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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Parody's paradox: 'Dover Beach' versus 'The Dover Bitch'

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ABSTRACT

This article tests the notion that a literary critic might judge one poem to be demonstrably better than another. It does so by staging a contest between Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach' and Anthony Hecht's parody 'The Dover Bitch'. Pitting Arnold versus Hecht raises several questions: how subjective, or prescriptive, can a critic be in defining standards for poetry? What values necessarily factor into a reader's aesthetic criteria, and how do these values work with, or against, the formal, thematic, and ethical freedoms poets require? Can a parody ever outshine the original? By closely comparing the details of each poem, the article ultimately demonstrates parody's desire to become what it mocks while also arguing for the importance of evaluation to literary studies. The article concludes by declaring who did Dover best—suggesting what 'best' might mean in the context of these two particular poems. This article arises from a British Academy Lecture delivered on 21 March 2024.

Keywords poetry, evaluation, parody, value, judgement, Matthew Arnold, Anthony Hecht

'Dover! Who *could* write upon it!'
—John Keats

'Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.' But what is true on the playground may not always be true for poetry, where copying takes many forms: adaptation, translation, and allusion on one side, parody and pastiche on the other. The sincerest form of parody is often very unflattering—and yet parody isn't necessarily the same thing as poking fun. Nor is it always sincere. As many great parodists have acknowledged, their art lies at one end of a long spectrum of relation that often begins with influence. 'Every writer is a parodist, in love with what he mimics', writes David Bromwich, pointing out how 'modes like parody and pastiche, as much as the process of allusion itself, belong to the usual give and take' of poetry writing.[1] Parody, as a form of response, has many guises, from subtle knock-off to exaggerated mockery. And a good parody can be extraordinarily original—though it cannot exist without the original. This essay concerns itself with parody's possibility as it evaluates the achievement of one of the most popular poems in English literary history—Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach'—against a mid-20th-century American response to that poem that some readers might generously call a 'spoof'. Can a parody ever exceed the original? Can a reflection outshine its source?

[1] Bromwich (1985: 330, 334).

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Arnold's poem has proven itself rich for copying ever since it first appeared in print in 1867. He had in fact written it well over a decade earlier—probably in the weeks following his marriage to Frances Lucy Wightman in 1851. Maybe it is the seeming sincerity of its voice, or the recognisability of its circumstance—a disillusioned lover, looking beyond the cliff's edge, contemplating the precipice of his own life—that has tempted so many others to follow suit. Here it is again in full:

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 Ægæan, 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.[2]

These lines seem to have been composed in perfect accordance with the 'two offices of poetry' Arnold had declared so important in a letter to Arthur Clough a few years prior: 'to add to one's store of thoughts and feelings' and 'to compose and elevate the mind by a sustained tone, numerous allusions, and a grand style'.[3] It is certainly a poem of both feelings and thoughts ('in the sound a thought', writes Arnold—pointing to the sea but also to the music of his own verse). He manages to sustain his tone across four long, quirkily-rhymed stanzas, full of suspenseful enjambments, each stanza bearing some relation to a sonnet: the first is fourteen lines, the second and third add up to exactly that many, and the fourth addresses itself to the lover who received those imperatives 'Come to the window' and 'Listen!' nearer the beginning (at the time, we might have read those commands as being directed toward us as readers). If Arnold is right that allusions 'elevate' the mind, his poem offers many, and they signal a broader classicism bound up not only in those references to Sophocles and Thucydides (the latter of whose histories of the Peloponnesian War include the famous night battle at Epipolae, where, 'on a darkling plain' the 'confused' soldiers could not discern friend from foe) but also in his poem's carefully measured, 'grand style'. 'Upon the straits', 'moon-blanched land', 'vast edges drear', 'Ah, love'—these phrases are highly rhetorical, old-fashioned, and demand to be taken seriously. Readers always have done: the year the poem appeared, Swinburne was already declaiming that it 'has a grand choral cadence as of steady surges, regular in resonance, not fitful or gusty, but antiphonal and reverberate'.[4] His assessment links Arnold's style to his content: the lines naturally imitate the sea and the tides they describe, as Arnold himself acknowledges when he remembers within the poem the long tradition of writers facing—and reproducing—the feelings that such maritime views invoke: Sophocles felt them 'long ago', and now he, and no doubt many other poets before and after.

In his chapter on 'Dover Beach' in *The End of the Poem*, Paul Muldoon mentions several of these subsequent poets whose 'remakes' of Arnold's famous lines successfully bring their own 'eternal note of sadness in'.[5] Robert Frost's version, 'Once by the Pacific', is more menacing than Arnold's:

> Great waves looked over others coming in,
> And thought of doing something to the shore
> That water never did to land before.
> …
> It looked as if a night of dark intent

[2] Arnold (1979).
[3] Arnold (1932).
[4] Swinburne (1867; 1973).
[5] Muldoon (2006).

> Was coming, and not only a night, an age.
> Someone had better be prepared for rage.[6]

Despite the change of mood, this poem still conjures some of the same images as Arnold's using the same simple words (waves, shore, land, dark, night) and likewise captures something of the original's 'melancholy, long, withdrawing roar'. So does the lone quatrain of Yeats's nostalgic 'The Nineteenth Century and After':

> Though the great song return no more
> There's keen delight in what we have:
> The rattle of pebbles on the shore
> Under the receding wave.[7]

Muldoon calls these poems 'remakes' rather than parodies—and it is true that their relation to 'Dover Beach' mainly appears to be one of influence rather than response or reproach. Even a more contemporary poem like Robert Hass's 'Sunrise', which commandeers Arnold's fourth stanza's famous apostrophe for its opening line, still adopts a respectfully 'tremulous cadence':

> Ah, love, this is fear. This is fear and syllables
> and the beginnings of beauty. We have walked the city,
> a flayed animal signifying death, a hybrid god
> who sings in the desolation of filth and money
> a song the heart is heavy to receive.…[8]

Hass's poem rings a modern note to be sure (T.S. Eliot's music overlays Arnold's), but the beginning's allusion to 'Dover Beach' is still serious and commemorative—a deliberate nod to the high 'Tradition' of poetry Arnold promoted so vehemently in his essays.

