REVISITING MATTHEW ARNOLD (1822-88)

"Who prop, thou askst, in these bad days, my mind?"

Might this be the worst ever opening line to a poem? The answer to who it was that poor Matthew Arnold depended on so much (barely discoverable in the poem itself, although there are *clues* for the classically minded), turns out to be Sophocles, the Greek tragic dramatist. The question (and answer) suggests already a poet consumed with gloomy thoughts.

We had to to do Matthew Arnold for A Level, and I'm interested to see whether the poems we had to study, then, are better or worse than I remember (to be frank, back in 1968, I found him at times a bit of a whingeing bore). I would guess that most people no longer read him much, if at all, though they probably know "Dover Beach", a favourite of mine, which received a boost in the novel *Saturday* by Ian McKewan (2005).

Saturday was interesting, by the way, because like the persona in the novel, I, too, had a daughter who had marched in London on that Saturday in 2003 - against committing troops to Iraq; and I also, though no heart surgeon, had thought then that Tony Blair had right on his side in taking a stand on Weapons of Mass Destruction, even though it turned out that the 'dossier' was 'dodgy' and there were in fact no WMDs to be found in Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

In our post-9/11 era of deep cultural, social and political rifts (from Brexit and Trump, to climate change, asylum seekers, economic migration and financial collapse), what poem doesn't speak better to the times than "Dover Beach"? With a No Deal exit from Europe currently looming and the likelihood of streams of trucks backed for miles up the M20, the beach at Dover has taken on an added significance. Here is the poem:

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.

The poem dates from 1851, when Matthew Arnold had just got married. It starts positively, and beautifully, with a description of the scene on the beach at Dover, where the honeymooners were staying. The tranquillity of the scene is emphasised and the reader, as well as his unnamed lover, is invited to share the view, taking in the cliffs, the June night air and the sound of the waves. Soon, however, the sea takes on a more symbolic and negative role. The light on the French coast "Gleams and is gone" – 1848, three years earlier, had been the year of revolutions in France and Europe and the word

"lumière" (or "light") also refers to the French Enlightenment, now becoming a precious thing of the past.

Why is the poem *so* dark at the end and why is the poet *so* deeply troubled? "Ah, love, let us be true To one another" – the tone seems almost desperate (we have to accept all the "Ah"s in Matthew Arnold' poetry - he is *constantly* sighing!). In this dark vision of a world torn with conflict on a huge scale, the only recourse for him seems to be a romantic affirmation of their love for each other. The poem's construction seems almost modern in its freedom, but it does also rhyme. It's interesting that the one line left hanging with no rhyme is "The Sea of Faith" (difficult anyway to find a rhyme for…?) but this is a poem, I think, which is less about real armies clashing, though armies certainly had been in conflict, eg in Italy, and more about Matthew Arnold's own inner turmoil, which he touches on elsewhere in his poems.

"Faith" with a capital F would seem to refer to all those certainties of his father's brand of religion that were being threatened by the Oxford Movement and a return to High Church anglicanism, almost Catholicism, which is ultimately where John Henry Newman (later Cardinal Newman) was heading. Matthew Arnold's father had written pamphlets against Newman, but when trying to choose between his father's writings and Newman's, young "Matt" had found it difficult to decide. He was inspired by both.

Matthew was the son of Dr Thomas Arnold, the famous headmaster of Rugby School immortalised in the novel "Tom Brown's Schooldays". His father had single-handedly "turned around" that renowned '*public school'* (in reality a fee-paying private school) and he was largely responsible for establishing the concept – morally and educationally – of what came to be known as 'public schools' (schools for an élite). Before his time, public schools like Eton were where the very rich sent their spoilt brats. These largely terrorised the poor (literally impoverished) teachers, their social inferiors, who could respond only with brute force, if they were able. It may be an over-simplification, but as I understand it, part of the success lay in Thomas Arnold's brilliant idea of turning poachers into gamekeepers and making the pupils *police* themselves – the "prefect" system. Who more respected and feared than the senior pupils themselves, leaving the teachers largely free to teach and oversee (and reward the prefects!)? Sport was *not* one of the Doctor's interests (rugby football had not yet been "invented"), but developing Christian manliness in his pupils was.

