

Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach:" A Cultural Polysemy

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Arnold's "Dover Beach," which has always been a popular text of the Victorian canon, embodies a number of cultural intertexts with multiple thematic and semantic dimensions. What follows is, therefore, an attempt to demonstrate this culturally polysemic nature of the poem and gesture towards the uses of cultural criticism in the study of the canon. However, before we can proceed with this task, it is necessary first to dwell in general terms on the problematics of the relationship between the canon and the practice of cultural criticism. I say "the problematics" because, as many of you will recall, a great controversy has already risen between pro-canonists and students of cultural criticism over the issue whether great literary works which, for Harold Bloom, constitute "the Western canon" can be subjected to the aims and practices of cultural criticism. As far as Bloom is concerned, it is more than a mere controversy: it is a war which the pro-canonists including Bloom himself have fought and lost to the champions of cultural criticism. Although Bloom's heavy tome *The Western Canon* (1994) is the final blow to date delivered at cultural criticism and its work, the victory in this war has already fallen

to cultural critics. So *The Western Canon* opens with an introduction which is entitled “An Elegy for the Canon” (15-41), implying that cultural critics have murdered or, rather, about to murder the canon and that what remains to be done is to write a funeral song for

the canon. Upon the publication of his *Western Canon*, Bloom was interviewed by *Newsweek*, and in the interview, entitled “We Have Lost the War,” he repeated his argument in an explicitly polemical and aggressive fashion:

There is no future for literary studies as such in the United States. Increasingly, those studies are being taken over by the garbage called cultural criticism. At New York University I am surrounded by professors of hip-hop. At Yale, I am surrounded by professors who are far more interested in various articles on the compost heap of so-called popular culture than they are by Proust or Shakespeare or Tolstoy. Still, I am aware that I am fighting a rear-guard action, and that the war is over and we have lost (7 November 1994 : 60).

For him, “cultural criticism is another dismal social science” (*The Western Canon*, 17. Hereafter cited as *WC*), which must be resisted stubbornly in order to preserve and maintain the aesthetic value of the canon (*WC*, 17 ff.). Furthermore, it is, he argues, a grave mistake to see literature and literary works as social documents (*WC*, 18) and seek social utilitarianism in them.

Fundamentally, Bloom’s denunciation of cultural criticism stems from the disregard which he believes cultural critics have of the aesthetic qualities of the canon; he argues that, as “pseudo-Marxists, pseudo-feminists, watery disciples of Foucault and other French theorists” (*Newsweek*, 60), whom he brands as “the School of Resentment”

(*WC*, 4, 23, 527 *et passim*), cultural critics make no distinction between good and bad literature and “substitute the library for the canon and the archive for the discerning spirit” (*WC*, 9), that is, any written text is good enough for study, and cultural referentiality rather than literary merit is what counts most in it.

Bloom’s arguments obviously constitute a canonical ideology and become a formulation for the re-mystification of the canon. Then, the fundamental question is this: What is cultural criticism? Of course, various critics and theoreticians from Williams and Foucault to Greenblatt have answered it in detail through their extensive studies. However, before we offer a concise account of the arguments concerning the principles and function of cultural criticism, we could argue that cultural criticism in its generic sense is the demystification of the canon by subjecting it to a process of rereading and rewriting in an enlarged and problematized context. So, Greenblatt has rightly pointed out with Foucault’s idea of textual and/or intertextual *archeology* in mind that

to recover the meaning of ... texts, to make any sense of them at all, we need to reconstruct the situation in which they were produced. Works of art by contrast contain directly or by implication much of this situation within themselves, and it is this sustained absorption that enables many literary works to survive the collapse of the conditions that led to their production (447).

It is obvious from this statement that, as a cultural critic and also as an established scholar of the Renaissance English canon, Greenblatt does not see cultural criticism as extrinsic to a textual analysis; nor does he consider it counteractive to internal formalist criticism. For him, cultural criticism aims at reconstructing the contexts and discovering the latent intertexts, which have constituted the genesis of a literary text (cf. 447). He

further suggests that questions concerning the problematization of cultural paradigms in a literary work

heighten our attention to features of the literary work that we might not have noticed, and, above all, to connections among elements within the work. Eventually, a full cultural analysis will need to push beyond the boundaries of the text, to establish links between the text and values, institutions, and practices elsewhere in the culture (447).

