Reflections on the Meaning and Structure of “Dover Beach”

The logical structure of “Dover Beach”, according to John Racin, has as its exact parallel the tripartite structureemployed in the meditative poems of Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, and other devotional poets of the 17th 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 Poetry of Meditation*, Yale University Press, 1962), 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. 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 analysed 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 visionof the coming Apocalypse. Thus the meditative structure (a microcosm 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 literal dimensions of the scene itself. However, the motive is clarified in the second part of the poem. 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 fulness 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 17th 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”.

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. 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. (For Arnold’s view of history see R A Forsyth. “The Contrasting Views of Arnold and Clough in the Context of Dr Arnold’s Historigraphy”, ELH, XXXV, 1968, 218-253).

Arnold’s view depends on the Hebraic-Christian assumptions that time is linear, that it exists within a universe that had a beginning *ex nihilo* and will have an end *ad nihilum*. 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. If the Sea of Faith is to return periodically, the tragic implications of the poem are lost. 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 *intellegout 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 splendour of faith, but no more than that. We are reminded of Arnold’s words: “I cannot conceal for 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”. 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 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”. 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 the poem 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 climaxed by a fearful close.