A man of tremendous charisma, energy and moral authority, Dr Thomas Arnold must have been a very difficult father to live up to, (I like the story of Matthew Arnold, returning to the school for his final years before going to Oxford, standing on the dais, behind his illustrious father at prayers, winking and making faces at his friends below, trying to get them to laugh!). Although he adored his father, he nevertheless felt a great weight of paternal expectation on his shoulders. He writes tellingly about this later in "Rugby Chapel", fifteen years after his father's untimely death in 1842 at the age of only 47. Here are a few extracts (it's a long and weighty poem and I find the use of anapaests in the rhythm awkward and off-putting, - - / - - /). He is intensely aware of his father's moral strength, but I don't get a sense of fondness or real affection here. I think this was a large part of the son's problem: not feeling worthy enough, *ever*.

Rugby Chapel

Coldly, sadly descends
The autumn-evening. The field
Strewn with its dank yellow drifts
Of wither'd leaves, and the elms,
Fade into dimness apace,
Silent;—hardly a shout
From a few boys late at their play!
The lights come out in the street,
In the school-room windows;—but cold,
Solemn, unlighted, austere,
Through the gathering darkness, arise
The chapel-walls, in whose bound
Thou, my father! art laid.

There thou dost lie, in the gloom
Of the autumn evening. But *ah!*
That word, gloom, to my mind
Brings thee back, in the light
Of thy radiant vigour, again;
In the gloom of November we pass'd
Days not dark at thy side;
Seasons impair'd not the ray
Of thy buoyant cheerfulness clear.
Such thou wast! and I stand
In the autumn evening, and think
Of bygone autumns with thee.

…….

What is the course of the life
Of mortal men on the earth?—
Most men eddy about
Here and there—eat and drink,
Chatter and love and hate,
Gather and squander, are raised
Aloft, are hurl'd in the dust,
Striving blindly, achieving
Nothing; and then they die—
Perish;—and no one asks
Who or what they have been,
More than he asks what waves,
In the moonlit solitudes mild
Of the midmost Ocean, have swell'd,
Foam'd for a moment, and gone.

And there are some, whom a thirst
Ardent, unquenchable, fires,
Not with the crowd to be spent,

Not without aim to go round
In an eddy of purposeless dust,
Effort unmeaning and vain.
Ah yes! some of us strive
Not without action to die
Fruitless, but something to snatch
From dull oblivion, nor all
Glut the devouring grave!
We, we have chosen our path—
Path to a clear-purposed goal,
Path of advance!—but it leads
A long, steep journey, through sunk
Gorges, o'er mountains in snow.
Cheerful, with friends, we set forth—
Then on the height, comes the storm.
Thunder crashes from rock
To rock, the cataracts reply,
Lightnings dazzle our eyes.
Roaring torrents have breach'd
The track, the stream-bed descends
In the place where the wayfarer once
Planted his footstep—the spray
Boils o'er its borders! aloft
The unseen snow-beds dislodge
Their hanging ruin; alas,
Havoc is made in our train!
Friends, who set forth at our side,
Falter, are lost in the storm.
We, we only are left!
With frowning foreheads, with lips
Sternly compress'd, we strain on,
On—and at nightfall at last
Come to the end of our way,
To the lonely inn 'mid the rocks;
Where the gaunt and taciturn host
Stands on the threshold, the wind
Shaking his thin white hairs—
Holds his lantern to scan
Our storm-beat figures, and asks:
Whom in our party we bring?
Whom we have left in the snow?
Sadly we answer: We bring
Only ourselves! we lost
Sight of the rest in the storm.
Hardly ourselves we fought through,
Stripp'd, without friends, as we are.
Friends, companions, and train,
The avalanche swept from our side.

But thou woulds't not *alone*
Be saved, my father! *alone*
Conquer and come to thy goal,
Leaving the rest in the wild.
We were weary, and we
Fearful, and we in our march
Fain to drop down and to die.
Still thou turnedst, and still
Beckonedst the trembler, and still
Gavest the weary thy hand.

And through thee I believe
In the noble and great who are gone;
Pure souls honour'd and blest
By former ages, who else—
Such, so soulless, so poor,
Is the race of men whom I see—
Seem'd but a dream of the heart,
Seem'd but a cry of desire.
Yes! I believe that there lived
Others like thee in the past,
Not like the men of the crowd
Who all round me to-day
Bluster or cringe, and make life
Hideous, and arid, and vile;
But souls temper'd with fire,
Fervent, heroic, and good,
Helpers and friends of mankind.
Servants of God!—or sons
Shall I not call you? Because
Not as servants ye knew
Your Father's innermost mind,
His, who unwillingly sees
One of his little ones lost—
Yours is the praise, if mankind
Hath not as yet in its march
Fainted, and fallen, and died!

…….

