Of the Devil's Party: Undetected Words of Milton's Satan in Arnold's "Dover Beach"

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"Dover Beach," one of the best-known poems in the language, might seem to offer few surprises. Yet nowhere in the critical literature can one find any mention of the striking fact that in the final, climactic lines of the poem, Arnold speaks the words of Milton's Satan, taken without alteration from *Paradise Lost*.1 These words are few—only four in number: "neither joy, nor love" (*DB* 1.33; *PL* IV.509).2 But they hardly stand alone. On the contrary, these quoted words combine with a series of other verbal and imaginal echoes and parallels to create a network of significant allusions to Milton's epic within Arnold's lyric. Milton's presence pervades all four stanzas of "Dover Beach," even in ways of which Arnold need not have been fully aware, and Miltonic undercurrents lend the lyric much of its peculiar power.

The concluding lines of "Dover Beach" were probably the first that Arnold wrote (Allott, pp. 239-240), and they remain the most important in

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1 Not only have Satan's quoted words gone unrecognized, none of the Arnold-Milton parallels adduced in the present essay finds mention in any critical source I have been able to discover. Kenneth Allott, however, in his edition of *The Poems of Matthew Arnold* (London, 1965), p. 241, notes the "positioning of the adjectives" in "tremulous cadence slow" and "vast edges drear" (he might have added "bright girdle furled") as a "Miltonic Grecism." And Paul F. Baum, in *Ten Studies in the Poetry of Matthew Arnold* (Duke Univ. Press, 1958), p. 95, interestingly notes that "twenty of the thirty-seven lines as printed are 5-stress lines; but besides these there are several examples of concealed blank verse": Baum prints pairs of shorter lines together as single lines in order to show eight more "concealed" pentameters. Such experiments show additional affinities of Arnold's verse art with the tradition of unrhymed pentameter verse as employed by Milton, though Baum does not make the connection with Milton.

the finished version of the poem. In these lines Arnold presents a fallen world. Transfigured through lovers’ eyes, this world may appear as untainted as an Eden, as “new” and “beautiful” as “dreams.” But it is really just a loveless, joyless nightmare, a benighted wilderness of internecine hostility:

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another for the world, which seems
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night. (ll. 29-37)

The only hope for our lives is conjugal love, and even this is a project, a resource, rather than a guaranteed refuge; “let us” make love our response to the world’s chaos, Arnold suggests—but he does not affirm that it will suffice. Certainly there is no love or joy outside the lovers’ window. Inside the room, the poet urges his beloved to help him try to recapture an Eden for which the external world no longer provides any parallels or precedents.

There was a time, of course—the time before paradise was lost—when the world outside the bower of two well-known lovers was indeed an objective correlative of their love: it was the perfect image of a perfect love, consummated in perfect joy. Satan realized this only too well when he paid Adam and Eve a visit:

Sight hateful, sight tormenting! thus these two
Imparadis’t in one another’s arms
The happier Eden, shall enjoy thir fill
Of bliss on bliss, while I to Hell am thrust,
Where neither joy nor love, but fierce desire,
Among our other torments not the least.
Still unfulfill’d with pain of longing pines. (PL IV.505-511)

Both Arnold and Milton’s Satan contrast the world enjoyed by two lovers with a quite different world containing “neither joy nor love.” For Arnold this joyless, loveless world is the one outside the lovers’ window, while for Satan the description applies to Hell. By quoting Satan’s words, Arnold implies that the world outside the lovers’ window has become Hell. Other parallels bear this out. The external world in Arnold’s poem offers no “light,” no “peace,” and no “help for pain” (ll. 33-34). All three of these deprivations are equally characteristic of Hell, where

No light, but rather darkness visible
Serv’d only to discover sights of woe,
Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace
And rest can never dwell, hope never comes
That comes to all, but torture without end
Still urges. (PL 1.63-68)
No joy, no love, "No light," no possibility of "peace / And rest," and no help for the pain of "torture without end"—this takes care of five of the six Arnoldian negations. But what of "certitude"? Predictably, this too is absent in Hell. Only mazes of perplexity await the demonic seekers of philosophic knowledge:

Others apart sat on a Hill retir'd,
In thoughts more elevate, and reason'd high
Of Providence, Foreknowledge, Will, and Fate,
Fist Fate, Free will, Foreknowledge absolute,
And found no end, in wand'ring mazes lost,
Of good and evil much they argu'd then,
Of happiness and final misery,
Passion and Apathy, and glory and shame,
Vain wisdom all, and false Philoscophie. (PL II.557-565)

Even the metaphorical "darkling plain" where Arnold hears the clashing of ignorant armies "by night" has its close counterpart in that "dreary Plain, forlorn and wild, / The seat of desolation, void of light" (PL I.180-181), where Satan proposes that he and his fellow devils might do well to rest and lay their plans for further battle with the Almighty.

