

On the Sea Image in *Dover Beach**

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Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach* skillfully uses the sea image to reveal the social condition of the Victorian people on the verge of spiritual collapse. The two opposing sea images at the beginning of the poem are a contrast between illusion and reality, thus triggering the contradiction between the Imaginary and the Real, which becomes an aesthetic symbol throughout the interpretation of the sea image and the writing of human spiritual world. From the time of Sophocles in ancient Greece to the Victorian period, the sea, as a mirror of the Imaginary, became a way for people to reflect on their suffering fate and harsh reality. Meanwhile, the powerful force of the sea drawing back pebbles contains the philosophical meaning of the Real world, which has the mysterious power to swallow everything and is difficult to be captured by the symbol language of the Symbolic society. The impact of the sea on the pebbles shows the contradiction between the Real and the Symbolic. The reinterpretation of the sea image in *Dover Beach* provides insight into reconciling the spirituality of people in the transition period to highly developed industrialization and modernization.

Keywords: *Dover Beach*, sea image, psychoanalysis, the Real-Imaginary-Symbolic

Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) is a famous British poet and critic of the Victorian era. He wrote extensively throughout his lifetime and made remarkable achievements in the fields of poetic composition, literary criticism, and cultural criticism. His poetry and criticism have a keen insight into the realities of the Victorian world, showing a great foresight rarely seen among writers of his time, so he is considered to be "the clearest-thinking, the sanest, and the most modern and forward-looking writer" (Houston, 1927, p. 187) at that time. The modernity of his work is generally considered to be reflected in his anticipation of the collapse of faith and an accurate expression of the crisis of faith in the people of Victorian England, just as George Sampson comments that his poetry "reflects more clearly than the poetry of either, the collapse of faith that was a tragedy in many sincere lives of the period" (Sampson & Churchill, 1970, p. 584). In *Dover Beach*, Arnold penetrated the superficial prosperity of the Victorian age, and expressed the anguish of spiritual struggle of Victorian people through the image of sea. Based on Lacan's linguistic psychoanalysis, this paper explores the philosophical role of the sea image in *Dover Beach* and how the sea image reflects the mental state of human society.

* All translations are from Matthew Arnold, *Dover Beach*, A Dictionary of Foreign Lyric Poetry, translated by Cao Minglun, Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 1991, p. 565.

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“Tranquility” and “Roar”: The Illusion and Reality of the Sea

The first stanza of *Dover Beach* presents two strikingly different images of the sea. One is a quiet, peaceful moonlit ocean, the other is a rough, pebble-swept sea. The two completely different sea images actually show the contrast between the imaginary sea image under the influence of the author's subjectivity and the real sea image in reality. This article argues that the contrast between the illusion and reality triggered by the image of the sea at the beginning of the poem becomes the theme throughout the poem.

The poem begins with skillful use of phonology and line length to create a quiet and peaceful image of the ocean under the moon. The poem opens with “The sea is calm to-night. /The tide is full, the moon lies fair”, which depicts the seascape of a moonlit night with a full tide. The unvoiced sounds like “calm”, “full”, “fair”, “tranquil” underline the serenity of the sea under the moon. The lines in the first stanza slowly change in length, which is in analogy to the soft waves of the sea. On the contrary, in the second half of the first stanza, the author hears the noise of the waves and sees the waves rolling away the pebbles, and the length of the last few lines of the poem changes sharply, analogous to the raging waves. The abundance of the voiced sounds such as “grating roar”, “draw back”, “fling” also shatters the peaceful atmosphere. The first five lines and the last eight lines of the first stanza present two opposing images: one serene and pleasant, others noisy and violent. William Toole points out that the harsh sound of the waves suggests the illusory nature of the opening harmonious scene (Toole, 1968, p. 8). The juxtaposition of these two opposing images of the sea can be explained as the contrast between the illusion of the Imaginary and the reality of the Real. It should be noted that the author later compares the illusion and the reality of the sea image he perceives with the way the Victorians see the present situation in England. The idea of England from those Victorians is also a vision of their own subjectivity. Beginning with the image of the sea in the first stanza, the poem gradually turns to the grand thinking of social history.

