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MATTHEW ARNOLD
POETRY AND CRITICISM

ANTITHETICAL DEVELOPMENTS
IN THE POETRY AND CRITICISM
OF
MATTHEW ARNOLD

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Abstract

My thesis involves a study of a development in Arnold's poetry that is antithetical to the development of Arnold's prose. At first, Arnold's poetry preached an active, moral involvement in the world. This stance gradually collapsed, and, from quite early in his career, Arnold's poetry is characterized by detachment and withdrawal from life.

Arnold's literary criticism exhibits an opposite movement. The Preface to Poems (1853) stresses the necessity for the pleasurable presentation of an action as a basis for poetry, and explicitly denies that the poet in any way interprets his age. This, says Arnold, is the "delirium of vanity." Yet Arnold makes an about face. He decides later, in his essay on Maurice de Guerin (1862), that poetry must be both the "interpretress" of the "natural" and "moral" world. This stance characterizes his later literary criticism.

The first chapter of my thesis deals with the above development in Arnold's poetry up to the 1853 volume of poems. The chapter ends there because the change described above has, by that time, taken place. The second chapter deals with Arnold's middle and later poetry, but primarily with the antithetical development of his early literary criticism. The third and fourth chapters deal with

Arnold's middle and later literary criticism, as well as Culture and Anarchy and Literature and Dogma, and the relationship between this prose and the contemporaneous poetry.

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Introduction

Matthew Arnold is an important Victorian poet, and the most important critic of his time. His poetry is most striking for the harsh world view it presents, and the withdrawal from society it teaches. His criticism, however, is full of hope for society. It delineates exactly the action man must take in order to improve his world.

This difference between Arnold's stance in his poetry and in his prose is important to consider. Detailed scrutiny of Arnold's works can define more exactly this difference. There is a correlation between his early poetry and later criticism, and between his middle and later poetry and his earliest criticism. Arnold's earliest poetry, like his later criticism, proposes the necessity of active involvement in the world. His middle and later poetry proposes withdrawal from society, and his earliest criticism provides the critical justification of this poetry of withdrawal. Thus, the development of Arnold's poetry and of his prose is antithetical. His poetry moved from favouring active, moral involvement in the world to preaching withdrawal, and his prose changed from being the justification of the poetry withdrawal to being a call to action for all mankind.

These movements are important in understanding Matthew Arnold's work as a whole. "To a Gipsy Child by

the Sea-shore" (1843) is at once an impressive critique of Wordsworth's Intimations ode, and a justification for action in the world. This attitude is repeated in many of Arnold's earliest poems.

In "Mycerinus" (1843-44?), however, Arnold introduces a tendency that will become the rule in his poetry. Here, he tells the story of a king who, told that he has but six years to live, decides to withdraw from society and responsibility to devote himself to revelry. This tendency to withdrawal gathers force, and becomes habitual in the bulk of Arnold's remaining poetry. It is most dangerously manifest in Balder Dead (1853-54) where the tendency towards withdrawal becomes the choice of death over life, and the waiting for a new age in which men merely recall past glories--a paradise of nostalgia!

In the Preface to Poems (1853) Arnold provides the justification for this poetry of withdrawal, arguing that it is the "delirium of vanity" for a poet to think that he interprets his age. What Arnold demands here of poetry is that it be a pleasurable presentation of excellent human actions. By 1857, however, with "On the Modern Element in Literature" Arnold changes his view. Here, he requires that a poet actively interpret his age, not run away from it. This demand is reiterated in all of Arnold's later criticism.

David J. DeLaura sums up well the result of Arnold's

new position:

Increasingly, in the poetry written after 1855, Arnold asserts the possibility of a satisfactory reintegration of society and of the human soul....A flaw in this implicitly "progressive" scheme is the fact that almost all readers find the more hopeful assertions of the major later poems--"Rugby Chapel," "Thyrsis," and "Obermann Once More"--less convincingly embodied than the alienated states of the best earlier poems.¹

Arnold was simply better able to interpret his age convincingly in prose than in poetry. Thus, he devoted more and more time to his literary, religious, and social criticism.

It is because Arnold's poetry and prose both changed extensively that there is such a large collection of conflicting critical studies of him. Most of these studies focus on a specific work of Arnold's, and take what is presented there to be his central stance. The problem with this method lies in the fact that Arnold never stopped developing.

An example of this problem can be found in the conflicting views of Vincent Buckley and A.Dwight Culler on Arnold's Romanticism. Buckley, in his Poetry and Morality: Studies in the Criticism of Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis, states explicitly that Arnold "is fully of the Romantic tradition of thought...and yet tempers it with constant recourse to the 'classical' spirit."² A.Dwight Culler,

¹David J. DeLaura, "Introduction", Matthew Arnold: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. David J. DeLaura (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1973), p. 5.

²Vincent Buckley, Poetry and Morality (London: Chatto and Windus Ltd., 1959), p. 25.

in Imaginative Reason argues, conversely, that Romanticism:

asserted, in the famous doctrine of the One Life, that man stands in a loving relation with God, nature, and his fellow men. But Arnold said that this was not true. God does not exist, nature is indifferent, and human beings find it impossible to communicate with one another.³

Here we have two critics at opposite poles of the basic question of Arnold's Romanticism. Depending upon the focus of one's attention in Arnold's works, either view is understandable. Buckley concentrates most especially on a late essay, "The Study of Poetry" (1880), while Culler is treating Arnold's poetry, which was almost all composed from 1843 to 1861. Buckley had only to view Arnold's judgement of eighteenth-century poets in "The Study of Poetry" to realize that Arnold's conception of poetry was, at root, Romantic. Culler, with reference to Sohrab and Rustum (1852-53), Balder Dead (1853-54) and Merope (1856-57), could conclude that Arnold's was not a Romantic conception of poetry.

Douglas Bush argues that:

the main body of Arnold's verse, written during the decade of his twenties, 1843-53, reveals a conflict...between romanticism and classicism....In the end classicism won.⁴

This question of Arnold's Romanticism is important. His 1853 Preface is clearly patterned after Wordsworth's Preface to the second edition of Lyrical Ballads (1800), and is at

³A. Dwight Culler, Imaginative Reason (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 28.

⁴Douglas Bush, Matthew Arnold (New York: Collier Books, 1971), p. xviii.

the same time a critique of it. Arnold's poetics increasingly move away from the classicism of the 1853 Preface to include more Romantic conceptions of poetry in his later criticism. A study of this development, as manifested in both Arnold's prose and criticism, is an important part of this thesis.

J.D. Jump's argument in his Matthew Arnold is an accurate description of the background of Arnold's shift from being primarily a poet to being primarily a critic:

At first he dreamed of an early retirement to Italy or of a diplomatic appointment in Switzerland. Knowing that foreign life was thoroughly congenial to him "and liberating in the highest degree," he longed to withdraw with his wife and children and to devote himself, probably among the Alps, to writing. But by the opening months of 1859 he was convinced that this longing was irresponsible. "I shall work best in the long-run by living in the country which is my own."⁵

Jump is referring to Arnold's desire to, like Obermann, withdraw to the Alps--to write poetry there. After 1859 Arnold wrote little poetry. Convinced that withdrawal was, in Jump's word, "irresponsible", Arnold devoted his time to writing criticism. In it, Arnold was better able to interpret his age and was less liable to withdraw.

A.L. Rowse, in his Matthew Arnold, does not agree that Arnold's longing to devote himself to writing poetry in isolation was "irresponsible". He asks of Arnold:

⁵J.D. Jump, Matthew Arnold (London: Longman's, Green and Co. Ltd., 1955), p. 1.

What is his true original course? There can be no doubt about that: it was to be a poet, he should have sacrificed everything and everybody to fulfil himself as such. It was in composing that he found himself happiest, and even confessed to "cheerfulness"--an indication that here was his real nature.⁶

Such an automatic valuation of poetry over prose criticism, though frequent, is not acceptable. Arnold's criticism, as I will argue in the fourth chapter, is his finest work; it is adequate in Arnold's high sense of that word, whereas his poetry too often is not. Literature and Dogma (1871-73) seems to me to exhibit all of the qualities Arnold demanded of the finest poetry. Here is consummate criticism of life.

I will treat Arnold's works roughly chronologically. Thus, the first chapter will deal with Arnold's most prolific period of poetry writing, 1843 to 1852, concentrating on the development from active involvement to withdrawal in these poems. The second chapter will consist of an examination of Arnold's Preface to Poems (1853), his later poetry (up to the composition of "Thyrsis" [1864-65]) and how these poems manifest the critical doctrine of the 1853 Preface, as well as "On the Modern Element in Literature" (1857), and the Preface to Merope (1857). The concentration here will be on the changes in Arnold's critical precepts. The third chapter will be a study of Arnold's works of the years from 1860 **to 1870**. I will deal with On Translating Homer (1861-62) and Essays in Criticism (1865) and the application of

⁶A.L. Rowse, Matthew Arnold (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p. 68.

Arnold's critical stance to social criticism in Culture and Anarchy (1869). The fourth chapter will cover the years 1870 to Arnold's death, with the concentration on defining Arnold's final critical precepts. I will study Literature and Dogma (1871-73), and Essays in Criticism, Second Series (1888) in this regard.

THE POETRY

" [The Poet] will not run away from nature as he were afraid of her, or depart from life...."
--Ben Jonson

Matthew Arnold devoted less than twenty years of his life to poetry. The most important developments that were to occur in his poetry took place between the years 1843 and 1852. It is this decade of poetry that will be treated in this chapter of my thesis, with the concentration being upon the movement from an active involvement in the world, to detachment and withdrawal in Arnold's poetry.

Matthew Arnold's career as a poet began with promise. In 1840 his "Alaric at Rome" won the Rugby school prize for poetry and in 1843, his "Cromwell" won the Newdigate prize at Oxford. Further, he had the undoubted advantage of being a friend of Wordsworth. Matthew Arnold did write a considerable amount of good poetry. As F.R. Leavis points out, Arnold's poetry was representative of Victorian poetry in general. His response to the conditions of the nineteenth century "does not differ fundamentally from that of his fellows."¹

Arnold continued writing poetry regularly until the composition of "Thyrsis" (1864-65?). With the publication of his first volume of poems, The Strayed Reveller and

¹F.R. Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1950), pp. 21-22.

and Other Poems (1849), Arnold's poems and the poetics they imply had already begun to change. The change involved the very basis of his view of the function of poetry.

One of the earliest statements of Arnold's poetics available to us appears in a letter to his fellow poet and intellectual confidant Arthur Hugh Clough, dated by H.F. Lowry "shortly after December 6, 1847":

Yet to solve the Universe as you try to do is as irritating as Tennyson's dawdling with its painted shell is fatiguing to me to witness: and yet I own that to re-construct the Universe is not a satisfactory attempt either--I keep saying, Shakspeare, Shakspeare, you are as obscure as life is: yet this unsatisfactoriness goes against the poetic office in general: for this must, I think certainly be its end.²

Here we have explicit the two poles of thought between which Arnold's poetry moved. Clearly, he feels that poetry must either solve or re-construct the universe. Indeed, to perform this function in one's poetry is to fulfil the office of poet. However, Arnold obviously reacted against such a criticism of life in poetry.

