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FROM "DOVER BEACH" TO "JAKARTA". A RE-EXAMINATION OF THE ARNOLDIAN CHOICE THROUGH AN INTERTEXTUAL EXERCISE

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ABSTRACT. ***From "Dover Beach" to "Jakarta". A Re-Examination of the Arnoldian Choice through an Intertextual Exercise.*** By juxtaposing Matthew Arnold's emblematic poem to texts by Anthony Hecht and Alice Munro, this paper aims at providing a review of some fundamental traits of the Victorian thinker's "philosophy of pessimism" ("choice", "renouncement", "self-effacement"), questioning, at the same time, the social and sexual stereotypes that both unite and differentiate the respective pieces.

Keywords: *Arnold, Hecht, Munro, choice, renouncement, pessimism, Dover Beach.*

REZUMAT. ***De la „Dover Beach" la „Jakarta". O reexaminare a opțiunii arnoldiene printr-un exercițiu de intertextualitate.*** Prin alăturarea poemului emblematic al lui Matthew Arnold unor texte de Anthony Hecht și Alice Munro, studiul de față își propune să ofere o reapreciere a câtorva trăsături fundamentale ale „filozofiei pesimismului" ce caracterizează viziunea gânditorului victorian („opțiune", „renunțare", „suprimarea eului"), interogând, în același timp, stereotipurile sociale și sexuale care unesc și totodată despart operele în cauză.

Cuvinte cheie*: Arnold, Hecht, Munro, opțiune, renunțare, pesimism, Plaja de la Dover.*

> Yes! in the sea of life enisled,
> With echoing straits between us thrown,
> Dotting the shoreless watery wild,
> We mortal millions live alone.
> The islands feel the enclasping flow,
> And then their endless bounds they know.
>
> —Matthew Arnold, *To Marguerite: Continued*

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1. Rationale

"Dover Beach" (1867) is considered by readers and scholars alike as the most memorable of Matthew Arnold's poems. Often described as a concise but intense philosophical work or an elegy on the present revolving around such age-old themes as "loss", "absence", "transience" or "change", it is one of the texts that paves the way to literary modernism, both in terms of form and choice of stylistic devices (blank verse, enjambment, high incidence of alliterative sequences, synaesthesia, etc.) and vision (the sense of collapse and imminent ending, the experience of a fragmenting world, history seen as a cycle or the precarious position of the individual in an indifferent and generally oppressive universe). Emblematic for its influential status are the many later texts that paid tribute to it in various ways, by using it as a source of inspiration, quoting or paraphrasing some of its lines, or by parody and pastiche. Indeed, through the intertextual network it has given rise to since its publication, "Dover Beach" has created a tradition of its own.[2]

In this paper, I will refer to a small part of this tradition, by examining two such intertextual connections. Starting from Arnold's claim expressed in *A Study of Poetry,* namely, that "poetry is a criticism of life" (*Essays in Criticism* 3), aiming in the long run at replacing religion and philosophy, I propose a re-examination of this poetic text by contrasting it with two twentieth century works: Anthony Hecht's "The Dover Bitch" (1967), respectively, Alice Munro's short story "Jakarta" (1998).

Limited by the constraints of an academic article, my investigation will necessarily take into account only a small set of the questions normally addressed by the comparatist approach. In particular, I am interested in the principal points of convergence / divergence, the degree and significance of the intersections, and the source of the pessimistic outlook in each case (if any). Equally important for my purpose will be to look at the type of "criticism of life" reflected in each (for instance, whether it is possible to identify a more profound target, which goes beyond the norms of each period—be it Victorian conservatism, twentieth century non-conformism or old and new gender stereotypes), as well as the consequences of the choices made by their protagonists.

Since both Arnold's poem and Hecht's piece will be quoted extensively later on, a general presentation of them is unnecessary. However, given its length and lesser availability, before the analytical exercise, I find it important to summarise the topical points of Munro's short story.

Published in the volume *The Love of a Good Woman*, "Jakarta" recounts the story of two couples, Kath and Kent, respectively, Sonje and Cottar. Typical of Munro, the central theme is the emotional development of the heroine (Kath) and

[2] Among the more memorable literary examples, we mention: W. B. Yeats's "The Nineteenth Century and After", Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*, Ewan MacEwan's *Saturday*. Arnold's poem is also referenced in musicals (*Cabaret*), pop songs ("Dover Beach" by The Bangles or "Armor and Sword" by Rush), or movies (the comedy-drama *The Anniversary Party*).

