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Charles Lyell's Churches and the Erosion of Faith in Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach"

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1. SOURCES FOR "DOVER BEACH"

"Dover Beach" is commonly interpreted as a general expression of the loss of Victorian faith, the "talismanic" poem about the mid-nineteenth-century crisis of belief. Scholars have long been intrigued by Arnold's successful metaphor of the retreating tide of the sea of faith, and a series of textual antecedents of this idea have been unearthed, albeit with varying success.

In 1902 Clarence Clark drew attention to a passage in Sainte-Beuve's *Literary Portraits* in which the author compared faith to the ebbing tide of the sea: "Mon âme est pareille à ces plages où l'on dit que Saint Louis s'est embarqué; la mer et la foi se sont depuis longtemps, hélas, retirées". This passage was given some prominence as the first of the 'Pensées' at the close of the *Derniers Portraits Littéraires*. Although Matthew Arnold's admiration for the French poet is well documented – he read his works tirelessly and the men met and corresponded in the late 1850s and early 1860s – the plausibility of Clark's tantalizing thesis ultimately depends on the dating of Arnold's poem.

"Dover Beach" was published in *New Poems* in 1867. As Clark took the date of publication roughly to coincide with the date of composition, Arnold had had ample time to absorb Sainte-Beuve's metaphor. Later critics and historians, however, largely agree that Arnold wrote the poem long before this. For example, half a century after Clark's article, David Allen Robertson pointed out a number of similarities between Arnold's poem and his friend Arthur Clough's "Say Not the Struggle Nought Availeth" (1849) and argued from this evidence that the poems showed signs of a poetic exchange of

ideas¹. This meant for Robertson that “Dover Beach” must have been written sometime between September 1848 and October 1849. There is, however, no biographical evidence for so early a date.

Knowledge of the composition of Arnold’s most famous poem is unfortunately incomplete. Nevertheless, we do know that he stayed with his newly wedded wife in Dover in June 1851. On this occasion he presumably wrote the concluding part of the poem starting “Ah, love, let us be true/ to one another”, while he scribbled the opening lines on a separate sheet following manuscript notes he was taking later that year in London for his dramatic poem *Empedocles on Etna* (Murray 1996: 116-17, 128). This places most of the lines of “Dover Beach” in late 1851. Sainte-Beuve’s *Derniers Portraits Littéraires*, too, was published in 1851, with a preface dated in December of that year, and it is doubtful whether Arnold could have read Sainte-Beuve’s volume in time for inclusion in his poem in 1851. However, as the passage beginning with “The Sea of Faith” is written in the margin of the manuscript², while the verso of the sheet remains blank, one wonders whether it might have been added to the manuscript after Arnold had read Sainte-Beuve’s ‘Pensées’. To support this, S.O.A Ullmann, analyzing Arnold’s handwriting, dates the lines written below the manuscript notes between June 1851 and April 1852. In that case, the ebbing-of-faith metaphor might well be indebted to Sainte-Beuve.

A year before Robertson’s article, the similarities in the images in Arnold’s and Clough’s poetry elicited a short comment by Buckner Trawick, who pointed out that the Thucydidian idea of armies fighting at night is prefigured in Clough’s *The Bothie of Toper-na-Fuosich* (1848): “If there is battle, ‘tis battle by night: I stand here in the darkness, / Here in the mêlée of men [...] / [...] which is friend and which is foeman?”. Trawick finds further “clinging” evidence of Arnold’s indebtedness to Clough in a passage immediately following these lines in *The Bothie*. They describe the swelling “return of tide”, which corresponds to the state of the soul of the speaker in the poem, and which, he argues, foreshadows Arnold’s “Sea of Faith”. Although the first part of Trawick’s analogy is largely left undiscussed by later scholars, for the last part various alternative sources have been indicated. Ronald Sharp, for example, finds echoes in John Keat’s sonnet “Bright Star”, while William Ulmer draws attention to a line in *The Nemesis of Faith* (1848), a

¹ “This was a period, also, in which Arnold and Clough maintained close touch, but were often far from agreement. It was a time when Arnold might well have made known to his friend an early, unpublished version of ‘Dover Beach,’ and when Clough might well have given Arnold, in return, a copy of ‘Say not.’” (Robertson, 1951: 924).