Arnold's canon of poetry presents a shift from one pole of thought to another. Throughout his canon, his poetry exhibits an acute awareness that, as F.R. Leavis

²The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough, ed. H.F. Lowry (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1932), p. 63.

argues, "the actual world is alien, recalcitrant, and unpoetical."³ Arnold's reaction to the actual world mirrors the shift in thought that I mention. Initially, his poetry expressed a great concern for the world. His was poetry which preached active involvement in the world; in which he did try to "solve" the universe. Indeed, Arnold's early poetry was motivated by a moral ideal of the function of art. Gradually he became less and less able to maintain such a basis for his art. Arnold's poetry increasingly mirrors this growing lack of moral concern for the world. His poetry ceases to be a criticism of life, and often becomes a sometimes moving, but often ineffectual, poetry of withdrawal.

With "To a Gipsy Child by the Sea-shore" (1843?)⁴ we come to a very important early poem. It is the first of Arnold's "mature" works not occasioned by a contest. During a vacation spent partly at Douglas on the Isle of Man, Arnold was taken aback by the "Meditative guise" (1.3) of a gipsy child. The "clouds of doom" (1.4) which "massed, round that slight brow" (1.4) were derived in Arnold's view from a foreknowledge of man's life on earth:

--Thou hast foreknown the vanity of hope,
Forseen thy harvest--....

³F.R. Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1950), p.21.

⁴Arnold, The Complete Poems, (Second Edition), eds. Kenneth Allott and Miriam Allott (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1979), p.22. All references to Arnold's poetry are to this edition.

...that sure pain
Whose sureness gray-haired scholars hardly
learn! (ll. 39-42)

Arnold begins to analyse the gipsy child's knowledge:

What mood wears like complexion to thy woe?
His who in mountain glens, at noon of day,
Sits rapt, and hears the battle break below?
--Ah! thine was not the shelter, but the fray.

Some exile's, mindful how the past was glad?
Some angel's, in an alien planet born?
--No exile's dream was ever half so sad,
Nor any angel's sorrow so forlorn. (ll. 21-28)

Clearly, yet paradoxically, the child's knowledge is derived through participation in this life, and not from a view attainable through withdrawal. Indeed, the child's recognition of the nature of the world through its living in the world is upheld over the passionless vision from the mountain in line twenty-three. The child's knowledge lies at the root of its sadness.

Of great importance to Arnold's later poetry is the introduction here of the idea of the stoic's escape:

Is the calm thine of stoic souls, who weigh
Life well, and find it wanting, nor deplore;
But in disdainful silence turn away,
Stand mute, self-centred, stern, and dream
no more? (ll. 29-32)

Here, the escape into self-centredness is rejected. The child does not choose escape, and it is for this reason that the child's gloom is said to be magnificent; it "enhance[s] and glorif[ies] this earth" (l.20).

As the gipsy child grows older, there is the chance that he will, through prosperity, ignore what he has known of the suffering of the world. The poem ends, however, with

the idea that the child's knowledge is its chain to the world of suffering. It will cause him inevitably to return to the world, to "wear this majesty of grief again." (l. 68)

The gipsy child, so admired by Arnold, represents an ideal of moral involvement in the world. The child's knowledge of the world enforces his involvement in it. Even though the world is a place of profound suffering, one must live in it and not choose the stoic's escape, or the mountain-dweller's withdrawal. The child's insight is gained by living in this world. The choice of escaping the world, either by changing one's opinion of it (from seeing it as a world of suffering to seeing it as a world of ease), or by indulging in the stoic's self-centredness, is shown to be wrong. Escapism is an evasion of man's moral responsibility.

In his next poem, "Mycerinus" (1843-44?), Arnold makes an about face. This poem tells the story of Mycerinus, the just king of Egypt, who has been informed that he has only six years to live. Mycerinus's reaction:

'Not by the justice that my father spurned,
Not for the thousands whom my father slew,
Altars unfed and temples overturned,
Cold hearts and thankless tongues, where thanks are due;
Fell this dread voice from lips that cannot lie,
Stern sentence of the Powers of Destiny.

'I will unfold my sentence and my crime.
My crime--~~that~~, rapt in reverential awe,
I sate obedient, in the fiery prime
Of youth, self-governed, at the feet of law;
Ennobling this dull pomp, the life of kings,
By contemplation of diviner things (ll. 1-12)

makes it clear that he feels that the prophecy is unjust.

He meditates on the nature of his benevolent rule as compared with the tyranny of his father's rule, and concludes that, given the fact that he must die young while his father lived a long life, there is no justice in the world.

Mycerinus begins to question. He asks the gods whether they might be "Not Gods but ghosts, in frozen apathy?" (l. 36). Perhaps, "the great powers we serve, themselves may be/ Slaves of a tyrannous necessity?" (ll. 41-42). Maybe the gods simply are not aware of the "earthly voice" (l. 44) and consequently they dwell "in deaf ease" (l. 47). It makes no difference which of these possibilities is true. Mycerinus can come to only one conclusion:

'Oh, wherefore cheat our youth, if thus it be,
Of one short joy, one lust, one pleasant dream?
Stringing vain words of powers we cannot see,
Blind divinations of a will supreme;
Lost labour! when the circumambient gloom
But hides, if Gods, Gods careless of our doom?

'The rest I give to joy. (ll. 49-55)

He commands that many lamps be built, so that he may retreat "'Into the silence of the groves and woods'" (l. 67) and revel night and day. Mycerinus is determined to prove the oracle false. He plans to turn night into day by revelling throughout each day thus turning six years into twelve.

The change from the gipsy child, to whom Arnold exclaims "--Ah! thine was not the shelter, but the fray" (l. 24), to Mycerinus is critical. Mycerinus acquires the gipsy child's knowledge of the world, and flees. That same knowledge is the gipsy child's chain to the world. Mycerinus's decision

becomes more disturbing as one continues reading the poem. He instructs the people of Egypt:

'Ye men of Egypt, ye have heard your king!
I go, and I return not. But the will
Of the great Gods is plain; and ye must bring
Ill deeds, ill passions, zealous to fulfil
Their pleasure, to their feet; and reap their praise,
The praise of Gods, rich boon! and length
of days.' (ll. 73-78)

Certainly, such advice could lead only to the anarchy Arnold later saw as imminent in Culture and Anarchy (1869).

C.B. Tinker and H.F. Lowry in their commentary on "Mycerinus" cite the fact that critics have questioned the lucidity of the poem:

Complaint has sometimes been made that the meaning of 'Mycerinus' is not clear, since the poet expresses no disapproval of the young king's abandonment of his duty, and seems to sympathize with the devotion of his six remaining years to revelry.⁵

Paull F. Baum, in his Ten Studies in the Poetry of Matthew Arnold (1958), devotes a chapter to "Mycerinus". Baum is aware of the above complaint, but says that "this complaint misses the whole point"⁶ of the poem:

The point is ironic, though the poem may not make it very clearly: that Mycerinus was justly angered and scornful of the ways of Destiny, and justified in trying to thwart them; and lo, what seemed to be a false solution turned out to be salvation.⁷

⁵C.B. Tinker and H.F. Lowry, The Poetry of Matthew Arnold: A Commentary (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 36.

⁶Paull F. Baum, Ten Studies in the Poetry of Matthew Arnold (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1958), p. 17.

⁷Ibid., p. 18.

To support this thesis, Baum cites some very tenuous "facts":

It was plain all along that Mycerinus was no roistering libertine and never could become one. His act was a mad rash protest against divine injustice, no doubt, and a foolish attempt to double his length of years; but he was "Girt with a band of revellers," never one of them. There is nothing in the text which says he was really one of them except the mild statement that "he revelled night and day," that is, ⁸ that he was with the revellers, not of them.

Surely it is not plain that Mycerinus could never become a "roistering libertine." In fact, his reasons for becoming one are clearly delineated in the poem. He feels that his impending death is unjust; that his life of temperance and religious devotion is not being justly rewarded. Thus, he determines to derive as much pleasure as possible from the rest of his lifetime. Although one may question the wisdom of a man's attempting to thwart fate simply because he deems it to be unjust, there is no question but that Mycerinus becomes a "roistering libertine" in the attempt.

Baum's statement that "There is nothing in the text which says that [Mycerinus] was really one of [the revellers] except the mild statement that 'he revelled night and day.'" ⁹ is an unfortunate example of how one can be led to grossly misread sections of a poem in order to justify one's peculiar thesis. That "mild" statement is, nevertheless, a statement; concrete evidence that Mycerinus carried out his plans and

⁸Ibid., p. 18.

⁹Ibid., p. 18.

retreated to the woods, not simply to be among the revellers, but to become a reveller.

The poem originally ended at line 99, before the "It may be" passages. This makes it clear that Arnold originally did not, as Baum thought, intend Mycerinus's action to be ironic. Allott thinks it possible that the final lines were added about 1848 when Arnold was seriously studying Stoicism:¹⁰

It may be on that joyless feast his eye
Dwelt with mere outward seeming; he, within,
Took measure of his soul, and knew its strength,
And by that silent knowledge, day by day,
Was calmed, ennobled, comforted, sustained. (ll. 107-111)

Arnold suggests that perhaps Mycerinus's withdrawal was into the stoic's self-centredness and not into revellry. Thus, he introduces a hint of justification for Mycerinus's action, as it resulted in self-knowledge. Still, this is presented as an afterthought, and merely a possibility, as is emphasized by the repetitions of "It may be".

Baum considers these statements to be "careful understatement[s]"¹¹ thus coming to his conclusion that Stoic self-awareness is exactly what Mycerinus intended to acquire. This may be the most convincing part of Baum's argument, and it depends upon the assumption that for "It may be" one may substitute "certainly." However, given his earlier misreadings, Baum's interpretation must finally be rejected.

¹⁰Arnold, The Complete Poems (Second Edition), eds. Kenneth Allott and Miriam Allott (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1979), p. 31n.

¹¹Paull F. Baum, Ten Studies in the Poetry of Matthew Arnold (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1958), p. 19.

Mycerinus's withdrawal is from a position of moral responsibility to revellry. F.R. Leavis argues that Arnold's poetry is representative of the "other-worldliness"¹² of Victorian poetry, a poetry in which "no protest is worth making except the protest of withdrawal."¹³

Thus, in two of Arnold's earliest poems we have an explicit dichotomy. "To a Gipsy Child by the Sea-shore" and "Mycerinus" present a similar world view. However, the reactions to that world view differ radically, from moral and active involvement in the world to withdrawal and escape from it. Arnold's poetry from this point on presents a gradual shift from the active involvement of the gipsy child, to the withdrawal, stoic or otherwise, of Mycerinus.