her achieving independence, with the necessary change entailed by it regarding her understanding of womanhood. Though there is no indication that the author used the Victorian text as a deliberate departure point for her story, the two texts can be connected on several levels. A first hint at Arnold's poem appears in the opening scene, focused upon the two women, Kath and Sonje, sitting on a beach and observing some young mothers, whom they call, deridingly, the "Monicas". The protagonists behold these married women at once with fascination and fear, considering them potential reflections of their own depersonalised future selves. The narrative covers a period of approximately forty years, which gives Munro the occasion to focus on a number of seminal moments in her characters' lives. These, the reader is made to understand, serve as revelatory acts, unveiling hidden, yet essential truths about others and themselves. As the story concludes, we are informed of the dissolution of both marriages. The initial character-pairs are also reversed, and the final scene, an encounter between Sonje and Kent (the latter, now, remarried), closes the circle. The subject of their conversation—in actuality, two independent monologues—revolves around the idea of "absence", illustrated by the remainder of the original set: Cottar, who has meanwhile mysteriously gone missing (admittedly) in Jakarta, and Kath, now an independent woman and the catalyst that fuels Kent's contemplation of missed opportunities.

Besides the above-mentioned early allusion, "Jakarta" includes two intertextual moments. The first of them takes place as an argument between Kath and Sonje regarding the fate of the female character March of D. H. Lawrence's novella, "The Fox". Through it, Munro allows Kath to pass judgement on the gender-stereotypes surrounding her own existence and at the same time face her own repressed thoughts:

> And that is how her female nature must live within his male nature. Then she will be happy and he will be strong and content. Then they will have achieved a true marriage.
> Kath says that she thinks this is stupid. She begins to make her case. "He's talking about sex, right?"
> "Not just," says Sonje. "About their whole life."
> "Yes, but sex. Sex leads to getting pregnant. I mean in the normal course of events. So March has a baby. She probably has more than one. And she has to look after them. How can you do that if your mind is waving around under the surface of the sea?"
>
> . . .
>
> Kath knows that something has gone wrong. Something is wrong with her own argument. Why is she so angry and excited? And why did she shift over to talking about babies, about children? Because she has a baby and Sonje doesn't? Did she say that about Lawrence and Frieda because she suspects that it is partly the same story with Cottar and Sonje?

> When you make the argument on the basis of the children, about the woman having to look after the children, you're in the clear. You can't be blamed. But when Kath does that she is covering up. She can't stand that part about the reeds and the water, she feels bloated and suffocated with incoherent protest. So it is herself she is thinking of, not of any children. She herself is the very woman that Lawrence is railing about. And she can't reveal that straight out because it might make Sonje suspect-it might make Kath herself suspect-an impoverishment in Kath's life. [3]

The second such instance is a reference to a segment from Arnold's poem, occurring at another watershed instance in the character's progress. During a chance encounter between Kath and a male guest at a beach party, the two engage in a short recitation of some of the more symbolic lines from "Dover Beach":

> Kath was down by the water, talking to the man whose wife and mistress she had seen in Sonje's kitchen earlier. His wife was swimming now, a little apart from the shriekers and splashers. In another life, the man said, he had been a minister.
> "'The sea of faith was once too at the full,'" he said humorously. "'And round earth's shore, lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled' —I was married to a completely different woman then."
> He sighed, and Kath thought he was searching for the rest of the verse.
> "'But now I only hear,'" she said, "'its melancholy long withdrawing roar, down the vast edges drear and naked shingles of the world.'" Then she stopped, because it seemed too much to go on with "Oh love let us be true—"

The significance of both of these intertextual overlaps will be considered in more detail in the section of this paper dedicated to discussing Munro's short story, with more emphasis given to the second, as it is of greater importance for the investigated subject.

In what follows, I will devote my attention to "Dover Beach". My interest is not in providing a meticulous textual analysis, but in explaining the reasons behind the solution proposed at the end of this poem. This part will also serve as the basis for the comparative discussion to follow afterwards.

2. The "melancholy long withdrawing roar": some thoughts on Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach"

A parallel reading of "Dover Beach" and other Arnoldian poetic works, including such anthological titles as "To Marguerite: Continued" (see the excerpt serving as the epigraph) or the earlier piece "Self-Dependence", can give us reliable insights regarding the main parameters of his philosophical and ethical

[3] For the primary sources quoted in this paper the digital (Kindle) editions of the texts have been used. Hence, hereafter, such quotations will not identified by physical page numbers. For more precise references, readers can consult any printed edition of the respective titles.

vision. In all three, the speakers are confronted with a hostile universe constantly working against individual happiness through both inner and outer forces. The source of discontent is threefold. The first culprit is the self and its petty struggle towards finding a place in a world guided by conventions and expectations: "Weary, and sick of asking of myself/What I am, and what I ought to be" ("Self-Dependence"). The second cause is the insurmountable divide between a golden past and a decayed present, whereby the "corruption" of the race is replicated on a personal level: "For surely once, they feel, we were/Parts of a single continent" vs. "Who order'd, that their longing's fire/Should be, as soon as kindled, cool'd? ("To Marguerite..."). Lastly, it is the result of the loss of faith in face of scientific and mechanistic "progress", which leaves in its wake a chaotic, joyless and indifferent space—"the naked shingles of the world" denounced in "Dover Beach". Corruptibility, Arnold believes, is central to nature, society and the individual. Hence, our obligation to search for the "best self", through self-improvement and culture (*Culture and Anarchy*, passim), but also through moderation and the unabated advance on the path to self-discovery.