² Ashley A17f2r, British Library; see also Tinker and Lowry 1966: 211 note.

novel written by James Anthony Froude about his loss of faith.

Lars-Håkan Svensson feels unimpressed by these analogies for the 'Sea of Faith' metaphor, and offers yet another reading of the famous passage. He argues that an "extraneous parallel" for the "tenor and vehicle" of Arnold's lines might be found in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ("I'll put a girdle round about the earth" II.2.175), which draws on the popular usage in Renaissance emblem books of presenting the circumnavigation of the globe as a world-encircling girdle, which, in turn, derived from an older tradition in Classical astronomy where the zodiac is described as a belt. Such a depiction of the zodiac can be found in the poetry of, amongst others, Donne and Collins.

Nicholas Salerno draws attention to a textual and thematic parallel in Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra*. Referring to the lines in which Cleopatra implies that for her all meaning of life had gone now that her lover is dying – "O sun, / Burn the great sphere thou mov'st in! darkling stand / The varying shore o' the world" (IV.15.9-11) – he points out that in both this speech and in "Dover Beach", only love can provide stability, that in both the dominating picture is that of the sea beating on the shore, that both describe the world as "darkling", and that both call it varying/various. "[I]t may be that Arnold found the passage [...] particularly memorable", Salerno concludes (Salerno 1960: 496).

Other critics have traced similarities between "Dover Beach" and lines in Wordsworth's poetry. Herbert Coursen has argued that, in his search for Wordsworthian revelation, Arnold made "[t]he landscape in which the moon endows all objects below with beauty" the central setting of his poetry (Coursen 1964: 570). Coursen also emphasizes that the significance of Arnold's poetry lies in the growing awareness that he can never be a Victorian echo of the late poet laureate³. Nowhere is this more obvious than in "Dover Beach", where "the fact that the moon lies fair only sharpens the recognition that the moon lies" (*ibid.*: 580). Francis O'Gorman, too, finds the chief sources of "Dover Beach" in Wordsworth, and he rightly draws attention to lines from the sonnets "It is a Beauteous Evening" and "At Dover", where Wordsworth bids us listen to the sea – "Listen! The mighty Being is awake, / And doth with his eternal motion make / a sound like thunder – everlastingly" – and where the ocean's "o'erpowering murmurings" are the "dread Voice that speaks from out the sea / Of God's eternal Word"⁴. Both poems affirm nature's capacity to reveal God. In Arnold's radical transformation

³ In assessing Wordsworth's achievements in 1879 Arnold wrote that "Wordsworth feels the joys offered to us in nature." Nicholas Murray comments that "Arnold's tragedy was that he aspired to do the same but was born into another age" (1996: 22-23).

⁴ "It is a Beauteous Evening" (1807), ll. 5-8; "At Dover" (1838), ll.11-12.

of Wordsworth's lines the Victorian poet "erases this Romantic faith [...] marking a sharp break between them and the new uncertainties of the later nineteenth century" (O'Gorman 2004: 312). Reading the lines from "Dover Beach" against Wordsworth's poetry makes sense, especially as ever since the poet laureate's death Arnold had pondered the meaning of natural beauty. For his poem "The Youth of Nature", which he finished on 4 January 1852, he had been rereading Wordsworth assiduously. As a matter of fact, apart from the two poems mentioned by O'Gorman, we can add at least two other sonnets by Wordsworth which find remarkable echoes in the lines of "Dover Beach": in "Composed in the Valley Near Dover, On the Day of Landing" (1807) Wordsworth speaks of "the roar/ Of the waves breaking on the chalky shore"; in "September, 1802. Near Dover" (1807) "the sea was calm and the air was clear, / The coast of France – the coast of France how near!", while "the barrier flood / Was like a lake, or river bright and fair, / [...] so doth God protect us".