Then, in such hour of need
Of your fainting, dispirited race,
Ye, like angels, appear,
Radiant with ardour divine!
Beacons of hope, ye appear!
Languor is not in your heart,
Weakness is not in your word,
Weariness not on your brow.
Ye alight in our van! at your voice,

Panic, despair, flee away.
Ye move through the ranks, recall
The stragglers, refresh the outworn,
Praise, re-inspire the brave!
Order, courage, return.
Eyes rekindling, and prayers,
Follow your steps as ye go.
Ye fill up the gaps in our files,
Strengthen the wavering line,
Stablish, continue our march,
On, to the bound of the waste,
On, to the City of God.

Ah! Poor Matthew! He seems weighed down with the feeling that he must try to rectify the world (as his father appeared to have done so brilliantly).

At Oxford, his best friend was another ex-pupil of Rugby School, Arthur Hugh Clough. Both had been fired up by the sort of "muscular Christianity" advocated by Thomas Arnold, but Clough, who was four years older than Matt, was the more brilliant scholar, widely expected to get a First (though to everyone's surprise he eventually only managed a Second Class Degree, which may have been because Clough had come under the forceful teachings of John Henry Newman, leading the crusading Oxford Movement. Clough disagreed with Newman and, compared to Matt, was a bit of a free spirit, resigning his eventual fellowship at Oxford and taking off for Europe. He witnessed the French attack on Rome in 1846 and in 1848, Clough was also in Paris at the same time as Ralph Waldo Emerson, a friend of his, and together they witnessed the February Revolution. Matthew Arnold rather admired his "republican" spirit but he was also more cautious, though he, too was in Paris around that time. Clough teased "Matt" for his devotion to George Sand, whom he visited at her home in Nohant, and his reading of her novels with their "dangerous" explorations of passionate love.

Here is one of my favourite poems of Arthur Hugh Clough; unlike Matthew Arnold's despondency about the spiritual condition of mankind and his own personal anguish, Clough is far more upbeat. This is a poem I try to repeat to myself (I can never remember it entirely, for some reason) when the going gets tough (and the tough get going!). Manly stuff!

SAY not the struggle naught availeth,
  The labour and the wounds are vain,
The enemy faints not, nor faileth,
  And as things have been they remain.

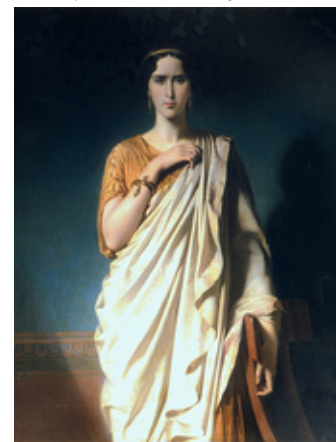
If hopes were dupes, fears may be liars;
   It may be, in yon smoke conceal'd,
Your comrades chase e'en now the fliers,
   And, but for you, possess the field.

For while the tired waves, vainly breaking,
   Seem here no painful inch to gain,
Far back, through creeks and inlets making,
   Comes silent, flooding in, the main.

And not by eastern windows only,
   When daylight comes, comes in the light;
In front the sun climbs slow, how slowly!
   But westward, look, the land is bright!

Compare the sea imagery with "Dover Beach". The situation is basically that of a metaphorical "battle" – life is about "soldiering on", but the poem then adopts the imagery of the sea; unlike the tide in "Dover Beach", retreating with its "melancholy roar", here the tide comes flooding back, like armies being reinforced. The ending of the poem reminds us that sunshine, however slowly (this is English sunshine, don't forget) it climbs, will still lighten up the west as it sets. It couldn't strike a more hopeful note.

Set against Matt's burden of moral earnestness was another path which he was tempted to follow in his youth: the path of sentimental, romantic attachments. Early on, in 1846-47 he fell for an actress called Rachel. The same age as Matt, Mlle 'Rachel' (née Elisabeth-Rachel Félix) was the first actress really to make a name for herself internationally, becoming a model for later actresses like Sarah Bernhardt. She was born into poverty and illiteracy, but managed somehow to become one of the leading lights of the Comédie Française. When she was presented to the very old Châteaubriand, he sighed and said , "How sad to see the birth of something so beautiful, just when one is about to die!" "But Monsieur, le Vicomte," she replied, "there are some men who *never* die!" Of her Victor Hugo, a notable womaniser, ambiguously stated she was "Perfection! Nothing more." Matt followed her back to Paris, watching her play every day for six weeks. Adoration, in vain, from afar.