At face value, it may appear paradoxical that while Arnold acknowledges the need for common action (e.g., through institutional and educational reform), the loss of one's bearings entails for him a general tendency to turn inward, as the closing scene of "Dover Beach" illustrates, where love and domestic values are seen as the only solution to the "turbid ebb and flow/Of human mysery [...]:

> 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.

However, Arnold's case merely illustrates the general confrontational dimension of the Victorian age, observable, for instance in such dichotomies as devotion to work and unleashing of creative energies vs. a generalised feeling of insecurity regarding the value of one's actions, technological advance vs. utopian revisionism, or faith in economic power and imperial rule vs. religious and intellectual doubting. Within this dualistic framework, Arnold's proposed solution, *renouncement*, may seem inefficient and overly idealistic, but it is entirely logical. Rather than tackling the destructive forces head on (which would only add to the overarching confusion), we should strive to maintain the equilibrium of opposites, through compromise. This can be achieved by resisting

the fleeting worldly temptations and adopting the stance of the intellectual classicist, that of disinterested contemplation[4].

Furthermore, with Arnold, such a highly ascetic attitude should not be understood as complete isolation. After all, his poetry abounds in moments where the subject is painfully aware of the presence of the other and in the complementary drive. To the evil of "enislement" decried in "To Marguerite...", he opposes the sustained preoccupation for becoming part of a pre-established, morally upright system, seen as a prerequisite for cultivating one's "higher self". As Meglio explains in reference to Arnold's view on the virtue of religion, integrating oneself into a system is essential "for the attainment of a multi-faceted 'perfection' in society", since "[b]y functioning within the terms of this well-defined and understood system, one would have the freedom to safely explore the more complicated aspects of humanity". In a similar manner, Caufield notes that the effacement of the self, or impersonality of "renouncement" can ensure "social salvation through self-denial".

Starting from these observations, I will now look more closely at two important questions related to the poem's central concerns: faith, and the position of the individual self. First, Meglio's remark calls for clarification, for it would be wrong to assume solely on its basis that the poet's lament, occasioned by the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of the "sea of faith", is in reference to the religious crisis pervading the Victorian age (or, equally, that his insistence on being "true to each other" in the poem's final scene is reducible to the Christian belief in the sacred marital vow). Like his fellow Victorian, George Eliot, Arnold turned agnostic in adolescence, having been displeased with doctrine and dogmatism. Consequent on this, he would become one of the most fervent critics of the traditional church. For Arnold, the value of religion resides in being an example of morality, of righteousness, and faith is useful only inasmuch as it is governed by reason. Similarly, Arnold explains in *Literature and Dogma*, God is "the eternal not-ourselves that makes for righteousness" (39). This intimate connection between faith and reason is also supported by the poem's sequencing, since this key line appears after Arnold's invocation of the figure of the Greek thinker, Sophocles:

> Sophocles long ago
> Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought
> Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
> Of human misery; we

[4] This can also be seen in his "touchstone" method of criticism and his views on poetry. As Douglas Bush explains in reference to the poet's 1853 Preface to *Empedocles on Etna*:

> Arnold condemned both Romantic subjectivity and current demands that poets turn from "the exhausted past" to modern life; he pleaded for great actions, characters, and passions, for man's elementary, universal feelings, as the timeless material of poetry. And to Romantic diffuseness and excess of imagery he opposed severe, coherent economy of form and style. (86)

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.

"The sea of faith" is the binary correlative not only of "the turbid ebb and flow/Of human misery" but also of the misleading calm of the coastal scenery contemplated at the beginning of the poem. Understood as one's unfaltering adherence to an ordering system of values, "faith" is the offspring of "thought", a rational illumination available to the individual in moments of turmoil or transition and the pillar that can still uphold the crumbling edifice.

Arnold's insistence on equilibrium and temperance is also evident in the final image of the "ignorant armies", inspired from Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian war. Here, the darkness of the night, responsible for the massacre of foe and friend alike, points to the disastrous effects of losing one's bearings. In addition, the use of the participle form "darkling" denotes a dynamic, processual perspective, suggesting that the real cause of the unfolding tragedy is not excessive ambition or blindness of the leaders, but the surprise factor of a sudden change.

