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MATTHEW ARNOLD AND THE SS *LUSITANIA*

On the first page of the January 1879 edition of *The Nineteenth Century*, Matthew Arnold printed one of his relatively few late poems. It was as follows:

I READ in Dante how that horned light,
 Which hid Ulysses, waved itself and said:
 ‘Following the sun, we set our vessel’s head
 To the great main; pass’d Seville on the right

 ‘And Ceuta on the left; then southward sped.
 And last in air, far off, dim rose a Height.
 We cheer’d; but from it rush’d a blast of might,
 And struck—and o’er us the sea-waters spread.’

I dropp’d the book, and of my child I thought
 In his long black ship speeding night and day
 O’er those same seas; dark Teneriffe rose, fraught

 With omen; ‘Oh! were that Mount pass’d,’ I say.
 Then the door opens and this card is brought:
 ‘Reach’d Cape Verde Islands, “Lusitania.”’¹

This poem has, to my knowledge, only been edited once (in Kenneth Allott, and then Kenneth Allott and Miriam Allott's Longman editions, 1965 and 1979). It has attracted almost no criticism.² But, set in context, it seems to me more interesting than it appears. The key to this sonnet is in the fact that Matthew Arnold does not call it, say, 'Fears for My Son's Safety' or 'A Passage to Australia' or 'Dante and the Voyage Out'. The title refers to a ship. And the identity and commercial history of SS *Lusitania*—unnoted by the Allotts—is important.

The personal context of the poem is that Richard (Dick) Penrose Arnold, Arnold's only surviving son, travelled from Plymouth to Australia to take up a bank job in Melbourne late in 1878 (I will discuss the exact dates presently). He was on board the first steamship of the new Orient Line (which was indeed long and black, like her two sister steamers, *Chimborazo* and *Cuzco*³). *Lusitania* was registered in the port of Liverpool and launched in April 1870 after being built at a cost of £91,852 at Birkenhead. She had been purchased by the new Pacific Steam Navigation Company the year before Dick booked his ticket and that company now managed the Line.⁴ Her monthly route out was from London to Melbourne and Sydney via Plymouth and round the Cape of Good Hope. She stopped only for coaling at what was then called St Vincent. It is now São Vicente, one of the Barlavento islands of Cape Verde about 435 miles off the coast of Mauritania in the North Atlantic Ocean.

Lusitania was a celebrity.⁵ She was relatively small (3877 tons or thereabouts) and 379'9" long (as a comparison RMS *Titanic* was 882'9" long and with 46,328 tonnage). This lightness gave *Lusitania* speed. So did the fact that she was powered by two combination engines, built by Laird and Co at Birkenhead (she would later be fitted with a third). These were so efficient that Parliament had been asked on 11 March 1878, a few months before *Lusitania* carried Arnold's son to Melbourne, why British naval warships did not use them, as many craft in the United States navy did. 'Messrs. Elder and Co.', said Charles Seeley, MP for Lincoln,

had been making compound engines for the mercantile marine for 17 years or more. The Pacific Steam Navigation Company began to use them in 1855, and had in 1871 all their 41 ships fitted with compound engines. The Peninsular and Oriental Company had been using them for 10 years; and Messrs. Laird, Brothers, said that all new ships at Liverpool were supplied with compound engines, and many old ones had been re-fitted with them.⁶

Built by Laird and run by the Pacific Steam Navigation Company, *Lusitania* was outclassing the military. She was among ships so modern that she was being touted in Parliament as a rebuke to the national defence.