Several of the early sonnets are important in this connection. They delineate a reaction to the world which is commensurate with that in the Gipsy Child poem. "To the Duke of Wellington" (1844) presents a world characterized as "the fretful foam/ Of vehement actions without scope or term" (ll. 11-12). Arnold praises Wellington for his actions in this world. He "laboured, but with purpose" (l. 19); was "Laborious, persevering, serious, firm--" (l. 10), thus providing a semblance of order and splendour in the "fretful foam" (l. 11) of history. Wellington possessed an essential insight into life, and he followed that insight with

¹²F. R. Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1950), p. 21.

¹³Ibid., p. 21.

appropriate action; he "saw one clue to life, and followed it." (l. 14) The emphasis here is on action and on the moral importance of active involvement.

With "Written in Emerson's Essays" (1844) we see the precursor of Arnold the social critic. The world view presented here is characteristically bleak, "O monstrous, dead, unprofitable world," (l. 1) yet this very fact motivates Arnold. He is aware that there were in his time, important social critics whose teachings were largely ignored by the public. Arnold's reaction is one of bitter amazement:

That thou canst hear, and hearing hold thy way!
A voice oracular hath pealed to-day,
To-day a hero's banner is unfurled;

Hast thou no lip for welcome? (ll. 2-5)

Arnold is desperately trying to draw the public's attention to these social critics--specifically to Emerson. However, his attempt, like Emerson's, is failing. It is "As though one spake of life unto the dead". (l. 8)

The poem ends with the juxtaposition of what mankind is to what it should be:

Scornful, and strange, and sorrowful, and full
Of bitter knowledge. Yet the will is free;
Strong is the soul, and wise, and beautiful;

The seeds of godlike power are in us still;
Gods are we, bards, saints, heroes, if we will!--
Dumb judges, answer, truth or mockery? (ll. 9-14)

Arnold challenges mankind to, at the least, think about our potentialities in order that we may answer "truth or mockery".

Although the poem ends with a question, that question is clearly rhetorical. Arnold's enthusiasm (and Emerson's)

is not questioned. The masses are simply challenged to see the truth--that we are indeed what "we will". The poem is critical of indifference, of detachment.

Arnold is here socially motivated. He is aware of social problems, and is just beginning to take action in his attempt to call attention to those problems, ultimately to alleviate some of them. The attempt will include most of his prose.

An awareness of some of the pressing problems of the day is apparent in "Horatian Echo" (1847). However, Arnold has no desire to deal with them in any way in this poem, instructing an ambitious friend:

Omit, omit, my simple friend,
 Still to enquire how parties tend,
 Or what we fix with foreign powers.
 If France and we are really friends,
 And what the Russian Czar intends,
 Is no concern of ours. (ll. 1-6)

He is content to allow the "imbeciles in present power" (l. 11) to debate "what the rights of man may mean." (l. 17) Clearly, in this poem Arnold is in no way morally or socially concerned. Here one cannot say that he proposes the physical withdrawal apparent in "Mycerinus". He does, though, propose an isolation from the political problems of his time--from the fundamental question of an individual's rights.

"The Strayed Reveller" (1847-48?) is a portrayal of the two tendencies I have been delineating in conflict within the poet. It tells the story of a youth who had come to join in the Bacchic revels, but who strays into the palace

of Circe. There, he drinks a bowl of Circe's wine, and spends the day dreaming:

I drank, Goddess!
And sank down here, sleeping,
On the steps of thy portico. (ll. 50-52)

He relates to Ulysses, who is now in Circe's palace too, the revelation he received during his vision.

The youth has been told of two modes of perception. The first is the objective view of the gods:

The Gods are happy.
They turn on all sides
Their shining eyes,
And see below them
The earth and men. (ll. 130-134)

While the second is that of the poet:

These things, Ulysses,
The wise bards also
Behold and sing.
But oh, what labour!
O prince, what pain! (ll. 207-211)

The difference in the two modes of perception consists in the fact that while the bards can see the gods' vision as the gods do, they must also "become what [they] sing". (l. 148)

If Arnold accepts the idea of the nature of poetry expounded by the bards as correct, there is a necessary connection between the poet and the world. The poet is a part of the world of which he writes; he cannot both flee and remain a poet. Given the two views of poetry in "The Strayed Reveller", it becomes clear that it is the view of the wise bards, the more truthful world view, that must be upheld over the detached view of the gods.

The youth, intoxicated with Circe's wine, has been

able to see without the pain suffered by the poet:

But I, Ulysses
 Sitting on the warm steps,
 Looking over the valley,
 All day long, have seen,
 Without pain, without labour. (ll. 270-274)

What has the youth seen?

Sometimes a wild-hair'd Maenad--
 Sometimes a Faun with torches--
 And sometimes, for a moment,
 Passing through the dark stems
 Flowing-robed, the beloved,
 The desired, the divine
 Beloved Iacchus. (ll. 275-281)

He has seen the Bacchic revels from which he strayed. His vision is very like that of the gods. The painful view of the poet, the more complete view of pain and pleasure, has not been the youth's. He desires only to continue his painless visions, visions inspired by the intoxicating wine. Arnold is critical of the youth's seeking painless visions through intoxication, and this criticism is achieved by giving us a view of true poetry, the poetry of the wise bard.

We see the two tendencies in Arnold's poetry clearly in the "The Strayed Reveller"; both his conviction that the poet must be of and connected to this world, and his desire to withdraw from the world and attain a detached, painless view of life. We accept the former view of poetry, but we note the desire in Arnold to write the latter kind of poetry.

That desire is apparent in "Resignation" (1843-48), a monologue in which Arnold and his sister Jane (Fausta) recall a journey they made ten years past, and which they are making once again.

Arnold analyses Jane's hopes for a life of action and accomplishment. He characterizes her ambition thus:

To die be given us, or attain!
 Fierce work it were, to do again.
 ... so pray all,
 Whom labours, self-ordained, enthral;
 Because they to themselves propose
 On this side the all common close
 A goal which, gained, may give repose.
 So pray they; and to stand again
 Where they stood once, to them were pain;
 Pain to thread back and renew
 Past straits, and currents long steered
 through. (ll. 1-2, 13-24)

Arnold sees that such action is ineffectual, that:

Not milder is the general lot
 Because our spirits have forgot,
 In actions dizzying eddy whirled,
 The something that infects the world. (ll. 275-279)

Jane's life of action may allow us to forget the pain that is the "general lot" of man, just as prosperity may allow the gipsy child to ignore the pain of life. Action does not, however, make that "general lot" necessarily easier.

Arnold poses as the ideal of human life, "the poet, to whose mighty heart/ Heaven doth a quicker pulse impart." (ll. 144-145)

It becomes clear quickly that the idea of poetry upheld here is not that upheld in "The Strayed Reveller". The poet must live with detachment. He, "Subdues that energy to scan/ Not his own course, but that of man." (ll. 146-147) Indeed, the poet figure "sees life unroll,/ A placid and continuous whole." (ll. 189-190) He sees this, however, as if "From some high station" (l. 164) from which he observes. His message is one of objective detachment.

Fausta questions this view of life. She sees that the poet "flees the common life of men" (l. 212) while she must "abide". Is this philosophy of detachment one we should live by? Arnold proceeds to answer in the affirmative:

Blame thou not, therefore, him who dares
 Judge vain beforehand human cares;
 Whose natural insight can discern
 What through experience others learn;

.....
 Him blame not, Fausta, rather praise! (ll. 231-234, 248)

Clearly the poetry implied by this notion of the poet does not deal with "human cares". It is removed, detached poetry written by a poet who cannot live a life of action, as "He hath not lived, if he lives so." (l. 153)

In "Resignation" the poet's withdrawal is well nigh total. He becomes devoid of human passion. When "Beautiful eyes meet his" (l. 160) he "Bears to admire uncravingly;" (l. 161). The ideal life is "The life of plants, and stones, and rain" (l. 195) which "chance shall not control" (l. 197). As Baum argues, the poet of "Resignation" can accept the "circumstances of life", he simply will not allow "himself to become involved in them."¹⁴

A. Dwight Culler points out that:

When the Revolution broke out in France in February 1848, both Arnold and Clough were vastly excited--though Clough much more than Arnold. The latter was

¹⁴Paull F. Baum, Ten Studies in the Poetry of Matthew Arnold (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1958), pp. 24-25.

unfortunately just then reading the Bhagavad-Gita, and although that poem does not discountenance action (quite the contrary), it does discourage setting one's heart upon the fruits of action.¹⁵

There we have, once again, action set against contemplative withdrawal. It is, as Culler puts it, a "conflict...between contemplation and action, and Arnold takes his stand with the contemplative life of the east."¹⁶

While I am often wary of Culler's judgements, as his Imaginary Reason amounts to the construction of a mythopoeic structure into which Arnold's poetry is neatly pigeon-holed, I think he is right about the poems composed in 1848, the final few poems of Arnold's initial volume of poetry. The two sonnets "To a Republican Friend, 1848" and "[To a Republican Friend] Continued" delineate, I think fairly accurately, the development of Arnold's thoughts in this matter. Both are addressed to Clough, who enthusiastically supported the Revolution.

In the first poem, Arnold shares Clough's enthusiasm:

God knows it, I am with you. If to prize
Those virtues, prized and practised by too few,
But prized, but loved, but eminent in you,
Man's fundamental life; if to despise

The barren optimistic sophistries
Of comfortable moles, whom what they do
Teaches the limit of the just and true
(And for such doing they require not eyes);

¹⁵A. Dwight Culler, Imaginative Reason (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 80.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 80.

If sadness at the long heart-wasting show
Wherein earth's great ones are disquieted;
If thoughts, not idle, while before me flow

The armies of the homeless and unfed--
If these are yours, if this is what you are,
Then am I yours, and what you feel, I share. (ll. 1-14)

Arnold is moved by the problems facing the people, both of Revolutionary France and of England. Unlike Clough, and unlike the people of France, however, a knowledge of these problems does not move Arnold to action.

That he doesn't value action is made clear in the second poem:

Yet, when I muse on what life is, I seem
Rather to patience prompted, than that proud
Prospect of hope which France proclaims so loud--(ll. 1-3)

Action is seen, in fact, to be fruitless. It is prized by those who think that man's actions have a considerable effect on the earth. The fact is, that the "Uno'erleaped Mountains of Necessity" (l. 7) spare "us narrower margin than we deem." (l. 8) Regardless of the action we might take, the day is still far removed when we will solve all problems:

Nor will that day dawn at a human nod,
When, bursting through the network superposed
By selfish occupation--plot and plan,

Lust, avarice, envy--liberated man,
All difference with his fellow mortal closed,
Shall be left standing face to face with God. (ll. 9-14)

We are now involved in a consideration of Arnold's most prolific period of poetry writing (1848-53)--a time of great personal upheaval. He met, left, and revisited "Marguerite" in Switzerland during the fall of 1848-1849.