Within this scheme, the poet's solution is commensurate with the challenge underway. Thus, while the professed symbolic withdrawal from the losing battle may echo the image of the fleeing armies, Arnold's strategy of "renouncement" does not lead to renunciation. Instead, it is a form of constructive disengagement, targeting a future re-engagement through the creation of a stronger bond which will work on a smaller scale. For the Arnoldian couple, being "true" implies the endorsement of a contract based on trust, respect and the willingness to let go of the self, to compromise. Unlike in the "Marguerite" poem, in "Dover Beach" the obstacles are surmounted, as the "island" is repopulated by an entity greater than the individual, resulting from the union of the two partners. In contrast to the underlying pessimism regarding the fate of the race, for the individual subject there still remains a glimmer of hope, and the overall feeling of the poem is that of uneasiness, rather than despair.

Despite the unpretentious elegance of Arnold's solution, which some might see as a late nineteenth century revival of the Garden of Eden myth (*sans* the religious element, evidently), it would be overly simplistic to interpret "Dover Beach" as yet another love story. While the previous observations verify and reinforce the moral and ethical creeds of the age, even as they were turning increasingly unsatisfactory, this piece distances itself from the Victorian

referential frame at least in one major respect, namely, its refusal to reflect the period's general bias regarding gender roles. Based on its genealogy (it was occasioned by Arnold's honeymoon stay at Dover in 1851), we may be inclined to consider the speaker an alter-ego of the poet, or at least a male voice, when in fact, as Eugene R. August has aptly pointed out, there is no textual indication that this voice is in any way gendered:

> . . . the poem's text contains no evidence whatsoever to indicate whether Arnold's speaker is male or female, much less patriarchal or matriarchal. At one point, the speaker addresses the beloved as "love," but that is a gender-neutral term that could easily be used by a male or a female speaker. Any attempt to determine the sex of the speaker will necessarily involve gross stereotyping. (35)

Similarly, the critic goes on, we cannot convincingly argue that the speaker is Arnold himself (unless, of course, we choose to indulge in the most elementary analytical error of assuming that the speaker in any literary work *must* necessarily be a fictional projection of its author). Therefore, it is more appropriate to interpret the poem "as an expression of a human feeling *shared* by women and men alike" (August 37, emphasis added). This un-gendered perspective, as we will see later, is one of the main differences between Arnold's poem and the other two texts.

Based on the above, I will now formulate a number of preliminary conclusions which will serve as reference points when discussing the texts by Hecht and Munro.

First, as Umunç explains in connection with question of "cultural polysemy", of what various scholars have described as four major types of intertext—political, social, cultural and gender—only the first three are clearly retraceable in this text. As a "criticism of life", "Dover Beach" necessarily reviews, as through an intertextual relationship, the political, societal and cultural issues which the poet considers responsible for the decay of values, but (as pointed out above) it makes no concrete reference to gender (nor is it reliant on it when passing a critical judgement).

From this, another observation follows: though universally acceptable, Arnold's solution is context-dependent, being the product not only of its own culture and age, but of a broader ideatic background too. In fact, according to Caufield, "Dover Beach" can be read as a "lugubrious litany of absence" that is indebted to a long-standing tradition:

> . . . Arnold's particular strain of pessimism seems to fall within the standard range of "technologies of the self," from the self-effacement of Christian asceticism, to the ego-extirpation of Buddhist metaphysics, to the self-disciplinary rigors of Stoicism.

Lastly, Arnold's stance is not entirely devoid of ambivalence, since he both subscribes and rejects "renouncement" as a solution: one's "ordinary self" should eventually be replaced by the "higher self", but the latter can only be attained by

engaging in a contract with a fellow human being—that is, through a *(re-) affirmation* of humankind, rather than a withdrawal from the world.

3. "Duck-rabbits" and cosmic last resorts: Anthony Hecht, "The Dover Bitch"

Written precisely one hundred years after the publication of Arnold's text, "The Dover Bitch", subtitled "A Criticism of Life: for Andrews Wanning", may appear to the untrained eye as a mere exercise in poetic craftsmanship. Already an established name by the time of the publication of *The Hard Hours* (the poem's parent volume), Anthony Hecht, like many of his famous literary predecessors, puts his art to test through a piece which both borrows and, as the title and subtitle suggest, is intent on ridiculing some of Arnold's verbal and imagistic formulas. However, beyond the typical postmodern ironic-parodic nod, upon closer examination we can see how a substantively more complex network of intertextual relationships starts to emerge, already from the opening lines. In fact, the very first of these overlaps strengthens, rather than dismisses Arnold's strategy of distancing from the contemplated subject and theme.

> 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.'