2. THE SEA-OF-FAITH METAPHOR

These analogies provide a rich panorama of the cultural and literary heritage of "Dover Beach". In writing of Arnold's "To Marguerite, In Returning a Volume of the Letters of Ortis" (1852), Kathleen Tillotson sets out with the premise that "[i]n the belief that some part of the poem's power consists in its waking of echoes from our reading and that these also lay within Arnold's reading, I have collected some of these and attempted to relate them to the poem." Michael Schmidt presses the point a bit further when he argues that "it's hard to think of a single poem that swims entirely free of its medium [...] Each is made of poems and other literary works from a past that especially engages them and of works by near antecedents and contemporaries." And therefore "[t]he scholarly sport of searching out sources and analogues is useful in determining not only what is original in conception, but what is original in mutation or metamorphosis" (Schmidt 1998: 11-12). If "Dover Beach" is "the greatest single poem of the Victorian period" (Schmidt 1998: 540) – and few critics would disagree with this ⁵ – it is only to be expected

⁵ Cf: "Even Professor [John Davies] Jump, whose book on Arnold is in general so damning that the reader trembles to think what Jump would say about an author he really disliked, has a good word for 'Dover Beach', as indeed have most critics." (Drew 1969: 201); compare also Stefan Collini's comment on the poems popularity: "the rhythm and cadence of 'Dover Beach' have cast their spell even over some of the unwillingly-conscripted readers of school anthologies" (Collini 1994: 40).

that it draws on a much larger cultural context than the narrow individual sensation the poem evinces.

There is a universality about the metaphor of the loss of faith in Arnold's poem that makes it so attractive. The success of Arnold's poem, which Isobel Armstrong has called "a threnody on the lost myth of Christianity" (Armstrong 1996: 173), seems to be based on the universality and generality of the ebbing of Christian faith in modern times. If we try, however, to pin down the factors which led to this decline of faith, the picture becomes misty. Most scholars have assumed that, apart from the broad notion that the positivist approaches that have come to characterize modern industrial society had undermined traditional values of faith and providence, there is in the poem no exact indication of the cause of this loss of faith. The historian Llewellyn Woodward, for instance, generically blames "the Scientific thought of the age [... for] undermining the very foundations of belief" (Woodward 1979: 533), while Bernard Reardon, a historian of religion, limits his analysis to the assertion that Arnold was "no optimist on the score of his age's material progress" (Reardon 1980: 371). Francis O'Gorman underscores that "while attentive to the particularities of place [... t]he poem has consistently been taken as representative of a whole phase of Victorian thought because it refuses to ground itself exactly: it has, intriguingly, neither focus on what kind of faith it considers nor on the causes of its decay" (O'Gorman 2004: 312). To Edward Alexander "the thought that the movement of the sea suggests to Arnold is that of the retreat of religious faith and its various subsidiary faiths" (Alexander 1973: 70), while, in an even more universal vein, Alan Grob discerns in the poem the "basic metaphysical allegory of cosmic hostility and beleaguering" (Grob 2002: 174).

3. ARNOLD'S EROSION

The textual sources for Arnold's successful trope of a retreating sea of faith that critics have unearthed are rarely more concrete than the metaphor they seek to explain. Ruth Pitman's analysis of the poem is a rare exception to this. In an excellent essay she argues from the metaphorical significance of Charles Lyell's descriptions of erosion in his *Principles of Geology* (1830-1833) to the structure of "Dover Beach" as a sequence of three eroded sonnets.