Nothing at all like the wild irreverence of the parody that Anthony Hecht attempts:

> **The Dover Bitch**
>
> *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

[6]Frost (1995).
[7]Yeats (1996).
[8]Hass (1979).

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*.[9]

When Hecht included this poem in his second collection, *The Hard Hours*, in 1967, exactly a century after Arnold's 'Dover Beach' first appeared in book form, he may not have imagined himself as being wholly 'serious'. But perhaps he did. Like Arnold, he had composed it many years before its appearance in the book—during the throes not of marriage but divorce. It invents a speaker, apparently contemporaneous with Arnold, who 'knew' the female addressee of the original poem perhaps more intimately even than the melancholic figure on the cliff, and presents us with *her* side of the story:

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.

This sexually frustrated woman must have felt, as so many of Arnold's recent critics have, that the brooding man she found herself with in Dover was something of a melancholic prude. Hecht's poem attempts to liberate her accordingly—'She's really all right … I give her a good time'—and winkingly sends her off with a bottle of one of those French perfumes she so covets. And yet the overall tone of the book to which this poem belongs, a book that won Hecht the Pulitzer Prize and contains some of his most harrowing, historically engaged poems (including 'More Light! More Light!' and 'Rites and

[9]Hecht 'The Dover Bitch' (2023: 83).

Ceremonies', both responding to the Holocaust), suggests we might read his epigraph, playing on Arnold's assertion that good poems are a 'criticism of life', in earnest rather than jest.

Is Hecht's parody in fact 'a criticism of life' rather than merely a criticism of Arnold? When Arnold uses this phrase in his 1880 essay *The Study of Poetry*, he is defending good poetry's ability 'to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us';[10] and yet the essay complicates this defence with the caveat that not all poetry is created equal—some poems being truer and more powerful than others:

> In poetry … the spirit of our race will find, we have said, as time goes on and as other helps fail, its consolation and stay. But the consolation and stay will be of power in proportion to the power of the criticism of life. And the criticism of life will be of power in proportion as the poetry conveying it is excellent rather than inferior, sound rather than unsound or half-sound, true rather than untrue or half-true.
>
> The best poetry is what we want; the best poetry will be found to have a power of forming, sustaining, and delighting us, as nothing else can.[11]

For Arnold, a poem's 'criticism of life' is only as effective as how 'excellent rather than inferior' it is—a quality that, as he writes elsewhere in the essay, relies on 'the high seriousness which comes from absolute sincerity'.[12] A reader certainly feels his dedication to sincerity in that final, exclamatory appeal in 'Dover Beach': 'let us be true/To one another!' For him, poetry accommodates the truths that life does not fully articulate—the ones you hear in sounds as much as thoughts. Life needs poets the way poems need critics.

But Hecht may well have had something more cynical in mind in reproducing Arnold's phrase. His poem appears to critique the seedier aspects of life: not just in its allusions to casual sex but also in the deplorable description of the girl's 'running to fat' and the comment that her translation of Sophocles is only 'fairly good'. Even the perfume he offers her—its name suggesting the one-night-stand—isn't classy: 'Nuit d'Amour' is the name of an everyday perfume that Hecht plucked from his own mid-century American milieu, neither true to Arnold's world nor anything like what classy French women wore.[13]

For Arnold, 'sincerity' would seem to require something less ironic, less anachronistic, less dramatic, than what Hecht produces. And yet sincerity in 'Dover Beach' is complicated too. Arnold's *tone* is sincere-sounding, to be sure—but is the *poem*? Arnold himself was a famously jovial young man, his actual demeanour nothing like that of the disillusioned speaker we encounter at Dover. Lionel Trilling notes in the biography that when Arnold's first volume of

[10] Arnold (1973: 161).
[11] Arnold (1973: 163).
[12] Arnold (1973: 184).
[13] I managed to purchase a bottle of this perfume (from the 1950s) in an online shop for vintage Americana.

poems appeared, 'Matthew's friends and family were puzzled that a book so gaily titled and by so gay a young man should be so sad.'[14] Now, it could be the case that the performance of his public demeanour called for a kind of sincerity that only poetry was able to deliver. And it is certainly the case that the facts of 'Dover Beach' match the biographical details of Arnold's life. He visited Dover several times during the period when he likely wrote the poem, though the exact timeline of its composition remains a mystery. The only surviving draft is unfinished and sits on the back of Arnold's notes towards the poem 'Empedocles on Etna', which he was composing between 1850 and 1852—and yet the last line of that manuscript version seems to gesture to the finished poem's final stanza as if it were already written down somewhere else: the phrase 'Ah love I &c' closes the draft. Were Arnold's famous final words about love actually written before the rest—maybe even about another woman?