In the first stanza, the description of the dreamlike sea image under the moon involves the image of the lights of the French coast and the shimmering light of the English cliffs. The lights are, on the one hand, related to the geographic position of the Dover Beach that links the French coast with the English cliffs as the closest section of England to France (Pitman, 1973, p. 111), so it is the authentic depiction of the scenery. On the other hand, it paves the way for the author's thinking on the social reality of England that is also going through changes in ideology just like France. Combined with Matthew Arnold's experience with his father, *Dover Beach* has historical and political implications for both Arnold and his son. His father Thomas Arnold once passed Dover and recorded his historical and political thoughts in his letters to his absent family, and at that time, Matthew Arnold was fifteen and was on his first visit to Dover. In his father's letter, he recalled the political and historical situation in France and England each time he passed Dover beach. “When I first came here, it was so soon after Napoleon's downfall... At my second and third visits, the British army still occupied the north of France. My second period of coming here, from 1825 to 1830, marked the last period of the old Bourbon reign in France, and the old Tory reign in England...” (qtd in Pitman, 1973, p. 114). His father chose Dover, the place where England reached the nearest to France, to mark the political time of reform and revolutions in France and England. The political and historical thinking connected to *Dover Beach* had an impact on his son Matthew Arnold as his fellow traveler. The mention of England and France lays the groundwork for the later thoughts on social history and politics.

In the first five lines of the first stanza, the description of the calm sea is mostly the outline of the visual landscape, while in the following lines of the first stanza the auditory sense is added to the description of the sea. Norman N. Holland once pointed out that “the strong sight images of the first five lines lead into a demand that a woman comes, a taste image (‘sweet’), and ...an inhaling of that sweet night air” (Holland, 1965, p. 13). He further notes that the strong sight is associated with taking in, especially in infancy we expect to take in from a mother who “gives us joy, love, light, peace...” (Holland, 1965, p. 13). To Holland, the one-sided visual images in the first five lines are too lovely to be real, just like the image of a mother in the eye of an immature infant. Besides, it can not be ignored that, according to Lacan, what the baby sees is at the mirror stage. The child at the mirror stage will mistakenly think that the image in the mirror is the child him/herself. In this way, the child mistakes the illusion of light and shadow for reality—confusing the reality with the illusion. The infant’s ecstasy after recognizing him/herself in the mirror is a narcissistic experience based on illusion, and it also produces a process of misidentification, misidentification of an idealized self, and an illusory relationship in the imaginary world. Lacan compares the child at the mirror stage with the relationship in the Imaginary. Similarly, the beautiful and serene sea image in the first section of the poem is analogical to the unreal scene seen by infants, which is the projection of idealization and the fantasy of the Imaginary. The illusion of the sea is like the projected visual image of the Imaginary, similar to the unreliable image identified by infants in the mirror stage, implying the subjectivity and unreality of the previous sea image. The first image of the tranquil sea is the presentation of the poet’s subjectivity. The poem is written when the poet is on honeymoon holiday with his wife, passing through the English Channel on his way to the French port of Dover. They live by the sea at the hotel, when the poet sees the beautiful scenery outside the window, he could not help calling his wife “Come to the window, sweet is the night air!”. It is noticeable that before the calling of the poet the description of the sea image is peaceful and sweet, and after the line, the sea image turns to be rough and violent, so the poet’s calling marks the boundary between the illusion and the reality of the sea image. The existence of the poet’s own perspective is emphasized in the description of the sea, which indicates the subjectivity of the image of the sea. According to Lacan’s views on the Imaginary world, people are influenced by their own factors when observing the image of others. The excited author’s construction of the sea image outside the window is naturally influenced by his own subjective factors, because “the image of others is projected by the Libido of ourselves, is the idealization of others by ourselves. It is the object of self-identification” (Wu, 2011, p. 406). That is to say, the image of others is the projection of our desires, which is what we want to see. It is difficult for individuals to form a completely objective understanding of others. What’s more, the author is immersed in a happy and sweet indoor environment, looking forward to the romantic trip to France. It is inevitable to project the desire for the beautiful and romantic love onto the construction of the image of the sea. The sea image is idealized to accord with the identification of self. The quiet beautiful moonlit ocean echoes the author’s inner desires for sweet love, thus creating an illusion of unity between self and others.

