University of Anbar / College of Arts / Department of English

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Dover Beach

BY MATTHEW ARNOLD

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.

"Dover Beach" is the most celebrated poem by Matthew Arnold, a writer and educator of the Victorian era. The poem expresses a crisis of faith, with the speaker acknowledging the diminished standing of Christianity, which the speaker sees as being unable to withstand the rising tide of scientific discovery. New research and intellectual inquiry cast doubt on humankind's central and special role in the universe. The speaker in the poem senses this change almost subconsciously, seeing and hearing it in the sea that the speaker is looking out upon. In its expression of alienation, doubt, and melancholy, the poem is often interpreted as a remarkably forward-thinking precursor to 20th century crises of faith—like Existentialism and Absurdism. In essence, the poem is an inquiry into what it means to be alive.

Matthew Arnold achieves a lonely tone in the poem “Dover Beach, ” through the use of imagery, simile, and personification.

The poem begins with a simple statement: “the sea is calm tonight”. At this early moment this is as yet nothing but a statement, waiting for the rest of the work to give it meaning. The statement bodes of the significance the sea is going to play as an image in the poem. The first part of the stanza seems to reflect on the sea’s calmness. As yet, there is no emotion or thought, only images, quiet. But! By the fourth line, already, something has changed. An ephemeral contrast to the timeless sea is introduced: “on the French coast the light *gleams and is gone*” (emphasis mine). Lonely imagery builds: the “cliffs… glimmering and vast”, the “tranquil bay.” In line nine another voice is added to the melody, literally—sound. “Listen!” the line starts, and goes on to add to the still, silent imagery that came before it—a voice, a presence, a roar—and movement, movement of waves which until now have not been described as moving. How are they moving? Out and in, returning ever, a cycle unending. This imagery will appear again and again in the poem. The last two lines of the stanzas start to add the feeling more pointedly, now

that the mood has been set: the waves have a “tremulous cadence slow, ” that brings “the eternal note of sadness in.”

In the next stanza, the sound imagery continues, even as the poem reaches out through history—“Sophocles long ago heard [the eternal note of sadness] on the Aegean [sea]” and it brought to his mind human misery. Here we have a comparison between human misery, ebbing and flowing, and the sea, ebbing and flowing. Arnold continues the comparison by adding another note: not only is human misery like the sea, so too is human faith, which “was once, too, at the full, ” and then with a bit of simile continues: “like the folds of a bright girdle.” Perhaps that would count as personification of the earth, because a girdle is something humans wear. But the persona who speaks now hears only its “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.” The tide is going out, leaving the “naked shingles” of the world, which literally means the loose pebbles that collect on beaches, but of course also brings to mind a lonely house.

The last stanza goes back to the beginning, to those beautiful calm images, and says, “the world, which seems to lie before us like a land of dreams, so various, so beautiful, so new, ” isn’t any of that. Really, the world “hath neither joy, nor love, nor light, nor certitude, nor help for pain.” The speaker and the listener, perched at the window (an edge-like place), are like the light that gleams and is gone from the edge of the land (the French coast). The poem ends with its strongest lonely image of “a darkling plain… where ignorant armies clash by night.” The speaker and the listener’s lonely state—which they are trying to fend off with their mutual love—extends to all of humanity, as suggested in this final dark picture.

My Last Duchess

BY ROBERT BROWNING

That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call

That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
"Fra Pandolf" by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek; perhaps
Fra Pandolf chanced to say, "Her mantle laps
Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat." Such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart—how shall I say?— too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name

With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—which I have not—to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark"—and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse—
E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretense
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

Summary

This poem is loosely based on historical events involving Alfonso, the Duke of Ferrara, who lived in the 16th century. The Duke is the speaker of the poem, and tells us he is entertaining an emissary who has come to negotiate the Duke's marriage (he has recently been widowed) to the daughter of another powerful family. As he shows the visitor through his palace, he stops before a portrait of the late Duchess, apparently a young and lovely girl. The Duke begins reminiscing about the portrait sessions, then about the Duchess herself. His musings give way to a diatribe on

her disgraceful behavior: he claims she flirted with everyone and did not appreciate his “gift of a nine-hundred-years- old name.” As his monologue continues, the reader realizes with ever-more chilling certainty that the Duke in fact caused the Duchess’s early demise: when her behavior escalated, “[he] gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together.” Having made this disclosure, the Duke returns to the business at hand: arranging for another marriage, with another young girl. As the Duke and the emissary walk leave the painting behind, the Duke points out other notable artworks in his collection.