We know that Arnold brought his new wife Frances to Dover early in the summer of 1851, and again later, at the beginning of September, when they took the night ferry from there to Calais. Frances ('Flue') described that crossing in a letter to her mother: the sea, she wrote, was 'calm as a mill-pond'.[15] Is this the 'calm' one Arnold's poem describes? And is Frances Lucy Wightman definitely the 'love' to whom the fourth stanza is addressed—or could those lines have been first written down before he even knew her, perhaps with the famously reluctant 'Marguerite' in mind? These details matter because reading 'Dover Beach', as most critics do, not just as a love poem but as an autobiographical *honeymoon* poem, situated at the brink of both the English Channel and the poet's marriage, informs its various religious and romantic cadences. The mystery of why it does not appear in Arnold's *Empedocles on Etna and Other Poems* of 1852, which also contains the 'Marguerite' poems as well as several verses about his new wife (in the section titled 'Faded Leaves'), continues to remain a source of speculation.[16] Did 'Flue' disapprove of the poem's sentiments regarding religious doubt and ask him to leave it out? Or was the poem simply not romantic enough—as Hecht impishly suggests? Not every bride would relish hearing such melancholy speeches from their groom: 'the world … /Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light/Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain …'. This may well be sincere, but it is not uplifting. At least on the surface, Arnold's poem seems to offer what his biographer Ian Hamilton calls a 'strained, anxious pledge of faith … a sigh of part-relief, part resignation'.[17] And David Riede mainly hears, in its closing sentiments, 'a desolating sense of aloneness'.[18]

On the other hand, it is also possible to feel, as Trilling suggests, an overriding sense of 'warm, tender, pathetic love' in 'Dover Beach'.[19] I do.

[14] Trilling (1955: 15).
[15] See Hamilton (1999: 142–3).
[16] Muldoon's essay, which turns on this question, suggests that the poem may have been 'suppressed' due to its being uncomfortably Oedipal for Arnold: 'he bites off the head of his father' (Muldoon 2006: 335).
[17] Hamilton (1999: 145).
[18] Riede (1988: 196).
[19] Trilling (1955: 127).

The opening leads the reader into expecting iambic pentameter ('The sea is calm tonight …') only to stop short at trimeter before having another go ('The tide is full; the moon lies fair …'), only to reach tetrameter, before finally landing five beats in the third line—it's clearly building at something. As he sputters into ignition, Arnold's speaker lets us know that whatever he is getting at isn't easy to say. So rather than get right to it, he spends twenty lines retreating into metaphor, allowing those waves near the end of the first fourteen-line 'stanza', which 'Begin, and cease, and then again begin', to depict visually the ambivalence we just heard enacted in the out-and-back measure of first three lines. These lines also mirror what is happening in the poem's form: at this moment, the sonnet proves inadequate to his lyric. He must start again.

Ruth Pitman's reading of Arnold's incomplete sonnets, and his formal experimentation more generally, is that 'erosion of form matches erosion of meaning'.[20] She is partly thinking geologically here (the cliffs in Kent were and are sites of erosion—a fact, she points out, Arnold may have known); but she likewise registers a structural weakness in the poem's argument: what exactly *is* this poet trying to say? His difficulty articulating the thoughts occasioned by this place and time is part of the tonal complexity of 'Dover Beach' (and, ultimately, its beauty). To stand at the edge of 'the world, which seems/To lie before us', knowing that you are ensconced in meaning that you cannot fully decipher, demonstrates the existential predicament of a man given to symbolic gestures and dramatic speech acts. Here is where verse offers itself as the only medium for the sincerity Arnold requires. As such, the first half of Arnold's poem reads as a kind of meta-poem: it spends two stanzas dwelling on the high rhetoric of cadences and notes, waves, ebbs, and flows, before finally piercing the heart of the matter—the dwindling 'Sea of Faith' and its possible recompense in the steadiness of faithful love. To my ear these lines are more beautiful than 'strained' or 'desolate'; but if they do represent honeymoon poetry, they are also pathetic, in both senses of that word.

One can see why Hecht—an admirer of Arnold's—felt the urge to poke fun. He would not have spent his honeymoon contemplating the existence of God while begging his wife to stay faithful. (Hecht's first honeymoon was in fact spent on Fire Island, though he did take his wife Pat—a fashion model—to Paris shortly after, where they were mostly unhappy.[21]) But faithfulness and spirituality do become lasting poetic subjects for him:

> Shall we now consider
> The suspicious postures of our virtue,
> The deformed consequences of our love[22]

Hecht asks this question in 'Rites and Ceremonies', a religious poem that appears in *The Hard Hours* only a few pages after 'The Dover Bitch'. So perhaps

[20] Pitman (1973: 129).
[21] Yezzi (2023: 200).
[22] Hecht, 'Rites and Ceremonies' (2023: 111).

the mood of his parody is truer to the original than it initially seems. In a letter to his friend Sandy McClatchy in 1992, Hecht explains that he

> felt a marked impatience with Arnold's way of making love into a form of redemption and substitution for any other form of transcendent experience. Putting that much weight on human fidelity in a love relationship is to burden it beyond the limits of any lightness or carefree spontaneity. It was to make love into something grimly solemn, like Victorian organ music, for which the word 'lugubrious' could have been coined.[23]

The poem accordingly presents a female protagonist who longs for what she imagines to be the 'carefree spontaneity' of lovers on the other side of the Channel. And yet like Arnold's speaker, she deals in feelings that are hard for her to say: the wandering, yearning thoughts associated with phrases like 'all the time he was talking she had in mind …' and 'after a while she got to looking out/At the lights across the channel, and felt really sad' are not a far cry from the wayward patterns of thinking her 'husband' displays as he watches the waves, remembering Sophocles and Thucydides, in Arnold's version. Both of them are living elsewhere—he in ancient books, she in romantic fantasies of France—rather than the present. And like Arnold's speaker, the male narrator of Hecht's poem also requires some time to articulate his point: 'What I mean to say is …' he sputters, most of the way through the poem, trying to muster the truth his verse hasn't yet achieved. And so the ending of the parody closely matches Arnold's in sentiment, if not in tone: Hecht offers his reader a lonely portrait of ultimate discord between lover and lover. He finds her 'dependable', thinks she is 'all right', and congratulates himself on providing her with a bottle of cheap perfume and an outlet to talk; but she is surely using him too—he is *her* 'mournful cosmic last resort'. Hecht has produced yet another version of those 'ignorant armies clash[ing] by night'.