Like Arnold, Hecht begins his poem by setting up a spatial divide between subject and object. In fact, in these lines the contemplating subject is doubly removed from the object: on a closer plane (indicated by the word "there") we find Matthew Arnold and his girl, while the English coastal backdrop is "crumbling away" at a farther point in space. However, the anaphoric connector "so" and the demonstrative "this" of the poem's opener clearly testify to the opposing, "magnetic" drive, informing us of the poet's true intention. Thus, in conjunction with the earlier hint ("a criticism of life"), these lines suggest that not only the individual Arnoldian text, but the entire poetic vision of the Victorian forefather will serve as a *co-text*, rather than just a context for Hecht's piece, making the two connect on a higher, allegorical plane.

In light of these observations, the reader might be tempted to interpret the rest of the poem primarily as a pastiche. Yet, the profoundness of Hecht's art consists precisely in the unflinching observance of a meticulously laid-out plan meant to embezzle his audience. The sarcastic paraphrase of Arnold's ideal of the Edenic couple, indicated by the male figure's more tentative tone ("*try* to be... and I'll do the same...", as opposed to the original's "*let* us be...") as well as the ambiguity of the adverb "there" (also hinting at a possible moral distancing

between observer and observed) cast again a veil of doubt on the author's purpose with this text. The strategy behind Hecht's argument is soon revealed: he will point in the direction of the most logical conclusion regarding the morality of his protagonists and the moral of his text, only to contradict it a moment later.

As things stand at this stage, the reversal of the Victorian scenario should be clear and final. The speaker takes a partisan position relative to the girl—not just any girl, but "*this* girl". He devotes the bulk of his attention to her, relegating the male participant to a nameless "he":

> Well now, I knew this girl. It's true she had read
> Sophocles in a fairly good translation
> 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.

By making her the centrepiece of attention, Hecht tricks us into siding, at least for a while, with the heroine. Compared to the poem's Arnold-figure, she excels in vitality and sensuality and, as such, could not be further removed from the ideal of womanhood of the "angel of the house" which lies at the basis of the lover in "Dover Beach" (or, rather, "angels of the house", to remain consistent with the earlier observations concerning the gender-ambiguity of the speaker in the Victorian text). Indeed, a closer relative to Hecht's girl would be Hardy's "new woman"—a strong-willed, passionate and instinctual individual, governed by the forces of nature and biology and less by the meanderings of intellect. It is not surprising therefore that the high pomp and seriousness of Arnold's discourse and the proposed ascetic way are incompatible with the drives and needs of this modern child:

> 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.

Given the absence of an adequate response to the demands of the situation (the sexual impulse being evident from the reference to the feeling of his whiskers "on the back of her neck") we may be inclined to give her our full sympathy. The enticing promise of the "lights across the channel", the "enormous beds" or the "blandishments in French and the perfumes" can't be matched by the lessons of dead philosophers or the "allusions" (a word-play on "illusions") of literature. If poetry is "criticism of life", the opposite must be true as well: life, as our contemporary experience proves, can be an equally compelling "criticism of poetry".

. . . 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.

Hecht's insistence on the girl's furious reaction to being seen as physically irrelevant and her demotion to the position of mere receptacle of someone else's angst can also clarify the poet's aesthetic stance. Rather than an ironic sequel to the Victorian text, it is a dialogical counterpart through which the twentieth century artist examines a possible response to the speaker's proposal at the end of Arnold's piece. Or, in a different formulation, tipping the scales in favour of the feminine side and the manifestly gendered rewriting of the original perspective reflect a position more clearly inspired by the modernist preoccupation for re-cohering the fragments and filling the gaps than by the postmodern penchant for ambiguity and multiple semantic layering.

Yet, despite the concrete imagery and dramatic pacing of this text, we should not lose sight of its verbal substrate (the unforgiving label assigned in the poem's title remains our beacon in this sense). Over the following lines, another counterpoint is made: we learn that with the passage of time the girl has turned into a staple of ordinariness and a mere object of sexual gratification. We may speculate as to what would have happened if her own choice at the end of the hotel scene had been different, but not for long. Hecht's appeal to lenience in the poem's finale ("But you mustn't judge her by that") is soon contradicted by the references to sexual promiscuity as well as by the ironic closer, wherein her genie (the contrapuntal equivalent of the earlier "genius") is necessarily recaptured in the bottle:

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*.[5]

This last change of perspective leads us to conclude that the vision informing Hecht's poem is, after all, not so different from Arnold's own. In fact, the more recent commentators of this text suggest that the true target of Hecht's critique is the immorality / amorality of the present, not the possibly

[5] It is difficult to identify with precision what Hecht had in mind with this name. Among the more feasible choices are a vintage perfume by Jean Dussés of Paris or a Swiss wine produced at the Cave Valcombe vinery. It is also possible, however, that Hecht simply made up a French brand-name that could best serve his ironic intention.

anachronistic set of values championed by the Victorian thinker. Schmidt argues that the poet does not take the side of the speaker and therefore the poem should not be regarded solely as a parody of the Arnoldian text:

> . . . whereas Matthew Arnold's speaker may be a bit pretentious and too earnest by twentieth-century standards, he approaches the world with conscience and moral seriousness. The Hecht speaker has no moral concerns at all and, far from taking the world too earnestly, lives without any ethical considerations other than the desire to get whatever pleasure he can.

