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MATTHEW ARNOLD, "DOVER BEACH,"
AND THE CHANNEL RAILWAY

When did Matthew Arnold write his most celebrated lyric, "Dover Beach"? Kenneth Allott and Miriam Allott in their Longman edition of Arnold's poems (1979) say it was composed "probably late June 1851."¹ And this has long been the assumption. It may well be correct. But it is worth exploring the possibility that it is not. Nicholas Shrimpton was prepared to do that in his review of Nicholas Murray's *A Life of Matthew Arnold* (1996)² and in his Everyman edition of selected Arnold poems (1998). It is not the case that there is empirical evidence (which the Allotts missed) that *confirms* a later date, only circumstantial evidence to allow for its possibility. That possibility is the starting point for my suggestion here. The relevant question in terms of dating is this: if Arnold wrote the poem in 1851, why did he not publish it in any of the five editions of his poems issued between 1851 and 1867? Nicholas Shrimpton concludes that "Dover Beach" was written "either in 1851 when Arnold twice briefly visited Dover during his honeymoons (for which there is some circumstantial manuscript evidence) or, alternatively, between 1857 and 1867."³ It is a sensible uncertainty.

I cannot solve the problem of when Arnold wrote this poem. But I want to suggest how differently the poem reads if, like Nicholas Shrimpton, we take on board the *possibility* that it was completed between 1857 and 1867 and not in the middle of Arnold's honeymoon. It has certainly never felt much like a honeymoon poem, with its confessions of the eternal note of sadness and a loveless world. More specifically, I think, "Dover Beach" reads differently if we allow that Arnold could have been aware of debates at the end of the 1850s and beginning of the 1860s about a cross-channel railway between the port of Dover and the French port of Calais. If we take these into account, the poem—in oblique though not direct contact with a matter of technological and military significance—acquires a distinctive national nuance.

Projects for a submarine train-line had certainly been discussed before 1851 (the idea of the cross-channel tunnel started in France in 1802). Such debates *could*, theoretically, be in the substrata of “Dover Beach” had it been written at the earlier date. But my thought is this: that between the years 1857 and 1867 there was a renewed and high-profile concentration on the feasibility and the problems of a railway link between Dover and Calais that could not have been easy to miss.

“Dover Beach” begins with an implied act of visual movement, a simple looking-across from England to France from a window. “The sea is calm to-night,” Arnold says:

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. (ll. 1-5)⁴

The poet’s gaze travels from one country to another, reminding his readers just how close these two land-masses are. It is true that the light in Calais quickly vanishes: France is not *that* close. Yet the eye has momentarily crossed the distance all the same. A reader between 1857 and 1867, however, might have been well aware of the seriousness of modern plans not simply to look at Calais from Dover but literally to enable travel to it under the “tranquil bay.”

James Chalmers’ book, with his own proposal for a crossing, *The Channel Railway, Connecting England and France* (1861), enumerated earlier attempts. “There have been before the world, to my knowledge,” he said,

twelve projects for this purpose, including the present; and, judging from the names, seven appear to be French, five English; but, if that of Mr. De la Haye, of Liverpool, be classed with the latter, there are then six of each nation. Three projectors, all French, proposed tunnelling under the Channel; seven, two

French and five English, propose submerged tubes; a Frenchman proposes an arched roadway, or tunnel, on the bottom; and an Englishman, a mammoth bridge.

The idea of tunnelling is much the oldest; a French engineer, Mathieu, sixty years ago, considered the work practicable, prepared plans, and laid them before Napoleon, then First Consul: they were some time exposed in the Luxembourg and other public galleries in Paris; but they have long been lost [...] The project of M. De Gamond, also a tunnel, appeared in 1856-7.⁵

But there was now, Chalmers said, to be a significant revival of British interest in the real possibility of a submarine link. Chalmers' plan did not involve digging a tunnel but making one. For the relatively modest sum of £12,000,000, the English engineer proposed "simply a strong iron tube." This would reach, Chalmers explained, "from shore to shore in the still depths of the Channel, beyond the influence of the storms that render the sea dangerous on the surface."⁶ The tube was to be supported "by its own buoyancy, having a powerful tendency to rise; and is kept down by anchors or boxes attached to and surrounding it and filled with rough stone, both boxes and tube being covered by an embankment of similar material."⁷ Eventually, this intrepid engineer added, the silt of the Channel would cover the tubes, rendering them simply a submarine ridge running from shore to shore.