Lusitania in fact was doing more than this. In the few months before Dick sailed, the sleek high-speed steamer was acclaimed as a record breaker. Part of the reason was that she powered by state-of-the-art engines, finally putting an end to the viability of sailed boats to Australia (though *Lusitania* also used sails when there were advantageous winds). But another part was that she was travelling the outward route via the Cape. P&O (Peninsular and Orient) were, at this point, making the voyage to Australia and back via the Suez Canal (opened in November 1869). But the Orient Line only *returned* via Suez. The new steam-powered route around the Cape (where usually the ships did not call) had reduced the journey time from Great Britain for the Orient Line's flagship steamer to an impressive forty days. 'The splendid passages made by the *Lusitania* and other vessels of her class', said *The Times* on 15 November 1877, 'are accepted as evidence strongly in favour of subsidizing the Cape in preference to the overland line for mails as well as for passengers' (4). The route offered a commercial advantage, not least in the delivery of post (and this, I think, is particularly relevant for Arnold).

The Times for 10 August 1877 (a Saturday) reported that *Lusitania* was setting the pace for postal deliveries to Australia and New Zealand. She had, the newspaper noted that Saturday, telegraphed her arrival from Melbourne two days earlier. *Lusitania* was, obviously enough, exploiting the new submarine telegraphy cables to keep London, through Lloyd's the insurers, informed of her progress—and those cables were also a state-of-the-art technology. The cables permitting direct communication

between London and New Zealand, for instance, had been completed only as recently as 1876. 'From the fact that telegrams in reply to letters by this steamer were delivered in London on Wednesday afternoon,' the newspaper said,

it would appear that [*Lusitania*] must have reached Port Phillip Heads early on the 8th [Thursday], thus making the passage from Plymouth, *via* the Cape of Good Hope, within 40 days' actual time, including 28 hours' detention for coaling at St. Vincent. This is the quickest passage yet made, and is ten days less than the advertised time of the Peninsular and Oriental steamers from Southampton to Glenelg, *via* the Suez Canal. (11)

A few months later, another apparent record was claimed, again putting pressure on the postal deliveries of the Peninsular and Orient. *The Times* for 15 November recorded that *Lusitania* had made the passage in an exceptional forty days six-and-a-half hours, including one day and seven hours at St Vincent for fuel. That, *The Times* asserted, was the fastest crossing yet recorded (there is obviously some imprecision in the calculations here as this journey sounds slower than the crossing previously noted). 'The last mail delivered by our excellent servants the Peninsular and Oriental Company', the newspaper went on, 'came six days before contract time, but was only one day less in the transit than if it had been carried by the *Lusitania*' (4). *Lusitania* was, to use a contemporary phrase, cutting-edge technology. Trackable by the ultra-modern network of international telegraphy, she discomfited her more well-known rival to such a degree by her speed that her success was being discussed in the national press. *Lusitania*, whose engines developed 3000 horsepower,⁷ was at the forefront of rapid communication between Great Britain and her most remote colonies.

At the plainest level, this material history reveals what pressure there was behind Arnold's words describing *Lusitania* as a 'long black ship *speeding* night and day'. Indeed she was. Here is the pace of modernity materialised. But more things can be said. One is simply about dates. The Allotts think that Arnold's poem was 'Probably written Dec. 1878'.⁸ Matthew Arnold said to Tom Arnold on 19 November 1878: 'Yes, poor old Dick is going out to Australia'.⁹ He obviously had not left at that point.

Lusitania's next departure thereafter was from London on 27 November¹⁰ and she reached Plymouth two days later. Writing to Frances Arnold on 1 December, Matthew confirmed that Dick had boarded. And *The Morning Post* for 30 November, among other journals, gave the official confirmation that *Lusitania* had set sail from Plymouth for Australia on 29th.¹¹ 'The *Lusitania*', the poet wrote sadly to Frances, had 'dropped down very slowly along the break-water towards Mt Edgecumbe, and through the passage towards the open sea; the sun came out quite bright as she made her start.'¹² Dante's peril at that stage was not on his mind. *Lusitania* was then tracked, though not completely, by international telegraphs. She passed Madeira on 3 December according to *The Liverpool Mercury*¹³ and at that speed, by my calculations, will have reached her refuelling stop at St Vincent on 6 December though this news was not, to my knowledge, published. If she kept to her usual schedule, *Lusitania* would have been there in the region of thirty hours (there is no reference to Arnold's receiving the telegram in his correspondence).

