"Dover Beach" and the Structure of Meditation
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Few poems have received as much critical attention as Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach." Indeed one might resolve, as did one writer in these pages, never to read another account of the poem. Despite considerable diversity of interpretation, most readers have seen that the main subject of the poem concerns the withdrawal of the Sea of Faith, a subject that motivates the general tone of melancholy evident from the beginning of the poem. What has not been noted, however, is that for his subject Arnold used a formal structure which was popular in English poetry when the Sea of Faith was at the full. An attendant effect is a curious irony that some critics have felt but have been unable fully to account for, an effect partially created by Arnold's firm control of the logical structure of the poem contrasted with a conclusion which posits a joyless, loveless, dark, contingent world, a world threatened with collapse into chaos.

The logical structure of "Dover Beach" has as its exact parallel the tripartite structure employed in the meditative poems of Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, and other devotional poets of the seventeenth century. Working within the general requirements of the meditative structure, Arnold was able to underscore, by the very form he used, the extremely bleak ramifications of the loss of faith he describes.

Since Louis L. Martz's pioneering work on the meditation, the terms "composition," "analysis," and "colloquy," have become firmly established in the language of criticism. The overall purpose of the meditation was "to excitate the will to holy affections and resolutions," and this purpose was to be achieved in three stages.

The meditation began with the composition of place or of similitude, or with a combination of the two. The former employed the
memory, the latter the imagination. Both were powers of man's sensible soul governed by the sensibles or particulars of his experience. These particulars were to invoke the passions or affections necessary to incline the will to "holy affections," the indispensable goal of the meditation. Donne's "I am a little world made cunningly" and his "Let man's soul be a sphere" exemplify composition by similitude, and the first six lines of Herbert's "Church Monuments" illustrate a typical composition of place.

The second stage of the meditation employed the cognitive faculty of the rational soul, the understanding. This movement from the purely sensory memory or imagination to the rational was a movement towards God, the supremely rational. In this stage, reason analyzed the significance of the sensory experience. The analysis demonstrated that the profoundest experience available to man becomes intelligible when reason performs its proper role. The analysis took many forms, but in general it may be described as the application of reason to experience in order to prove the intelligibility of faith: *intellego ut credam*. Further, this discovery of meaning was intended to stir the will, the appetitive power of the rational soul, to embrace the good as defined by reason.

The meditation concluded with the colloquy, generally a petition addressed to God, to Christ, to the soul, or to an object of loving concern. In this way the meditation ended on a note of exalted fervor invoking the hope of salvation and a vision of the coming Apocalypse.

Thus the meditative structure (a microcosm, it was argued, of the Trinity) employed the imagination-memory, reason, and will, faculties which allowed the poet to imagine-remember, to understand, and to love God. Further, the structure was a paradigm for a Christian view of history which interpreted human experience in relation to the coming Apocalypse, which was to end history.

The opening fourteen lines of "Dover Beach" combine the characteristics of place and similitude. The place, seen and heard, is incredibly attractive, as Yvor Winters wrote: "one of the finest passages in the century." Yet the tone of dignified, controlled melancholy, "the eternal note of sadness," goes far beyond the motives implicit in the

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1 Perhaps the best short summary of the faculty psychology reflected in the meditation is the Preface to Nicholas Coeffeteau's *Tableau des passions humaines* (Paris, 1615). The work was translated into English by Edward Grimeston, A *Table of Humane Passions* (London, 1621).

literal dimensions of the scene itself. However, the motive is clarified in the second part of the poem (ll. 15-28). Here we learn that the place is the primary similitude of the poem. The sea at full tide is a vehicle for that period in history when religious faith was at the full. The motive for the note of sadness is the poet's realization that the night scene, the full tide, etc., are subject to change, that the religious period of history in its fullness was on the threshold of a long, slow retreat into extinction.

Arnold's analysis, his application of reason to the opening scene, leads to a markedly different conclusion from that of the seventeenth-century devotional poets. Sophocles found in the sound of the sea an archetypal pattern for the ebb and flow of human misery. "Ebb and flow" accurately adheres to the ancient Grecian idea of eternal recurrence, a recurrence made inevitable by cyclical time set in an eternal universe. Murray Krieger finds in this idea the key to the poem. He writes: "The tidal ebb and flow, retreat and advance, and the endless nature of these, are precisely what is needed to give Arnold the sense of eternal recurrence which characterizes the full meaning of the poem." For Krieger, the image of tidal conflict is everlasting, we "feel the unprogressiveness of man's ever-repetitive circular history" (p. 78), and man's fate is "pitilessly bound by the inescapable circle" (p. 79).

The full implications of endless "ebb and flow" are grim indeed; nevertheless such a theory of history would suggest the periodic return to eras of religious faith. Arnold, however, hears not the "ebb and flow," but only the long, withdrawing roar of the Sea of Faith. There is not the slightest hint in the entire poem that the Sea of Faith may be gathering its forces for a return. The development of thought within the poem indicates that time is linear, a concept which makes recurrence impossible. This point is quite important, for it makes the meaning of the poem far more tragic than Krieger's reading will allow. It is, of course, literally true that tides retreat only to advance again. But Arnold's tides are not real tides, nor is his view of history the same as that of Sophocles.'

Arnold's view depends on the Hebraic-Christian assumptions that time is linear, that it exists within a universe that had a beginning.

