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A presentation of the contemporary human condition in Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach* and William Holman Hunt's *Our English Coasts, 1852 (Strayed Sheep)*.

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More than just lyrically and visually pleasing icons of their age, 'Dover Beach' and 'Our English Coasts' also invoke the contemporary human condition. Comparison of both artefacts reveals different concerns of consequences arising out of this condition, yet at the same time also reveals similarities in the underlying cause of those concerns. Thus, through discussions of their imagery, metaphor, allegory and revolutionary presentation, the comparison yields a tangible understanding of the human condition in the early 1850s.



Figure 1 - William Holman Hunt, *Our English Coasts, 1852 (Strayed Sheep)*, 1852, oil on canvas, 43.2 x 58.4 cm, © Tate, London 2018.

Both *Dover Beach* (written circa 1851, published 1867, see Appendix) and *Our English Coasts, 1852 (Strayed Sheep)* (Figure 1) (hereafter referred to as *Our English Coasts*) are a product of their time. Borne out of a febrile political environment of which both Hunt and Arnold had some first-hand experience, a political reading of both the poem and the painting is entirely pertinent. What a comparison of both elucidates, however, is something of the human condition of the early 1850s. Religious readings of both underscore the contemporary importance given to the need to save man's soul. With both religion and politics acting on man as much as the other, an important connection is created between the religious and political readings of both artefacts. Coupled with the Victorian reliance on the past portrayed in a contemporary manner and a revolutionary approach to colour and composition, both *Dover Beach* and *Our English Coasts* reveal each other to be similarly subtle in their communication with the reader/viewer. Thus, by demanding consideration of the deeper meanings of the imagery in each, the human condition is represented not just through surface depictions of sheep, cliffs and the sea, but in acknowledging that there are also tensions bubbling just beneath that surface.

The political situation in continental Europe in the late-1840s was fractious. For example, as Antony Harrison points out, in 1848 revolutions were seen in Sicily in January, Paris in February and Germany and Italy in March. March 1848, moreover, saw the fall of the Austrian chancellor, Clemens Metternich. Aftershocks were then felt throughout the rest of that year and into 1849 with Italy resenting its Austrian occupiers, Germany hostile to Poland and disputing provinces with Austria and Prussia, and Russia looking to war with Europe, in order to defend its hold on Poland, and separately with Turkey. England was also experiencing disrupted social and political change. In England, the 1840s, known as the 'hungry forties', fuelled the rise of the 'Condition of England' novel such as Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845), Charles Kingsley's *Yeast* (1848) and *Alton Locke: Tailor and Poet* (1850), and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (1848).¹ Upper and middle classes feared working-class insurrection: the long shadow of the French Revolution cast 60 years earlier - arguably perpetuated by the more recent memory of the Napoleonic wars at the turn of the century, the current threat of Napoleon III and other, current, continental political upheaval - was still lingering.² Further, Chartism, now on the cusp of disappearing, had been a genuine mouthpiece for politicised working classes in its prime in the late 1830s and early 1840s.³ Harrison states that Matthew

¹ See Antony Harrison, *The Cultural Production of Matthew Arnold* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, c. 2009), pp.13-14.

² On the long shadow cast by the French Revolution, see Angus Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: Habits of Heart and Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp.224-5.

³ On the rise and fall of Chartism, see Angus Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: Habits of Heart and Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp.141-6.

Arnold visited the continent in the autumn of 1848 and returned in the spring of 1849, aged 26.⁴ Jan Marsh also states that William Holman Hunt was at a Chartist rally in 1848, aged 21, with John Everett Millais.⁵ Being first-hand witness to this political and social fracture at such a young age situates both *Dover Beach* (as Harrison suggests⁶) and *Our English Coasts* as being influenced by the political and social pressures to which Europeans were subject at this politically unstable time.