More serious was his adoration, again from afar it seems, of a French girl he calls "Marguerite", whom he met in Switzerland in 1849. This encounter gave rise to several poems, where he sadly rails against the *pain* of unrequited love. What is most noticeable in the poem is Matthew Arnold's sense, which is apparent in so much of his poetry, of his aching sense of isolation, of feeling *alone.*

Isolation: To Marguerite

We were apart; yet, day by day,
I bade my heart more constant be.
I bade it keep the world away,
And grow a home for only thee;
Nor fear'd but thy love likewise grew,
Like mine, each day, more tried, more true.

The fault was grave! I might have known,
What far too soon, alas! I learn'd—
The heart can bind itself alone,
And faith may oft be unreturn'd.
Self-sway'd our feelings ebb and swell—
Thou lov'st no more;—Farewell! Farewell!

Farewell!—and thou, thou lonely heart,
Which never yet without remorse
Even for a moment didst depart
From thy remote and spher{e}d course
To haunt the place where passions reign—
Back to thy solitude again!

Back! with the conscious thrill of shame
Which Luna felt, that summer-night,
Flash through her pure immortal frame,
When she forsook the starry height
To hang over Endymion's sleep
Upon the pine-grown Latmian steep.

Yet she, chaste queen, had never proved
How vain a thing is mortal love,
Wandering in Heaven, far removed.
But thou hast long had place to prove
This truth—to prove, and make thine own:
"Thou hast been, shalt be, art, alone."

Or, if not quite alone, yet they
Which touch thee are unmating things—
Ocean and clouds and night and day;
Lorn autumns and triumphant springs;
And life, and others' joy and pain,
And love, if love, of happier men.

Of happier men—for they, at least,
Have *dream'd* two human hearts might blend
In one, and were through faith released
From isolation without end
Prolong'd; nor knew, although not less
Alone than thou, their loneliness.

This sense of isolation is given even more prominence in the follow-up poem, where the imagery of the sea creates that sense of almost cosmic loneliness that we find in “Dover Beach”, which came later.

To Marguerite: Continued

Yes! in the sea of life enisled,
With echoing straits between us thrown,
Dotting the shoreless watery wild,
We mortal millions live *alone.*
The islands feel the enclasping flow,
And then their endless bounds they know.

But when the moon their hollows lights,
And they are swept by balms of spring,
And in their glens, on starry nights,
The nightingales divinely sing;
And lovely notes, from shore to shore,
Across the sounds and channels pour—

Oh! then a longing like despair
Is to their farthest caverns sent;
For surely once, they feel, we were
Parts of a single continent!
Now round us spreads the watery plain—
Oh might our marges meet again!

Who order'd, that their longing's fire
Should be, as soon as kindled, cool'd?
Who renders vain their deep desire?—
A God, a God their severance ruled!
And bade betwixt their shores to be
The unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea.

Isn't that wonderful last couplet a gem? But what '*chagrin d'amour*'! In the end, Matthew Arnold married Frances Lucy Wightman (Lucy or "Flu"), the daughter of a judge, conventionally, and (we hope) happily, in June 1851. Matt had just achieved financial security at last, through the good services of Lord Lansdowne, for whom he had been working as a private secretary since 1847. Appointed as one of Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools, Arnold was now able to marry.

They had six children and led a happy existence on the whole, though Matthew had to work very hard as an inspector of schools, threading his way back and forth across the new railways that were linking every part of Britain. As a man of letters, Arnold did not lead a sheltered life and saw at first hand poverty and the great need for educational reform.

Here is a poem from the early days of their courtship.

The River

STILL glides the stream, slow drops the boat
Under the rustling poplars' shade;
Silent the swans beside us float:
None speaks, none heeds—ah, turn thy head.

Let those arch eyes now softly shine, *5*
That mocking mouth grow sweetly bland:
Ah, let them rest, those eyes, on mine;
On mine let rest that lovely hand.

My pent-up tears oppress my brain,
My heart is swoln with love unsaid: *10*
Ah, let me weep, and tell my pain,
And on thy shoulder rest my head.

Before I die, before the soul,
Which now is mine, must re-attain
Immunity from my control, *15*
And wander round the world again:

Before this teas'd o'erlabour'd heart
For ever leaves its vain employ,
Dead to its deep habitual smart,
And dead to hopes of future joy.

Still plenty of "Ah!"s, I'm afraid. It's almost as if he were afraid to be happy. Why would he want a "sweetly *bland*" mouth rather than a "mocking" one, which sounds far more fun? Let us hope "Flu" was patient, kind, loving and could ease his "o'erlabour'd heart"!