In fact, no cultural critic rejects the canon or downsizes its distinctive qualities. On the contrary, cultural criticism has recognized the aesthetic value of the canon while demystifying its elitist and hierofic recapitulation. It is through cultural criticism that the traditional binary opposition between the literary (canonical) and the non-literary (non-canonical), or high and popular culture, has thus been eliminated; it has indeed led to a democratic and unbiased reconstruction of the dynamics and paradigms of culture. As Keeseey has pointed out, as practitioners of cultural criticism, new historicists have made it their essential concern “to collapse the disciplinary walls that are built on oppositions” (420). One should also suggest that, in its theory-based dimension, cultural criticism is multi-theoretical and operates through Marxist, structuralist, poststructuralist or deconstructionist, feminist, new historicist, intertextual, semiotic and other critical theories (Keeseey, 422; cf. Bloom, *WC*, 527 *et passim*); in its knowledge-based dimension, it is interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary or, to use a current term, *transdisciplinary*. Thus, it traverses “disciplinary and departmental boundaries” (Keeseey, 422), and cultural studies becomes a field of study topically and theoretically *sans frontière*. Interestingly, the title of this Conference, “Crossing the Boundaries,” reiterates this point, though the word “boundaries” is not qualified clearly. Also the word “crossing” seems to imply an intentional and determined act and may therefore be replaced by the word *traversing*,

which signifies the natural and unobtrusive situatedness of other disciplines within the context of cultural studies.

Now what we have pointed out so far is evidently a useful frame of theoretical reference for a cultural reading of Arnold's "Dover Beach." I have chosen the poem as the working text of this paper not with any specific reason except that it has always been considered Arnold's best poem and that its intertextuality or transtextuality challenges any cultural reading. Genetically, as it has commonly been accepted, the poem was first written in the summer of 1851, following Arnold's marriage on 10 June 1851 to Frances Lucy Wightman. However, as Warren Anderson has argued, Arnold revised and enlarged it later in the early 1860s before it was finally published in 1867 in *New Poems* (70). The studies made so far of the poem have been thematic, hermeneutic and historical; naturally, they have contributed a great deal to the heightening of our pleasure and understanding of the poem (Carroll, 16-17; Anderson, 70 ff.; Riede, 195-203; Collini, 39-41). However, the poem still beckons to us for a further reading in a cultural context, but, speaking deconstructively, one must admit that the deferral of its full meaning will continue and that it can never be exhausted. Indeed, the deferral of meaning and, thereby, its inexhaustibility should also be added to Bloom's list of the constituents, which are "sublimity" (*WC*, 2), "mastery of figurative language, originality, cognitive power, knowledge, [and] exuberance of diction" (*WC*, 29) and make up the "aesthetic strength" of the canon (*WC*, 29).

Culturally speaking, the poem seems (I say “seems” deliberately to follow a deconstructive and new historicist argument) to recapitulate four major cultural paradigms or intertexts, which are related to contemporary politics, social changes, classicism, and gender. Of these four cultural intertexts, that of gender is the least recognizable because for Arnold it is not an issue at all. Also Arnold’s dominant pessimism and despair so strongly expressed throughout the poem is another element which in fact has its explanation in the analysis of the four intertexts.

The political and social intertexts of the poem are embodied in the first and third stanzas (ll. 1-14 and 21-28). These intertexts are symbolically suggested through the rich iconography of the landscape described in the poem. Yet, together with the second stanza (ll. 15-20) which voices Arnold’s classicism and his concern with social conflicts, they carry their meaning into the final stanza (ll. 29-37), in which the suggestion of contrasting and conflicting tensions reaches a culmination at the personal, social and temporal levels.