It has long been suggested that Britain adopted the sea as part of its identity given its victorious naval history, bolstering its perceived status as a powerful island safe from foreign, military interference.⁷ This positions Arnold's 'Glimmering and vast' (l. 5) cliffs of England standing strong after the light on the French coast 'Gleams and is gone' (l. 4) as a part of that construction of identity: the extinguishing light of France is easily understood as a political metaphor, as much as a literal description of the lights going out at night when seen from the Kent coast. On a political reading of *Our English Coasts*, such as taken by F. G. Stephens in 1852 - 'a satire on the defenceless state of the country against foreign invasion'⁸ - the undefended cliffs articulate a thinly-veiled fear of continental political aggrandisement. This conflicts with the more traditional view of English indefatigability adopted by Arnold. Yet it is suggested that this reading of *Our English Coasts* is a pertinent one in light of Hunt's presence at that Chartist rally: it is a presence that indicates a possible ability to see England as less than entirely heroic. Indeed, as 'J.B' in the Tate Gallery's *The Pre-Raphaelites* points out, some of Hunt's letters in 1852 contain evidence of awareness of the fear of Napoleonic invasion, notably in his description of the Militia Bill that was being keenly debated in Parliament in the early summer of 1852:

[The Militia Bill] proposed voluntary enlistment, 'in case of need, to be embodied for the defence of our coasts in aid of the regular army [...] It is denied by military men that these militia regiments will ever be properly qualified to cope with such troops as we may expect an invading force to be composed of' (*The Times*, 26 May 1852).⁹

⁴ Harrison, pp.13-14.

⁵ Jan Marsh, *The Pre-Raphaelites: Their Lives in Letters and Diaries* (London: Collins & Brown, 1996), p.11.

⁶ Harrison states that aspects of the continental political upheaval of the late 1840s to which Arnold 'was witness (if not eyewitness) [...] constitute the political subtexts of both "Dover Beach" and "Revolutions" [another of Arnold's poems, not for discussion in this essay]'. Harrison, p.14.

⁷ For example, see Cynthia Behrman, *Victorian Myths of the Sea* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, c. 1977). However, as the poem deals with Dover, and as the painting was mostly painted in Fairlight near Hastings, East Sussex (for example, see Tim Barringer, Jason Rosenfeld, Alison Smith (with contributions by Elizabeth Prettejohn and Diane Waggoner), *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde* (London: Tate Publishing, 2012), p. 99), the remainder of this essay will use the adjective 'English', rather than 'British'. The evils of doing so are not for this essay.

⁸ F. G. Stephens quoted in Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2012), p.66.

⁹ Tate Gallery, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate Gallery; Penguin Books, 1984), pp.107-108.

The conclusion the Tate Gallery offers to this is that the sheep in *Our English Coasts* represent the volunteers.¹⁰ Certainly, a political reading of sheep on cliffs in painting as a demonstration of England's defensive weakness is upheld in Edwin Landseer's *Peace* (painted 1845) (Figure 2¹¹). Allen Staley states 'Hunt cited *Peace* as a work "of real point and poetry"'.¹² The defences of Landseer's Dover coast (acknowledging the pertinence of the geography in light of the subject matter of *Dover Beach*) are shown to have fallen into disrepair - one of the lambs investigates the mouth of an upturned



Figure 2 - *Peace*, engraved by J.Cousen & Lumb Stocks after a picture by Sir Edwin Landseer, published in the *The Works of Sir Edwin Landseer RA*, 1878, steel engraved antique print with recent hand colouring, 25.5 x 19 cm, image courtesy of ancestryimages.com.

¹⁰ Tate Gallery, p.108.

¹¹ The description of fig. 2 is taken from the source of the image:

<<http://ancestryimages.com/proddetail.php?prod=f4105>> [accessed 10 March 2018]. However, the author of this essay viewed a version of the book referred to in the description that was dated 1879, not 1878. The differences between the description of the book in the image and the book's reference in the bibliography are therefore deliberate.

