Matthew Arnold: “Dover Beach”

The sea is calm tonight.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
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.
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanched 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.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Ægean, 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 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.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! 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;
> And we are here as on a darkling plain
> Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
> Where ignorant armies clash by night.

It is a story worth remembering, though it seems to have faded from memory. Lyndon Johnson, in the midst of the war in Vietnam, decided to hold a 'Festival of the Arts.' One of the invitees was poet Robert Lowell, and he was not just invited: he was asked to speak, along with novelists Saul Bellow and John Hersey and critic Dwight MacDonald. Lowell, after first accepting the invitation, quite publicly declined it. He wrote Johnson a letter, praising his "domestic legislation and intentions," but criticizing him for the ongoing war in Southeast Asia. He concluded that that "at this anguished, delicate, and perhaps determining moment, I feel I am serving you and our country best by not taking part in the White House Festival of the Arts."

Johnson was angry and upset. When he spoke at the event he decided that his best course was to quote Lowell, approvingly: he would be larger than his critic. Alas, his speech was written by his staff, and they – perhaps keying off a Lowell epigraph – inserted a line that I reproduce here:

> Robert Lowell, the poet, doesn't like everything around here. But I like one of his lines where he wrote, "For the world which seems to lie out before us like a land of dreams." Well, in this great age, and it is a great age—the world does seem to lie before us like a land of dreams.

To understand this story, you must be aware – as Johnson was not – that the line he cited was not by Lowell, but by Matthew Arnold. And, in context, the line meant, well, pretty the opposite of what Johnson intended it to mean. The line is from the last stanza of "Dover Beach."

I want to look at that poem. I think it is one of the best poems ever written in English, despite my sense that it is at times overwritten and too ostentatiously allusive, that it lacks the subtlety that so often marks great poems, that it at moments comes closer to speechifying than writing a lyric. Notwithstanding, it is a great, great poem. Flawed but wondrous.

The poem is a mediation: as it proceeds it becomes increasingly clear that the poet is meditating out loud to someone who is standing beside him. We learn about the setting in the opening lines. It is a warm evening. The poet is looking

out over the English Channel. Although he begins by noting the “sweet… night air,” his thoughts turn from the temperature and what he sees to the sounds he hears as waves crash upon the rocky beach. From the sound of the waves, his thoughts home in on the predicament of modern men and women. Despite Arnold’s deficiencies as a poet – he has more, I think, insufficiencies than any of his contemporaries – he records what it feels like to be human as the modern age advances and coalesces.

The modern age? By the middle of the nineteenth century, when this poem was written, the economic sphere was marked by the ongoing ubiquity of factories and industrial manufacture. This was a time shaped by the always-increasing ascendency of industrial capitalism and of growing consumer-oriented marketing. The demographics of the times saw people in Britain, and increasingly as time passed (and in the twentieth century that came and went after Arnold’s day) throughout the world, a massive movement from the country to the city. From the rural (where they had a rootedness in agricultural processes of farms and cottages, and labor and in ages-old patterns of behavior) into the urban (where the exciting but uncertain business of urban life resulted, unfortunately, in a consequent sense of unrootedness). Modernism in the second half of the nineteenth century was characterized by new systems – evolution, Marxism – which overturned older verities and by a skepticism that was the result of the receding of old and established norms, and the emergence of new institutions and behaviors.

As Arnold wrote in “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse,” a poem in which the poet visits a Carthusian monastery which is unchanged from what it was and where its inhabitants were living as they had lived many centuries before, he recognizes how out of joint he is with this disappearing past. He feels himself to be “wandering between two worlds, one dead,/ The other powerless to be born,/ With nowhere yet to rest my head.” This situation, which was emergent in the nineteenth century still, I think, pertains to our human condition today. Matthew Arnold, in stark terms, was an early and prescient visionary, In another poem, “Memorial Verses,” he credits William Wordsworth, in an earlier generation, with ‘feeling’ his way into the future. So too does Arnold – less accomplished as a poet than Wordsworth was – feel his way into the experience modernity.