Assuming Arnold wrote the poem immediately he received his son's message, I think we can be reasonably confident that the date of composition was either 6 or 7 December. Aptly for a poem concerned with speed, Arnold must have posted it immediately to *The Nineteenth Century* to be ready for the January edition, which was certainly out in the first week of the month, as it was reviewed on 8 January in the *Aberdeen Weekly Journal* (Arnold's poem was 'simple and graphic'¹⁴) and *Freeman's*.¹⁵ That was a turn-around time of less than a month. (Dick's remaining journey, incidentally, did not live up his father's sonnet because it was longer than usual and included a stop at the Cape.¹⁶ *Lusitania* arrived at Adelaide on 15 January¹⁷ though I cannot establish when exactly she reached Melbourne.¹⁸ Although Arnold himself could not have known it, the super-fast ship did not keep to its reputation on this particular voyage.)

Arnold, in his sonnet, describes how he has just read Dante, the unsurpassed voice of journeying from the Middle Ages. And then he has felt an uncomfortable relationship between Dante's imaginary shipwreck at the end of the thirteenth or beginning of the fourteenth century with the possible wrecking of

one of the most advanced passenger ships of 1878. It would hardly have been possible in December that year to have marked out a clearer contrast between the Medieval and the contemporary, the old theological and the modern technological, the imaginary and the severely factual. *Lusitania*, moreover, was at that point uniquely associated with the rapid transmission of messages, either in the old form of the post or the new form of the international telegraph. Arnold's turn to a telegram after putting down his copy of the *Inferno* at the close of his sonnet expresses at once a worry about his son, admits the discomfiting capacity of Dante to speak promptly to the modern world across nearly six centuries, and is a salute to the modern world in the form of a high-speed steamer using the most recent of communication technology and delivering older forms of communication (the mail) in record time. Here is a remarkably coherent coordination, even penetration, of the old and the new. In richer ways than are now immediately apparent, this was a poem of time travel and of transmissions.

Considering the more general history of *Lusitania* invites us to pay better attention to the intellectual propositions of the poem. But it also, however unlikely it seems, makes more significant the original shape of the sonnet in *The Nineteenth Century* (a poem that, incidentally, Arnold did not reprint, perhaps because its modernity belonged so much to the moment that it swiftly became out-of-date). The Allotts, following Longman Annotated English Poets house-style, removed Arnold's contractions ('passed' for 'pass'd', etc¹⁹). And they also, for an unclear reason, merged Arnold's sestet in *The Nineteenth Century* into a single six-line block of verse from Arnold's two groups of three. This matters because the poem is playing with ideas of modernity and communication both in general and in terms of textual detail: the exact forms of words and lines are not irrelevant.

Dick's telegram—"Reach'd Cape Verde Islands, 'Lusitania'" —is concise (he is going to Melbourne to try to make some money and is not wasting it on unnecessary words). But a little of Arnold's subtlety is muted when the text is bunched together. Arnold's original grouping of three lines evokes momentarily a brevity that gestures to the telegraph's concision. And that 'Reach'd' captures even in a single word the fusion of old with new, the broadest topic of Arnold's poem. Contracting space,

shortening messages, is what the telegraph requires. But here, the contraction of a single word produces an older form of orthography, a form of spelling that, aptly, later editors wanted to modernise. A gesture to a practice required for contemporary state-of-the-art communication produces a memory of the past. And Arnold compounds this sense of the coordination of old with new even in this choice of words: ‘the door opens and this card is brought’. A ‘card’ is a term from older technology too: a letter, a visiting card, or some form of hand-written message. Referring to a brief written note, ‘card’ in this sense is traced by *OED* to 1596 (*OED* also notes its revival in the form of the postcard in 1870).²⁰ Yet ‘card’ actually means in Arnold’s sonnet in January 1879 not something from the close of the sixteenth century but words delivered through a vibrantly modern electric-powered and almost instantaneous transmission system from an island in the deep ocean nearly three thousand miles away from London.

