stage he is trying to educate her perceptions, the primary level of knowledge. In the second stanza a merging occurs, but it is a continuation of the act of educating, this time on the level of conception. The process, which reflects a common belief and practice related to the female passivity and the male activity in the sexual act, amounts to sublimation, which, as a part of the solution to the transitoriness of sex, will peak in the last stanza. The poem enhances the process formally by reducing the girl to a dummy, a passive and mute presence with the mere faculty of listening and thus receiving influences from the male partner standing before her. The sexual instinct is sublimated to an act of instruction.

The case of faith is both further objectification and a diagnosis of the malaise of his society, of which his crisis is only a direct effect. Faith has been subject to the law of historical change, which was one of the formative forces of the intellectual life of the Victorian Age. However, the speaker's conception is rather elegiac, bordering on the tragic. Miller describes this historical consciousness in this way.

The time of harmony is always past, to be able to describe it rationally means no longer to have it, and to be forced to look back at it with nostalgia, as a lost paradise and its vanished happiness. Nor can the poet reach this time by renovating the temporal stream, for though it is the origin of the present, an unbridgeable space separates it from even the first of the broken, evanescent moments leading to the present time. It was a time before times, for there was not yet a tragically broken sequence.

The speaker's sentiments validate this modern portrayal of the breaking of time for his lyrical vision is, at least in some of its important aspects and undertones, remarkably similar to Miller's scholarly outlook.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating to the breath
Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Here, the speaker, while underscoring the notion of historical periodicity\textsuperscript{12} evoked earlier, bemoans the past with its safety, love, fullness, and protectiveness,
all arising from an abundance of faith. Like some of his contemporaries who regarded the times sadly, he painfully feels the loss and nostalgically yearns for the old days as a "lost paradise." And he has a very good reason to do so since it is this social disease that has caused his present predicament. The girdle of faith, reminiscent of Venus's girdle of chastity, is let loose, and the result is sexual licentiousness in particular and moral deterioration in general. With this great loss the world has become meaningless, and his personal experience is spiritually empty. So, the poem moves centrifugally from the speaker's self to the world at large and centripetally in the opposite direction, since the condition of England inflicts upon him the sense of alienation from the girl. In a faithless world sex, not love, defines man/woman intercourse, and sex, being short-lived, cannot sustain any permanent relationship. The reversion to the first person singular pronoun is symptomatic of another onslaught of this painful awarenesss and an indication of the social disintegration that plagues a community without faith.

But this is the turning point in the speaker's tragic evolution. Being a man of faith, he finds himself caught up in a heretic world. He is trapped between the past and the present, entangled, as it were, in the whirlpool of historical change. John Farrell, speaking about the nineteenth century concept of the tragic, says, "In the tragedy of former ages finite man is made to confront a moral order that is the will of an external authority. In the nineteenth century the tragic confrontation is more likely to be not with eternity but with history." In Farrell's opinion, Arnold's view of the tragic moment is expressed in these lines from "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse," "Wandering between two worlds, one dead,/ The other powerless to be born." But, in Arnold's point of view, this situation could be both painful and tragic. The transformation from one to the other is far from simple.

It is in the fourth stanza that the evolution is completed. The artistic image of the previous stanza, a surreptitious mode of escape, is abandoned for a somewhat literal depiction of the situation that echoes Carlyle's more impassioned "Condition of England."

... for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.

These lines bespeak further realization by the speaker not only of the condition of his country and world but also of his own mind. The awakening is rather a recognition of what he has hitherto suppressed, of an England without faith, of a grim reality hidden behind shiny appearances. And the recognition is brought about by a decision to be true to oneself and others. His confrontational attitude gains weight as it stresses his intellectual earnestness and integrity. If, as Culler says, the reason for which Arnold rejected *Empedocles on Etna* was not Aristotle but the chapter on
the Everlasting Yea in Carlyle's Sartor Resartus, the speaker of "Dover Beach" is an early example of such a tragic hero. It is at this point that he overcomes his subjectivity and egoism, although it is these that have brought about a much needed revelation of an essential law of nature and subsequently of the malaise of his society. Historically, this attitude may have materialized at the time when Arnold was undergoing a similar transformation. "The main significance... of Arnold's rejection of Empedocles on Etna and his writing the Preface of 1853 is that he was thereby moving from subjectivity to objectivity"; that is, from Romanticism to Victorianism. However, the mere shift does not constitute the speaker's intricate response. He goes on to define his place more specifically, "And we are here as on a darkling plane/Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight/Where ignorant armies clash by night." The ambiguities point at the two sides of the experience. "Here" could be Dover beach and England. "We" may include the girl, whom he is addressing at this moment, or his community of contemporary prophets. On the other hand, by putting himself on the darkling plain, which is to Culler the realm of experience, the speaker has developed considerably. He has come to be more conscious of the dimensions and ramifications of his place in the world, a state of organized innocence expressed partly by the relatively regular rhyme scheme of this stanza. Additionally, he sets himself, along with the company of prophets or immediate audience, apart from the warring factions, as if he has chosen his future role and mode of involvement. In Culture and Anarchy Arnold employs the same image to characterize people governed by their ordinary selves and to introduce his heroes.