Let us turn,. then, to “Dover Beach.”

The poem has four stanzas. Let’s look at them one at a time. Here is the first stanza.

> The sea is calm tonight.

The tide is full, the moon lies fair
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.
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanched 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.

We should ote that the sixth line indicates that there is a speaker in the poem, and that he is speaking to someone. It is a beautiful evening on the shore of England as the speaker looks eastward, toward France. "calm…fair…glimmering…vast…tranquil… sweet…" The adjectives set the scene, a tranquil evening with "the cliffs of England" in the foreground and, far off, a light on the continent in France. The speaker is speaking to his lover (as we recognize later in the poem when he declares, "Ah, love"). The opening lines are all about fulness and calm. The is what he *sees*.

But in line nine, with the imperative: "Listen!" he commands the woman beside him to move from *seeing* to *hearing*. Having moved from sight to sound, the poets notes the "grating roar" as the sea meets the land, as the waves crash upon the pebbly beach (a "strand" is a shoreline), crash over and over again, as waves are wont to do. Fulness and tranquility disappear and the world grinds with that "grating" sound. And then, being a literary chap (I told you there are defects to this poem!) he 'reads' the sound he hears, and in reading it he hears a "sadness" which is eternal. The waves come in slowly, but resound again and again as is characteristic of waves on the shore. They "bring/ the eternal note of sadness in." Literary, isn't it. Not a move that I fully approve.

(Decades ago a Freudian critic looked at the situation, a man and woman by the shore, and asked what it meant that the man leaps from tranquility to sadness and onward to confusion. A panic attack in a sexualized encounter? With the chaos and seeming destructiveness of sex looming, and holding hands an idealized and escapist response? Yes, I think it can be read this way, although the poem is about – it seems to me – more than the personal.)

Why is that note of sadness “eternal?” The second stanza tell us. Because long ago, on a Greek shoreline in a very different part of Europe, on the Mediterranean and not the Atlantic, Sophocles heard that same sound, the sound of the waves crashing onto the land. That sound has not only reverberated all night, it has reverberated since humans first started writing down what they encountered when they encountered the world. The sound of waves crashing, and retreating: it is, as the ‘reader of sounds’ Matthew Arnold proposes, the sound of sadness.

> Sophocles long ago
> Heard it on the Ægean, 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.

Greece, Britain: the sound is everywhere. What comes, recedes. But now, in the current era (Arnold was writing in 1867) the sound is also a historical reminder that seas can recede, tas waves reced, as all high tides recede: Everything passes.

The third stanza re-emphasizes the poet’s awareness that things recede. This receding (did I say the poem is flawed? Ah, yes, I did. Nowhere so evidently as the tendentious beginning of the third stanza with its capitalized Sea of Faith, and it doesn’t get much better in the next lines with the oceans metaphorically portrayed as a girdle around the earth. Although if one visualizes a globe, the blue seas do seem to enwrap the masses of land…) becomes out human milieu. The lines show that the waves “draw back” but I also sense that the tide is going out on this night in which he observes and writes.

> 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.

The first four lines of this stanza are sentimental: as the tide goes out, so does the faith that our forebears had, for this faith is something we don’t have in similar measure. Then, suddenly, the lines enlarge. There is something deeply sad about

the “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” as the tide flows out, as it ‘retreats’ to the gentle breeze of the “night-wind” (Remember the opening: “calm…fair…glimmering…vast…tranquil… sweet…” That calm and quiet evening is still before him, even as he hears the waves pounding and senses the mark of the receding tide.).

Earlier the the waves crashed on the “moon-blanched land,” but now that strand is transformed into “the vast edges drear/And naked shingles of the world.” We are far from the “bright girdle” for now we are without faith, and are inhabitants of a world of endless defeat and pain. To which we are, like the rocky beaches (a “shingle” is a stony beach), “naked” and exposed to battering.

Then we arrive at the perfect last stanza, the one from which Lyndon Johnson quoted so inappropriately – and not just because Arnold and not Lowell wrote the line he cited. That final stanza calls for human companionship and solidarity in the face of a universe which seems to hammer at us with unfeeling destructive power, as the waves hammer, and have always hammered, the shore. A shore which is no longer protected by a girdle of faith, but which is naked to the elements.