In addition, Alan Grob once pointed out that the moon in the poem is a representative of the ideal and a symbol of “sweetness and light” advocated by Arnold (Sneyd, 2018, p. 468). “Sweetness and light” is the title of the first chapter of Arnold’s book *Culture and Anarchy*, expressing the Ideal realm of pursuing perfection. To Arthur, light symbolizes the ideal, and the different degrees of brightness projected by the moon in the poem represent the different degrees of the ideal. The moonlight “gleams and is gone” in the first stanza of the poem,

either bright or dark, corresponds to the phantom projection of the Imaginary world, which is either real or imaginary. Comparing with the third section that analogizes the “sea of faith” to a belt of light, the light is constant and stable, and the world of faith is the ideal world sung by the poet. Back to the first stanza, the word “moon-blanch” is used to describe the boundary between sea and land. The word “Blanch” means the extracting whiteness to pale, with an overtone of too much whiteness to distortion, which indicates the concealment of reality caused by over-saturation of ideal. It can be understood as indulging in the ideal illusion of the Imaginary world projected by Libido and ignoring the real existence of the Real world.

The author, who is watching from the window, hears the roar of the sea and begins to perceive the real sea. Based on the description of the sea in the first stanza and the author’s change of perspective in the house, we can notice that the change in the image of the sea outside the window is related to the change of the author’s perspective in the house. Arnold, who is on holiday in a sweet and relaxed mood, once viewed the image of the sea outside the window as beautiful and peaceful. When he comes to the window, and carefully observes the ocean, the real sea image is disclosed. The real ocean has a disordered and primitive power, containing the philosophy of the Real world, which reflects the truth of human destiny. The contrast between the Imaginary and the Real triggered by the image of the sea reflects the philosophy of the history of human society. Just as the waves of the sea “begin and cease and then again begin”, emphasizing the repetition of the ebb and flow of the tide and expresses the philosophical theme of the cycle of human destiny (Racin, 1970, p. 51), which leads to the following philosophical thinking on the common problems of ancient Greece and modern times.

“Tides of Suffering”: The Mirror of the Imaginary World

The poet is reminded of the roar of the real sea that the ancient Greek tragedian Sophocles also heard this sound. Sophocles felt the fluctuating fate of human suffering when hearing the ebb and flow of the ocean, and thousands of years later the poet “find also in the sound a thought/ hearing it by this distant northern sea”. The second stanza of *Dover Beach* shows the transformation from south to north, from ancient times to today, from there to here (Krieger, 1956, p. 75). The first stanza describes the sea at Dover Beach, and in the second stanza, the poet turns his mind from the seas of the north to those of the Mediterranean region of ancient Greece. The sea image crosses the time and space, and connects the common problems people encounter, namely the disorientation and confusion of living in the world, and thus the ocean is given a universal and transcendental connotation.

As mentioned in the first section of the poem, people are used to falling into the illusion of the unity of the Imaginary world, while the external world is the disordered reality of the Real world. This contradiction also accompanies the progress of human civilization. The special geographical environment and climate of ancient Greece made people’s production and life as well as the development of each city-state closely related to the sea. People like to live in an ideal life of stability and security. However, the sea with its mysterious and unstable power would bring unknown disasters to the life of the ancient Greeks from time to time. In ancient Greece, the mysterious power of the sea made people live in worry and fear for the unknown fate. People projected their desire for unity into the sea, imagined oracles and laws of fate, and linked the changes of the sea to the will of God and the arrangement of fate. However, the broken reality is ultimately contrary to the unity of the Imaginary pursued by people. Therefore, ancient Greek tragedies often show people’s insignificance in the face of fate and