An interpretation of "Dover Beach" in terms of geological erosion hinges on the following lines in the poem, in which the endless eroding forces of the waves break the coast into lifeless banks of shingle:

Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow
[...]
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. (ll.9-14, 24-8)

Looking for the geological references for these lines, Pitman writes that Arnold “could have read the descriptions of Reculver, Dover and Dover Straits in Lyell” (Pitman 1973: 118). Although this is helpful, she looks only briefly at Lyell’s treatment of erosion of the coast near Dover – she argues that Lyell’s hypothesis that at Dover Straits England was formerly connected to France is not only of geological interest, but also of patriotic importance – but reveals no evidence from *Principles of Geology* that shows a direct bearing on Arnold’s poem. Moreover, compared to the rest of Lyell’s chapter on erosion, the part on Dover is not particularly imaginative. Numerous more impressive and memorable instances of coastal erosion can be found in Lyell’s text. Regrettably, Pitman does not have a look at what Lyell achieves with these other examples of erosion. Although she is certainly right to conclude that “[t]he physical erosion and exposure of the world envisage a threatened faith in terms of geology’s threat to Genesis” (Pitman 1973: 123) ⁶, she fails to notice the ironic subtext with which Lyell subtly underscores the larger implications of uniformitarianism. His playful mockery of religion and its claim to eternity are an effective ploy to drive his greater message home. It is in passages like these that the idea that links the notion of erosion to the decline of religious faith comes to the surface.

4. ARNOLD AND LYELL

Lyell’s explanation of geological change in terms of present causes, and its consequent discovery of deep time, had enormous impact on the Victorian

⁶ In her recent study of how the Victorians reacted to the new sciences of geology and archaeology, Virginia Zimmerman too acknowledges that “[w]hen the reader listens at line nine, he or she hears geological time and can only conclude that human lives are worthless” (Zimmerman 2008: 5), but, unfortunately, she does not explain why and how this is achieved, nor does refer to processes of geological erosion.

imagination. Arnold may not have been particularly interested in physical science – Frank Dudley sensed in the poet “a certain distrust of or distaste for science and a fairly comprehensive ignorance of its details” (Dudley 1942: 276) – but those discoveries that had a direct influence on how his contemporaries saw and understood the world could not have escaped his attention. “The great merit of the *Principles*, was that it altered the whole tone of one’s mind”, Charles Darwin wrote to his father-in-law in 1844⁷. Admittedly, Darwin’s is the comment of a fellow scientist and geologist. But this should not obscure the fact that *Principles of Geology* was widely read by a general reading public when it was first published in three volumes from 1830 to 1833 and that it remained a highly popular work till the mid-1870s. Especially till 1850 new and revised editions appeared in rapid succession. A first volume of the second edition (1832) was out before the last volume in the first edition (1833) was published. A third edition appeared in 1834, a fourth in 1835, a fifth in 1837, a sixth in 1840, a seventh in 1847, and an eighth in 1850⁸.

Arnold could not have ignored the way *Principles of Geology* was changing the Victorian world view. To show, moreover, that he was fully aware of the forces of erosion, Pitman quotes lines that Arnold scribbled around 1866 in his copy of *Herder’s Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*:

The everlasting substance of the hills
Hath frayed and slidden down, and we no more
Touch the same surface which our fathers trod⁹.

The idea expressed in these lines is not unlike those describing Tennyson’s more famous “Ionian hills”¹⁰.

5. *PRINCIPLES OF GEOLOGY*

Principles of Geology recasts the history of the earth in terms of endless dynamics of the earth’s crust, of which the erosion of the English coast is

⁷ Charles Darwin to Leonard Horner, 29 August 1844, letter 771 of the Darwin Correspondence Project, <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-771> (accessed 10/1/2014).

⁸ Further editions followed in 1853, 1866-68, 1872 and 1875.

⁹ “Fragment xii”, Kenneth Allott (ed.), *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, 1965: 584, quoted in Pitman 1973: 110.