Does he know it? In other words, is this dramatic irony, or plain old misogyny? Readers have been divided since the beginning. Edward Hirsch considers 'The Dover Bitch' an integral player in the seriousness of Hecht's prize-winning collection and reads the poem as simultaneously parodic and distinctly Arnoldian in its values:

> One of the striking features of *The Hard Hours* is the way the poems continually deflate a certain type of rhetoric, searching out and exposing the false and phony, puncturing the heroic gesture. It is as if the poet had decided that he could only speak truly—indeed could only be believed—after he had first cleared away the sentimentalities and undermined the poetic tendency to inflate both language and experience. The satirical revision of 'Dover Beach' remains the most notorious example …[24]

[23] Hecht (2013).
[24] Hirsch (1989: 54).

Arnold himself would not have been able to resist Hecht's dedication to 'searching out and exposing the false and phony', as Hirsch sees it—though he would surely argue against the notion that these qualities are intrinsically tied to heroic gestures or 'inflated' language. But what Hirsch eventually emphasises is not so much Hecht's effort to 'deflate … rhetoric' as his effort to compose 'reality':

> 'The Dover Bitch' … ultimately questions the relationship of poetic language to reality. The serious idea behind the broad deflating humor is that people have to be treated as they really are, not as opportunities for the grandiose self to declaim rhetorically. … The poem playfully fixes the woman addressed by Arnold's poem as a living flesh-and-blood person, flawed but nice, a generous woman of easy virtue 'Running to fat, but dependable as they come.' In the process it critiques a melodramatic language as well as a sentimental Victorian ideal. Finally, it addresses and adjusts the gap between the romantic and the actual.[25]

There are some complications with such an argument, not least the fact that 'Victorian' poets famously engaged with questions regarding 'the relationship of poetic language to reality' (Browning's dramatic monologues are the prime example perhaps, but Arnold's and Tennyson's poems, too). However, Hirsch may also be suggesting that the poem likewise critiques Hecht's own melodramatic language in some of the other ostensibly more 'serious' poems in *The Hard Hours*, many of which subscribe to the kind of 'inflated' language this 'satirical revision' appears to work against. And yet Hecht's speaker still keeps some sense of decorum, refusing to convey those 'one or two unprintable things' she said while observing her husband fingering his watch chain.

In any case, Hirsch's reading seems in keeping with the poet's own insistence that the parody capture something of the 'spontaneity' of most 'love relationship[s]'. And yet, as Maryann Corbett has recently noted, the poem has an uncomfortable way of 'mak[ing] us uncertain whom we should be laughing at. At the woman, so clearly mismatched with the great poet? Or at the speaker, whose attitude to the woman is so clearly self-centred and supercilious, and whose reading of Arnold is so incomplete?'[26] Our appreciation of the main parodic elements of Hecht's poem risks overlooking its more blatant signs of misogyny, including the language in the title. Whose word is 'Bitch', exactly? Does the poet say it, or poem's speaker? '[W]e're nagged', Corbett writes,

> by the thought that the woman herself wouldn't want to be seen or described in this way: not smart enough to know a 'fairly good translation' from an excellent one; merely pretty, and valued primarily by the standard of prettiness; satisfied with the annual one-night stand; becoming less and less attractive; bought off with the occasional bottle of '*Nuit d'Amour*'[27]

[25] Hirsch (1989: 54–5).
[26] Corbett (2009: 44).
[27] Corbett (2009: 44).

Hecht was not unaware of this sort of response—though he appears not to have anticipated it. In the same letter to McClatchy, he explains that: 'On the basis both of the poem and its title I have been accused of sexism, though when I wrote the poem I intended only to bring a spirit of levity and informality to the relations between men and women in the persons of Arnold's poem.'[28] This light riposte appears to leave open the possibility for unintentional meanings even as he claims his own innocence (Hecht was wise to Freudian concepts and underwent psychoanalysis for many years). But he does not elaborate on the extent to which his investment in those 'persons of Arnold's poem' takes advantage of complexities in 'voice' and 'persona'—complexities that were important to Arnold but even more so to his contemporaries, Tennyson and Browning.

Several of Hecht's readers, including Corbett and, more recently, Hecht's biographer David Yezzi, gesture towards these qualities in his poem, although they don't explicitly name them as 'dramatic'. But it seems to me that the poem's success hangs on its living up to this designation. And the fact that the word 'Bitch' in the title stands apart—or may stand apart—from the voice in the poem only complicates the dilemma. Jonathan Post calls 'The Dover Bitch' Hecht's 'notorious bad-boy poem',[29] and Corbett acknowledges that she 'believe[s] Hecht knows very well how bad this narrator looks'.[30] And Yezzi, in order to exonerate Hecht from seeming 'crass and condescending', explains that '[t]his is a persona' and that

> the poem adopts a callous view of male–female relations, in which the speaker (and in his own way, the poet) are left very much on the hook.[31]

These sorts of anxieties regarding authorial personality are the very ones upon which many successful dramatic monologues turn. By the end of his career, Hecht had written several virtuosic dramatic monologues (see, for example, 'The Grapes'), and he often commented in interviews that 'lyric' poems should not necessarily reflect 'whatever is going on in [the poet's] turbulent psyche':

> I have in fact tried to disguise myself in my poems, and have adopted the voices of persons wholly different from me, including women. Novelists do this sort of thing all the time, while many readers and critics seem to deny this privilege to the poet, or to doubt that he is able to do it. Some of the most grotesque misreadings of my poems have been made by those who assume that all my poems are voiced *in propria persona*.[32]

[28] Hecht (2013: 246).
[29] Post (2015: 76).
[30] Corbet, (2009, 44).
[31] Yezzi (2023: 267).
[32] Hecht (2004: 59).