Instead, the target of criticism should be sought in "the developing American slacker 'cool' outlook of the twentieth century, much like what Matthew Arnold refers to […] as 'charlatanism'" (Schmidt). In other words, we are witness here to the natural (albeit extreme) extension of Arnold's "renouncement"—the author's withdrawal into a realm beyond morality and his subsequent adoption of a stoic stance, dictated not by the fearful *prospect* that this brave new world may have "neither joy, nor love, nor light", but by the *knowledge*[6] that things are inevitably so. As Pontynen has noted, the path pursued by the "Dover Bitch" reflects an "existential coarseness" that cannot warrant any amount of sympathy (342). Love may not suffice in itself, but its replacement by something much less noble—hedonism—most certainly removes one from the Arnoldian "higher self". Against such a background, Pontynen explains, the artist's only response is to trivialise tragedy through a comical response, "[b]ut it is a dark comedy of which the joke is still on us" (342).

In summation, we can say that Hecht's poem confronts the readers with two possible "criticisms of life", presenting itself to the readers as an example of what Gerhard Joseph calls a "duck-rabbit" or "Janus-faced" text which lends itself to multiple, complementary interpretations. It is simultaneously a satire of modern relationships and a critique of Victorian romance and melodrama (Joseph 9), as both sex and love prove unsatisfactory in the long run. It is a complex piece based on the point-counterpoint technique, requiring from the audience a continuous reading and counter-reading of text and co-text. This interplay, Joseph argues, also illustrates the transition from determinacy to indeterminacy, essential for the progress of modern thought:

> the movement from an apparently "univocal" "Dover Beach" to an apparently "equivocal" "Dover Bitch" may be read as an allegory of the shift in our […] hermeneutic narrative – of a turn from what we have fashioned as "Victorian

[6] Such a position is even more understandable in light of Hecht's personal experience: as an American infantry man, he participated in combat missions in Germany and Czechoslovakia, also helping in the liberation of the Flossenburg concentration camp, where he gathered evidence from French prisoners. The accounts about the harsh conditions and the suffering endured by these people had left an indelible mark on the poet.

> determinacy" to what binarily follows it in our literary historical plot, "Modernist and Post-Modernist indeterminacy." (Joseph 10)

4. Absent thee from felicity a while—a long while: Alice Munro, "Jakarta"

If in the case of the previously discussed title the intertextual approach is not only justified but obligatory, given the obvious formal and thematic kinship with the model, in the case of Munro's short story, the interpretive-analytical effort is more demanding. In a first phase, readers must understand the points at which the texts intersect.

For a start, adding to our earlier observations, we can say that for Hecht's poem "Dover Beach" serves as a "source proximate", an example of what Miola describes as "Type 4" intertextuality.[7] By contrast, with "Jakarta", the relationship involves a more sophisticated dynamic of intertextual connections. For one thing, as a *quotation* ("Type 3" intertextuality) Arnold's poem frames and gives direction to Munro's narrative, contributing to character delineation in a key moment of the story. More importantly though, at a deeper level, it also serves as a *paralogue*[8] ("Type 7" intertextuality), indicative of a shared worldview and thus capable of serving as a key to deciphering the otherwise inconspicuous moral valences of Munro's work.

Indeed, together with other stories in *The Love of a Good Woman*, "Jakarta" displays thematic similarities with both of the previously discussed pieces. As noted by Sandy English, "transition" and "transformation" represent a constant authorial interest in this volume: "The stories communicate a sense of considerable amounts of time passing, of the changes that happen to an individual or a family over decades, and the lag of consciousness in catching up with these changes."

However, in contrast with both poets, Munro avoids generalisations about human nature or our fate as a species, transferring the source of Arnoldian pessimism to an immediate concrete plane. "Uneasiness", the critic explains, acquires a "more historically located sense" (English). Despite being mainly concerned with the protagonists' life-changing choices, Munro ties her narrative to a specific social and cultural context, the period of intellectual turmoil and suspicion succeeding World War 2, as indicated, for instance, by the recurring

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[7] In reference to this type of intertextuality, the author observes that: "[t]he source functions as the book-on-the-desk; the author honors, reshapes, steals, ransacks, and plunders. The dynamics include copying, paraphrase, compression, conflation, expansion, omission, innovation, transference, and contradiction" (19).