He published The Strayed Reveller and Other Poems in 1849. Wordsworth died in 1850, and later the same year Arnold's courtship of Frances Lucy Wightman was interrupted. In 1851 he was appointed inspector of schools, effectively limiting his free time, and thus his time for writing poetry. That year, he married Frances Lucy, and the following year he published Empedocles on Etna, and Other Poems (1852).

Little noticed by critics and biographers of Arnold, who concentrate in this period on Marguerite, there is a significant utterance by Arnold about the Hungarian War of Independence. I have argued that Arnold's poetry largely involves a movement from poetry favouring action to poetry of withdrawal. That movement had largely taken place by this time. However, Arnold's "Sonnet to the Hungarian Nation" is a call to action:

Hungarians! Save the world! Renew the stories
Of men who against hope repelled the chain
And make the world's dead spirit leap again!
On land renew that Greek exploit, whose glories
Hallow the Salaminian promontories,
And the Armada flung to the fierce main. (ll. 9-14)

Significantly, this poem was never reprinted by Arnold. It summoned an entire nation to action and implicitly refused withdrawal. I suggest that it was not reprinted because, by the next printing of his poems, it no longer conformed to Arnold's idea of the poetical--an idea more and more characterized by detached withdrawal.

It doesn't matter exactly who Marguerite was. What is important is that she existed, and that Arnold fell in

love with her. How would a man, whose life from 1843 to 1848 involved a movement to isolation, react to falling in love? Clearly the idea of intimate communion with a woman appealed to Arnold for a time. He tells Clough in 1848 that he will linger at Thun "for the sake of the blue eyes of one of its inmates."¹⁷ The following year Arnold returned to the same area to meet Marguerite. By this time, however, Arnold's desire for withdrawal had overcome his love for Marguerite. In "Meeting" Arnold speaks of having to make a choice about Marguerite. He is counselled to "retire" (l. 12):

Again I spring to make my choice;
 Again in tones of ire
 I hear a God's tremendous voice:
 'Be counselled, and retire'

Ye guiding Powers who join and part,
 What would ye have with me?
 Ah, warn some more ambitious heart,
 And let the peaceful be! (ll. 9-16)

Arnold has already made this choice; he does not need counselling. He will retire and remain peaceful. He will resign Marguerite.

Indeed, he has no real choice. Arnold envisions the human condition as being such that there can be no communion between individuals, that each individual is an island.

This is made clear in "To Marguerite--Continued":

Yes! in the sea of life enisled,
 With echoing straits between us thrown,
 Dotting the shoreless watery wild,

¹⁷The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough, ed. H.F. Lowry (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1932), p.91.

We mortal millions live alone.
 The islands feel the encl^as^ping flow,
 And then the endless bounds they know. (ll. 1-6)

We do desire communion, but its attainment is impossible.

We are all, in Arnold's view, separated by "The unplumbed,
 salt, estranging sea." (l. 24)

The mountains of Switzerland were important to Arnold for another reason. They were the mountains into which Senancour's Obermann withdrew. In his poem "Stanzas in Memory of the Author of 'Obermann'" (1849), Arnold expresses succinctly the poles of his reaction to the world:

Ah! two desires toss about
 The poet's feverish blood.
 One drives him to the world without,
 And one to solitude. (ll. 93-96)

Obermann's choice was to solitude:

The glow, he cries, the thrill of life,
Where, Where do these abound?
 Not in the world, not in the strife
 Of men, shall they be found.

He who has watched, not shared, the strife,
 Knows how the day hath gone.
 He only lives with the world's life,
 Who hath renounced his own. (ll. 97-104)

while Arnold's was to the world without, "I in the world must live". (l. 137)

This is not to say that Arnold chose a life of action. He may not have withdrawn from human life physically as Obermann did, yet he has withdrawn in a different sense:

They do not ask, who pined unseen,
 Who was on action hurled,
 Whose one bond is, that all have been
 Unspotted by the world. (ll. 153-156)

He may live in the world along with the few other "Children

of the Second Birth" (l. 143), but he certainly is not of that world. Arnold manages to stay aloof. His is simply a different type of withdrawal.

Empedocles on Etna was the title poem of Arnold's 1852 volume of poetry. J.C. Shairp theorized, during the poem's composition, that Empedocles on Etna was not so "much about the man who leapt into the crater--but his name and outward circumstances are used for the drapery of [Arnold's] own thoughts."¹⁸ This is true in a very real sense.

The two other characters in the dramatic poem discuss the nature of Empedocles's dilemma. Pausanias conjectures that because:

this new swarm
Of sophists has got empire in our schools
Where he was paramount. (I,i, 121-123)

Empedocles "is banished/ And lives a lonely man in triple gloom." (ll. 123-124) Callicles, on the other hand, thinks:

'Tis not the times, 'tis not the sophists vex him;
There is some root of suffering in himself,
Some secret and unfollowed vein of woe,
Which makes the time look black and sad to
him. (I,i, 150-153)

Both men are right. Indeed, "the world is all against [Empedocles], and incredulous of the truth."¹⁹ This wording of Pausanias's argument appears in Arnold's prose analysis

¹⁸The editors's introduction to Empedocles on Etna, Arnold, The Complete Poems (Second Edition), eds. Kenneth Allott and Miriam Allott (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1979), p. 154.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 155.

of the character of Empedocles. There too we have the corroboration of Callicles's view. "[Empedocles's] mind is overtasked by the effort to hold fast so great and severe a truth in solitude...his spring and elasticity of mind are gone: he is clouded, oppressed, dispirited, without hope and energy."²⁰

I have shown that Arnold's poetry, almost from the beginning, was increasingly a poetry of withdrawal from society. When faced with the world's multitudinousness, Arnold more and more proposes withdrawal. Thus, Pausanias's view of Empedocles's problem has its corollary in much of Arnold's earlier poetry.²¹ Further, the view of the solitary Empedocles, for whom the air is "too rare" because of the lack of human companionship²² brings to mind Obermann, whose solitariness Arnold ultimately rejected.

Empedocles did withdraw from society, yet such withdrawal was not necessary for Pausanias. Empedocles instructs him how to live with happiness in society:

He hath his lesson too, and that debt's paid;
And the good, learned, friendly, quiet man
May bravlier front his life, and in himself
Find henceforth energy and heart. (II,i, 7-10)

²⁰Ibid., p. 155.

²¹It is the reason for the withdrawal in "Mycerinus", "Resignation" and "[To an Ambitious Friend] Continued", for instance, and as I hope to show in "Dover Beach".

²²The editors's introduction to Empedocles on Etna, Arnold, The Complete Poems (Second Edition), eds. Kenneth Allott and Miriam Allott (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1979), p. 155.

Clearly, Empedocles's problem is greater than Pausanius's unhappiness:

But I--
The weary man, the banished citizen,
Whose banishment is not his greatest ill,
Whose weariness no energy can reach,
And for whose hurt courage is not the cure--(II,i,10-14)

Empedocles, like Arnold, was compelled to withdraw from the "barren optimistic sophistries" of society. Like the poet of "Resignation", Empedocles isolates himself physically and emotionally from the rest of humanity. Thus:

this heart will glow no more; thou art
A living man no more, Empedocles!
Nothing but a devouring flame of thought--
But a naked, eternally restless mind. (II, i, 327-330)

All that is left is thought, and Empedocles cannot withdraw from his own thoughts. The only escape for Empedocles is the crater of Etna. If one can compare Arnold to his Empedocles, it would seem that Arnold here decides that this most extreme form of withdrawal is destructive.

Arnold shows an awareness of the problems inherent in his poetry of withdrawal in Empedocles on Etna. Empedocles, too, was a poet. He throws down the "laurel bough" (II,i, 197):

I am weary of thee.
I am weary of the solitude
Where he who bears thee must abide--
Of the rocks of Parnassus
Of the gorge of Delphi,
Of the moonlit peaks, and the caves. (II,i, 198-203)

Empedocles has seen that his idea of poetry required solitude. He then asks "can life reach him?" (II,i, 210). Clearly it cannot. Poetry "fencest-him from the multitude" (II,i, 211), so that all he can hear is "the beating of his own heart"(II,i,214).

Here, the poetry of withdrawal is rejected, because it cannot speak of human life.

Of course, the poem ends with Callicles's singing. Callicles rejects the subject of Empedocles as being proper for poetry:

Not here, O Apollo!
 Are haunts meet for thee.
 But, where Helicon breaks down
 In cliffs to the sea. (II,i, 421-424)

Characteristically for Arnold, the poet's proper place is physically removed from society.

There is an important aspect of Arnold's withdrawal which, as far as I have been able to discern, has not been discussed in the criticism of Arnold's poetry. I return to Empedocles on Etna. There, we have the usual Arnoldian view of society in Empedocles's lesson to Pausanias. It is a world of which man "A thousand glimpses wins,/ And never sees a whole" (I,ii, 84-85):

What? hate, and awe, and shame
 Fill thee to see our time;
 Thou feelest thy soul's frame
 Shaken and out of chime?
 What? life and chance go hard with thee too, as with us;

Thy citizens, 'tis said,
 Envy thee and oppress,
 Thy goodness no men aid,
 All strive to make it less;
 Tyranny, pride, and lust, fill Sicily's abodes. (I,ii, 112-121)

Pausanias is instructed to look within himself to determine "what ails him so" (I,ii, 131), and thus gain a cure for those ailments.

What Pausanias will discover is that "he makes his

will / The measure of his rights" (I,ii, 154-155). He should instead learn to expect less from life. This lesson will enable Pausanias to return to society and live with a measure of happiness--"Life still/ Leaves human effort scope." (I,ii, 422-423). The poet Empedocles is unable to take his own advice, and remains isolated.

In "Resignation" there is a similar argument. After outlining the detached isolation of the ideal poet, and holding up that example as being the proper way to live Arnold is challenged by Fausta:

In the day's life, whose iron round
Hems us all in, he is not bound;
He leaves his kind, o'erleaps their pen,
And flees the common life of men.
He escapes thence, but we abide--.(ll. 209-214)

Arnold answers by saying that we should aspire to the position of his ideal poet. At the very least Fausta should resign her "passionate hopes.../ For quiet, and a fearless mind." (ll. 243-244), and like Pausanias not expect too much of life.

Again, the "non-poet" figure, here Fausta, wishes to live in the world and is instructed how to do so. The poet, however, because of his foreknowledge of the vanity of "human cares" (l. 232), remains withdrawn from the world. Similarly, the poet-youth in "The Strayed Reveller" wishes to continue his painless visions from his post on the hillside; to watch the Bacchic revels from which he strayed. All of this indicates something that is of extreme importance in Matthew Arnold. Thomas Arnold had instilled in his son Matthew a very strong

sense of morality in what Warren Anderson calls "the tensely moral atmosphere of Rugby during the 1830's."²³ Anderson argues further that at Rugby, Matthew Arnold learned "the ethical approach, whereby any work of literature--including his own poetry-- was 'to be condemned or admired' according as it seemed dispiriting or fortifying."²⁴ That Matthew Arnold was a moral man, there is no doubt.