It might seem appropriate to hear Hecht in the speaker of 'The Dover Bitch' because of the timing of its initial publication (it first appeared in the *Transatlantic Review* as he was separating from his wife), and even more so because of its earnest-sounding epigraph—a contemporary poet's anti-Arnoldian take on romantic and spiritual life. But Hecht points out that he was

> greatly irritated by critics and general readers who assumed for a long time that everything I wrote was purely about myself. And for that reason I went out of my way to choose the voices of women, women who could not possibly be me.[33]

One obvious reason Hecht's speaker in 'The Dover Bitch' 'could not possibly be' Hecht himself is that he was not alive in the 1850s to seduce Arnold's 'girl'. But the voice in the poem is nevertheless profoundly contemporary and profoundly male. So why isn't this poem—ostensibly written to give Arnold's 'girl' a voice—actually spoken by her, as it could have been? (Indeed, several of Hecht's best dramatic monologues feature female speakers.[34]) Perhaps this is the poem's fatal flaw. Or perhaps the fact that his poem trades one male lover for another keeps it safely in the realm of parody: the woman's perspective once again gets subsumed in a man's meditative fantasies about what he has to offer her (and she to him). The 'criticism' Hecht achieves is more fully on show this way. '[We] have a drink/And I give her a good time'—these lines, the laddish confessions of a specific man seemingly directed at another likely male listener, could almost have been uttered by Browning's Fra Lippo Lippi. Maybe Hecht's listener is simply Andrews Wanning, a colleague of his at Smith College and the poem's dedicatee. But, regardless, Hecht winds up presenting a persona more than an argument—or a persona *as* argument. Reading the poem this way throws other aspects of its voiced-ness into relief: 'So there stood Matthew Arnold and this girl', 'Well now, I knew this girl', 'What I mean to say is'—these phrases may be less related to the poem's 'deflated' rhetoric (as Hirsch puts it) as they are to its rendering of character. They clue readers in to what sort of man this lover is. The word 'Bitch' sets off a first alarm—but it is only the beginning: the fact that Hecht leads us to condemn a speaker who is initially somewhat likeable makes his seemingly 'light' verse dramatic and many-layered.[35]

It may also be what makes his parody most significantly Arnoldian. Christopher Ricks touches admiringly on this element of Hecht's poem in a review of a scholarly book about Arnold:

> Anthony Hecht's brilliant and poignant poem is by no means flippant. … It takes Arnold and 'Dover Beach' seriously, so seriously as to consider awe or reverence insufficiently heartfelt as a response. And then, having subjected Arnold to an unprecedented

[33] Hecht (1996).
[34] See, e.g., 'The Grapes' and 'The Transparent Man' (2023: 217, 369).
[35] The poem was included in Amis's anthology of light verse (1978)—with Hecht's permission.

> scepticism, it turns in its own light and we suddenly see the superiority of Arnold—and of all he epitomized—to that knowing speaker whose worldliness was at first so refreshing. The poem, we realise, is in important ways a tribute to Arnold, though hardly a reverential one, just as it effects 'A Criticism of Life' even after it has toyed with the phrase. In its surprise and its relevance, the poem constitutes a criticism of Arnold-criticism, too.[36]

When Ricks writes that the poem 'turns in its own light', he presumably means that the cynical 'worldliness' of the knowing speaker begins to darken the moral landscape of the verse. And here, of course, is where Arnold shines. Yet there may also be reasons to call up Arnold on similar grounds: our ambivalence about Hecht's speaker begins to mirror the ambivalence that many readers of Arnold—including, perhaps, Hecht—have found themselves feeling about his speaker, who is after all standing at one of England's most beautiful shores, maybe on his honeymoon, with a woman he claims to love, and yet nevertheless disheartened and world-weary. In other words, for all his seeming 'sincerity', Arnold's man doesn't come off entirely clean. That Hecht's parody manages to replicate the slow trajectory of this inconsistency is one of its most impressive virtues.

How conscious was Hecht of this structural and tonal overlap? There are some signs he knew exactly what he was doing. Might Hecht even have known about the existence of Arnold's partial manuscript of 'Dover Beach' when he paraphrases its last stanza at the beginning of his own poem?

> Try to be true to me
> And I'll do the same for you, for things are bad
> All over, etc., etc.

Hecht's cavalier mockery of a sentiment so utterly sincere in Arnold feels like mere good fun—until one remembers that Arnold himself had adopted a similar tone when referring to these very lines, which he had presumably already composed, at the end of his draft:

> 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 I &c[37]

In Arnold's draft's Victorian short-hand, we are briefly privy to a rare splitting-off of poet from speaker. 'Ah love I &c', he scribbles, cheerily waving himself to the finish line. His 'etcetera' has the jauntiness of a poet, mid-composition, who has just seen his way to the end of his poem—a poem

[36] Ricks (1968).

[37] British Library Ashley A17, fol. 2r. (access online at: https://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/content/dover-beach).

that, as we have seen, makes a point of its own belaboured-ness. It is not impossible that Hecht was consciously mimicking Arnold's '&c' when he writes 'etc., etc' in his poem—though it seems very unlikely. But even if he was not aware of the draft, the notes of authorial distance he strikes in his own poem—through its dramatic elements—appear to model themselves on the tricky relation between the poet of 'Dover Beach' and its speaker. Through a small chink in the wall (Arnold's draft's '&c'), we can detect in the original poem something like the ironic distance Hecht so carefully effects in his.

To label 'Dover Beach' something akin to a dramatic monologue is not so very large a leap. Several aspects of it call into question its 'high seriousness' and sincerity in Arnoldian terms. One is that girdle. If we imagine Arnold's poem encompassing four distinct sections—the first describing the cliffs and sea, the second connecting them to classical sources, the third expressing anxiety over a loss of faith, and the fourth addressing the beloved as a form of recompense—then why the sexual simile in a stanza about religion?

> The Sea of Faith
> Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
> Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.