¹² William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, vol. I, pp.48-9, quoted in Allen Staley, *The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape* (New Haven, Con.; London: Yale University Press, 2001), p.79.

As Staley goes on to explain, 'The point of *Peace* was as a pendant to a companion picture of *War* (destroyed: formerly Tate Gallery) [...] There are biblical overtones in the imagery: in the figures, who suggest a Holy Family, as well in the sheep, but they enhance the pacific mood of the scene rather than transform it into a vehicle of religious symbolism. We have seen that in 1850 Landseer also exhibited a *Lost Sheep*, appending it to a biblical quotation. However, this picture of a shepherd carrying a sheep had no visual similarity to *Strayed Sheep*, and, as Hunt originally titled his picture, 'Our English Coasts', their later similarity of titles is accidental. Landseer's *Peace* showed the Channel coast near Dover with its defences fallen into disrepair, and *Strayed Sheep* also shows the unguarded Channel coast, whatever else it may mean as well.' Allen Staley, *The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape* (New Haven, Con.; London: Yale University Press, 2001), p.79.

Christies sold a watercolour of this image in 2000. The Lot Essay stated that both the oil original and its companion, *War*, were destroyed in 1928. *War*, it stated, showed the bodies of two cavalry officers and their horses on a ruined farm. The contrast between both was intended to illustrate the dichotomy between the blessings of peace and the horrors of war: <<http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/english-school-after-edwin-landseer-a-time-1939165-details.aspx>> [accessed 10 March 2018].

cannon, which cannon is almost obscured by the composition of other peaceful sheep, a sleeping dog and a young family apparently oblivious of their proximity to the cliff's edge. The blitheness of Landseer's family grouping when considered against the sheep on the cliff's edge in the Hunt reinforces a political reading of *Our English Coasts*. Whilst the imagery in the Hunt is ostensibly idyllic, just as in the Landseer, Hunt's painting is in fact a subtle representation of the very real political dangers perceived to lie across the sea, dangers which the stoic cliffs of England are suggested as being less capable of repelling than Arnold would wish them to be.

More than merely open to political readings, however, humanity's proximity to the religious precipice, where falling over the edge equates to an absence of faith and/or morality, is a common thread in both Arnold's poem and Hunt's painting. Arnold directly bemoans the contemporary loss of faith:

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 [...] (ll. 21-26)

The imagery is of an audible, aggressive retreat, actively abandoning the human listener. In Hunt, the vehicle for invoking spiritual instability is his sheep. In Christianity, 'He shall feed his flock like a shepherd' (Isaiah 40. 11), 'All we like sheep have gone astray' (Isaiah 53. 6) and 'We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep' (Morning Service: Book of Common Prayer), to give only three examples, invoke the solidity of the ancient, pastoral profession of shepherd with the image of a defenceless group needing care and guidance. Hunt's own awareness of ovine religious allegory in *Our English Coasts* can moreover reasonably be assumed given his previous piece, *The Hireling Shepherd* (Figure 3), to which *Our English Coasts* is considered a sequel by 'JR' in *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde* through 'its imaging of wayward, unmarked sheep'.¹³ In *The Hireling Shepherd*, an allegory of a perceived abandonment by Anglican priests of their congregations, the sheep are scattered - in the cornfield, in the brook, presented at many angles to the viewer and all around the field in the background - whilst the shepherd pursues the disinterested girl.¹⁴ The lamb eating unripe apples on her

¹³ Tim Barringer, Jason Rosenfeld, Alison Smith (with contributions by Elizabeth Prettejohn and Diane Waggoner), *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde* (London: Tate Publishing, 2012), p.99.