The Channel Railway was part of a wider debate on the possibility of leaving London by train and arriving in Paris without having disembarked. Chalmers' idea, in turn, was widely noticed. Even *The Times*, for instance, Great Britain's most long-established daily newspaper, reviewed it on 9 November at length, ending with a question. Such "are the vistas opened out by this temptation from Mr Chalmers," the newspaper said, "that we invite the competent authorities to examine his project. Is it a roc's egg with which the deluding magician is mocking us, as he tempted Aladdin, or is it really a feasible scheme?"⁸ The article looked for genuine advice on whether Chalmers might succeed where Monsieur de Gamond had not. *The London Review* gave Chalmers' proposal serious thought too, reproducing a diagram of the tube in its long review and concluding that:

The accomplishment of such an undertaking would indeed confer honour on any engineer. Already Mount Cenis is half drilled, and we see no reason why that greater Mount Cenis, the British Channel, should not be penetrated by some genius, backed by sufficient sinews of war.⁹

There were, of course, doubts. The most serious of which (aside from questions of actual achievability) was about security. Great Britain's relationship with France was enduringly conflicted, though the two countries had fought together rather than against each other in the Crimean War. The exact nature of Napoleon III's imperial ambitions, and those of his potential successors, remained, however, a matter of concern. *The Athenæum*, reviewing Chalmers' proposal negatively in October 1861, rebuked the engineer for ignorantly increasing the chances of invasion, a gravely real threat only a few years earlier at the point of Napoleon III's *coup d'état* in December 1851.¹⁰ The individuals who would "reap especial good" from this project, *The Athenæum* declared, "are shallow-pated engineers, who, without sufficient reason, would tamper with the salt-walls in which our national freedom has for so many generations been preserved."¹¹ Earlier plans had tried to address this issue of ignorance and armies, which continued a worry during the building of the actual Channel Tunnel that finally opened on 6 May 1994. Thomé de Gamond's drilling scheme had been agreed on 25 August 1855 and was frequently discussed in the British press in the second half of that decade. But De Gamond's plans, as *The London Journal* noted in January 1858, wisely involved no compromise to security. His tunnel included devices available to both English and French engineers to flood "the whole of the tunnel, up to the arches, with water, in less than an hour; so that a French or English army attempting to make any such hostile passage, would be certain to meet the fate of Pharoah and his hosts."¹²

If Arnold wrote "Dover Beach" somewhere between 1857 and 1867, he might have been aware of debates about literally crossing to France from Dover under the waves. As he looked at the lights on the other side of the narrow water-way, he might have known that travelling by ship to Calais could soon become old-fashioned. And this thought, were it on Arnold's mind, might have helped suggest what became the final lines of his text.

Arnold's last image can appear incongruous with the rest of the poem because its military nature is seemingly unprepared-for. "And we are here as on a darkling plain," Arnold writes, setting down three of the most memorable lines about the nature of modernity in nineteenth-century poetry:

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night. (ll.34-6)

The temper of the contemporary moment, as every reader of this poem knows, is defined by a post-Christian confusion of direction. Human beings, in the mire of their uncertainties, caught amid the blind forces of life, are like armies destroying themselves and each other in the dark while knowing nothing of what they are fighting for.

The understandable concerns about national security in relation to the proposed channel railway summoned many images of military ruin. *Once A Week*, in an article on "The Gateways of England and France" on 8 September 1866 reassured its readers that any Channel tunnel "would be easily defended outwork by drowning it instead of destroying it."¹³ *Chambers Journal* reported on the same day that Thomé de Gamond's scheme would cause no alarms about armies by day or night: "what would result," de Gamond had been asked, "if England and France were at war; would the international tunnel railway be used by the troops of each country to invade the other?":

No, is the reply; the whole tunnel could speedily be flooded from the Varne, and the water pumped out again when the war is over—an ingenious idea, to say the least of it.¹⁴