It is unexpected to be sure—though not necessarily inaccurate as figures go. One can almost imagine the sea, with its frothy overlapping layers of white-caps, looking something like a tightened Victorian girdle. And likewise one can imagine those waves eventually lengthening out or 'unfurling' the way the folds of a girdle might if you undo it. But to associate that loosening with a loss of faith (i.e. the 'long, withdrawing roar') is to paint a moment of serious religious doubt into a scene of undressing. This may not be inconsistent with the poem's final sentiments, or indeed with its subsequent outcry, 'Ah, love'—but it is not in keeping with the tone of austerity Arnold has established. Nor are those 'naked shingles', referring primarily to pebbles on the beach but also picking up, as several critics have noted, the other meaning of 'shingles'—a viral skin rash often affecting the middle and sides of the body. The word, as both Timothy O'Brien and Paul Muldoon have pointed out, derives from the Latin 'cingulum', which means, of all things, 'girdle'.[38]

These comments may feel unseemly given the high tone of the rest of the poem. And yet we know Arnold thought carefully about 'girdle', since his prior draft has the word 'garment' instead. While most serious readers of Arnold's poem have not taken the bait, Muldoon is a notable exception. Registering '[t]he erotic charge of the "folds" and "furl'd," combined with the "girdle" ',[39] he suggests that

> it's hard not to read the poem as a description of lovemaking,
> perhaps that of 'ignorant' newlyweds who 'clash by night.'

[38] See O'Brien (1986: 53) and Muldoon (2006: 331–2).
[39] Muldoon (2006: 331).

> The vocabulary of the poem may be erotically construed, moving as it does from 'full' through 'lies … upon' and 'stand' and 'spray' and the rhythm of 'begin, and cease, and then begin again' and 'withdrawing' to 'the eternal note of sadness' that corresponds to what is sometimes known as post-coital tristesse.[40]

This analysis perhaps extends past the mark, and yet it cannily brings to the fore some of the poem's subtler notes of voiced masculinity—especially in comparison to scholarly treatments that accuse Arnold's lines of lacking sexual vitality. O'Brien, in his analysis of Hecht's poem, finds a suitable middle ground for Arnold's, pointing to a 'repression that in its own insidious way controls [it]'.[41] 'The best parodies', writes O'Brien, 'prey on works whose textures distinguish themselves through some conspicuous absence'.[42] That Arnold's poem leaves out—or tries to leave out, with only mixed success—the sexual elements of a honeymoon night is what makes way for a poem like Hecht's. But as I have been arguing, Arnold himself may also have been staging a critique. The knowingness of a poet who selects 'shingles' after using the word 'girdle'—who is likely aware, from his classical education at Rugby School, of the etymological connection between these two words—suggests to me that Arnold is not a poet easily self-deceived. Whereas his speaker may well be. Arnold's critics have lighted, over the years, on inconsistencies in the poem that might be chalked up to the 'tremulous' emotional state of this endearingly pathetic lover. One is what Pitman calls 'the vexed question of Arnold's tides', which Robert Graves thinks Arnold 'muddled' with the 'the ebb and flow of particular waves'.[43] Another is the fact that the poem is called 'Dover Beach'—when it seems to take place on the cliffs (though this doesn't preclude the beach being below). Paul Baum, one of the poem's most established admirers, finds in it only one 'structural blemish'—that the final stanza suddenly 'shifts our interest and attention' to Thucydides' 'darkling plain', when it had 'hitherto' remained consistently maritime.[44] (Hardly a blemish, in my opinion.) These interpretive cruxes are not necessarily flaws; in fact, I find most of them to be intrinsically tied to what I like best about Arnold's poem—the persistent pathos of his dramatic persona. However they may well call into question that rubric of Arnoldian 'sincerity' with which Hecht's parody so fruitfully plays.

Another threat to Arnold's sincerity is the way his poem appeals to so many sources. It is difficult for a poem so allusive to remain fully sincere: its preoccupation with tradition and precursors sometimes gets in the way. Could 'Dover Beach' itself be read as a parody? Readers familiar with Wordsworth's early poetry may think so: 'It is a beauteous evening, calm and free', writes Arnold's mentor-friend and perhaps greatest influence, as he looks toward Dover

[40] Muldoon (2006: 331).
[41] O'Brien (1986: 52).
[42] O'Brien (1986: 52).
[43] See Pitman (1973: 119), along with her footnote 8, which mentions all the critics who try to offer what she calls 'ingenious answers' to the problem of Arnold's tides.
[44] Baum (1958: 91).

across the English Channel from Calais in 1802:

> It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,
> The holy time is quiet as a Nun
> Breathless with adoration; the broad sun
> Is sinking down in its tranquillity;
> The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the Sea;
> Listen! the mighty Being is awake,
> And doth with his eternal motion make
> A sound like thunder—everlastingly.[45]

The setting by the Channel, the time of day, the sea, religion, the silent female addressee who appears later in the poem—Arnold carries all of these elements of Wordsworth's poem into his own first stanza, along with many of the same words: 'calm', 'tranquil', 'eternal', and the real give away, 'Listen!'[46] I am of course not the first to notice these connections—critics have been clamouring about Arnold's sources for 'Dover Beach' for many decades, pointing variously to Sophocles,[47] *King Lear*,[48] *Paradise Lost* (compare, for instance, Milton's 'The world was all before them' to Arnold's 'the world, which seems/To lie before us'),[49] and so on. My point is not that Arnold's poem is unoriginal—but rather that its derivativeness should remind us that while his man may *seem* sincere, he is simultaneously part of a longstanding trope in a similar way to Hecht's own speaker. Riede finds these allusions in 'Dover Beach' undermining—at least to Arnold's own wishes for the poem—and therefore reads them as evidence of the battle he constantly waged with 'a language so overused that uncontrollable echoes and chains of association are inevitable'.[50] This may be so; but they also contribute significantly to the drama of the poem. Arnold's complex web of source material ensures his speaker is many-layered: simultaneously himself, Adam, Wordsworth—anyone but Arnold *as* Arnold. The allusions teach us to read him contextually, just as theorists of the Victorian dramatic monologue have persuasively shown us how to do with reference to so many characters in Tennyson and Browning.[51]

