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THE GENRE OF "DOVER BEACH"

By Tom J. Truss, Jr.

"TRISTRAM AND ISEULT" was a favorite with Arnold.¹ The fact that it was reprinted frequently during his lifetime perhaps bears out this contention. A glance at the textual history of the poem, with its variant readings,² indicates Arnold's concern for it as well as some dissatisfaction with it.³ Because the poem was very much on Arnold's mind, it becomes a rather good point of departure in an examination of "Dover Beach," which has a similar history.⁴

³Tinker and Lowry, Commentary, p. 113.
⁴Conditions of the composition of the two poems might roughly coincide. Various views of "Dover Beach" presuppose that the last paragraph of the poem was written around 1848-1849—Paul Turner, "Dover Beach and The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich," English Studies, XXVIII (1947), 173-178; Buckner B. Trawick, "The Sea of Faith and the Battle by Night in Dover Beach," PMLA, LXV (1950), 1282-1283; and David Allan Robertson, "'Dover Beach' and 'Say Not the Struggle Naught Availeth,'" PMLA, LXVI (1951), 919-920. The opening three paragraphs were probably written in June, 1851, on Arnold's wedding trip—Paul F. Baum, Ten Studies in the Poetry of Matthew Arnold (Durham: Duke University Press, 1958), p. 86. Coinciding with the earlier date is Arnold's significant reference (September 29, 1848) to a pair of blue eyes at Thun, which probably underlie the Marguerite poems—The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough, ed. H. F. Lowry (London: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 91. If one wishes to find some basis for the poem in Arnold's own experience, the vocative "Ah, love" (1. 29) might be construed as a reference not specifically to Miss Wightman nor to "Marguerite" but to a transfigured fusion of the two.

At Thun, Arnold read the account of Tristram and Iseult which lies at the root of his narrative poem (see his letter to Mr. Hill, printed by R. E. C. Houghton in TLS, May 19, 1932, p. 368). The pair of blue eyes in Switzerland is thus imbedded somewhere in his characterization of the Irish Iseult. The poem was published, however, after Arnold's marriage to Miss Wightman.
Problematic though “Tristram and Iseult” might be, some of its dominant themes are reflected in “Dover Beach.”

The two Iseult-images are significant to this inquiry. Iseult of Ireland had the hero’s youthful prime, when Tristram was a “peerless hunter, harper, knight” (Pt. I, 1. 22), when the “wild delicious pain” (Pt. I, 1. 151) of his love for the Irish Iseult began. Contrasting sharply with this side of his nature is that revealed by his life with the other Iseult, his wife. In his domestic existence he has “Hours, if not of ecstasy, / From violent anguish surely free!” (Pt. I, 11. 232-233). This life is not satisfying, however: “There’s a secret in his breast / Which will never let him rest” (Pt. I, 11. 245-246). The hero of the poem is thus torn asunder by the two Iseults.

Iseult of Ireland, with her proud dark eyes, her petulant quick replies, her dazzling hand, and her raven hair (Pt. I, 11. 119-123) is associated with the joys of Tristram’s youth; and the power which she holds over him has persisted throughout his life and has made him unable to live with the circumstances which the world has placed him in. At his death, even, she comforts him with words of pleasure:

Fear me not, I will be always with thee;
I will watch thee, tend thee, soothe thy pain;
Sing thee tales of true, long-parted lovers,
Join’d at evening of their days again.

(Pt. II, 11. 29-32)

The kind of imagery depicting the Irish Iseult appears also in the Switzerland poems: “Ah, Marguerite, fain / Would these arms reach to clasp thee!” (2, 11. 60-61). One can collect a host of images in a category which can be called ideas of joyful youth—in *Empeodoles*, the poet Callicles, with Peisianax, drinking wine and playing his harp at whim in the company of guests and a new dancing girl; the youthful king Mycerinus retreating with a throng of revelers to the cool region of a grove; in the “Scholar Gipsy,” the youthful Thames, when wits were fresh and clear. The themes contained in this imagery are freedom from mundane concerns and delight in pleasures for their own sake—in nature, in companionship, in revelry, in art, in free intellectual inquiry.