¹⁴ 'When [Hunt][...] exhibited the painting at the Royal Academy, he included these lines from *King Lear* as an epigraph:

Sleepeth or waketh thou, jolly shepherd?
 Thy sheep be in the corn;



Figure 3 - William Holman Hunt, *The Hireling Shepherd*, 1851, oil on canvas, 76.4 x 109.5 cm, image courtesy of Manchester Art Gallery.

lap and the death's head moth trapped in the shepherd's left hand (see footnote 14) further indicate that the scene is not harmonious. In *Our English Coasts*, however, the danger is of a slightly different sort: there is no shepherd at all for the sheep on the cliff's precipice. As the Tate Gallery observes, Ruskin responds to the concurrent protestant division over doctrine in *Notes on the Construction of Sheepfolds* (1851) by 'employing the metaphor of Christians as strayed sheep and lamenting the fact that "Christ's truth" was restrained "to the white cliffs of England and white crests of the Alps"'.¹⁵ Whilst for Arnold the cliff image is that of Ruskin's sheer, chalk face, the cliffs for Hunt contain the added danger of brambles. Significantly, the two sheep closest to the viewer are struggling in the brambles already and the one in the bottom right appears to be being pushed there by the malign presence of the black sheep

And for one blast of thy minikin mouth,
Thy sheep shall take no harm. [Act III, scene 6]

[In a ...] letter to [J. E.] Pythian [Hunt] explains that "Shakespeare's song represents a Shepherd who is neglecting his real duty of guarding the sheep: instead of using his voice in truthfully performing his duty, he is using his "minikin mouth" in some idle way. He was a type thus of other muddle headed pastors who instead of performing their services to their flock — which is in constant peril — discuss vain questions of no value to any human soul. My fool has found a death's head moth, and this fills his little mind with forebodings of evil and he takes it to an equally sage counsellor for her opinion. She scorns his anxiety from ignorance rather than profundity, but only the more distracts his faithfulness: while she feeds her lamb with sour apples his sheep have burst bounds and got into the corn. It is not merely that the wheat will be spoilt, but in eating it the sheep are doomed to destruction from becoming what farmers call "blown." [21 January 1897; London (Manchester City Art Gallery MS.)]' George P. Landow, 'The Hireling Shepherd' in *William Holman Hunt and typological symbolism* (New Haven : Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 1979), <<http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/whh/replete/hireling.html>> [accessed 10 March 2018].

¹⁵ E.T. Cook and A. D. O. Wedderburn (eds.), *The Works of John Ruskin: Library Edition*, 39 vols., 1902-1912, vol. XII, p.557, quoted in Tate Gallery, p.108.

The Tate Gallery goes on to suggest that 'together with Landseer's 'Peace' [...] Ruskin's pamphlet may have encouraged Hunt to visualise his sheep [in *Our English Coasts*] straying over the cliff.' Tate Gallery, p.108.



Figure 4 - detail from William Holman Hunt, *Our English Coasts, 1852 (Strayed Sheep)* (see fig. 1)
© Tate, London 2018.

who stares aggressively at the viewer with her orange eyes (Figure 4). With the likelihood of the biblical source of ‘black sheep’ being a known metaphor to Hunt,¹⁶ the placement of the black sheep in that position seems deliberate. On this religious reading, the sheep are under pressure from disreputable members of the flock in addition to falling over the cliff into the infernal chaos and isolation of the brambles without the guidance of a shepherd to stop them and/or haul them back and with little chance of release. The same perpetual uncertainty, lack of direction and tangible danger, particularly when considered in light of the poem’s earlier direct statement of decreasing faith, are reflected in the final lines of *Dover Beach*:

And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.¹⁷ (ll. 35-37)

Harrison suggests that Arnold was concerned primarily with middle-class men like himself than with the condition of the working classes.¹⁸ It is possible, then, to view loss of faith in *Dover Beach* as a lament on predominantly middle-class faithlessness. By contrast, in *Our English Coasts*, the possibilities of loss of moral and religious guidance are the problem and, through the connotations of the imagery of the painting, this would appear to be unconfined to just one class of person. Yet, on

¹⁶ The use of ‘black sheep’ to infer a disreputable or unsatisfactory person is recorded as in use by the Oxford English Dictionary as early as 1640, the source of which being the bible: ‘1640 T. Shepard *Sincere Convert* v. 127 Cast out all the Prophane people among us, as drunkards, swearers, whores, lyers, which the Scripture brands for blacke sheepe, and condemnes them in a 100. places.’ See definition of ‘black sheep’ in OED online: <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/288486?redirectedFrom=black+sheep#eid>> [accessed 10 March 2018].