Hecht's lover—with his seedy charisma, historically framed details, and subtlety of character—may well appear more like one of Browning's speakers than Arnold's. This may add to the virtuosity of his parody, for on some level Hecht manages to stage, perhaps unconsciously, a contest that was itself staged in Arnold's own time. Arnold was not England's best dramatic poet—surely that was Browning—though he certainly wrote many poems as fine, or finer, than many of Browning's. And so the extent to which Hecht's speaker is stronger, or at least more persuasive, than Arnold's may well be the extent to which a

[45] Wordsworth (1984).
[46] See Knoepflmacher (1963).
[47] See, e.g., Anderson (1965).
[48] Riede (1988: 201–2).
[49] See Sharp (1983).
[50] Riede (1988: 203).
[51] See, e.g., Langbaum (1957) and Tucker (1980).

Browning poem might have treated a Victorian audience to a more dramatic, more ironic take on the situation at Dover, in a language more meaningfully believable, than Arnold's poem did.

But fantasising over what kind of fellow Browning would have put on Dover's cliffs does a disservice to the impressive balance Arnold manages to cultivate in his poem between sincerity and drama. And anyway the contest at hand isn't between Browning and Arnold, but Arnold and Hecht. Hecht's parody, we can see, is not exactly Arnoldian in style; rather its style is exactly *not-Arnoldian*, characterised by overt eroticism and a breezy forthrightness of tone. In achieving this difference, Hecht unconsciously reproduces what he consciously undoes: a disenchanted knowingness on the part of the author, at the expense of the speaker, that requires the reader to untangle. The dramatic irony inherent to both poems is that neither lover—neither Arnold's nor Hecht's—has a solid grip on how he comes across. Both speakers display a sense of desperation at how things are (they criticise life) and yet both are also part of the problem. Arnold's speaker cannot achieve Arnold's own knowingness—nor does the lover in Hecht's poem quite live up to the earnestness Hecht finds himself offering in the form of an Arnoldian 'criticism of life'. It may be perfect mimicry on Hecht's part—the consummate parody—or merely an accidental trap he has serendipitously fallen into from one side of imitation's door.

John Bayley has described Keatsian parody in terms of the 'balance' he achieves between being too 'knowingly parodic' and unintentionally losing himself in the imitation—the result being that 'Keats's most vivid realities are themselves parodies of it, actualities the more intense for never actually occurring.'[52] Hecht's poem finds this balance. It presents itself as intentionally parodic and un-Arnoldian; however, in doing so it achieves a likeness to the original that would not have otherwise been possible. 'The Dover Bitch' opens as deliberately as any 'orthodox parody' whose 'point and protection', writes Bayley, 'is never to deceive its reader into supposing it to be the "real" thing'.[53] But it quickly loses itself in unintentional likeness. Here is where Hecht's poem stands a chance at surpassing Arnold's, since the truest parodies may also be un-parodic. Parody's paradox is its desire to un-essence itself—to become, rather than betray, the original.

So who wrote Dover better? Will I foolishly declare Hecht's parody better than one of the 19th-century's greatest lyrics? If I were judging on sincerity alone, Hecht's poem may well surpass Arnold's, since it not only sets out to critique Arnold's but also to effect within it the 'criticism of life' his predecessor saw as inherent in all good poetry. He achieves these aims by adopting a dramatic stance that allows his poem—first intentionally, and then likely unintentionally—to 'interpret' both 'Dover Beach' the poem and also the feelings of its desperate speaker, who in the end provides an unlikely model for his own. However, Arnold cannot be bested; I have been mainly discussing the biographical and dramatic elements of his famous poem, but its descriptive and

[52] Bayley (1993: 119).
[53] Bayley (1993: 14).

formal qualities are of course what has established it as Arnold's strongest lyric and one of its century's most memorable productions. That its stanzas bend toward, but will not reproduce, the sonnet form is both musically suspenseful and indicative of their speaker's ambivalence about tradition—religious and literary. Its 'grand style', to use Arnold's phrase, and several allusions recall prior poems whose own meanings and melodies help 'elevate' the tone; and the suddenness, yet inevitability, of its apostrophe in stanza four allows what might have been called a 'stock' character to inhabit fully, if momentarily, his own persona. Arnold ironically comes closest, in that 'Ah, love' to betraying himself. Hecht's poem is clever, natural-seeming, and formal enough (though nowhere near as virtuosic as Hecht's other experiments in form elsewhere in *The Hard Hours*); however, it neither aspires to nor achieves the same level of beauty as Arnold's poem.

What confirms my belief in the superiority of Arnold's poem's is the way it knowingly transforms its own parodic elements (as it encounters Wordsworth, Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Milton in turn) into an original blend of the dramatic and seemingly personal. By inventing a speaker who claims so much of the poet's own literary disposition, yet who, because of his innocence and utter pathos, cannot quite be him, Arnold devises his own version of the dramatic form that would come to define his poetic era. And he does so all the while encompassing the questioning spirit of his age—in language nevertheless convincingly private, and directed at his beloved. Hecht's parody is admirably multi-valanced, but it does not unpeel into so many distinct layers.