Iseult of Brittany seems to embody the opposite point of view. Her only activity is mundane and depressing—minding her fatherless children. Arnold shows her living in a winter of sorrows:
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Joy has not found her yet, nor ever will—

She seems one dying in a mask of youth.

(Pt. III, ll. 68-75)

This is the same sensibility reflected in the "Lines Written in Kensington Gardens": "nor let me die / Before I have begun to live" (11. 43-44); and in "To a Gipsy Child by the Sea-shore": "Thou hast foreknown the vanity of hope, / Foreseen thy harvest—yet proceed'st to live" (11. 39-40). In this frame of reference, the disease of modern life, with its sick hurry, its divided aims, has killed man's ability to feel, and the central stream of his existence has been buried by distractions which sap his powers.

"Dover Beach" draws imagery from both varieties of sentiment. The invocation, "Ah, love, let us be true / To one another," clashes with the observation about the world, which has neither "joy, nor love, nor light." In the opening line the speaker sees a calmness in the sea—the same kind of calmness which the poet Callicles associates with the songs of Apollo and the muses at the conclusion of Empedocles. At the end of the poem, however, the speaker refers to ignorant armies which clash by night. This is just the kind of struggle which eats away the soul of the speaker of "The Buried Life." The listener in "Dover Beach," then, hears the reflections of one who has brought the two worlds together—that of youthful freedom in aesthetic and intellectual delight for its own sake, and that of mature despair of self-knowledge and human attainment.

The first of the two worlds traditionally finds literary expression in lyric form, particularly during the Romantic period. Shelley provides a good illustration. Although the reader is never certain of the identity of the person addressed in the lines "I arise from dreams of Thee / In the first sweet sleep of night," the devotion to her (or it) is powerful enough to lift the speaker out of himself. The object of his devotion comes to hold absolute power over the devotee. In this suspended state, the speaker has cast aside the burden of himself and can express his feelings in divine discourse. In the divine ego of such a Romantic point of view, the poet loses his individuality to the point that he becomes an exalted, representative man, and he is hence a purveyor of universal truth. He sees into the life of things, not just for himself but for all men; and in the ecstatic state necessary for this insight, the tone of lyric discourse most nearly approximates his inner feeling. In "Dover Beach" is an incipient ecstasy for seeing into the life of things. The descriptive
passage at the beginning of the poem prepares the reader for an insight expressed with lyric grandeur. The beautiful natural scene and the presence of the beloved are familiar devices of Romantic lyric poetry.

The second world finds expression in a different mode of discourse, the dramatic monologue. Whereas the speaker in the Romantic lyric has risen above himself, the speaker in the dramatic monologue decidedly has not. The Duke in "My Last Duchess" deliberately indulges in self-revelation, and he delights us—and perhaps himself—with his own peculiarities. Although Andrea del Sarto pays lip-service to reaching the heights on which Michelangelo dwelled, in the end he rationalizes his own ineptitude and tries to justify his position—"there's still Lucretia,—as I choose." Fra Lippo Lippi uses his own theories of nature and art as a defense for his personal life. As a formal argument, his discourse contains loopholes; but as a dramatic monologue, it is a brilliant display of Lippo's self-hood. In brief, the dramatic monologue is a device for self-exploration. The speaker wishes to educate his listener to something about himself, to some limitation of his own nature—and to gain sympathy for his own limited point of view. In "Dover Beach" the speaker feels compelled by powers external to himself to explain his own melancholy; and the expression "let us be true to one another" stands obliquely as a plea for sympathy, even though it seems on the surface to be the lyric declaration of love's modus vivendi.