Arnold's view of the poet, however, was not derived from the teachings of his father. Rather it was developed from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, from the period of English Romanticism. The solitary contemplative poet was a Romantic commonplace mirrored in Arnold's descriptions of the poet in such works as "Resignation", "The Strayed Reveller", and Empedocles on Etna.

Arnold was aware of the weaknesses of such a view of poetry, and said that he was "bent against the modern English habit (too much encouraged by Wordsworth) of using poetry as a channel for thinking aloud, instead of making anything."²⁵ Much of Arnold's poetry is just that, a channel for thinking aloud. Arnold was so steeped in the Romantic tradition of poetry, however, that, although he could recognize its

²³Warren D. Anderson, Matthew Arnold and the Classical Tradition (Don Mills: Longman Canada Ltd., 1965), p. 9.

²⁴Ibid., p. 9.

²⁵"The Letters of Matthew Arnold", Victorian Poetry and Poetics, eds. W.E. Houghton and G.R. Stange (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959), p. 561.

weaknesses in his letters and criticism, he could not escape its influence for long in his own poetry. As F.R. Leavis argues in New Bearings in English Poetry (1932):

[nineteenth-century poets] had behind them the prestige of the Romantic achievement and found their sanction in undoubted poetic successes...though to cut free from the accompanying conventions and techniques would not be so easy as one might think.²⁶

Arnold's morality made him choose to return to society like his Pausanias and Fausta. The faults inherent in the positions of his poet figures were, however, too great for him to overcome, and Arnold did not have Hopkins's creative strength to enable him to be a reformer of poetry in poetry. Arnold chose to be a reformer of poetry in his criticism instead.

In the composition of "Memorial Verses" (1850) one notes a change in the idea of detachment and withdrawal that Arnold's poetry proposed. It is in this poem that we first see the distinction between withdrawal and disinterestedness. This distinction will be very important in our consideration of Arnold's literary criticism.

"Memorial Verses" is an elegy on Wordsworth's death. However, Arnold's remarks in the poem on Goethe, "Europe's sagest head" (l. 16), are of importance here:

²⁶F.R. Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1950), p. 23.

And he was happy, if to know
 Causes of things, and far below
 His feet to see the lurid flow
 Of terror, and insane distress,
 And headlong fate, be happiness. (ll. 29-33)

These lines seem to be merely a reiteration of the detached stance of much of Arnold's poetry. However, the lines which precede these show that the stance here is not simply one of withdrawal. Arnold says of Goethe that:

He took the suffering human race,
 He read each wound, each weakness clear;
 And stuck his finger on the place,
 And said: Thou ailest here, and here!
 He looked on Europe's dying hour
 Of fitful dream and feverish power;
 His eye plunged down the weltering strife,
 The turmoil of expiring life--.(ll. 19-26)

Here, detachment is the means by which one can attain an objective view of things. It does not preclude action.

This change in Arnold's idea of detachment is subtle but important. Take, for instance, the poet-figure in "Resignation" (1843-48). In many ways he is similar to Goethe in "Memorial Verses":

From some high station he looks down,
 At sunset, on a populous town;
 Surveys each happy group which fleets
 Toil ended, through the shining streets,
 Each with some errand of its own--
 And does not say: I am alone. (ll. 164-169)

The difference consists in the fact that while the poet of "Resignation" simply leans back and observes life, Goethe takes action. He says "Thou ailest here, and here!" (l. 22) As with "Written in Emerson's Essays" (1844), we have here the precursor of Arnold the social critic. In "Memorial Verses"

the idea of detachment is proposed as a way of obtaining a clear-sighted view of life. It is then the critic's task to inform us of our problems. This is the stance of Arnold's critical prose, and is surely different than the stance proposed in most of his poetry.

That difference between disinterestedness and withdrawal is made clearer when one studies a poem which is roughly the contemporary of "Memorial Verses". That poem is "Dover Beach" (1851). A. Dwight Culler argues that:

One would not go far wrong, then, if he took from this most famous of Arnold's poems its most famous phrase and said that this is the central statement which Arnold makes about the human condition; "We are here as on a darkling plain."²⁷

This may well be Arnold's central statement about the "human condition," but it is his reaction to the human condition which is important here. "Dover Beach" epitomizes the withdrawal and detachment that has increasingly characterized Arnold's poetry.

Arnold immediately sets the scene in the poem. It is tranquil, sparkling, beautiful:

The sea is calm to-night.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits, on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air! (ll. 1-6)

His attention is drawn to the sound of the waves breaking

²⁷A. Dwight Culler, *Imaginative Reason* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 41.

on shore:

the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back,
and fling,
At their return, up the high strand, (ll. 9-11)

This "tremulous cadence slow" (l. 13) is associated with "the eternal note of sadness". (l. 14) The association of waves with sadness is corroborated by the allusion to the experience of Sophocles. The waves:

brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery. (ll. 16-18)

The action of waves is similar to that of the tide--both waves and tides ebb and flow. The tide image is applied to the metaphorical "Sea of Faith". (l. 21) At one time this faith "round earth's shore/ Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled." (ll. 22-23) Like the tide, however, faith is withdrawing "down the vast edges drear/ And naked shingles of the world." (ll. 27-28)

Arnold has made extensive use of the action of the sea. At the beginning of the first stanza, "The tide is full," (l. 2) and by the end of the second stanza the tide is clearly ebbing. Arnold can only hear "Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar." (l. 25) The sound of the waves pulling pebbles towards the sea, then depositing them once again inland, is associated with sadness. Human misery is described in terms that again suggest the "ebb and flow" (l. 17) of the waves or of the tide.

The world described in "Dover Beach" is one of

oppressive sadness; a world of great uncertainty in which everything seems to suggest its opposite. Indeed, although the world may seem "So various, so beautiful, so new" (l.32), it "Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,/ Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain." (ll. 33-34) It is a world in which religious faith is in decline. Arnold posits an escape from this situation for himself and Frances Lucy, "Ah, love, let us be true/ To one another!" (ll. 29-30), an escape through faithfulness in love.

It is at this point that one begins to see that the poem is seriously flawed. Arnold immediately points out that there is no love in the world (l. 33), leaving us with one of two conclusions. Either there is no hope for the escape Arnold proposes (because there is no possibility of a love relationship in which to be faithful), or the escape is a total withdrawal from the world, the:

darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night. (ll. 35-37)

It is this latter possibility that Arnold intends to suggest here. F.R. Leavis calls this desire for escape Arnold's "peculiar other-worldliness."²⁸ In general (and this generalization can be fairly applied to Arnold's poetry), F.R. Leavis argues that "Victorian poetry admits implicitly that the actual world is alien, recalcitrant, and unpoetical, and

²⁸F.R. Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1961), p. 21.

that no protest is worth making except the protest of withdrawal."²⁹

The withdrawal in "Dover Beach" is at odds with the application in the poem of the tidal imagery to faith. At this particular moment, Arnold is able to discern only faith's "withdrawing" roar. The use of the tide image should imply that faith, like the tide, will return again, and will be as strong, as "full" (l. 22) and "bright" (l. 23) as it once was. Similarly, sadness, though strong now, should logically lessen. Arnold's decision to withdraw shows that he is unaware of the demands created by the very images he employs. Withdrawal is not warranted.³⁰ In fact, the impulse to withdraw is judged as limited by the very language used to express it.

²⁹Ibid., p. 21.

³⁰Matthew Arnold, in his letter to Clough of February 12, 1853, states:

I remember your being annoyed once or twice, and that I was vexed with myself: but at that time I was absorbed in my speculations and plans and agitations respecting Fanny Lucy, and was as egoistic and anti-social as possible....So entirely indeed am I convinced that being in love generally unfits a man for the society of his friends,....(The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough, ed. H.F. Lowry [Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1932], p. 128)

This sheds a different light on the escapism of "Dover Beach." It seems that it is not the world itself which makes Arnold retreat into faithfulness in love, but rather love which renders Arnold unfit to live in society, and thus causes his withdrawal. Viewing this letter in conjunction with "Dover Beach", it becomes clear that Arnold is confused as to the reasons for such withdrawal. This may account for some of the problems in "Dover Beach."

This movement to detachment and withdrawal had, by this time, become habitual with Arnold in his poetry. "Dover Beach" is a striking example of such an habitual movement. The detachment proposed is not grounded in the desire for intellectual objectivity (disinterestedness). Neither are the reasons given for such a movement adequate. Withdrawal had simply become, by this time, automatic. Arnold by 1851 seems to be using poetry only as a means of emotional relief or as an escape from reality.

"A Summer Night" (1849-52) is roughly contemporary with "Dover Beach", and it was one of the final poems composed for inclusion in Arnold's 1852 volume. In it, Arnold returns once again to the theme of action, and characteristically focuses on the impotence of one's actions.

In "A Summer Night", Arnold delineates two human types, the madman and the slave, and he himself fluctuates between the two. The first type, the slave, includes most men. They:

in a brazen prison live,
Where, in the sun's hot eye,
With heads bent o'er their toil, they languidly
Their lives to some unmeaning taskwork give,
Dreaming of nought beyond their prison-wall.(ll.37-41)

until, "Death in their prison reaches them,/ Unfreed, having seen nothing, still unblest." (ll. 49-50) The second type, the madmen, "Escape their prison and depart/ On the wide ocean of life anew." (ll. 51-52) Although in a sense free, these few men are helpless at the hands of the "Despotic" (l. 57)

trade winds ("trade" again suggesting labour). Although momentarily they are "undebarr'd/ By thwarting signs," (ll. 59-60) they nevertheless have embarked on "some false way." (l. 59) Nature gives no sign to indicate that the way is false. Eventually "the tempest strikes [them]" (l. 62), and these men are seen to be, "Still bent to make some port [they know] not where,/ Still standing for some false, impossible shore." (ll. 68-69)

Some comments from On Translating Homer: Last Words (1862) are important here. Arnold translates a passage from Goethe, who describes those who are "'driven along a false road to a false goal....A great many men waste in this way the fairest portion of their lives, and fall at last into a wonderful delusion.'"³¹ These wanderers are Arnold's madmen. They, at least, enjoy the possibility of happiness, though they too are eventually lost in the "deepening gloom" (l. 71) of the tempest.

Arnold asks, "Is there no life, but these alone?/ Madman or slave, must man be one? (ll. 74-75) The stars serve but to remind one "How boundless might his soul's horizon be" (l. 88), and thus how bound man's soul, in fact, is. The final two lines, "How fair a lot to fill/ Is left

³¹Matthew Arnold, "On Translating Homer: Last Words", The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold, Vol. I, ed. R.H. Super (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1960), p. 173. Referred to as Super, I. The approximate date of composition, rather than of publication, is given in brackets after the titles of Arnold's prose works.

