

Locating Light on the Darkling Plain: Reverberations of Matthew  
Arnold's Victorian Melancholy and Virginia Woolf's Hopeful Modern  
Vision

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In the introduction to his survey of Modern Fiction the late professor David Thibedeaux related a devastating description of the Modern Period that would provide a definitive touchtone for his class' study of that literature.

"What is life like in the Modern Period?" he would rhetorically ask his students as they engaged such texts as Hesse's Journey to the East, Huxley's Brave New World, and Anderson's Winnesberg, Ohio. They answered him fearlessly referring to the texts and sometimes recounting the key litany he did repeatedly and impassionedly recite:

...the darkling plain is here, in mud and barbed wire, with no joy, love, light, certitude, peace, nor help from pain, where ignorant armies clash by night. Only a bleak solipsism survives, each sole self projecting its own reality, unsure of its match with any other. The past is dead. God is dead.

(Unknown, "Modernism")<sup>1</sup>

Thibedeaux's critical application of Arnoldian gloom does much to contextualize the psychological plights of those characters inhabiting Modern Literature and it provides a place for the texts to commiserate. Yet it offers no solace to a certain reader stricken heartsick by Melville's Bartleby ("there is no joy, love, or peace there [etc.]," his mind murmurs.) This reader finds himself utterly alone approaching hopelessness and feels abandoned by the texts; he

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<sup>1</sup> Here Arnold's images are invoked in a later Modernist's account of World-War-I's annihilation. While Arnold encloses his darkling plain within a simile Norton editors cite some nighttime battles of his own day as sources for his "ignorant armies," realizing the darkling plain in his actuality.

has lost sight of his self on the darkling plain as an "eternal note of sadness" rattles through his consciousness; still, an internal flicker makes him wonder if there is more to life than sadness pervading and death looming, or why are we living here, writing and reading these records?

If he is to begin to satisfy these huge concerns he must visit Arnold's darkling plain himself armed with the light of supporting scholarship to reckon with those warblings of obscurity that have rendered him directionless. Such are the aims of this essay which will find in Arnold's vision more than doom saying and in the essays of Virginia Woolf a romantic vision of modernity that consoles those hyperbolic paranoids too enchanted by a negative apocalypse. It will show that the glum shadow Arnold seems to cast cannot ever touch or dim Woolf's assured, shimmering elucidations. Finally, Thibedeaux's research question will be seen to its logical conclusion wherein despair shrinks from the light of hope and dies.

#### "Dover Beach" Revisited and Reviewed

As mentioned, the darkling plain first appears in Arnold's "Dover Beach", which is reprinted here:

##### "Dover Beach"

The sea is calm tonight.  
 The tide is full, the moon lies fair  
 Upon the straights - 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-blanch'd 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 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 Sea of Faith  
 Was once, too, at the full, and the 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 from pain;  
 And we are here as on a darkling plain  
 Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
 Where ignorant armies clash by night.

The student disoriented by Arnold's influential gloom, beginning his recovery, reads the above poem and consults Auburn High School teacher Lois B. Miller's scholarship which eases him with the happy announcement that "this is a poem after the heart of a modern lover of poetry." (Miller, *The Eternal Note of Sadness: An Analysis of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach"*) She praises the work's sensual immediacy which "makes an unforgettable impression on the classroom of today. [...T]he 'long withdrawing roar' of the sea reminds [her students] of the

sounds when they awake in the night in unfamiliar surroundings." She makes "especial mention [...] of the poet's use of the word *darkling*. [...] students are delighted at its recurrence in the poems they study." Though in her reading man is deserted on the plain ("Arnold leaves him there"), "the pessimism of Arnold need not be contagious" because the presence of the other indicates "human affection is an absolute in the mirage of the world." (Miller, *Eternal Note*)