Form

“My Last Duchess” comprises rhyming pentameter lines. The lines do not employ end-stops; rather, they use *enjambment*—gthat is, sentences and other grammatical units do not necessarily conclude at the end of lines. Consequently, the rhymes do not create a sense of closure when they come, but rather remain a subtle driving force behind the Duke’s compulsive revelations. The Duke is quite a performer: he mimics others’ voices, creates hypothetical situations, and uses the force of his personality to make horrifying information seem merely colorful. Indeed, the poem provides a classic example of a dramatic monologue: the speaker is clearly distinct from the poet; an audience is suggested but never appears in the poem; and the revelation of the Duke’s character is the poem’s primary aim.

Commentary

But Browning has more in mind than simply creating a colorful character and placing him in a picturesque historical scene. Rather, the specific historical setting of the poem harbors much significance: the Italian Renaissance held a particular fascination for Browning and his contemporaries, for it represented the flowering of the aesthetic and the human alongside, or in some cases in the place of, the religious and the moral. Thus the temporal setting allows Browning to again explore sex, violence, and aesthetics as all entangled, complicating and confusing each other: the lushness of the language belies the fact that the Duchess was punished for her natural sexuality. The Duke’s ravings suggest that most of the supposed transgressions took place only in his mind. Like some of Browning’s fellow Victorians, the Duke sees sin lurking in every corner. The reason the speaker here gives for killing the Duchess ostensibly differs from that given by the speaker of “Porphyria’s Lover” for murder Porphyria; however,

both women are nevertheless victims of a male desire to inscribe and fix female sexuality. The desperate need to do this mirrors the efforts of Victorian society to mold the behavior—gsexual and otherwise—gof individuals. For people confronted with an increasingly complex and anonymous modern world, this impulse comes naturally: to control would seem to be to conserve and stabilize. The Renaissance was a time when morally dissolute men like the Duke exercised absolute power, and as such it is a fascinating study for the Victorians: works like this imply that, surely, a time that produced magnificent art like the Duchess's portrait couldn't have been entirely evil in its allocation of societal control—geven though it put men like the Duke in power.

A poem like "My Last Duchess" calculatedly engages its readers on a psychological level. Because we hear only the Duke's musings, we must piece the story together ourselves. Browning forces his reader to become involved in the poem in order to understand it, and this adds to the fun of reading his work. It also forces the reader to question his or her own response to the subject portrayed and the method of its portrayal. We are forced to consider, Which aspect of the poem dominates: the horror of the Duchess's fate, or the beauty of the language and the powerful dramatic development? Thus by posing this question the poem firstly tests the Victorian reader's response to the modern world—git asks, Has everyday life made you numb yet?—gand secondly asks a question that must be asked of all art—git queries, Does art have a moral component, or is it merely an aesthetic exercise? In these latter considerations Browning prefigures writers like Charles Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde.

Up-Hill

BY CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

Does the road wind up-hill all the way?
  Yes, to the very end.
Will the day's journey take the whole long day?
  From morn to night, my friend.

But is there for the night a resting-place?
  A roof for when the slow dark hours begin.
May not the darkness hide it from my face?
  You cannot miss that inn.

Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?
  Those who have gone before.
Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?
  They will not keep you standing at that door.

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?
  Of labour you shall find the sum.
Will there be beds for me and all who seek?
  Yea, beds for all who come.

Poems that depict struggle are, generally speaking, poems that are universal. Everyone struggles in some capacity or the other, and this is hardly something that the average person needs a particular art form to tell them. Christina Rossetti was no stranger to struggle in life, and her poem, Up-hill, seems to call up her perspective on the concept. It imagines a conversation told in such a way that the reader can easily hear one side or the other coming out of their own thought process, and relating to it one way or the other. “An uphill battle” is a common expression that likely informed the title of Rossetti’s work, so it is no surprise that both the expression and the poem are still very relevant today.