oracle. Just as Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* shows the powerless struggle of the individual will in a given fate, Antigone also shows the contradiction between divine law and law, and the image of the sea is also mentioned in Antigone: "Being sails the gray-/ White sea running before/ Winter storm-winds, he/ Scuds beneath high/ Waves surging over him/ On each side" (Sophocles, 2003, p. 68). It describes the hardships and terror of going on the sea. The sea "associating with the dark, stormy Thracian sea with the irrational sufferings that have afflicted Antigone's family" (Segal, 2003, p. 27). Here the ocean acts as a powerful force against the will of human beings, bringing frustration and suffering to people. Ancient Greek tragedies eulogize great human beings who have the courage to fight against the will of God and nature. The gods merged with nature as a force to bring sufferings to people. "Universal sadness" refers to the undeliverable misery of man under the power of fate, as if he were dragged up and down by the irreversible force of the waves (Creevy, 1978, p. 14). The sea in ancient Greece, as a mirror for people to project their desires, reflects the conflict between the broken Real and the unity of the Imaginary. People project their desire for a stable and secure life on the sea, and imagine heroic figures who dare to overcome the natural forces of the sea or struggle with the mysterious forces of fate, but the uncertainty of the Real world often makes them powerless. Therefore, people combine the powerful natural forces of the sea with the oracle to create a series of stories about tragic heroes who bravely fight against the nature and oracle. These created tragic figures also magnify the brilliance of human nature and provide spiritual guidance for people, supporting them in the tenacious life against the disruptive and unordered forces from the ocean and other irresistible forces.

In addition, Arnold's association with the sea at Dover Beach with the Mediterranean in ancient Greece is partly due to the strong influence of Greek culture on Arnold. Arnold upheld the ancient Greek civilization, and in his book *Culture and Anarchy*, he pointed out that the real culture should be committed to the perfection of human nature. The perfect human nature consists of the two final aims: the Final Aim of Hellenism and Hebraism (Arnold, 2006, p. 96). The aim of Hellenism is the spirit of ancient Greece. The spirit of ancient Greece fully embodies the spirit of intellectual pursuit, which is to constantly explore the intellectual nature, explore the attributes of human basic ethical, moral and political ideas, and strive to obtain the ultimate wisdom. For example, Socrates' spirit of philosophical inquiry is the spirit of seeking the original attributes of things and the ultimate pursuit of truth. which is what Matthew Arnold says "to see things as they really are" (2006, p. 97). The pursuit of intelligence is an important way for people to get rid of ignorance and vulgarity. In the face of capricious and vulgar British people during the social transformation period, Arnold felt deeply the danger of fragmentation and anarchy caused by the cultural crisis. He advocated the cultivation of culture and encouraged people to pursue sweetness and light instead of wealth and technology. The "light of reason" in traditional ancient Greece culture can provide higher judgment and higher cognitive level. To the majority of vulgar and flatulent British people at that time, the spirit of the ancient Greece can bring spiritual nourishment to the Victorian society. Arnold's cultural view proposed that the real culture should be devoted to the perfection of human nature, which requires moral needs as well as rational needs (Arnold, 2006, p. 117), rational needs are based on the spirit of the ancient Greece, and the moral needs come from the Hebrew tradition represented by the Bible. According to Matthew Arnold, "the uppermost idea with Hebraism is conduct and obedience" (2006, p. 97). This is because the Hebrews, with the same strong primitive religious consciousness, established a set of structures concerning the divine image, energy, law and so on. The Hebrew spirit can be understood as a psychological mechanism for people to

obey authority out of self-preservation: people worship God, the supreme one and the most powerful one, which contains a sense of reverence for religious God.

Later in his poem, Arnold proposes the Hebrew spirit, the idea that religious faith can bring light and hope to people. Arnold recalls “the sea of faith”. “The sea of faith was once, too, at the full”, and the moon shines on it like “the folds of a bright girdle”. The scene of “the sea of faith” here echoes the illusion projected by the author’s desire in the first section of the poem, which is an illusory ideal. “The moonlight on the water symbolizes the world of illusion, a world which was secured by the bright girdle of the Sea of Faith” (Toole, 1968, p. 8), a steady, shiny girdle represents an ideal state of perfection, and fastens the world on the land securely in place. The implication here is that religious faith was once able to provide spiritual comfort and peace of mind. The Hebrew tradition and ancient Greek traditional civilization represented by religious belief were the cultural prescriptions that Arnold believed could save the impetuous utilitarian society, keeping the moral constraints of religion and leaving room for the freedom of Greek thought (Yiqing, 2003, p. 28). The ideal is like “the sea of faith” with smooth water and a bright moon. However, when “the sea of faith” ebbs, it gives “the melancholy long withdrawing roar”, which is different from “the grating roar” in the first stanza, adding the poet’s sigh of despair and helplessness after reflecting on the society. At that time, the Victorians were dangerously immersed in the Imaginary world on land, living blandly under the beautiful illusion projected by the desire for money and losing their religious belief and traditional culture. They thought pretentiously that rich England was a “land of dreams/ so various, so beautiful, so new”, but that the world on land was a dreamlike illusion, beautiful but unreal. It was at this time of spiritual crisis that Arnold proposed the Greek spirit and the Hebrew spirit. Through the Greek spirit’s pursuit of knowledge and wisdom and the Hebrew spirit’s awe and restraint of religious belief, the Victorians can be far away from the spiritual dilemma.