¹⁰ Tennyson in *In Memoriam* (1850) wrote: “But I should turn mine ears and hear / The moanings of the homeless sea, / The sound of streams that swift or slow / Draw down Ionian hills, and sow / The dust of continents to be” (Canto XXXV).

only a small part. Why did Lyell's passages on erosion have such impact on the mid-Victorian reader? Part of this question can be answered by considering the way Lyell organized and presented his views of geological processes to the reader.

The first five chapters of *Principles of Geology* deal with the history of geology, and they are, as it were, Lyell's geological Pentateuch. In these chapters Lyell emphasizes that, in the process of emancipation of geology as a science in its own right, "the identification of its objects with those of Cosmogony has been the most common and serious source of confusion" (Lyell 1830: i.4) ¹¹. These chapters contain very little detail of geological phenomena and are mainly of interest for historiographers. In the following chapters (6-8) Lyell concentrates on questions of climate and provides numerous concrete examples from Sicily, Siberia, the USA, Greenland, the Himalayas, New Zealand and the Apennines. The scenario is deliberately world-wide and contains some spectacular imaginative speculation, at which, Lyell admits, "[t]he imagination is apt to take alarm" (i.113). Chapter nine is about organic remains in the earth's crust. It discusses the theory that argues for the "successive development of the animal and vegetable world, from the simplest to the most perfect forms" (i.153). In a mainly theoretical analysis, Lyell decides there is no foundation for such a hypothesis. In the following chapters, Lyell inquires into what changes are now in progress in the organic and inorganic kingdoms of nature. Starting with aqueous agents of change, he proceeds to describe the destructive and reproductive action of running water in rivers, springs, and deltas, using again world-wide examples which range from the river Po to the Mississippi (chapters 10-14). Exciting as all this travelling over the globe may be, there is little in the numerous examples that would have been immediately familiar for the English reader. This changes for the first time in chapter fifteen, which Lyell dedicates to the destroying effects of tides and currents, by 'touring' the coastline from Scotland to Cornwall, illustrating the various instances of the inroads of the sea on the *British* coast. The scenes described here were familiar to English readers, and it became clear that what Lyell was arguing was directly applicable to the United Kingdom itself. Thus for many readers the import of Lyell's theory must suddenly have come to life without any need for extraordinary demands on the imagination.

The familiarity with the scenes described during Lyell's "coastal tour" is strengthened by the insertion in the text of small engravings of British landscapes. In the first fourteen chapters of the first edition, there are only

¹¹ Unless otherwise specified, all references are to the first edition of 1830. Chapter numbering in later editions varies.

six woodcuts of a rather technical and lifeless character showing transverse sections and diagrams illustrating geological formations. In the chapter on erosion, on the other hand, Lyell inserts four small woodcuts of British scenery in which there is a conspicuous presence of human beings, as if to underscore the implication of geological change for *man*. Moreover, by depicting human activity against a background of enormous formations of rocks, man is seen as insignificantly small in the face of vast geological processes.

The woodcuts of British scenery Lyell introduced in his chapter on erosion are reminiscent of the small vignettes Thomas Bewick placed at the end of his chapters in his popular *History of British Birds* (1797, 1804). That Lyell was well-aware of the influence of Bewick's work is borne out by a direct reference in his geological text to "this excellent artist" (i.274).

6. LYELL'S CHURCHES

Lyell starts his description of the eroding forces of the tides and currents with contemplating how huge masses of rock are overturned and moved during gales along the coast of Shetland. The examples, of course, serve to illustrate that "[m]odern observations show that the reduction of continuous tracts to such insular masses is a process in which Nature is still actively engaged" (i.259). To heighten the impact of his factual portrayal of meteorological and tidal agents modeling inorganic nature, Lyell has to rely on his choice of words and images in making such processes come to life:

we cannot but admit that a region which shall be the theatre, for myriads of ages, of the action of such disturbing causes, will present, at some future period, a scene of havoc and ruin. (i.260)

The natural scene is presented in terms of a theatre, which, admittedly, is a word which Lyell throughout *Principles* loosely uses to mean "a place where one can see", but which nonetheless evokes the original connotation of "seeing the action of a dramatic play". The anthropic feature impressed on such a passage is repeated a page later when the "scene of havoc and ruin" is presented as being caused by an army attacking a fortress in times of war: "the Atlantic, when provoked by wintry gales, batters against it with all the force of real artillery – the waves having, in their repeated assaults, forced themselves an entrance" (i.261-2).