The cause of this transformation of earth into Hell is the withdrawal of the "Sea of Faith," which Arnold hears "Retreating, to the breath / Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear / And naked shingles of the world" (ll. 26-28). As in the original story of the Fall, so here too the consciousness of nakedness, of vulnerability, becomes a problem only after "Faith" is broken or lost, or withdrawn. Appropriately, right after the passage in which Satan describes Hell as a place of "neither joy nor love," he immediately offers his thoughts on the question of "faith." Reflecting on what he has just overheard from the conversation of Adam and Eve, Satan says:

Yet let me not forget what I have gain'd
From thir own mouths; all is not theirs it seems:
One fatal Tree there stands of Knowledge call'd,
Forbidden them to taste: Knowledge forbid'n?blurry words
Suspicious, reasonless. Why should thir Lord
Envy them that? can it be sin to know,
Can it be death? and do they only stand
By Ignorance, is that thir happy state,
The proof of thir obedience and thir faith? (PL IV.512-520)

Both Satan and Arnold consider the question of faith in close conjunction with the question of the loss of joy and love. Arnold shares Satan's pessimism about the lack of happiness outside of Eden. Arnold clearly empathizes with Adam and Eve in their experience of the woeful consequences of loss of faith. Satan sees faith as a foolishness easy to challenge; Arnold sees its loss as a tragedy worthy of being sung by Sophocles. Satan created a tragedy; Arnold contemplates one.

By tempting Adam and Eve, Satan helped turn their world into something more closely resembling his own Hell, in which "fierce
desire. Still unfulfill'd with pain of longing pines" (Pl. IV. 509, 511). Similarly, in the second stanza of "Dover Beach," the withdrawal of the tide suggests to Arnold's Sophocles "the turbid ebb and flow/Of human misery" (ll. 17-18). "The eternal note of sadness" that Arnold hears in stanza one seems to echo the concluding lines of Satan's speech on the "long woes" that will result from the loss of faith:

Live while ye may,
Yet happy pair; enjoy, 'till I return,
Short pleasures, for long woes are to succeed. (Pl. IV. 533-535)

The method we have been using so far—that of moving backward in Arnold's poem as we move forward in Milton's—may strike the reader as curious. But this method yields results. If we continue this simultaneous backward and forward motion a couple of steps further, still more Arnold-Milton parallels appear. As soon as Satan has ended his envious, plotting speech, we see him departing while the sun sets in the west, "where Heav'n/With Earth and Ocean meets" (Pl. IV. 539-540). And as we move back still closer to the beginning of "Dover Beach," we see "the long line of spray/Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land" (ll. 7-8). In both passages the meeting of elements is symbolic. In Paradise Lost at this point, the fall has not yet occurred, so one can still see an allegorical union of Heaven or sky with earth and ocean, just as at the beginning of "Dover Beach" the poet's mood is still relatively tranquil and serene, so the sea still seems "calm" (l. 1). Yet in the Miltonic passage on cosmic unity the sun is already setting, perhaps an allegorical hint at coming trouble; and in the same way in Arnold's poem, "on the French coast the light/Gleams and is gone" (ll. 3-4), rather like the vanishing of the visionary gleam itself, a forecast of the poet's later dejection.

After Satan has departed from Eden, Milton shows us the declining sunbeams illuminating the whiteness of the eastern gate of Paradise, "a Rock/Of Alabaster, pil'd up to the Clouds," while surrounding it all "The rest was craggy cliff, that overhung/Still as it rose, impossible to climb" (Pl. IV. 543-544, 547-548). And at the beginning of Arnold's poem, the chalky "cliffs of England stand,/Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay" (ll. 4-5), suggesting the security of a land-based Eden oblivious of the inconstant sea. In Arnold's perception of Dover cliffs we have a phenomenon analogous to Wordsworth's perception of Mount Snowdon in Book XIV of The Prelude. One need not doubt that Wordsworth actually saw Snowdon, despite the close resemblance of the scene in The Prelude to the landscape described in Paradise Lost VII. 285-287. So too the reader of "Dover Beach" need hardly doubt that Arnold's firsthand observation of the Dover cliffs had left a lively record in his mind. Yet these cliffs might not have appeared to glimmer quite so brightly, or have
loomed quite so vast, without the Miltonic precedent of the gleaming eastern gate of Eden and its surrounding unscalable rocky height.

These final Arnold-Milton parallels suggest that with Arnold, as with Coleridge, even a seemingly straightforward descriptive passage may travel to us by quite a labyrinthine route (a “road to Xanadu”) from its hidden sources in the poet's mind. Yet these lesser corroborative landscape parallels will not all necessarily remain in our own minds with every reading of “Dover Beach.” What we will find it difficult to forget on rereading the poem is the quotation from Satan embedded within the poet’s final message, a quotation supported with additional parallels from Hell for every item in that final relentless litany of uncompromising negations: “neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain” (ll. 33-34). The parallels between the deprivations experienced in Milton’s Hell and those felt in the external world of Arnold’s poem greatly increase the pathos of the latter poet’s plight. The embrace of Adam and Eve, as Satan accurately saw, was but “The happier Eden” within a wide Edenic space. But now that the world has become Hell, the embrace of two lovers stranded amid a dark expanse of aimless fury is a very precarious Eden indeed—an Eden internal, vulnerable, isolated, intermittent at best. The poet tenderly holds out to his beloved the prospect of hope, but in the same sentence, almost in the same breath, he depicts their earthly world in the very words used by a despairing Devil to describe an eternal Hell. It takes a Milton-trained ear to appreciate the barely suppressed tension in the poet’s voice as his pledge of love yields place to counter-revelations from the abyss.