The sea, as a mirror of the Imaginary through which people project their desires, reflects people’s spiritual world and provides people with another way to look at themselves. Through the medium of the sea, the present and the past are linked across the boundaries of time and space, and the reality of society is re-visited from the perspective of ancient Greece. Through the image of the sea, Arnold connected the common problems that people have encountered in ancient times, that is, people’s confusion and suffering fate caused by the contradiction between the unity of the Imaginary that people desire and the disorder of the Real. The ancient Greeks projected their desire for certainty onto the sea that they wanted to conquer, imagining out the heroic figures that courageously fight against the sea. In Arnold’s opinion, the ancient Greek spirit of pursuing wisdom and the Hebrew spirit of pursuing faith can help people to pursue a perfect state. The sea of faith can bring hope and light to the world.

“Pebbles Which the Waves Draw Back”: Power of the Real World

The third stanza of “Dover Beach” is similar to the structure of the first stanza in that it both begins with a beautiful illusion and then turns to the real situation, and the description of the real situation always includes the image of pebbles. The pebbles “which the waves draw back and fling/at their return” are in contrast to the meaning expressed by the sea image. The pebbles appear in the first stanza, the author hears the piercing clamor “Of pebbles which the waves draw back,” and the waves “fling (the pebbles)/ At their return, up the high strand”. Also, in the third stanza “the sea of faith” ebbs and leaves the world with a puddle of “naked shingles of the

world". "The naked shingles" literally means a painful skin disease, which in the poem refers to the pebbles on the beach. Arnold is "alluding to the modern world as a vast body infected by 'this strange disease of modern life'...left with the tormenting girdle of diseased skepticism" (Andrews, 1970, p. 15). The most striking manifestation of skepticism at that time was that people began to doubt the basic principles of religion and blindly believe in objectivity and practicality, forming a kind of instrumental rationality that uphold utilitarianism and technology. People were alienated by utilitarian purposes and technical tools, about which Arnold was worried: "I see a wave of more than American vulgarity, moral, intellectual, and social, preparing to break over us" (Arnold, 1895, p. 16). In the poem, Arnold compares the pebbles on the beach to skin diseases, and the most common "disease" in British society during the transition period was the prevalence of instrumental rationality after the loss of faith, so it can be said that the pebbles are a metaphor for the pathology of instrumental rationality prevailing in British society at that time.

Instrumental rationality, first proposed by Max Weber, is determined by the expectations "used as 'conditions' or 'means' for the attainment of the actor's own rationally pursued and calculated ends" (Weber, 1978, p. 24). Instrumental rationality confirms the usefulness of tools through the way of practice, so as to pursue the maximum effect of things and serve the realization of a kind of utility for people. Instrumental rationality is the rationality that achieves the goal most effectively by calculating utility accurately, and it is a kind of value that takes tool worship and technology as the survival goal, and it usually goes with the worship of the utilitarianism. The behavior under instrumental rationality only considers the primacy of utility and effectiveness. Instrumental rationality, to some extent, arises from the development of science and capitalism. As science and capitalism mature, means replace values and consciousness, and the religion was also forgotten (Zhen, 1996, p. 4). This is the downside of the rapid technological and economic development in modern society. People began to pursue economic interests and hold a firm superstition in science and technology while ignoring humanistic wisdom and religious belief. As to modernity, Arnold once said that "modern times find themselves with an immense system of institutions, established facts, accredited dogmas, customs, rules, which have come to them from times not modern" (Arnold, 1863, p. 7). The rules and institutions of modern society are an interest-maximizing signifier system dominated by instrumental rationality, for which Lacan argues that the signifier system forms networks operating beyond the conscious control, and the unconscious is really at work. This is the structure of the Symbolic (Leader, Groves, & Appignanesi, 2000, p. 45). The Symbolic world originally refers to the system composed of the social language. Everyone will accept this language system when they grow up, and once they accept this language system, they will unconsciously accept the social rules behind the language system. Everyone's cognitive process will be affected by this language system, and the system which invisibly affects our cognitive process can be understood as the Symbolic order. The language symbolizing order gradually forms a series of human moral norms and behavioral rules that play a decisive role in us humans. The formulation of these orders is controlled by the generally accepted ideology. In Victorian society at that time, instrumental rationality and utilitarianism prevailed, and these negative ideologies have gradually controlled people's ideas and behavior habits, but people failed to notice that they were under the control of the Symbolic world. The pebble, as the material existence that can be piled up on the land, refers to the symbolic order dominating the instrumental rationality, which emphasizes utility at the expense of humanistic values such as culture and art.