[8] Miola underlines the increased complexity of the paralogue in comparison to other types of intertextuality: "Paralogues are texts that illuminate the intellectual, social, theological, or political meanings in other texts. Unlike texts or even traditions, paralogues move horizontally and analogically in discourses rather than in vertical lineation through the author's mind or intention" (23).

insistence on the "communist" connections of Cottar and Sonje (we may argue in this sense that the former's mysterious disappearance at the end of the story is also the consequence of his ideological allegiance). In addition, the critic goes on, "personal revolt" and "domestic life", the main issues addressed in Munro's volume, are inextricably linked with the question of choice:

> It is natural and perhaps inevitable that one reacts to the discomfort, pain and even spiritual oppression within the family, but, in Munro's world, one also runs the risk of making disastrous mistakes by leaving or disrupting domestic life. (English)

Based on these, we may argue that "Jakarta" is in a sense the antinomical counterpart of both previously discussed texts. Firstly, through the characters of Kath and Cottar (as opposed to Kent and Sonje), Munro suggests that "turning outward" and embracing the world and the others is the only solution that can eventually diminish human misery. As Sandy English further argues, Munro's characters are marked by the burden of lost opportunities, but it is those who do not accept the existential limitations (such as those imposed by marriage, family life or friendship, we may add) are the ones who "stand the chance of regretting less". Secondly, through Kath, Munro constructs a complex character embodying contradictory drives, who simultaneously incriminates and vindicates both Arnold's idealised lover (expected by partner and society to be capable of being prim and faithful) and Hecht's oversexualised girl (who ends up being objectified in the wake of her own choices).

Already from the opening scenes of the story we can see the peculiar stand of Munro's heroine regarding the social and gender conventions of her times. Thus, even before becoming a mother herself, she interprets motherhood as a form of "absence", an act that prevents the individual from fully exploring the potentialities of womanhood. Similarly, she looks at adult life as a series of examinations to pass (marriage, first and second babies, etc.) in an inevitable progression that makes one arrive at "wherever it was you were going". Nonetheless, if relative to the "Monicas", Kath appears non-conventional and progressive, as the story unfolds we are made to understand that her rebelliousness is merely a mask she chose to wear against the temptations she is not prepared to face. Relevant in this sense is her reaction during the key scene of the party taking place on the beach, when flirting with a complete stranger fills her with the more mundane counterpart of the Arnoldian "confused alarms of struggle and flight":

> . . . The sex Kath had with Kent was eager and strenuous, but at the same time reticent. They had not seduced each other but more or less stumbled into intimacy, or what they believed to be intimacy, and stayed there. If there is only to be the one partner in your life nothing has to be made special – it already is so. They had looked at each other naked, but at those times they

> had not except by chance looked into each other's eyes.
> That was what Kath was doing now, all the time, with her unknown partner. They advanced and retreated and circled and dodged, putting on a show for each other, and looking into each other's eyes. Their eyes declared that this show was nothing, nothing compared to the raw tussle they could manage when they chose. . . .

Kath tries to push her own boundaries by *imagining* a scenario which completes her own fantasy regarding marital bliss. But while at this stage fabulation is still more important than action, as her story continues she will gradually immerse herself in the realm of the concrete—a realm that she knows she must create on her own. Unlike the other two authors, Munro endows her character with a voice and turns her into an artificer, much like Joyce's Stephen Daedalus, and so her story slowly reveals its greater ambition—that of being an *allegory of creative process*.

Consequently, the next rite of passage will involve verbalising her fantasies to herself. After one of her conversations with Kent she comes to realise that she is no stranger to the idea of sexual promiscuity in principle. What she abhors, we are left to understand, is the lack of choice and consensual decision:

> . . . Kent said, "You mean young guys would go to bed with that old woman? She's got to be fifty."
> Kath said, "Cottar's thirty-eight."
> "Even so," said Kent. "It's disgusting."
>
> But Kath found the idea of those stipulated and obligatory copulations exciting as well as disgusting. To pass yourself around obediently and blamelessly, to whoever came up on the list—it was like temple prostitution. Lust served as your duty. It gave her a deep obscene thrill, to think of that.
>
> . . .
>
> For all the tempting thoughts that came into her mind, Kath believed that she could only, ever, sleep with Kent. Sex was like something they had invented between them. Trying it with somebody else would mean a change of circuits—all of her life would blow up in her face. Yet she could not say she loved Kent agonizingly.