³²Douglas Bush, Matthew Arnold (New York: Collier Books, 1971), p. 55.

to each man still" (ll. 91-92) would seem to be Arnold's declaration, as Douglas Bush argues, "that man's soul has boundless possibilities of serene and fruitful freedom."³² However, says Bush, such "is a hope hardly validated by what has gone before."³³ Nature doesn't comfort us, it serves only to remind us of our limits. We are either madman or slave; our actions in the long run are meaningless.

Thus, in "A Summer Night" we have Arnold's expression of his sense of human action, and his view that action cannot provide comfort or happiness. In "Dover Beach" we have seen a similar movement, that has become habitual, towards detachment and withdrawal. This was Arnold's frame of mind at the time of the writing of the Preface to his edition of Poems (1853). That Preface, "On the Modern Element in Literature", and the Preface to Merope represent Arnold's earliest formal literary criticism. They will be discussed, together with important further poems, in the second chapter.

³³Ibid., p. 55.

THE EARLY CRITICISM

The Preface to Arnold's 1853 volume of poems represents Arnold's first attempt at formally elucidating his poetics. It is an assertion of a classical theory of poetry born out of an age of the romantic poetry of Wordsworth, Keats and Tennyson, and out of Arnold's attempt to break from that tradition.

Arnold's relationship to Romanticism is ambiguous. This is most clear in his relationship to the greatest English Romantic poet, William Wordsworth. That Wordsworth had a significant influence on Matthew Arnold is readily evident. Speaking of Arnold as poet, F.R. Leavis states that, "of the Victorian poets it is Arnold who is known as the Wordsworthian, and if there can be said to have been a Wordsworthian tradition, it is through him that it passes."¹ Similarly, Leon Gottfried, in his excellent discussion of Arnold and the Romantics, is careful to point out that:

Throughout a long and varied literary career, spanning some forty years, Matthew Arnold never tired of admiring, criticizing, imitating and rebelling against William Wordsworth.... Wordsworth...belongs with a group of plastic forces which helped create Matthew Arnold, and taught him that which was to become a permanent part of him.²

¹F.R. Leavis, Revaluation (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1964), p. 173.

²Leon Gottfried, Matthew Arnold and the Romantics (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), p. 6.

Further, Wordsworth, who Arnold ranked as the third greatest English poet (after Shakespeare and Milton), was actually a friend of the Arnolds. It is not surprising that Arnold's 1853 Preface amounted to a critique of Wordsworth's Preface to the second edition of Lyrical Ballads (1800), and if I do not overestimate the importance of Wordsworth's Preface, Arnold's is a critique of Romanticism in general.

In the Preface to Lyrical Ballads (1800), Wordsworth states that:

The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of the imagination.³

Similarly, Arnold claims that the eternal objects of poetry, "are actions; human actions; possessing an inherent interest in themselves, and which are to be communicated in an interesting manner by the art of the poet."⁴ Both agree. Human actions are to be the subjects of good poetry. Arnold demands that the actions a poet selects must be of a sufficiently high quality. They must be excellent. What, though, are excellent actions? They are those, Arnold says:

which most powerfully appeal to the great primary human affections: to those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time.

³William Wordsworth, "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads (1850)", The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, Vol. I, eds. W.J.B. Owen and J.W. Smyser (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 123.

⁴Super, I, p.3.

These feelings are permanent and the same; that which interests them is permanent and the same also.⁵

Still, when Wordsworth gives his reasons for choosing rustic life as the source of actions for his poems, we hear the precursor of Arnold's ideas:

Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential-passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated.⁶

Arnold, who saw that poetry must appeal to "the great primary human affections" and "elementary feelings" here differs in no essential way from Wordsworth, who wished to trace "the essential passions of the heart" and again, our "elementary feelings" in poetry.

It is when Wordsworth says of poetry, "that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling"⁷ that he and Arnold part company. Arnold simply states that "the action itself, its selection and construction, this is what is all important."⁸ Arnold was aware that Wordsworth's

⁵Super, I, p.4.

⁶William Wordsworth, "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads (1850)", The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, Vol.I, eds. W.J.B. Owen and J.W. Smyser (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 125.

⁷Ibid., p. 129.

⁸Super, I, p. 5.

position led to poetry in which action was simply a vehicle by which the poet's feelings were expressed; "a channel for thinking aloud."⁹

This disagreement between the two poets in their pre-faces points to a major difference in their poetic theories. Arnold writes:

The Greeks felt, no doubt with their exquisite sagacity of taste, that an action of present times was too near them, too much mixed up with what was accidental and passing, to form a sufficiently grand, detached, and self-subsistent object for a tragic poem.¹⁰

The operative word for Arnold here is "detached". He desires the modern poet to choose as his subject a "fitting action".¹¹ Such actions are primarily to be found in Greek poetry, and thus are detached temporally. More is required, however. The modern poet must catch the spirit of the Greek models of literature by "penetrating himself with their works".¹²

Wordsworth has a similar passage in his Preface:

it will be the wish of the Poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes, nay, for short spaces of time, perhaps, to let himself slip into an

⁹"The Letters of Matthew Arnold", Victorian Poetry and Poetics, eds. W.E. Houghton and G.R. Stange (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959), p. 561.

¹⁰Super, I, p. 7.

¹¹Ibid., p. 7.

¹²Ibid., p. 7.

entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs.¹³

The difference between Arnold and Wordsworth here is critical. Wordsworth's phrase, "identify his own feelings with theirs," amounts to a placing of the self in every poem, in each situation and every character. Arnold's "penetrating himself with their works" carries no such connotation. Arnold wishes, rather, to lose himself in the ancients--to prefer them to himself.

Arnold recognised that subjective poetry would result from the critical precepts of the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads (1800). Indeed, he had much of the canon of English Romantic poetry as evidence of subjectivism. The Prelude, Wordsworth's long poem upon the formation of his own mind, was published in 1850. Tennyson's In Memoriam was published in the same year; both appeared just three years before Arnold's Preface. They must have been in the back of Arnold's mind when he attacked the following remark by David Masson:

'A true allegory of the state of one's own mind in a representative history,' the Poet is told, 'is perhaps the highest thing that one can attempt in the way of poetry'.... An allegory of the state of one's own mind, the highest problem of an art which imitates actions! No assuredly, it is not, it never

¹³William Wordsworth, "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads (1850)", The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, eds. W.J.B. Owen and J.W. Smyser (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 138.

can be so: no great poetical work has ever been produced with such an aim.¹⁴

Arnold was against such subjective poetry. He demanded detachment, and his poetry increasingly mirrored that demand.

Arnold's explanation of the withdrawal of Empedocles on Etna from the 1853 volume of his poetry was the reason for the composition of the 1853 Preface. He begins by outlining what his intentions were in writing Empedocles on Etna. Arnold "intended to delineate the feelings of one of the last of the Greek religious philosophers."¹⁵ Arnold saw in the character of Empedocles "much that we are accustomed to consider as exclusively modern;"¹⁶ a character in whom "the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced."¹⁷ Clearly, he considered Empedocles to be a subject of sufficiently high quality for a tragedy.

More than just an accurate representation of a man's feelings is required for tragedy:

Any accurate representation may therefore be expected to be interesting; but, if the representation be a poetical one, more than this is demanded. It is demanded, not only that it shall interest, but also that it shall inspire and rejoice the reader; that it shall convey a charm, and infuse delight.¹⁸

¹⁴Super, I, p.8.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 1.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 1.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 1.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 2.

Empedocles was not a good poem because it did not delight; it did not provide "a forgetfulness of evils, and a truce from cares."¹⁹ It is a poem "in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done."²⁰ Instead of giving the reader pleasure, Arnold thought that Empedocles on Etna was painful.

Clearly, Arnold felt bound to stress that poetry had to give the reader a measure of pleasure. Of the poet, Arnold says that:

They do not talk of their mission, nor of interpreting their age, nor of the coming Poet; all this, they know, is the mere delirium of vanity; their business is not to praise their age, but to afford to the men who live in it the highest pleasure which they are capable of feeling.²¹

The movement in Arnold's poetry away from proposing an active involvement in the world to detachment and withdrawal is derived from such a theory of poetry. The need to give pleasure was connected with the movement towards objective detachment; the refusal of the poet to interpret his world.

Arnold strove to attain the ideals of his 1853 Preface in the showpiece of Poems (1853), Sohrab and Rustum (1852-53).

¹⁹Ibid., p. 2.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 2-3.

²¹Ibid., p. 13.

He chose as his subject an action, not his feelings, and that action was ancient (although Persian rather than Greek). Also, there was a concentration on the form of the poem; as revealed in Arnold's letter to Clough from August 3, 1853 concerning the composition of Sohrab and Rustum:

Composition, in the painters sense--that is the devil. And, when one thinks of it, our painters cannot compose though they can show great genius--so too in poetry is it not to be expected that in this same article of composition the awkward incorrect Northern nature should shew itself? though we may have feeling²² fire--eloquence--as much as our betters.

The demand that poetry be pleasurable was one that Arnold took very seriously. Again speaking to Clough of Sohrab and Rustum, he writes that, "I have just got through a thing which pleases me better than anything I have yet done."²³ And that, says Arnold in a quatrain used as a prefatory note to Sohrab and Rustum, is a good indication of the pleasure the reader will derive from the poem:

What Poets feel not, when they make,
A pleasure in creating,
The world, in its turn, will not take
Pleasure in contemplating.

Although he liked the poem less when it was finished, Arnold still felt that it did give a measure of pleasure, as he indicates in his letter to Clough of November 30, 1853:

²²The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough, ed. H.F. Lowry (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1932), p. 139.

²³Ibid., p. 136.

I am glad you like the Gipsy Scholar--
 but what does it do for you? Homer animates--
 Shakspeare animates--in its poor way I think
 Sohrab and Rustum animates--the Gipsy Scholar
 at best awakens a pleasing melancholy. But
 this is not what we want.

The complaining millions of men
 Darken in labour and pain--

what they want is something to animate
 and ennoble them--not merely to add
 zest to their melancholy or grace to
 their dreams.²⁴

Clearly, Sohrab and Rustum was meant to illustrate the
 literary theory of the 1853 Preface, and Arnold considered
 that he had succeeded in fulfilling this aim.

In fact, Arnold was successful to a certain degree.
 The poem's structure, especially in the working up of
 details for the dramatic irony, is admirable, and the poem
 is moving. Further, the consciously Homeric style, especially
 in the use of Homeric similes, serves to add to what
 Douglas Bush calls, the "epic objectivity"²⁵ of the poem.
 It represents Arnold's now habitual escape from the modern
 world; this time to an heroic past.