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6"Dover Beach' and the Tragic Sense of Eternal Recurrence," University of Kansas City Review, XXIII (1956), 74.
ex nihilo and will have an end ad nilulum. Thus the past is irretrievable, and no repetition is possible. St. Augustine and Christian historians such as Orosius, Otto of Freising, and a host of others dwelt upon the blackness of the human state in such a universe. But they countered this condition with the promise of the Apocalypse. An eternity of light was to follow temporal blackness. Arnold's poem holds out no hope for any version of an apocalypse. As we shall see in his conclusion, it suggests quite the opposite. If the Sea of Faith is to return periodically, the tragic implications of the poem are lost, and it becomes "comic" in the medieval sense; i.e., the prospect of a return to the folds of the "bright girdle furled" even for a time is a happy one.

In the second part of the poem, Arnold's analysis concludes that faith is no longer possible: for him intellego ut non credam. Except for his commitment to linear time, which makes recurrence impossible, Arnold does not attempt to explain why. The sea metaphor only suggests that human experience and belief are subject to vast, powerful forces beyond man's control. "The folds of a bright girdle furled" connotes the attractiveness of faith, but the connotations are severely bound by the rational explicitness of the analysis. Reason grants the past splendor of faith, but no more than that. We are reminded of Arnold's words: "I cannot conceal from myself the objection which really wounds and perplexes me from the religious side is that the service of reason is freezing to feeling, chilling to the religious moods; and feeling and the religious mood are eternally the deepest being of man, the ground of all joy and greatness for him."*

Arnold's colloquy, beginning with "Ah love, let us be true / To one another," sharply contrasts with the generalized analysis. The colloquy stirs initially a sense of intimacy and hope. As R. A. Forsyth points out: "It seems natural that in his personal efforts to re-establish an 'heroic' balance in his 'unpoetic' times, Arnold should be driven back on human love as the experience through which he would most likely resolve his sense of isolation and loneliness" (Forsyth, p. 234). But the possibility of human love is not Arnold's resolution in "Dover Beach." Certainly the prospect of fidelity in love echoes, however faintly, the ecstatic tone of hope and love in the devotional poet's petition to God or Christ, a petition supported by the long tradition of the essential promise of Christianity. Arnold's poem invokes human love as a substitute for divine love, a substitute made necessary by the loss of faith, but his

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invocation is muted because his “love” makes no response, but remains passive and uncharacterized. So slight is “love’s” role that Yvor Winters saw this love as offering “a solution so weak as to be an evasion of the problem posed” (Winters, p. 184). But surely this “love” provides no solution at all, nor can one believe that Arnold meant it to. Immediately following his brief petition to “love,” he turns our attention to the world. His characterization of the world rules out the possibility of fidelity in love:

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.

Whereas the devotional poets asked for God’s saving love in order to triumph over a world as dark, confused, and chaotic as Arnold’s and had no doubts but that God’s love was more powerful than the world, Arnold asks for human love in a context which makes the world’s “triumph” and man’s tragedy certain.

Arnold’s closing lines are a prelude to disaster:

And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

The vision may appall us, but it is the corollary of Arnold’s analysis. A world without religious faith is doomed to destruction. As we have seen, the colloquy of the traditional meditation was to stimulate the will to “holy affections.” Arnold’s colloquy, the logical and rhetorical climax of the poem, leaves the will helpless to avert the coming catastrophe.

This study of the structure of “Dover Beach” helps to account for the pervasive irony of the poem. Arnold, using the rigorous structure of the meditation, highlights the revolution in religious thought that took place in English history. His evocative Wordsworthian “place” contrasts with the explicitly Christian scenes, such as Christ’s passion and Judgment Day, of the earlier tradition. His analysis grants the attractiveness of Christian faith, but argues its demise. His colloquy points not to the light of the Apocalypse, but to a darkening future of unrelieved terror to be climax ed by a fearful close.

On the basis of internal evidence alone, this study thus far argues that Arnold’s use of the meditative tradition was deliberate. It remains to consider what external evidence exists. Arnold read St. Francois de Sales, who, as Martz has shown, was instrumental in defining the medi-
tative process and exerted considerable influence on the English devotional poets. More telling is Arnold’s knowledge of George Herbert, about whom he wrote in *St. Paul and Protestantism*: “And surely it can hardly be denied that the more eminently and exactly Christian type of righteousness is the type exhibited by Church worthies like Herbert.”9 His note-books show that he read Izaak Walton’s *Life of Herbert* (p. 582) and that he read Herbert’s *Country Parson* (p. 587). Even more suggestive is that by 1867 as a *terminus ad quem* he read, as he himself noted, “G. Herbert’s poems” (p. 581). In his note-books he quoted from “The Church Porch,” Herbert’s introduction to *The Temple*, three times (pp. 68, 97, and 102). In his note-books he also quoted from “The Elixir” (p. 77) and in *Culture and Anarchy* from “The Size” (*Prose Works*, V, 169).

This external evidence is by no means conclusive. Yet it does show that the religious devotion exhibited in Herbert’s life and works could have suggested to Arnold Christian faith at the full. Further, it shows that there is nothing inherently improbable in the surmise that he knew the meditative structure and that he deliberately employed it for ironic effects. The stronger evidence is the structure of “Dover Beach” itself.

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