¹⁷ These final lines also recall Thucydides’ account of the Peloponnesian War: ‘In a night battle— and this was the only one fought between large armies in the whole of the war— how could anyone be certain of anything? There was a bright moon, and as happens in moonlight they could see each other as human shapes from some distance, but without any confident recognition of friend or foe. Large numbers of hoplites from both sides were milling about in a confined space.’ Thucydides, and P. J. Rhodes, *The Peloponnesian War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.41. <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=472103>> [accessed 10 March 2018].
With thanks to Dr Dewey Hall for his guidance on this point of reference.

¹⁸ Harrison states that Arnold’s ‘goal is to inspire the middle classes to pursue the highest cultural ideals they are capable of embracing, to be models for the lower classes in the same fashion that, traditionally, the “culture and dignity” of the aristocracy has served as a model for them.’ Harrison, p.22.

either basis, the human condition is the axiomatic principle of each. Staley states ‘F. G. Stephens wrote in 1860 that [...] [*Our English Coasts*] was “of men, not of sheep”’.¹⁹ Here, then, the political and religious readings of each of *Our English Coasts* and *Dover Beach* cannot be divided. Humanity is under seige from political and moral instability and, as Angus Hawkins argues in *Victorian Political Culture*, man’s engagement with religion and politics was difficult to separate in Victorian culture.²⁰ Ignoring one reading is to thus omit a vital part of understanding the human condition in 1850s. Furthermore, *Our English Coasts* was given the alternative title of *Strayed Sheep* when it was displayed in Paris at the Exposition Universelle in 1855. Although the Tate Gallery suggests Hunt’s title change was ‘to stress the religious symbolism of [...] [*Our English Coasts*], suggesting its relationship to ‘The Light of the World’ [...], his major contribution to the show’,²¹ the fact of the change is arguable proof that both readings are inseparable on the basis that the religious reading was felt necessary to be drawn out over the political one for the Exposition. It is submitted that the same is also true of the poem on the basis that ignoring one reading is to prefer the other without consideration of the entire poem and, therefore, of another manifest component of the mid-nineteenth century human condition.

What further situates the poem and the painting in the mid-nineteenth century is the use of the ‘past’ - the invocation of the Victorian reliance on the construction of a mythical past where religious and political certainty assuages contemporary uncertainty. In *Our English Coasts*, there is the ostensibly timeless, ovine, pastoral idyll. In *Dover Beach*, Harrison argues that the metaphor of ‘The Sea of Faith’ invokes a medieval past through the image of the girdle.²² Additionally, as Howard Isham states, Arnold’s reference to Sophocles (ll. 15-16) is to the play *Philoctetes*, which Arnold had been recently reading.²³ In *Philoctetes*, the choir sings of Philoctetes’ suffering on Lemnos:

Alone on this inhospitable shore,
Where waves forever beat and tempests roar,
How could he hope or comfort know,
Or painful life support beneath such weight of woe?²⁴

This repetitive desolation of island life is recalled in *Dover Beach* where the same relentless waves and constant noise yield nothing but woe or sadness:

¹⁹ Allen Staley, *The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape* (New Haven, Con.; London: Yale University Press, 2001), p.79.

²⁰ ‘Politics and religion were intimately intertwined, rather than separate spheres of thought and sentiment.’ Angus Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: Habits of Heart and Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p.8.

²¹ Tate Gallery, p.108.

²² Harrison, p.27.

²³ Howard Isham, *Image of the Sea: Oceanic Consciousness in the Romantic Century* (New York: Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004), p.268.