Commentators argue that the poem is successful because
 of its subjectivity. Lionel Trilling states that "it is
 almost impossible not to find...at least a shadowy personal
 significance. The strong son is slain by the mightier
 father; and in the end Sohrab draws his father's

²⁴Ibid., p. 146.

²⁵Douglas Bush, Matthew Arnold (New York: Collier
 Books, 1971), p. 67.

spear from his own side to let out his life."²⁶ This assertion ignores both Arnold's explicit desire to write objectively detached poetry, and, as Bush argues, the facts of Arnold's relationship to his father:

Since Freudian formulas are exempt from the usual need for evidence, it has been said by numerous critics that "Sohrab and Rustum" owes much of its power to Arnold's unconscious releasing of early antagonism to his father. Dr. Arnold, to be sure, had been more religious and scholarly than poetical, and he had felt prolonged anxiety about his son's lack of studious zeal, but we know of no "antagonism"; and Sohrab feels nothing but devotion to Rustum.²⁷

Still, Trilling may be right. Some of the power of the poem is derived from its subjectivity. Culler argues that:

One may even feel that the poem is as good as it is precisely because it does not take Arnold out of himself but is that very thing which he deploras, "a true allegory of the state of one's own mind."²⁸

It is all the more powerful, however, because of the choice of a moving subject, and the construction of the action so as to make full use of the possibilities for

²⁶Lionel Trilling, Matthew Arnold (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1955), p. 124.

²⁷Douglas Bush, Matthew Arnold (New York: Collier Books, 1971), p. 69.

²⁸A. Dwight Culler, Imaginative Reason (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 207.

dramatic irony. Sohrab and Rustum then, was a self-conscious effort at fulfilling the precepts of the 1853 Preface. It can thus be usefully related to Balder Dead and Merope.

With "The Scholar-Gipsy" (1852-53), Arnold returns to a vein of poetry that was clearly more natural to him. "The Scholar-Gipsy" is a restatement of Arnold's characteristic theme: withdrawal from the world. In a letter to his brother Tom of May 15, 1857, Arnold states that his purpose in writing "The Scholar-Gipsy" was to "fix the remembrance of those delightful wanderings...in the Cumner Hills."²⁹

The source of Arnold's poem is Glanvill's The Vanity of Dogmatizing (1661), and thus the Scholar-Gipsy was:

born in days when wits were fresh and clear,
And life ran gaily as the sparkling Thames;
Before this strange disease of modern life,
With its sick hurry, its divided aims,
Its heads o'ertaxed, its palsied hearts, was
rife--. (ll. 201-205)

The world in which the Scholar-Gipsy was born is contrasted with the modern world. The seventeenth century was almost an ideal age, an age before what Eliot was later to call the dissociation of sensibility. Yet the Gipsy decides to withdraw:

For early didst thou leave the world, with
 powers
Fresh, undiverted to the world without,

²⁹From the editors's introduction to "The Scholar-Gipsy", Arnold, The Complete Poems (Second Edition), eds. Kenneth Allott and Miriam Allott (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1979), p. 356.

Firm to their mark, not spent in other things;
 Free from the sick fatigue, the languid doubt,
 Which much to have tried, in much been baffled,
 brings. (ll. 161-165)

trading in the "days when wits were fresh and clear" in order to passively wait "for the spark from heaven to fall." (l. 120)

Once again here, Arnold is producing poetry of withdrawal. The Scholar-Gipsy explicitly refuses to be actively involved in the world. Given the world view presented in his earlier poetry, the withdrawal in those poems was at least understandable. Here, however, one becomes very critical of the withdrawal, as it seems that the Scholar-Gipsy really has no reason for withdrawing. His world was already ideal. So too, one is critical of the vague, unexplained spark for which the Scholar-Gipsy waits.

In Balder Dead (1853-54), Arnold attempted once again to write a poem which accorded with the theories of the 1853 Preface. He took as his subject a Scandinavian myth. Whereas Empedocles on Etna and Sohrab and Rustum both moved from life to death, Balder Dead starts with death, and is concerned with bringing a dead god back to life. Such an action should be intrinsically more pleasurable.

Balder was a poet, and his poetry fulfilled exactly the requirements of the 1853 Preface:

But they harp ever on one string, and wake
 Remembrance in our soul of wars alone,
 Such as on earth we valiantly have waged,
 And blood, and ringing blows, and violent death.
 But when thou sangest, Balder, thou didst strike

Another note, and, like a bird in spring,
 Thy voice of joyance minded us, and youth,
 And wife, and children, and our ancient
 home. (III Funeral, 137-144)

His poetry provided the required pleasure; a forgetfulness of evil and a truce from cares.

Balder Dead is important, also, because it restates Arnold's desire for detachment and withdrawal from the world. Balder, in fact, sounds very much like Arnold in "Dover Beach":

But even there, O Nanna, we might find
 Some solace in each other's look and speech,
 Wandering together through that gloomy world,
 And talking of the life we led in Heaven
 While we yet lived, among the other Gods. (I Sending, 326-330)

There is a difference, however, from "Dover Beach". There, Arnold wished to escape the world through faithfulness in love. In Balder Dead, Balder wishes to make the best of his situation; he does not wish to escape.

In his final speech the withdrawal is apparent:

For I am long since weary of your storm
 Of carnage, and find, Hermod, in your life
 Something too much of war and broils, which make
 Life one perpetual fight, a path of blood.
 Mine eyes are dizzy with the arrowy hail;
 Mine ears are stunned with blows, and sick for calm
 Inactive therefore let me lie in gloom,
 Unarmed, inglorious, I attend the course
 Of ages, and my late return to light
 In times less alien to a spirit mild
 In new-recovered seats, the happier day.
 (III Funeral, 503-513)

In "Dover Beach", Arnold had wished to escape through love. Here, although Balder's love for his wife is important, it is really an escape from life by way of death. Balder up-- holds death over life here; death is a means to a new heaven.

That new heaven, in turn, is not especially attractive:

But we in Heaven shall find again with joy
 The ruined palaces of Odin, seats
 Familiar, halls where we have supped of old;
 Re-enter them with wonder, never fill
 Our eyes with gazing, and rebuild with tears.
 And we shall tread once more the well-known plain
 Of Ida, and among the grass shall find
 The golden dice wherewith we played of yore;
 And that will bring to mind the former life
 And pastime of the Gods, the wise discourse
 Of Odin, the delights of other days. (III Funeral, 532-542)

That new heaven consists in deriving joy from the memories of past deeds. Balder chooses to remain in the realm of the dead and await this paradise of nostalgia rather than face life.

That choice of death rather than facing life is made by Hoder also. Hoder's isolation from the others is stressed. He is blind, with an "ignorant witless mind" (I Sending, l. 98) and "unforseeing soul" (I Sending, l. 99). It was Hoder who cast the fatal branch, thereby causing his isolation to deepen. His despair leads to his contemplating suicide. One questions whether he wishes to die because he killed Balder and wishes to atone for this act or because of this isolation, his fear of the reproach of the other gods. When he does commit suicide, it cannot be that he wished for death as a means to bring back Balder. That, Hoder knows, is not possible. He must die, then, to escape an unbearable isolation.

The poem ends with Hermod also longing to join

Balder, Nanna and Hoder--longing for death. In the final simile, this death is seen as a freedom from bonds:

And as a stork which idle boys have trapped,
 And tied him in a yard, at autumn sees
 Flocks of his kind pass flying o'er his head
 To warmer lands, and coasts that keep the sun;
 He strains to join their flight, and from his sted
 Follows them with a long complaining cry--
 So Hermod gazed, and yearned to join his kin.
 (III Funeral, 559-565)

Balder Dead, composed according to the critical precepts of the 1853 Preface, represents the most dangerous manifestation of Arnold's desire for withdrawal and detachment. It becomes a desire for death.

Merope was probably composed during 1856 and 1857, and was published in 1858. It is contemporaneous with "On the Modern Element in Literature". It too was meant to exhibit the critical precepts of the 1853 Preface. Tinker and Lowry argue that "Far more than 'Sohrab' or 'Balder,' 'Merope' really illustrates the architectonicé and the strictures against 'fine writing' laid down in the Preface of 1853."³⁰

Arnold's Preface to Merope shows clearly that he was chiefly interested in form:

I desired to try, therefore, how much of
 the effectiveness of the Greek poetical
 forms I could retain in an English
 poem constructed under the conditions
 of those forms; of those forms, too

³⁰C.B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry, The Poetry of Matthew Arnold: A Commentary (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 284.

in their severest and most definite expression, in their application to dramatic poetry.³¹

By choosing from among ancient subjects about which no Greek treatments were extant, Arnold hoped to avoid comparisons with Greek originals which would render an independent treatment of them impossible.

Tinker and Lowry, and Culler both agree with Douglas Bush that the subject of Merope:

does involve a serious conflict of ethical values. Many years earlier, Polyphontes had gained power by murdering the king, Merope's husband, and two of their three sons; he has vainly urged marriage, but she has counted on the return of her surviving son to exact vengeance. He does return, secretly, and is almost killed, in error, by his mother; but he kills Polyphontes and becomes king, with popular support. Merope's problem is choosing between Polyphontes' 'liberal, pragmatic ethic of compromise' and 'the older ethic of absolute values,' in this case the right of revenge or justice. (Culler, pp. 223-224)³²

Arnold felt that the existing treatments of the Merope story by Torelli, Maffei, Voltaire and Alfieri erred in that they did not provide Polyphontes with sufficient motives for his proposal to marry Merope. Arnold's assigning of this motive is seen by Culler to be the source of the poem's failure as a tragedy of the Greek kind.

However, as I argued earlier, Arnold's main concern

³¹Super, I, p. 39.

³²Douglas Bush, Matthew Arnold (New York: Collier Books, 1971), p. 63.

is with the form of the poem, which "conducts us to a state of feeling which it is the highest aim of tragedy to produce, to a sentiment of sublime acquiescence in the course of fate, and in the dispensations of human life."³³ The Preface to Merope mirrors this concern, especially in the long account of the form of Greek tragedy and the function of the chorus in both the Greek works and Milton's Samson Agonistes. This concern with form is outlined most clearly in Arnold's letter to his sister Jane of September 6, 1858. In the letter, Arnold speaks of the temptation he feels towards a total concentration on form:

People do not understand what a temptation there is, if you cannot bear anything not very good to transfer your operations to a region where form is everything. Perfection of a certain kind may there be attained, or at least approached, without knocking yourself to pieces.³⁴

Such was Arnold's aim in writing Merope.

Merope was, according to most contemporary and modern critics, a failure. Arnold must have felt the need to reassess the poetics of his 1853 Preface given the tendency towards death in Balder Dead and the "rigor mortis"³⁵ from which, as Bush argues, Merope suffers. That re-assessment came in 1857, in Arnold's inaugural lecture on

³³Super, I, p. 59.

³⁴The Letters of Matthew Arnold: 1848-88, Vol. I, ed. G.W.E Russell (New York and London: Macmillan, 1901), p. 84.