Well, and this is the very self [the best self]
which culture, or the study of perfection, seeks
to develop in us; at the expense of our old untransformed
self, taking pleasure only in doing what it likes
or is used to do, and exposing us to the risk of
crashing with everyone else who is doing the same.

The speaker, then, sloughing off his ordinary self, is inspired by his better self, to use Arnold's words in speaking about his aliens, "persons who are mainly led, not by their class spirit, but by a general humane spirit, by the love of human perfection." Able to see things "as they are," and having overcome his morose subjectivity, the speaker decides to act, beginning with an appeal, "Ah, love, let us be true/To one another!" Although he sweetly calls her "love," the overall implication of the poem and of this plea in particular, which amounts to a contradiction in terms, is that so far there has been no love between them, but rather sexual attraction, which, in the first place, has made his experience possible. So, when he addresses her as "love," he is outpouring his incipient love of humanity, although it is very difficult not to feel the ironic tone directed toward the corruption of his native language and culture, in which "love" signifies both agape and eros, and toward the girl herself. Accordingly, the appeal serves to highlight love, as opposed to sex, and to elevate the two people to a level of mutual truthfulness necessary for a better
assessment of the world around them and for an enlightened resolution to face it against all odds. This, perhaps, is the speaker’s answer to the law of transitoriness, and his defiance, too. Like the prophets of the age, he is transmuted here into a moral teacher, having prepared the girl for this climax. Underlying this attitude is a tenacious refusal to relinquish his moral and intellectual integrity. One can say of him what Culler says of Empedocles, “His heroism is the heroism of pure intellectual integrity, of not believing what he would like to believe merely because it would be more comforting to do so.”\(^{21}\) Arnold rejected *Empedocles on Etna* on the grounds that it was “poetically faulty”\(^{22}\) dramatizing pain “unrelieved by instinct, hope, or resistance.”\(^{23}\) The speaker, possessing this kind of heroism, rises to the tragic status on an everyday plane of action by refusing to suffer passively, by resisting and hoping, putting his faith in love as *agape* not *eros*, and by choosing to be a morally and intellectually enlightened teacher in a benighted world of narrow selfish interests. In this way he qualifies as an alien in Arnold’s sense.

Thus, “Dover Beach” deals with the speaker’s awakening to the law of transitoriness as manifested in personally distressful experience and as objectified in nature and history. The awakening thrusts him into a situation, painful at first but tragic later on. But “Dover Beach” is not intended by Arnold to body forth his aesthetic views on the painful and the tragic or on the role of poetry in society. It is an early expression of these perspectives, written at a time when such matters were taking shape in his mind. However, it is a successful attempt, a fact which might explain its soothing effect despite its unpleasant realities. One may say that it points the way to the possibilities of tragedy in everyday life, a challenge which many modern writers have chosen to face.
Footnotes

2 "Psychological Depth and "Dover Beach," VS, IX (Sept. 1965), 6.
4 See Holland.
5 Holland, p.9. Holland's approach is psychoanalytic, and he suggests that it falls in line with Aristotle's belief that art is satisfying because it is an imitation of life. However, he somehow undermines these basic assumptions about art in general by his meticulous analysis of "Dover Beach."
6 The poem, as most scholars agree, may have been conceived during a rendezvous with Marguerite or during Arnold's honeymoon with Frances.
7 Holland, p.7.
9 "Love and Strife in 'Dover Beach'," VN, LIII (1977), 29.
10 Neff, p.29.
12 See, for example, Carlyle's "Signs of the Times," "Characteristics," and Past and Present; Mill's The Spirit of the Age; and Arnold's Culture and Anarchy.
15 Culler, p. 203.
16 See Imaginative Reason.
18 In The Portable Matthew Arnold, ed. Lionel Trilling (New York, 1949), p. 524. The emphasis is mine.
19 Culture and Anarchy, p 538.
20 This is the phrase applied by Arnold in his Culture and Anarchy to those who tend to seek their best selves and free themselves from machinery, who, in short, pursue perfection by making sure that reason and the will of God will prevail.
21 Culler, p. 173.