Another way of putting this crude evaluation is that Arnold's poem has more of 'truth and seriousness' than Hecht's. We know Arnold cared for these qualities and spoke powerfully for them in his lectures and essays. 'The superior character of truth and seriousness, in the matter and substance of the best poetry', he declares in *The Study of Poetry*, 'is inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement marking its style and manner'. Can it still be the case a century and a half later? Are these still reasonable aesthetic criteria for us? I think so—and I think Hecht believed in them too. 'Poets can be bad, as they can be good, in any number of ways', Hecht once wrote, explaining how

> Too often … poems fail the way a joke badly told will fail: the teller sits back grinning in foolish triumph and still more foolish expectation of uproarious laughter, only to be greeted by embarrassed silence. And what does he do then? Why, he cheerfully seeks out the sort of audience who will share his special sense of humor, dismissing as dull-witted all those who failed to approve of his jest. He is sure to find a few more dull-witted than he, who will commend his skills be they never so little.[54]

'The Dover Bitch' is not a joke told badly, nor is it necessarily in bad taste. But his poem opens with a promise it knows it can only partially fulfil, because to

[54] Hecht (2003: 2).

criticise life in the Arnoldian sense requires more than parody's parameters will allow.

One of my aims in these pages has been to explore the limits and possibilities of parody. Another has been to judge the merits of two poems in relation to one another. To whom should it matter that I think Arnold's poem wins? I am certainly not the first, nor even the thousandth, reader to praise 'Dover Beach'. But reading it *against* Hecht's poem has transformed my own appreciation of it. The act of judging improved my reading. Evaluation is like that. It prioritises; it gives structure; it brings in to focus; it throws into relief. Declaring one poem better than another need not disqualify the losing poem from having value; indeed, the opposite is likely to be the case: by exonerating the losing poem from pressures of quality—by taking it for what it is—we can see better what value lies in it. Sometimes a poem's greatness is only partial; and sometimes this only becomes apparent when reading it in relative terms.

In her book *The Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski has explained, somewhat ruefully, why the kinds of subjective interpretation inherent to evaluative readings have become anathema in our discipline: '[t]here is an understandable wariness of being tarred with the brush of subjective or emotional response', she writes.[55] And yet subjectivity is also what allows us our creativity and honesty as readers—and what differentiates us from each other. What *I* argue about Arnold's poem will never be exactly what *you* argue about it, not just because texts always mean many things in many ways, but because the personally-inflected way we make our arguments affects the meaning of what we say. A renewed effort at critical subjectivity—in the form of evaluative reading—may helpfully loosen the parameters of literary study, as long as we're honest about what we're doing.

And yet it can be difficult to tell the difference between subjective and objective judgements in the criticism that we read. As I have been thinking about the critical advantages that might come from pitting one poem against another, I am reminded how F.R. Leavis—a critic whose reputation has not exactly increased over time—once confessed his determination to find a way of 'getting beyond a neutrally descriptive account of the differences between two poems'.[56] Indeed, after pronouncing a poem by Tennyson decidedly inferior to one by D.H. Lawrence, Leavis declares that 'The comparison is not gratuitous, a puritanic intrusion of critical righteousness' because the 'readiness to make the kind of judgement that the comparison enforces is implicit in any sound response to Tennyson's poem'.[57] I think his point here goes well beyond the evaluation of the two poems he is comparing: he is describing the implicit judgement involved in any critical act. His analysis demonstrates how comparison becomes a tool in how we all rate, discern, judge, or evaluate. It happens even when the two objects being compared are not directly before us. When we read a poem, we involve ourselves, mostly unconsciously, in the act of

[55] Felski (2015).
[56] Leavis (1975: 74).
[57] Leavis (1975: 79).

comparing it to all of the other poems we have ever encountered. If we go on to pronounce it better or worse than this one or that one, doing so is only the articulation of the critical process happening intuitively as we read. To judge is to prioritise what matters over what doesn't matter as much. Leavis wasn't especially tactful in how he imposed his judgements; but he may well have learned his process from Arnold, whose development of literary critical style grew out of a belief that poetry too is a kind of evaluative criticism—'of life' as well as other poems. Hecht knew this too as he composed his parodic critique. Judging is part of the act of reading, as it is part of any aesthetic experience in our lives. The one can hardly happen without the other.

So what happens when the parody gets parodied? Well, the woman finally gets a voice:

The Dover Bitch Criticises Her Life

(after Hecht, after Arnold)

I am waiting on the beach. Soon the car door will slam,
Then shingle will mutter grudgingly under his feet.
He will come. He will keep the old promise. I will not turn round.
We'll meet with the light behind me; a year is a long time.
Here's where we first met, in the far-off days
When I was a poet's muse. How he laughed at me then;
Laughed till we fell serious, fell accidentally into bed,
Since when, again and again we have fallen together,
Though the fallings are growing further and further apart …
This is how it will be. A kiss. A meal somewhere decent.
A wine from across the water, for old times' sake.
And afterward, tipsy and sad, I will treat him right.
I will treat him to all the year's longings in one great lay.
I will nurse him asleep on breasts that are not what they were;
Try not to consider the different levels of love.
Oh my beloved, insensitive, cynical swine;
I want him here, sharing old jokes and taking the piss
Out of my O-level Greek. A year is a long time,
But I am still Persephone, albeit gone to seed;
Six months remembering, then six anticipating.
Heaven knows, I was never a greedy woman
But I hope he remembers the bottle of Nuit d'Amour.
I'm almost out. And that's what gets me through
Between times. The merest whiff on a tissue
Shushes the fears, tempers the imaginings,
Takes the raw edge off the gnawing knowing
That my long loss is someone else's gain.[58]

[58]Drysdale (2005: 80).

To pit Ann Drysdale's parody against Hecht's requires another essay; but if I *were* to stage such a contest, it would involve 'laugh[ing] until we fell serious'. Because to parody a serious poem is to do more than merely imitate or poke fun. Drysdale's poem has the seriousness of 'criticism' to which both Arnold and Hecht aspire. The famous dictum (usually attributed to Oscar Wilde) with which I began is itself, when taken whole, evaluative: 'Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery that mediocrity can pay to greatness.' Hecht's poem is not mediocre, nor does it merely imitate Arnold. But it does flatter him. That it does so seemingly unintentionally may be what marks him as a 'true' parodist of excellence in the most Arnoldian sense.

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