Up-hill is written in a common style for poetry; it consists of four verses with four lines each. Notably, Up-hill is written from the perspective of two distinct narrators, one who asks questions, and one who provides answers. These narrators are kept easily separate from one another by the simple rhyming pattern of the piece. It is rhymed in an ABAB style, where every “A” (which is to say the first and third line of each verse) rhyme is spoken by one narrator, and

every “B” line the other. To further simplify this, the lines also alternate between asking questions and giving answers. In this way, Rossetti is able to craft a poetic conversation between two people without complicating her work in any way — normally a fairly difficult thing to do. Between the rhyming and the narration pattern, this is an easy poem to read and follow, and flows nicely, despite the somewhat erratic syllable count for each verse.

In the first verse, the author seems to be drawing on the common “uphill battle” metaphor to inform the title of the poem. The first speaker asks about “the road,” and whether or not it is uphill for its entire length, as well as whether or not the time it will take to walk the road will mean the entire day. The description of the “whole long day” is an unusual choice — especially since without the word “long,” this line would match the first one for syllables. Its addition is meaningful in showing the reader that the speaking asking questions is tired. Their uphill journey has clearly taken some time up to this point, and they are anxious for its conclusion. It is also possible that the “long day,” in contrast to simply “the day” refers to a twenty-four hour period. This seems likely based on the answer they receive — that their journey will not be over before sundown. The second narrator’s lines are much shorter than the first one’s; they are succinct. The only aspect of their character of particular note is that they refer to the other speaker as their friend.

The questions and answers continue with the second verse, where an atmosphere begins to become noticeable. The two characters portrayed here are clearly very different in their perspectives on the uphill journey. The first speaker is unsure and lacks confidence; here they ask if there is a place they can stay for the night, since their journey will take so long. As soon as they are told that such a place exists, they worry that they’ll miss seeing it. The second speaker, by contrast, is certain not only that there is an inn for shelter against the dark, but that they will undoubtedly find it before it is too dark to see. It is an odd experience as a reader to alternate between fear and confidence on every line of the work; Rossetti has chosen to portray one journey through two opposite viewpoints, and yet it remains easy to follow and understand.

In the third (and second-to-last) verse, the questioning narrator wonders about the inn they are to find, and whether or not they will be welcome there. This is a strange line of thought — the idea

of an inn, after all, is for anyone to find shelter, and an inn is constructed with nomads in mind. And yet, the speaker here is concerned that they will be unwelcome, despite assurances from their companion that they will be welcomed by the “other wayfarers.” The first speaker hopes to find friends in their same predicament, and are told that they will. The anxieties of the initial speaker and the confidence of the second one continue to be the prominent theme of the work, though the identities of both remain concealed.

The idea of two friends walking up a hill for a full day is a rather unlikely scenario in the literal sense. The expression from which this poem likely was inspired refers to situations and scenarios that require harder work than usual to overcome — walking down a pathway versus walking up a hill. In a figurative sense, the speaker asking questions in this work is attempting to overcome an obstacle, and liken it to trying to walk uphill for a full day. The second speaker could be a friend encouraging them along the way, or it could be another aspect of their own personality, their sense of optimism or determination to finish what they have started.

The idea of an inn along the way, in which lies comfort equal to the work put in (“Of labour you shall find the sum”), as well as other people climbing the same hill, is a likely metaphor for friends and family. It is difficult — to put it lightly — to attempt to cross over any kind of obstacle without some kind of support. If it was easy to do, after all, it wouldn’t be much of an obstacle. So the speaker draws on their own sense of self and imagines that at the end of the day, there will be a roof over their head. Perhaps they are going home to their family, or perhaps the inn is a bar where they can meet up with friends and forget about the hardships of the day.

The amazing thing about *Up-hill* is that any of the above interpretations are plausible when the entire poem is read in a metaphorical context. At its core, the poem is about two voices, one struggling and seeking rest, and another encouraging them and telling them they will find it. Nearly everyone should be able to relate to this in some way, because the poem is intentionally written to stand on the fine line between vague and relatable. What exactly the speakers are doing in trying to ascend this climb is unspecified, because it doesn’t matter. What does matter is that second voice that encourages them, assures them, and helps them to find rest. A friend, a family member, or an internal voice — to every reader, it will be someone different. The important thing, however, is that it will be someone.

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