²⁴ Quoted in Isham, p. 268. As described by Isham, Philoctetes had inherited Heracles’ weapons but was isolated on the island of Lemnos by Agamemnon on his way to Troy, before it became clear that Greek victory at Troy was impossible until the weapons of Heracles could be brought to Achilles’ son, Neoptolemus.

[...] the grating roar
 Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling, [...]
 Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
 With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
 The eternal note of sadness in. (ll. 9-10, 12-14)

The reliance on Sophocles (and Thucydides in the final lines) and the medieval girdle image supports Kate Campbell's assertion that *Dover Beach* (amongst others of Arnold's poetic corpus from this period) is about contemporary disconnection: 'these poems delineate feelings of disunity' and 'centre on self-consciousness and separation from the world, under the weight of the representations that overlay it'.²⁵ This 'self-consciousness and separation' conveyed through reliance on imagery and language from ancient texts correctly confirms the commitment of the poem to the depiction of the human condition in the 1850s: the 'weight of the representations' infer the layers assumed by the contemporary individual as much as they are created by the poem's imagery and allegory. Indeed, as Campbell states, Arnold produces 'enduring pictures of modernity and selfhood'.²⁶ Harrison opines that it is 'typical of Arnold throughout his poetic corpus [...] [that] the text self-consciously elides and therefore mystifies all details that might situate it within any particular historical moment'.²⁷ Yet, arguably, the presence of what Harrison admits is a displacement of anxieties over present political threats 'by refocusing on the reassuring stability of the classical authors' situates *Dover Beach* squarely in the Victorian period with its construction of historical political and religious stability.²⁸ As Hunt's subtle use of imagery in *The Hireling Shepherd*, by his own admission, demonstrates his ability to create a painting with many deeper meanings than its outward beauty would suggest, *Our English Coasts* has to be seen in the same vein. Thus it is clear that both the poem and the painting are directing the reader/viewer to look at more than just the surface imagery and into the, occasionally allegorical, meanings of those images. In doing so, the human condition is given an aspect that suggests there are layers to be found beneath the surface if one would take time to look beyond initial, aesthetic impressions.

This subtlety of presentation arguably compounds the demonstrable misery to which both the poem and the painting declare man to be subject. The sea is the primary allegorical vehicle for this. Sophocles heard the same 'turbid ebb and flow | Of human misery' (ll. 17-18) in the Ægean, which we now find in the Northern Sea and which is felt down to 'the vast edges drear | And naked shingles of the world' (ll. 27-28). Coupled with the use of the sea to describe the contemporary loss of faith (l. 21),

²⁵ Kate Campbell, *Matthew Arnold* (Tavistock: Northcote, 2008), p.18.

²⁶ Campbell, p.18.

²⁷ Harrison, pp.12-13.

²⁸ Harrison, p.17.



Figure 5 - detail from William Holman Hunt, *Our English Coasts, 1852 (Strayed Sheep)* (see fig. 1) © Tate, London 2018

this sense of repetitive human misery in *Dover Beach* is given double impact, as the infinity of the sea connects both misery and loss of faith in perpetual anguish. Even the opening line - ‘The sea is calm tonight’ - implies the tempestuous potential of the limitless sea and therefore of inevitable storms of woe. In *Our English Coasts*, the sea is beautifully bright and clear, ostensibly containing none of Arnold’s impending doom. Elizabeth Prettejohn points out how sharply in focus the whole painting is, and therefore how it does not ‘ease its way into the depth’²⁹ But crucially the sea is the only place where the image disappears into a hazy distance. In this respect, the sea is depicted as being incapable of being given such attention to detail because of its size as much as because of its placement on the horizon. It therefore arguably supports Arnold’s notion of a limitless ocean. More than that, though, Prettejohn points out how unsettling the composition of the painting is: ‘Each time there is an abrupt shift from the sharply delineated edge of the nearer landscape element to a scene much farther off but no less vivid’.³⁰ She correctly states that ‘the spatial shifts and the overall asymmetry of the composition are disquieting, in keeping with the subject matter, even though the landscape is one of overwhelming plenitude and sun-drenched colour’.³¹ In 1883, Ruskin claimed that the painting ‘[...] showed to us, for the first time in the history of art, the absolutely faithful balances of colour and shade by which actual sunshine might be transposed into a key in which the harmonies possible with material pigments should yet produce the same impressions upon the mind which were caused by the light itself’.³² The consequences of so faithfully reproducing the visual effect of sunlight are inter alia, as Christopher