Miller's reading gives heart to the researcher who is inclined to read Arnold's poem even less pessimistically, freed from the emotional constraints of the post-War rendering of its landscape (where the darkling plain has been annexed from the metaphor and one is asked to live there.) Thus liberated from that prison his spirit seemingly rises into air abandonedly like "pebbles which the waves...fling...up" and what started as a queasy disconcertedness startles him now with the literal tickle of delight it stirs. He hears Arnold burying end rhymes under heavy prosaic syntax and recalls Milton's efforts against the detractive practice. Then, he resurrects the rhymes for scrutiny and watches them disintegrate in his hands by Arnold's design. These are exciting developments for our researcher. For further explication he refers to more scholarly commentary and finds Lauren Caldwell's reading truly edifying. In "Truncating Coleridgean Conversation and the Re-visioning of 'Dover Beach'" she cites Ruth Pitman's reading of "the corrosive influence of science on Matthew Arnold's world and its manifestation in the eroding stanzaic structure" of the poem, arguing

that it records both "what has happened to the self in the world" and "our post-Romantic relationship to Romanticism." In this relationship, "the self is distanced to the point of dislocation" from the world, which is "scientifically unconcerned" with any "Romantic self" that can no longer live in linguistic representation. "If one is to retain poetry and any kind of Romanticism, one must rehabilitate language first" in an age Arnold describes as "deeply *unpoetical*." (Caldwell, "Truncating")

Caldwell reads the eroding of the piece as an "attempt to describe the world with a language that no longer holds" via a series of failed visions and revisions of this world. She attributes the mechanical failures of "Dover Beach" (wherein figurations are unsuccessful in producing romantic equivalences or working metaphors) to Arnold's "imbedding the revising process in the poems themselves as, paradoxically, both the perpetual problem and unceasing impetus for their motion." This method she relates to the "generation of preface writers" who often undermined the poems they introduced. Caldwell finds Arnold "groping his way through a [...] linguistically eroded world toward [...] a glimmer of fusion. [...] If language is to mean again - it will not arise from progress but from failure." She argues that in this "Arnoldian conversation poem [...] the Romantic Utility of the conversational addressee" establishes firm grounds upon which to erect a revised record.

Arnold deems himself successful. In a letter to his mother, he

states:

My poems represent, on the whole, the main movement of the mind of the last quarter of a century, and thus they will probably have their day as people become conscious to themselves of what that movement of mind is, and interested in the literary productions that reflect it. (Arnold, Norton 1473)

Michael McGhee argues in *After "Dover Beach: Arnold's Recast Religion"* that Arnold's experiment denotes his "experiential notion of a revelatory life freed from traditional dogma." He cites Arnold from *Literature and Dogma*:

"And a certainty is the sense of *life*, of being truly alive. [...This sense is] capable of being developed, apparently, by progress in righteousness into something immeasurably stronger. Here is the true basis for all religious aspiration after immortality. And it is an experimental basis." (Arnold, *Literature and Dogma*)

McGhee finds that grief in "Dover Beach" "is a part of the total experience of the tranquil bay, something disturbing within the enchantment, and we hear it [...] precipitate the associations which lead to the insight, not just that faith is illusory, but that it is irrelevant to the one thing needful" which is that notion of a revelatory life enhanced through ethical action. McGhee says Arnold "replaces [metaphysics] with ethics as the route through which

otherwise unknown realities make themselves manifest." The poem's sadness is what "a Buddhist would recognize [as...] *dukkha*, a sense of suffering, pain, or unsatisfactoriness which [...] must be traced to its intentional object, so that the melancholy becomes a *clue*, [...] to something submerged or unacknowledged." (McGhee, *After "Dover Beach"*) The reader's respondent apprehension is necessary to his spiritual growth and is his bodily response to its encounter with a sublime truth. Though Arnold later turn to criticism in aiding the troubled modern psyche, his records in verse of a "sick individual in a sick society" are also vitally cathartic.

James Longenbach in "Matthew Arnold and the Modern Apocalypse" likens Arnold's "fabling to make truth" to Nietzsche's idea of truth as "a moveable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified [...] and which seem to a people to be binding. Truths are illusions we have forgotten are illusions." It is with this understanding, Longenbach says, that Arnold avoids the moralizing rhetoric of offering final solutions, realizing that "in a world of action, language cannot save us." Neither would an apocalyptic vision damn viewers unless acted upon. Longenbach hopes "we see how Arnold himself saw not only the pleasure but the pathos of 'as if,'" as he refers us to Wallace Stevens', from "Adagia": "final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else."



Upon reading these articles the researcher hopefully views the darkling plain in a new light. After it all, is he not safe among two lovers at a beachfront window contemplating some finer points of a magnificent yet troublesome existence? And will not the light on the French coast, gone now for a mere moment, soon gleam again completing its revolution? Exhilarated by being alive he reflects on Gertrude Stein's "Reflection on the Atomic Bomb:"

"They asked me what I thought of the atomic bomb. I said I had not been able to take any interest in it. [...] What is the use, if they are really as destructive as all that there is nothing left and if there is nothing there nobody to be interested and nothing to be interested about. [...]Everybody gets so much information all day long that they lose their common sense. They listen so much that they forget to be natural. This is a nice story.