Despite her initial submissiveness, Kath gradually challenges societal norms and expectations, and, above all, the established views regarding gender roles. As her story reaches its natural conclusion, we see her standing in a position diametrically opposed to that championed by the Victorian speaker, but at the same time also different from that of Hecht's feminine figure. We learn of her eventual divorce from Kent, which attests to her willingness and capacity to pursue a chosen path, contradicting her own youthful belief in the

virtue of an enduring bond with a lifetime mate. This impression is further strengthened if we examine her disposition relative to the heroine in Lawrence's story (Munro's inclusion of this second intertext being now fully justified). As the final scene of "The Fox" shows, for Lawrence's girl the passage into womanhood implies the relinquishment of her individuality and absorbance into the domineering male self. By contrast, Munro fully empowers Kath by placing her in the realm of fiction. Like Cottar, who now serves as her male counterpart, she becomes a *presence through absence*. In the closing scenes we see her exerting a curious, shadowy influence on her former husband:

> But when you knew somebody was alive, when you could drive to the very door, you let the opportunity pass. What wouldn't be worth it? To see her a stranger that he couldn't believe he'd ever been married to, or to see that she could never be a stranger yet was unaccountably removed?

It is precisely this final distancing and independence that grants her privilege over Hecht's character too, for whom maturity implies a loss of the self as the persona slowly replaces the person. In other words, if for Munro's heroine experience and the ensuing sexual diversity bring liberation from physical, spiritual and even social dependence, for Hecht's girl they become a form of bondage of the sort that caused Kath's revulsion in the earlier quote: she is a "bitch" not because of promiscuousness, but because she has become a "vulgar", *irrelevant* individual, who can be bought and pleased with a bottle of *Nuit d'Amour*.

Ironically, once the roles have changed, it is through Kent that Kath's choice is given a qualitative judgement. We see this in the closing scenes, where, while pondering over the ordinariness of human existence, he comes to equate "domesticity" with "predictability":

> His old friend's wife, who was over seventy, wanted to show him pictures of herself and some other old woman dressed up as Klondike dance-hall girls, for a musical show they had put on. And his grown-up children were caught up in their own lives. That was only natural and not a surprise to him. The surprise was that these lives, the lives his sons and daughter were living, seemed closed in now, somewhat predictable. Even the changes in them that he could foresee or was told were coming—Noelle was on the verge of leaving her second husband—were not very interesting.

Kent's final musing complements Kath's choice, completing the anti-Arnoldian circle. There is no assuagement, only despair, in the comfort and security of the hearth:

> "Your wife's been gone a long time," she said. "It's absurd, but young people seem unimportant to me. As if they could vanish off the earth and it wouldn't really matter."

> "Just the opposite," Kent said. "That's us you're talking about. That's us."
> Because of the pill his thoughts stretch out long and gauzy and lit up like vapor trails. He travels a thought that has to do with staying here, with listening to Sonje talk about Jakarta while the wind blows sand off the dunes. A thought that has to do with not having to go on, to go home.

In the end, like the Shakespearean companion, Kent and Sonje are refused happiness, becoming instead the raconteurs of the struggles and choices of others.

5. Concluding remarks

Given the complexity of the discussed texts and the numerous planes on which they intersect, it is impossible to provide an exhaustive treatment of my subject. Nevertheless, at the end of this interpretive exercise, I can formulate some summative remarks that will serve as conclusions.

On a thematic level, we observe that all of them are focused on the idea of change / transformation, as well as the passage of time and its impact upon the individual. In terms of imagery, each gives centrality to the beach (or its spatial proxies, the sea and seashore) as the locus of intersections, evocative of turmoil and transition.

With Arnold, the cautious pessimist, the beach is placed at a safe distance, while his speaker is left to contemplate it from the precarious security of the room, conscious of its dangers. For the Victorian poet, it represents the space of temptations that must be resisted, since the siren songs it carries are those of a world devoid of "joy", "love" and "light". In Hecht's poem, the protective space remains, but for the girl who chooses to look outside it becomes a prison. However, her fate eventually verifies Arnold's concerns: the "lights across the channel" will inevitably dim one's inner light. In Munro's case, the beach symbolises the narrow borderline between the present and the future, which must be crossed by the heroine for self-fulfilment to be complete. It is upon the dock that Kath is tempted and tested, and where she catches glimpses of the things she has repressed through allegiance to domestic values. Her "renouncement" works in a direction opposite to Arnold's: she trades safety for freedom, even though she knows this will undoubtedly lead to solitude.

In the final analysis, we see that both Hecht and Munro formulate a conclusion that Arnold was incapable of accepting, proving themselves as genuine exponents of the pessimistic strain of thought. "Let us be true to each other" may be a noble ideal, especially when fuelled by youthful exuberance, but life—these authors remind us—frequently defeats individual will, as the tempting voices are too loud, or too true to ignore. The choices are never final, but their consequences are often irrevocable.

Through its rich semantic potential, "Dover Beach" remains a quintessential Arnoldian text, proof not only of its creator's artistic genius and depth of vision or an inexorable potential for critical explorations, but also a piece of documentary value—one of the more compelling testimonials to the fact that our Victorian forerunners have left us not only the fruits and flaws of an industrial revolution, but also many of their hopes, doubts and fears.

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