A poem about messages, concerning a ship specially involved in 1877 and 1878 in sending them, Matthew Arnold’s ‘S.S. Lusitania’ manages to think of how meanings travel at high speed from the Medieval to the contemporary as well as from one part of the ocean to another, just as it fuses the language of the old letter with that of ticker tape. And Arnold even suggests, in the subtlest gestures of his sonnet, how the earlier orthography of ‘reach’d’ might symptomatically, and with pertinent implications for the coordination of times, belong amid the international reach of modern communication powered by the enviable combination engines of *Lusitania* as, faster than her rivals, she reach’d her distant shores.

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NOTES

¹ Matthew Arnold, ‘S.S. Lusitania’, *The Nineteenth Century*, 5 (January 1879), 1.

² See Tomas Monterrey, 'Parenthood and Poetic Technique in Matthew Arnold's "S.S. Lusitania"', *Rivista di Studi Vittoriani*, 12 (2001), 5-24.

³ See the print reproduced on <http://www.pandosnco.co.uk/orient.html>, last accessed 4 April 2015.

⁴ Technical particulars about the ship are from the report in *Westport Times*, 4 September 1877, 4.

⁵ She had no relation, of course, to the more famous Cunard liner *Lusitania*, destroyed by a German U-boat on 7 May 1915.

⁶ Hansard Commons Debates 11 March 1878 vol. 238 c.1066. Charles Seeley (1803-87) made a fortune from providing pig iron to the navy (used for ballast). He chaired the House of Commons Committee on Admiralty Reform in 1868.

⁷ As a comparison, Brunel's SS *Great Britain* (1843) developed 1000 horsepower.

⁸ *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. by Kenneth Allott and Miriam Allott (Harlow, 1979), 591.

⁹ *The Letters of Matthew Arnold: A Digital Edition* (<http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/arnold/default.xqy>): Letter V4P436D1.

¹⁰ See, for instance, the announcement in *The Standard*, 27 November 1878, 1.

¹¹ 'Ship News', *The Morning Post*, 30 November 1878, 7.

¹² *Letters of Matthew Arnold*, Letter V4P440D2.

¹³ 'Shipping', *Liverpool Mercury*, 5 December 1878, 3.

¹⁴ *Aberdeen Weekly Journal*, 8 January 1879, 6.

¹⁵ 'Literature', *Freeman's Journal*, 8 January 1879, 2.

¹⁶ As reported by Lloyd's, *The Times*, 13 January 1879, 6, *Lusitania* 'arrived' at the Cape on 24 December 1878, which reads as if she made an unexpected stop-over. The ship database <theshipslist.com> indicates that there was no call at the Cape usually (<http://www.theshipslist.com/ships/lines/orient.shtml>, last accessed 4 April 2015).

¹⁷ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 16 January 1879, 6.

¹⁸ Arnold noted in a letter to Jane Forster, 16 January 1879, that he had received a telegram from the Andersons, the owners of *Lusitania*, 'to say that she has arrived at Adelaide. She arrived there yesterday, and I suppose will stay there today; then she will take about two days to steam to Melbourne', 16 January 1879 (*Letters of Matthew Arnold*, Letter V5P4D1). But it was only on 13 March that Arnold told Gordon Wordsworth that 'We have just heard from poor old Dick, who had just got to Melbourne and been set to work in his bank', Letter V5P15D2. 'Just got' does not sound right for a ship theoretically planned to arrive nearly two months earlier.

¹⁹ The poem is reproduced in modernised form in *Poems of Matthew Arnold*, 592.

²⁰ See *OED*, electronic edition, 'Card', 1.6.a.