It is with a sense of relief that the researcher looks past his Victorian angst and opens his anthology to an essay by High Modernist Virginia Woolf entitled, "Modern Fiction," which proves another valuable resource for him in answering Thibedeaux's question, "What is life like in the Modern Period?" Her survey of that Literature and its aims refreshes our reader. He finds Woolf taking up Arnold's efforts to record the self's "movement of the mind":

The mind receives a myriad impressions - trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of

steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms. [...] Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.

She recognizes futility in the struggle to find "the floor of your mind," this place where one might best witness life and art intersecting. In her essay "Gas" she renders a portrayal of this obsession after

"[...] some fast flying always disappearing black object, drawn rapidly ahead of us. We become aware of something that we could never see in the other world; something that we have been sent in search of [...] we fly on the trail of this truth which, if we could grasp it, we should be forever illuminated. And we rush faster and faster [...] until [...] we seem to be crushed between the upper world and the lower world and then suddenly the pressure is lessened. We emerge into daylight [...] The truth that was being drawn so fast ahead of us vanishes.

Modern advancements in science and literature, according to Woolf, do not bring us any nearer to this elusive truth. "We do not come to write better," Woolf comments. "All that we can be said to do is to keep moving, now a little in this direction, now in that, but with a

circular tendency should the whole course of the track be viewed from a sufficiently lofty pinnacle." Woolf takes pleasure in the chase, and our researcher enjoys following the extravagant choreography of her pursuit. Before she dizzies him she reminds him, reassuringly and resoundingly, to "look within and life 'or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing' [...] is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end." He realizes how blind he had been in permitting the "no light no love no certitude" bit to repeat so needlessly in his head that it threatened to become all he saw<sup>2</sup>.

Woolf considers too how the Fiction handles our researcher's gravest concern noting Tchekov's character, Gusev, who "dies, and looking 'like a carrot or a radish' is thrown overboard." These "conclusions [...] of the utmost sadness" threaten to "present question after question which must be left to sound on and on [...] in hopeless interrogation that fills us with a deep [...] despair." Before succumbing to such despair (best exemplified, she says, in a tradition wholly foreign) she locates a "voice of protest" within her own tradition "which seems to have bred in us the instinct to enjoy and fight rather than to suffer and to understand. [...] English fiction from Sterne to Meredith bears witness to our natural delight in humour and comedy, in the beauty of earth, in the activities of the

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<sup>2</sup> For scholarship on Woolf's visionary brand of poetic prose see: J.H. Robert's "'Vision and Design' in Virginia Woolf", Thomas Matro's tracing convergences of human and aesthetic relations in "Only Relations: Vision and Achievement in *To the Lighthouse*," "Burning Down the House: Sara Coleridge, Virginia Woolf, and the Politics of Literary Revision" in which Bradford Mudge discusses Woolf's re-envisioning of her plagued literary foremother, and Sally Minogue's "Was it a Vision? Structuring Emptiness in *To the Lighthouse*."

intellect, and in the splendour of the body." Closing her essay she imagines Modern Fiction anthropomorphically bidding us to "break and bully her, as well as honour and love her" (*Modern Fiction*).

Our thrilled reader gains clarity and more encouragement from Woolf's "Letter to a Young Poet," which destroys any lingering negativity Arnold managed to inspire in him. Woolf maintains the viability of the Modern self: "self joins in the dance; self lends itself to the rhythm." If the "young poet," she says "[...] may be right in talking about the difficulty of the time, [he is] wrong to despair." Even as the "necrophils" are "propheying despair" ("science, they say, has made poetry impossible. No poetry in motor cars"), "why should not poetry," freeing itself from "certain falsities, the great wreckage of the Victorian age [...] open its eyes, look out of the window" (Woolf, "Letter"). For Woolf reassures him:

"for my part I do not believe in poets dying, Keats Shelley and Byron are alive here in this room in you and you and you [...] So long as you and you and you [...] are aged precisely twenty-three and propose - O enviable lot! - to spend the next fifty years of your life writing poetry, I refuse to think that the art is dead." (Woolf, "Letter")

Now our beloved reader, consoled and inspired, approaches the keyboard now to excitedly record some advancement in his research.