Although Lyell's early metaphors for the destructive power of tides are effective, man remains merely an observer in these scenes of destruction of inanimate nature. The discourse of erosion, however, becomes considerably

more dramatic when the author next moves to the coast of Yorkshire, and points out that in old maps of that county “we find spots, now sandbanks in the sea, marked as the ancient sites of the towns and villages” (i.266). Fear, too, of “great devastation” at some future time is not unreasonable, Lyell warns.

If in the examples from Shetland and Yorkshire the repetition of past devastation is still loosely placed at “some future period”, in the description of the next stretch of coast in Norfolk and Suffolk the destruction is “incessant and rapid” (i.267). Stopping briefly at an inn in Sherringham, Lyell notes that “only a small garden was [...] left between the building and the sea” whereas there were at least 50 yards between the house and the sea when it was built 24 years before. At Dunwich in Suffolk he reports “losses, at a subsequent period, of a monastery – at another of several churches – afterwards of the old port – then of four hundred houses at once – of the church of St. Leonard, the high road, town-hall, gaol, and many other buildings” (i.273).

It is important to note how, in chapter fifteen, Lyell gradually, but systematically, enhances the power of erosion in a crescendo of examples. He first presents the reader with a spectacular decay of inanimate matter where man is only a spectator at a distance. He next describes numerous scenarios where human settlements are effaced, and with it the topography of Britain. And, finally, he dwells at length on how the forces of nature erode that which represents his, and his country’s, spiritual life: religion. In the example of Dunwich Lyell poignantly comments:

There is, however, a church, of considerable antiquity, still standing, the *last* of twelve mentioned in some records. In 1740, the laying open of the churchyard of St. Nicolas and St Francis, in the sea cliffs, is well described by [Thomas] Gardner, with the coffins and skeletons exposed to view, – some lying on the beach [...] Of these cemeteries, *no remains can now be seen.* (i.273; my emphasis)

In a climactic passage, Lyell next refers to a tailpiece in Thomas Bewick’s second volume of *History of British Birds* (1804). Without reproducing the woodcut, he describes the vignette in great detail, and adds, in a brilliant stroke of wit, a comment that puts the single episodes of erosion back in the larger context of *Principles of Geology*:

On the verge of a cliff, which the sea has undermined, are represented the unshaken tower and western end of an abbey. The eastern aisle is gone, and the pillars of the cloister are soon to follow. The waves have almost isolated the promontory, and invaded the cemetery, where they have made sport with the mortal relics, and thrown up a skull upon the beach. In the foreground is seen a broken tombstone, erected, as its legend tells, “to *perpetuate* the memory”—of one whose name is obliterated, as is that of the county for which he was “Custos Rotulorum.” A cormo-

rant is perched on the monument, defiling it, as if to remind some moralizer like Hamlet, of "the base uses" to which things sacred may be turned. Had this excellent artist desired to satirize certain popular theories of geology, he might have inscribed the stone to the memory of some philosopher who taught "the permanency of existing continents"—"the era of repose"—"the impotence of modern causes." (i.273-4)

Although the fate of churches (and its cemeteries) are reliable archival sources to illustrate the effect of tidal forces, Lyell was also fully aware of its ironic potential in his strategy to free the science of geology from the blind dictates of religion: "[a] sketch of the progress of Geology is the history of a constant and violent struggle between new opinions and ancient doctrines, sanctioned by the implicit *faith* of many generations, and supposed to rest on scriptural authority" (i.30; my emphasis). Churches laid waste by the repeated assaults of the artillery of the forces of nature become a mighty parable of the fate of the influence of religion when looking for explanations of the present state of the earth.