It's beyond the scope of this essay to examine my other set texts, "The Scholar Gipsy" and "Thyrsis", both of which are inspired by Arthur Hugh Clough. Here is the ending of "Thyrsis" and one can tell that poor "Matt" is missing his friend's optimism and support.

Let in thy voice a whisper often come,
To chase fatigue and fear:
Why faintest thou! I wander'd till I died.
Roam on! The light we sought is shining still.
Dost thou ask proof? Our tree yet crowns the hill,
Our Scholar travels yet the loved hill-side.

They are long poems, as is "Empedocles on Etna", which is a poem in dramatic form about the supposed suicide of the philosopher Empedocles. I'm sorry to tell you that there is little light at the end of the "tunnel" as far as *that* poem is concerned (apart from the desire of the protagonist to become one with nature).

As it happens, in 1985 we were holidaying in Sicily and bumped, quite by chance, into a couple we knew from Somerset. Vicki and Judy looked after the children, while Jan and I decided to climb Etna and peer over the edge of the crater, which was smoking, interestingly. When we got there, however, we were told that the mountain was closed because a French tourist had been killed the day before by molten lava landing on her head. Jan was for ignoring that and just going up anyway. Plus we had sandwiches and water and had arranged things so we could have a day out. I gingerly followed

Nearing the crater was an extraordinary business, as we scaled a steep track that led us through a charred landscape of congealed lava that had crusted alarmingly into random rivers, banks and channels. Every thirty or forty seconds the whole earth trembled and there was an enormous exhalation – imagine one of Matt's "Ah!"s magnified a hundred thousand times like a giant coughing from deep within the mountain. Very, very cautiously we crept forward until we could both peer over the edge.

We found ourselves looking down at a seething cauldron about 80 meters across at the bottom. Streams below swirled very slowly with yellow, sulphurous streaks; mottled purples and blues could also be seen through the steam and smoke; red sparks bounced around the blackened basin.

As we looked, there was yet another "GASP!!!!" from the volcano and a surge of steam and more sparks, but luckily nothing was being thrown upwards.

Jan and I must have stared down for only a minute or so, for I remember just one exhalation, but I *DID* think of Empedocles at that moment (although I remembered nothing of the poem's argument nor its interminable debates). I simply recalled him

leaping in, the only really interesting bit of the poem. Re-reading it now, I am struck by how realistic the descriptions are and wondered whether Arnold ever visited Etna or whether (for he was a voracious reader) he had just read it all up (in Greek, no doubt).

Here is a last gloomy reflection from another poem that we didn't study.

From **A Summer's Night**

For most men in a brazen prison live,
Where, in the sun's hot eye,
With heads bent o'er their toil, they languidly
Their lives to some unmeaning taskwork give,
Dreaming of naught beyond their prison wall.

PS I cannot resist adding this poem by Anthony Hecht, "The Dover Bitch". As I've said before, much poetry bounces off other poems and enjoys subverting them. Here is just such a (wicked) subversion. I once brought this poem up at a serious English Examiners' Meeting and got a rather reproving look from the leader (partly, I think, because he hadn't come across it):

The Dover Bitch

By Anthony Hecht

A Criticism of Life: for Andrews Wanning

So there stood Matthew Arnold and this girl
With the cliffs of England crumbling away behind them,
And he said to her, 'Try to be true to me,
And I'll do the same for you, for things are bad
All over, etc., etc.'
Well now, I knew this girl. It's true she had read
Sophocles in a fairly good translation
And caught that bitter allusion to the sea,
But all the time he was talking she had in mind
The notion of what his whiskers would feel like
On the back of her neck. She told me later on
That after a while she got to looking out
At the lights across the channel, and really felt sad,
Thinking of all the wine and enormous beds
And blandishments in French and the perfumes.
And then she got really angry. To have been brought
All the way down from London, and then be addressed
As a sort of mournful cosmic last resort
Is really tough on a girl, and she was pretty.
Anyway, she watched him pace the room
And finger his watch-chain and seem to sweat a bit,
And then she said one or two unprintable things.
But you mustn't judge her by that. What I mean to say is,
She's really all right. I still see her once in a while
And she always treats me right. We have a drink
And I give her a good time, and perhaps it's a year
Before I see her again, but there she is,
Running to fat, but dependable as they come.
And sometimes I bring her a bottle of *Nuit d' Amour*.