An examination of the metrics of the poem illustrates these points rather vividly. Two patterns seem to vie with each other for predominance. In the first paragraph one detects a lyric urge in the interlocking rhymes aba (11.1-3) and dbd (11.5-7). The c-rhyme, however, distorts the pattern and creates a series of unrhymed pentameters, in the manner of a dramatic monologue: acdb (11.3-6). Running counter to the dbd pattern (11.5-7) is the end-stopped b-line. In addition, no regular lyric pattern in line-lengths is established in the aba and dbd sequences. Instead, a submerged

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6I am partly indebted to Baum, Ten Studies, pp. 94-96. To my ear, the paragraphs of the poems scan as follows:

(1) a5b5acdb5dc5ef5sc5t5fg5c5

(2) a5b5acdb5dc5c5

(3) a5b5c5d5—imperfect—d5c5

(4) a5b5acdb5dc5c5
pentameter in the opening line seems to overpower any other possibility: “The sea is calm tonight. / The tide is full” begins a blank-verse sequence which contains “on the French coast the light / Gleams and is gone” and “the cliffs of England stand / Glimmering and vast.” Before the pentameter dominates, however, Arnold shortens the length of lines in the sequence *dce* (11. 7-9) and hides another pentameter in the expression “Listen! you hear the grating roar / Of pebbles.” Unrhymed pentameter is thus pitched into conflict with lines of unequal length and interlocked rhymes. In metrics the poem struggles between the blank verse of dramatic monologue and regular patterns of a love lyric.

The second and third paragraphs bear out this point. In the second Arnold composes, in a regular pattern of rhymes, lines of unequal length but hides pentameters in them: “the turbid ebb and flow / Of human misery” (11. 17-18) and “we / Find also in the sound a thought” (11. 18-19). The tone of the poem changes slightly in the third paragraph: it is less lyrical than that containing the reminiscences of Sophocles. No regular sequence of rhyme words appears here, and the short lines combine to form blank verse:

The Sea of Faith / Was once, too, at the full (11. 21-22)
But now I only hear / Its melancholy (11. 24-25)
Retreating, to the breath / Of the night-wind (11. 26-27)

The final paragraph is most revealing. The rhyme scheme of its opening eight lines is regular: *abbaabdc*, like the octave of a sonnet. Lines 30 through 36 are sustained pentameters which get their impetus from the submerged five-foot unit: “Ah, love, let us be true / To one another” (11. 29-30). A pattern for regular sustained lyric rapture exists for a while, but the final line, “Where ignorant armies clash by night,” upsets the pattern with its length (four feet) and with its rhyme word (it breaks the scheme with a repetition in the wrong position). The pattern for lyric expression collapses under the burden of unlyrical sentiment. Instead of rising to the lyric grandeur which the request “Come to the window” anticipates, the poem drops to a cacophonous ending.

Arnold classified “Dover Beach” as a lyric poem? His classification is rather inaccurate. The poem depicts a sensibility which chooses to be lyric but which cannot, because the forces of the

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1In the very fine *Voices of Matthew Arnold* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), W. Stacy Johnson discusses “Dover Beach” under the heading “Monologue and Dialogue,” pp. 90-94.
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world make the speaker's mood and hence his poem unlyrical. Instead of rising to an extended expression of love which transcends the limitations of the human speaker, the work becomes a dramatic discourse revealing the inner feelings of a man oppressed by the world. Furthermore, we see Arnold's woman-image at the point she is being transformed from an Iseult of Ireland to an Iseult of Brittany. "Dover Beach" is thus a love poem without love, and a lyric without song. Like "The Buried Life" it depicts that peculiar state in which one yearns for the intensity of a free and untrammeled vision and feels that since he has recognized it in others he should find it for himself. The gift of seeing life steadily and seeing it whole is not for him. Although the Romantic lyricists were disillusioned of their visions, they took solace in the knowledge that they had once seen life whole, and in the possibility that such a vision might come to them again. The speaker of "Dover Beach" is a visionary who never achieved such a vision; we must know him through his monologue, which by its very nature is not whole but episodic and fragmentary.

The poem lies somewhere between the concomitant traditions of lyric and dramatic verse. In its imagery, in the arrangement of its expository material, and in its metrics, its line of movement veers first in one direction and then in the other, with the discourse never reaching the point of full expression in a dramatic or in a lyric mode. As soon as one mode almost attains dominance, the other one begins to gather force. The unique genre which results sharply parallels the torn and oppressed sensibility which speaks in it.