²⁹ Elizabeth Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate Publishing, 2000), p.178.

³⁰ Prettejohn, p.178.

³¹ Prettejohn, p.178.

³² E.T. Cook and A. D. O. Wedderburn (eds.), *The Works of John Ruskin: Library Edition*, 39 vols., 1902-1912, vol. 33, pp.272-3, quoted in Tate Gallery, p.108.

Wood points out, the way the light shows through the sheep's ears, lighting even their veins, and the use of so much blue and violet on the fleeces in shadow.³³ Thus Hunt's use of colour and space is imperative to a more complete understanding of the subtle allusions to contemporary life. Strong pigments were used unapologetically, and the detail and compositional dissymmetry were revolutionary. When combined in a painting of such ostensible pastoral simplicity, this ultimately serves to convey the presence of manifold tensions that lie beneath the idyllic, physical surface - tensions begun in the choice of imagery and continued into the (technicalities of) composition. Moreover, there is a steamer in the top left-hand corner, its dark smoke trail only just visible (Figure 5).³⁴ As Prettejohn states, this steamer undermines the pastoral idyll: the painting is definitively situated in the mid-nineteenth century and is not the timeless image of sheep in nature that one might assume at first glance.³⁵ It is thus characteristic of *Our English Coasts* (as further supported by *The Hireling Shepherd*) and *Dover Beach* (particularly on Harrison's reading) that they subtly and elliptically allude to the troubles of the present. In so doing they suggest that at least some of these troubles are hidden beneath outward form. It is a reasonable extension to then see the human condition being represented as a tense mixture of fear of political and social unrest together with concern at loss of faith and of a moral compass, which tensions are, in part, outwardly invisible yet tangibly present. The reader/viewer is asked to look deeper and understand both the poem and the painting in their contemporary cultural, religious and political contexts. Comparing the way both do this ultimately illumines not only both artefacts, but also the complex, contemporary human condition in the 1850s.

Without the other as a comparison, extracting meaning from *Dover Beach* and *Our English Coasts* is a fairly basic task. However, comparing both reveals a concern for the spiritual and social welfare of man as reflected in contemporary politics and religion. This in turn reveals something of the zeitgeist of the human condition in the 1850s. Arnold's yearning to remain strong amid chaos and loss of faith is contrasted with Hunt's broader concern with loss of moral guidance. Arnold's Victorian reliance on medieval imagery and Greek tragedy is comparable to Hunt's use of sheep and his revolutionary take on the pastoral idyll through his use of composition and colour. Both poem and painting imply chaos outside the imagery they create and both ultimately demonstrate that the political and religious readings belonging to each artefact are inseparable. In *Dover Beach* and *Our English Coasts*, imagery of the sea, cliffs and sheep reveal the contemporary human condition as a combination of fearful engagement with politics and religion, whose tensions are often barely concealed under the beautiful front outwardly presented.

³³ Christopher Wood, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Phoenix Illustrated, 1997), p.82.

³⁴ Prettejohn states that it was William Michael Rossetti's *Spectator* notice that pointed out the presence of this steamer - Prettejohn, p.177.

³⁵ Prettejohn, p.177.

APPENDIX

Dover Beach

Matthew Arnold

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. 5
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling, 10
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 15
Heard it on the Ægean, 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. 20

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, 25
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 30
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 35
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

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