That Lyell realized the success of such instances is confirmed by the fact that in later editions of *Principles of Geology* he added a number of small woodcuts of churches to the chapter on the erosion of the British coast. Thus, in the fourth edition he reproduces a view of Reculver Church, taken from the *Gentleman's Magazine* of 1781, followed by a vignette of the same church in 1834. In the second picture the churchyard and the chapel are gone, and the church with its two spires, which in the first picture stood at a reasonable distance from the sea, now finds itself on the very edge of the cliffs. It "was dismantled and abandoned as a place of worship," Lyell specifies in the accompanying text¹². It is also interesting to note that the passage describing Bewick's vignette and his sarcastic comment on philosophers who advocate the permanency of the physical earth stands unaltered in all the twelve editions that *Principles of Geology* went through during the 45 years of Lyell's professional life.

7. NAKED SHINGLES

The various instances of churches being laid waste by the forces of erosion in Lyell's *Principles of Geology* square perfectly with Arnold's double meta-

¹² *The Principles of Geology*, fourth edition, 1835: ii.37. By 1853 the chapter also features a rather primitive sketch of the remains of the buried Church of Eccles (9th edn., ii.306). In the tenth edition of 1866 Lyell changed this sketch for a woodcut of much better quality, adding a second illustration, based on a drawing by S.W. King, of the situation in 1862 (10th edn., i.514).

phor of faith which surrounds us all like the all-encompassing sea, but which is being eroded by the same sea as geological explanations take the place of religious certainty. Arnold once famously wrote that the Englishman holds the Church of England as “the most national and natural institution in the world” (Arnold 1885: 139), while in *Literature & Dogma* he had affirmed that “For us, religion is the solidest of realities, and Christianity the greatest and happiest stroke ever yet made for human perfection” (Arnold 1873: 108), a phrase he re-used in his preface to *God & the Bible*. It is, therefore, in Lyell’s churches that the connection between erosion of the English coast and religion in Arnold’s poem makes perfect sense. Bewick’s inspiration to make the skeleton which has been laid bare by the sea as belonging to a nameless keeper of the rolls, would have added further poignancy to a profound sense of loss. For Arnold, without religion, without history, and without the memory of man himself, what remains are the bleak and “naked shingles of the world” of “Dover Beach”. Shingles, too, feature prominently in *Principles of Geology*. After describing the annihilation of the churches on the English coast, Lyell uses the last pages of the chapter to describe the formation of shingle out of the excavations made by the waves: “[w]e may expect the slightest impediment in the course of that tidal wave, which is sweeping away annually large tracts of our coast, to give rise to banks of sand and shingle many miles in length” (i.282).

True faith is defined by Christ in a passage in the gospel of St. Mark: “Have faith in God. For verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith”.¹³ If before the Victorian period only God could move mountains into the sea, in Arnold’s time Lyell’s geology could do so too.

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¹³ *Authorized King James Version*, Mark 11.22-23.

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ABSTRACT

The author discusses how in the poem "Dover Beach" (1851-52) Matthew Arnold engages with literary texts of the past as well as with works of contemporary writers. Thus parallels in Arnold's text with passages written by Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, Thucydides, Arthur Clough, William Shakespeare, and William Wordsworth are highlighted. Special attention is paid to Arnold's metaphor of the retreating tide of the sea of faith by linking it to the processes of erosion described in great detail in the first volume of Charles Lyell's influential *Principles of Geology* (1830), and it is argued that the numerous descriptions and woodcuts of collapsing churches along the British coast in this volume might have inspired Arnold to represent the loss of faith as a process of erosion.