The tunnel was to be a commercial life-line. But it also invoked an idea of a fighting force literally destroyed in the dark. "Fears have been entertained that [a tube or tunnel] might become an instrument of invasion," Chalmers had said in 1861; but both ends would be "furnished with sluices, or valves, the

opening of any of which would immediately inundate the roadway, not only preventing invasion, but destroying the army that made the attempt.”¹⁵

Various national implications of “Dover Beach” have been suggested. Walter Kokernot thought that the Sikh Rebellion lay behind Arnold’s concluding metaphor of ignorant armies in an essay in *Victorian Poetry* in 2005.¹⁶ Lauren Caldwell later observed that conflicts closer to home were present when she said that the literal appearance of France at the beginning of the poem “is loaded with memory of her revolutions.”¹⁷ Molly Clark Hillard developed this perspective, arguing in January 2008: “Given the revolutions of 1848 that England circumvented and France did not, the first [verse paragraph] presents an image that in another poem might be read as the sun setting on the French, but not the British, empire.”¹⁸ That vanishing light in France was, she asserts, Arnold’s cryptic way of signifying hope for the diminishment of Napoleon III’s France (a man, as it happens, who had been practically interested in a channel railway).

But my suggestion is different. In the late 1850s and 1860s, exactly the portion of the sea with which Arnold began “Dover Beach” was the focus of a lively argument about a commercially advantageous but also nationally perilous transport link. It was, in turn, associated precisely with the destruction of armies in the dark. Arnold was thinking in “Dover Beach” of matters above the waves. But also, it may be, he was half-remembering a contemporary idea of what could literally happen below them.

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NOTES

¹ *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. by Kenneth Allott and Miriam Allott (Harlow: Longman, 1979), 253.

² Nicholas Shrimpton, review of Nicholas Murray, *A Life of Matthew Arnold* (1996), *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 June 1996, 4-5.

³ *Matthew Arnold*, *Everyman’s Poetry*, ed. by Nicholas Shrimpton (London: Everyman, 1998), 102.

⁴ The text is quoted from the Allott and Allott edition, using line numbers.

⁵ James Chalmers, *The Channel Railway, Connecting England and France* (London: Spon, 1861), 2. The French engineers listed here are [M.] de la Haye, Albert Mathieu-Favier (the first proposer of a link, in 1802), and Thomé de Gamond. Their projects and earlier ones are discussed in detail in Jean-Pierre Navaille, *Le tunnel sous la Manche: deux siècles pour sauter le pas, 1802-1987* (Champ Vallon: Époques, 1987), esp. 97-101.

⁶ Chalmers, *The Channel Railway*, 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ “The Channel Railway,” *The Times*, 9 November 1861, 7.

⁹ “The Undersea Railroad,” *The London Review*, 3 (12 October 1861), 457-8 (458). On the Mt Cenis tunnel, see “The Tunnel Under Mont Cenis,” *Westminster Review*, 25 (January 1864), 30-48.

¹⁰ See Jonathan P. Ribner, “Our English Coasts, 1852: William Holman Hunt and Invasion Fear at Midcentury,” *Art Journal*, 55, (1996), 45-54.

¹¹ “The Channel Railway,” *The Athenæum*, 1774 (26 October 1861), 534-5 (535).

¹² “A Tremendous ‘Bore,’” *The London Journal*, 26 (23 January 1858), 332.

¹³ “The Gateways of England and France,” *Once A Week* 2 (8 September 1866), 263-6 (266).

¹⁴ “The Dover and Calais Railway,” *Chambers’ Journal*, 8 September 1866, 566-9 (568).

¹⁵ Chalmers, *The Channel Railway*, 43.

¹⁶ See Walter H. Kokernot, “‘Where ignorant armies clash by night’ and the Sikh Rebellion: A Contemporary Source for Matthew Arnold’s Night-battle Imagery,” *Victorian Poetry*, 43 (2005), 99-108.

¹⁷ Lauren Caldwell, “Truncating Coleridgean Conversation and the Re-visioning of ‘Dover Beach,’” *Victorian Poetry*, 45 (2007), 429-45 (432).

¹⁸ Molly Clark Hillard, “‘When Desert Armies Stand Ready to Fight’: Re-Reading McEwan’s *Saturday* and Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach,’” *Partial Answers*, 6 (2008), 181-206 (191).