The first stanza opens with a literal description of tranquillity in nature -- the sea, the moonlight, the sweet night air, and a loving and loyal companion. Yet, this apparent tranquillity is spoiled by the sharp and somewhat foreboding contrast between France and England; the French side, though in light for a short time, is now in darkness (ll. 3-4) while the English side with its huge, white and glimmering cliffs of Dover is bright (ll. 4-5). Temporally, the tranquillity of the present is also spoiled by the unending war raging between the ever-changing and destructive sea on the one hand and the solid and

unchanging land on the other (ll. 7-14). In other words, the present has the dichotomy of war and peace. This temporal dichotomy is translated in the final stanza into the ever-recurrent theme of the unsettled present and the seemingly promising future:

...the world, which seems
 To lie before us like a land of dreams,
 So various, so beautiful and so new,
 Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
 Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.
 (ll. 30 - 34)

To return to the first stanza then, the topographical iconography and visual symbolism gains a further intertextual significance if one can see the whole piece as a cryptic reference to the political and social unrest in the 1840s and 1850s in France and England. These were the turbulent years; the political movements and social events, ranging from the revolutions on the Continent and the workers' union activities in England to the Benthamite doctrine of utilitarianism, the Chartist movement and the establishment by Marx and Engels in 1847 of the first Communist Party (Hearder, 19-63 and 216 ff.), cast a shadow of uncertainty and instability in society. France was engulfed in a state of anarchy and social agitation while England under the Whig governments in the 1850s was able to attain a state of economic prosperity and social peace (Hearder, 216 ff.). Despite the unrest in the working life and the danger of a possible spread into England of the anarchic events on the Continent, the English institutions, that is, the monarchy, the Parliament, the government, the legal system and so forth, were not shaken but stood strong. Yet, on the Continent, especially in France, the hope and optimism that the French Revolution of 1789 had ushered in through its principles of freedom, equality and brotherhood for the dignity and well-being of man had already

died away like a flash, and now in the 1840s anarchy, bigotry and oppression once again engulfed the country in darkness. This contrast between the two countries finds its symbolic and politically intertextual expression in Arnold's juxtaposition of the glimmering cliffs of Dover and the darkness of the French coast (ll. 3-5).

When we consider Arnold's ideas on culture and politics, expressed in his prose writings (especially, Arnold, 295-316, 317-338, 343-363, and 432-455), he was much closer to the Tory policies which supported the formulation and implementation of democratic constitutional ideas and social reforms; in other words, he cherished constitutionalism and reformist policies. He believed in the cultivation and improvement of the individual, and this was a policy of education, which, in his capacity as the Inspector General of schools, he pursued with tenacity. Hence, the inculcation in the individual of classical values and strong moral ideas was for him of paramount importance. However, he saw an alarming difference between his own ideals and the radically foreboding events of his time; his optimism about the cultivation and improvement of the individual was undermined by a growing sense of despair. In his conflicting mood he identifies himself with Sophocles, who, for Arnold, also experienced and witnessed similar circumstances of human misery in politically turbulent democratic Athens. Thus, Arnold's classicism as regards his concept of culture and the cultivation of the mind takes a personally metaphorical turn and provides him with a sense of belonging; he strongly believes that he and Sophocles belong together and that they share the same thoughts and fears about political bigotry, dogmatism and radicalism, which hamper man's progress and inevitably lead to human misery. In this

respect, "Dover Beach" becomes Arnold's metaphorical statement about the dangers and threat of political radicalism; it underlines his serious concern about the rising proletarianism and social anarchy. His fear of a mass movement or a proletariat revolution, which could be brought about by the illiterate, uncultivated, politically unruly and volatile masses, provoked by the new radical ideas of the time, underlies the poem and, in the final stanza, his deep-seated pessimism turns into an apocalyptic vision of the present (ll. 29-37).

Finally, as we have suggested above, in cultural terms the poem also has a gender intertext which is somewhat subdued and takes its significance from the contemporary gender relationship in society. The female in the poem, who accompanies the poet-speaker, is presented as a secondary figure. Her position in the poem is that of the traditional female type in a male-dominated society such as the Victorian society was; she is mute, submissive, and obedient. Indeed, it is the male who dominates and guides her. Thus, through the way she is presented in the poem, we see a reflection of the Victorian gender relationship, and in this respect the poem embodies a significant cultural intertext.

In concluding our reading of the poem culturally, it should be stressed once again that "Dover Beach" is intertextually a diachronic poem. It recapitulates the political, social, cultural and generic intertexts of Arnold's time and society, which can further be appreciated and discussed through a practice of cultural criticism.

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