Ah, Lyndon Johnson. You did so well in inventing Medicare, Medicaid, Head Start, OEO, VISTA, Food Stamps; in passing landmark legislation on civil rights and voting rights; in providing federal money to schools and for higher education. You were our greatest domestic president since Franklin Roosevelt. But you did and your speechwriters not know a thing about poetry. Nor could you keep us from greatly expanding that war in Vietnam, which would cost untold lives and ultimately end in an American defeat.

Lyndon Johnson, even if he had lines prepared for him, was a bad reader, did not see that the world only *seemed* to hold great promise. He was – or his speech writers were so seduced by – that “land of dreams,/ So various, so beautiful, so new” and its seeming that he didn’t notice that this was all maya, illusion, to Arnold. It ‘seemed’ beautiful to Arnold and I would suggest that this ‘promise’ still seems to be before us today, in our time. I deeply understand why the line was so seductive, for we like to think of America as a ‘land of dreams’ and we very much want to believe that all that lies before us is – the reverberations of that series “so…so…so…” seem to ground the words – various and beautiful and new.

> Ah, love, let us be true
> To one another! 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;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

But the world is *not* various or beautiful or new. It does not have the things we wish it would have, that we so ardently and deeply wish it would have. It does not have joy. It does not have love, save for that holding on to one another that the stanza opens with. It does not have light (this is, after all, a night-time poem in which waves crash loudly upon the shore.) With the incessant pounding of the surf, there is no point of certitude. Nor is there peace. Nor is there anything to assuage the pain we feel. What Arnold has created in the penultimate lines of this poem is a whole series of negatives, recurrent negatives, in what must be one of the most wonderful portrayals (ironic, isn't it, how lyrically he portrays this!) of the lacks we are doomed to encounter as we live in this, our world, which "Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,/ Nor certitude, nor peace…" Nor is there help for those pains, except for each of us to hold on to another human being as we face lack of certitude and the absence of peace. So many negative: sa they roll onward, they reinforce one another. No joy, no love, no light, no certitude, not peace, no help for pain.

The poem ends with a startling image which is also a metaphor for human existence. We need to recall that the poet is standing by the English Channel, hearing the waves come in, one after another, pounding on the rocky beach. This situation seems emblematic to him: "We are here as on a darkling plain." That "as" indicates that a simile is coming, yet so powerful is the feeling that we forget that it is a simile, a comparison, and see it as our human condition in this modernity that confronts us when we no longer have faith and are resigned to facing the world as we find it.

"No help for pain." We are terrified, unknowing (in eh simile, Arnold will say "ignorant"), wanting to escape ("flight") and yet trapped in the darkness where violence is loosed and destruction is all around. "Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,/ Where ignorant armies clash by night." The sounds he hears, and has heard incessantly since the ninth line of the poem – or was it the seventh? – are emblematic of the world in which he, on the cusp of modernity, lives in.

That world from which Lyndon Johnson wanted to escape in the face of Robert Lowell's challenge to him about the war in Vietnam is all around us at the

end of Arnold's poem. Struggle, confusion, flight, darkness, military engagement: that, says Arnold, is the world we inhabit. The sounds he hears on the shoreline of the English Channel are the sounds of battle, of armies confronting each other, killing one another in great ignorance of the forces which impel them. (It was not accidental that Norman Mailer titled his great work of reportage, about a massive protest against the war in Vietnam, A*rmies of the Night.*) Facing modernity and the savage elements it has released, , the poem tells us, all we have is one another, remaining true to each other as the world is collapsing all around us.

Arnold's poem, which begins with mildness, falters along its way and ends up with a recognition of mindless destruction. If we are looking for the fully realized work of art, we will not find it here. Yet by its close, the poem tells us much, and deeply, of who we are and where we live and the small thing we can count on: our relations with those we love.

All the rest is noise, confusion, uncertainty and endless pain.