The sea that draws back pebbles implies the irreconcilable contradictory forces of the Symbolic and the Real world. The sea is a primordial force that preceded the formation of human civilization. It is unfathomable, mysterious and unknown, difficult to describe in the symbolic language of modern society. The sea has also always been an inexhaustible problem for mankind to explore. It has a powerful force that can swallow everything and can be seen as a representative of the power of the Real world, which is always present but difficult to spy on, is absolutely real but impossible to capture. According to Žižek, the “real world” is a terrible thing, harmful to our eyes, as dazzling as Plato’s sun (Žižek, 2007, p. 207). The real power of the ocean “draw back” pebbles and “fling/ At their return, up the high strand”. The sea as the power of the Real world is in an antagonistic relationship with the pebbles of the Symbolic world because the Real world “resists symbolization, is a primitive ignorance and disorder” (Homer, 2004, p. 81). The image of pebbles on the land is like the Symbolic order on the land. For example, it can be pieced together like language symbols and constructed like social order. Pebble, as a material existence on land, metaphorically symbolizes the utilitarian thought of pursuing practical material in the society. In fact, the Symbolic society built by such ideas is shaky and cannot resist the challenging force of the Real world. A symbolic society built up with symbolic order is like a beach fortress built up with pebbles, which can be overturned by the power of the Real world represented by the sea at any time. Just as the Victorians, who were blind in their pursuit of material things, were eventually defeated by their ignorance of the truths and beliefs that are the most important.

The land where the pebbles are located in is a “vast edges drear”, “darkling plain”. The land and pebble are opposite to the sea, showing the negative metaphor of pebble and land, that is, land and pebble are spiritual desert without faith and wisdom. A land without moonlight is a wasteland without ideals for the poet, and people living in a material world full of symbolic order but without spirituality are like ignorant armies fighting at night on a dim wasteland. The image of night battle refers to the foolish warfare recorded by Thucydides in which the Athenians killed each other because they could not distinguish between themselves and their enemies in the dark (Sneyd, 2018, p. 472). Blinded by darkness, the army killed each other ignorantly, just as the Victorians, who have been blinded by the symbolic order of instrumental rationality and utilitarianism, were ignorantly harming each other for self-serving profit and reckless riot. The ignorant army in the darkness is a metaphor for the narrow-minded and arrogant British people who were bound in the shackles of the Symbolic world dominated by industrial civilization, reflected in the repeated demonstrations and riots of the working class, the liberalism of the middle class and the unruliness of the aristocracy, which provokes the alarm for the self-destructive anarchic behavior under the blindness of utilitarianism and instrumental rationality.

Conclusion

Through the author’s perceptions of the sea image, *Dover Beach* reveals that the quiet sea is an idealized illusion constructed in the Imaginary world, and the Real sea is a disordered force that breaks the illusion. The poet uses the sea image to extend the discrepancy between the illusion of unity and the fragmented reality to his thoughts on society and the human spirit. The sea image has been endowed with modern philosophical meaning that transcends time and space. Rereading *Dover Beach* provides us with a summary of the historical experience of how people reconciled their spiritual dilemmas during the period of social transformation.

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