³⁵Douglas Bush, Matthew Arnold (New York: Collier Books, 1971), p. 63.

becoming Professor of Poetry at Oxford, "On the Modern Element in Literature" (1857). That lecture represents a significant shift in Arnold's poetics. It is a shift in the very basis of Arnold's idea of proper poetry.

In the 1853 Preface, Arnold says of poets that, "They do not talk of their mission, nor of interpreting their age, nor of the coming Poet; all this, they know, is the mere delirium of vanity."³⁶ Yet in "On the Modern Element in Literature," Arnold states emphatically that "a literature completely interprets its epoch,"³⁷ and further, that the finest literatures are:

the literatures which have most successfully solved for their ages the problem which occupies ours: the literatures which in their day and for their own nation have adequately comprehended, have adequately represented, the spectacle before them.³⁸

Arnold now demands that poetry interpret the age in which it is written.

The central question to be asked of poetry, then, is whether "this epoch [is] adequately interpreted by its highest literature."³⁹ Arnold outlines the characteristics of the age of Pericles in Athens, and of the great period of Rome. He concludes that "the supreme characteristic of a highly developed, a modern age is the manifestation

³⁶Super, I, p. 13.

³⁷Super, I, p. 22.

³⁸Ibid., p. 21.

³⁹Ibid., p. 28.

of a critical spirit, the endeavour of a rational arrangement and appreciation of facts."⁴⁰ Thucydides is seen to be a man who possesses this characteristic to the highest degree, and consequently he is "a man of action, a man of the world, a man of his time."⁴¹ Thus, Thucydides is cited as being a writer of the highest quality. Lucretius, although modern, is not felt by Arnold to be adequate:

And how can a man adequately interpret the activity of his age when he is not in sympathy with it? Think of the varied, the abundant, the wide spectacle of the Roman life of his day; think of its fulness of occupation, its energy of effort. From these Lucretius withdraws himself, and bids his disciples to withdraw themselves; he bids them to leave the business of the world, and to apply themselves "naturam cognoscere rerum--to learn the nature of things."⁴²

He suffers from an essentially modern ennui which causes him to withdraw. Lucretius sounds very like the Scholar-Gipsy, and Arnold himself in "Dover Beach". The literature produced by Lucretius is "overstrained, gloom-weighted, morbid; and he who is morbid is no adequate interpreter of his age."⁴³

Surely Arnold must have applied that judgement to himself and to his poetry, and the assessment is a fair one. "On the Modern Element in Literature" is a turning point in Arnold's literary career. It is the birth of Arnold

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 25.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 26.

⁴²Ibid., p. 33.

⁴³Ibid., p. 34.

the critic, and it heralds the death of Arnold the poet.

"Heine's Grave" (1858-63) is a restatement of some of Arnold's ideas from "On the Modern Element in Literature". In that lecture Arnold outlined the qualities of a completely adequate poet. One must ask:

Has the poet the serious cheerfulness of Sophocles, of a man who has mastered the problem of human life, who knows its gravity, and is therefore serious, but who knows that he comprehends it, and is therefore cheerful?⁴⁴

Lucretius was "overstrained, gloom-weighted, morbid."⁴⁵

He lacked essential cheerfulness, and was not therefore an adequate interpreter of his age. Heine, as presented in "Heine's Grave" (1858-63), is very like the Lucretius of "On the Modern Element in Literature". The speaker in the poem realizes that Heine, too, lacks this cheerfulness.

"Bitter spirits, ye claim/ Heine? Alas, he is yours!"

(ll. 46-47). Arnold implies that there is something wrong with such a temperament, in the "Alas" of line 47.

Arnold's comparison of Heine and Shakespeare points out that there is indeed something wrong with Heine's bitterness:

...no grave
By the Avon side, in the bright
Stratford meadows, for thee,
Shakespeare! loveliest of souls,
Peerless in radiance, in joy.
What, then, so harsh and malign,
Heine! distils from thy life,
Poisons the peace of thy grave? (ll. 62-69)

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 35.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 34.

It is Shakespearean joy and charm which Heine lacks, and it is the lack of these qualities in Heine that led him to withdraw from life:

...how oft
Heine's spirit outworn
Longed itself out of the din,
Back to the tranquil, the cool
Far German home of his youth! (ll. 147-151)

This bitter withdrawal, so similar to that represented in much of Arnold's poetry, is finally dismissed at the end of the poem:

Bitter and strange, was the life
Of Heine--his strange, alas,
His bitter life--may a life
Other and milder be mine! (ll. 223-226)

Yet in "Thyrsis" (1864-65), Arnold again composes poetry of withdrawal. Arnold called "Thyrsis" "A MONODY, to commemorate the author's friend, / ARTHUR HUGH CLOUGH, who died at Florence, 1861." Some of Arnold's comments in his letters concerning "Thyrsis" are important in this regard. He wrote to his mother on April 25, 1863 that "The weather was fine but with a detestable cold wind, so that a new poem about the Cumner hillside, and Clough in connection with it, which I meant to have begun at Oxford this week, I could not begin...."⁴⁶ From this letter, one must conclude that the poem is primarily about the Cumner hillside, not about Clough.

Such a view is corroborated in Arnold's letter to

⁴⁶The Letters of Matthew Arnold: 1848-88, Vol. I, ed. G.W. Russell (New York and London: Macmillan, 1901), p. 221.

J.C. Shairp of April 12, 1866:

It had long been in my head to connect
Clough with that Cumner country, and
when I began I was carried irresistibly
into this form...one has the feeling,
if one reads the poem as a memorial
poem, that not enough is said about
Clough in it...still, Clough had
this idyllic side, too; to deal with
this suited my desire to deal again
with that Cumner country: anyway, only⁴⁷
so could I treat the matter this time.

The form into which Arnold was irresistibly carried is exactly that of "The Scholar-Gipsy". Both poems deal with the same area, and they employ a similar stanza form. "Thyrsis" is a reworking of "The Scholar-Gipsy," and it too represents Arnold's longing to relive his Oxford days.

"Thyrsis" differs from "The Scholar-Gipsy" in that it offers hope while accepting the obligation to participate in modern life. It is a vision of modern urban life which opens the poem. That the village and life there changes, is made clear from the outset:

How changed is here each spot man makes or fills!
In the two Hinkseys nothing keeps the same;
The village street its haunted mansion lacks,
And from the sign is gone Sibylla's name,
And from the roofs the twisted chimney-stacks--
Are ye too changed, ye hills? (ll. 1-6)

The search for the answer to that question becomes the search for the "signal-elm." (l. 26) As long as it stands, the Gipsy-Scholar lives, and the hills remain unchanged. Later in the poem, the quest becomes the search for Truth:

⁴⁷ Ibid., Vol. I, p. 380.

And long the way appears, which seemed so short
 To the less practised eye of sanguine youth;
 And high the mountain-tops, in cloudy air,
 The mountain-tops where is the throne of Truth.
 (ll. 141-144)

The elm is symbolic of this elusive truth.

Arnold and the Scholar-Gipsy both flee contact with others; both of them withdraw. In "Thyrsis", Arnold's desire to flee is almost overwhelming. That withdrawal is a desire to go the way of Thyrsis:

Unbreachable the fort
 Of the long-battered world uplifts its wall;
 And strange and vain the earthly turmoil grows,
 And near and real the charm of thy repose,
 And night as welcome as a friend would fall. (ll. 146-150)

This is, in fact, a desire for death. Arnold's musings are interrupted by a band of hunters, and like the Gipsy before him, Arnold runs. Withdrawal leads directly to the signal-elm--to truth. The knowledge that the tree still stands drives away the "fatigue and fear" (l. 236) of the city, and enables Arnold to continue living in the city. Still, that truth is attained through withdrawal.

I have noted the movement in Arnold's poetry from the active moral involvement in such early poems as "To a Gipsy Child by the Sea-shore" (1843?), "To the Duke of Wellington" (1844) and "Horatian Echo" (1847), to the detachment and withdrawal of most of the middle and later poetry.

Arnold's literary criticism begins with the critical justification of poetry of withdrawal in the Preface to

Poems (1853). There, Arnold demanded that the subjects of poetry be ancient actions, with the concentration placed on the form and construction of that action, rather than on the poet's feelings about the subject. Arnold explicitly denied that the poet in any way interpreted his age. This stance was exhibited in Sohrab and Rustum (1853), and was reinforced by the creed of the Preface to Merope (1858).

With the publication of "On the Modern Element in Literature" (1857) Arnold's poetics begin to change. There, Arnold suggests that any adequate literature must interpret its age. Further, Arnold argues that gloomy or morbid poetry could not adequately interpret its age, since a full understanding of one's age brings, in its wake, cheerfulness. Clearly, Arnold was consciously changing the poetics that had allowed for the choice of death over life in Balder Dead (1853-54), and withdrawal from the world in such earlier poems as "Dover Beach" (1851) and "The Scholar-Gipsy" (1852-53). That change in his poetics is notably manifested in "Thyrsis" (1864-65), which is a refutation of the tendency towards withdrawal which we find in so much of Arnold's earlier poetry. Thus, it stands in relation to his earlier poetry much as "On the Modern Element in Literature" (1857) stands in relation to the 1853 Preface. There too, the later essay refutes the tendency towards withdrawal inherent in the poetics of the 1853 Preface. "On the Modern Element in Literature" presents a coherent and convincing argument

for the modification of Arnold's poetics. "Thyrsis", however, is no more than a gesturing towards this new critical creed. It is still knowledge attainable through withdrawal that allows Arnold to remain in the world.

For Arnold, withdrawal had become habitual, and it was a habit from which he could not break in his poetry. As "On the Modern Element in Literature" proves, however, Arnold could break from this habit in his criticism. Thus, he devotes more and more of his creative energy to his literary, social and religious criticism, and from this time on writes very little poetry.

This early indication of a development in Arnold's poetics is important. That development is, as I will argue in the following chapter, antithetical to the development I noted in his poetry. The third chapter will deal with Arnold's literary criticism from roughly 1860 to 1870, with a concentration on On Translating Homer (1861-62), and Essays in Criticism, First Series (1865).

CRITICISM LITERARY AND SOCIAL

Douglas Bush opens his discussion of On Translating Homer (1861-62) with these words:

In these lectures Arnold gave the earliest and fullest display of his very acute perceptions and sensitive taste, both in his choice of illustrative quotations and in his comments upon them....A first reading of the small book gives one, as only rare books do, a real sense of enriched faculties and critical growth, and that sense is only confirmed by rereading.¹

Indeed, On Translating Homer is excellent practical literary criticism constructed upon the solid foundation of Arnold's earlier criticism. The "critical growth" the lectures embody stems from the fact that On Translating Homer is largely a synthesis of important aspects of the 1853 Preface, the Preface to Merope (1857), and "On the Modern Element in Literature" (1857).

Arnold characteristically prefaces these lectures upon the attitude that ancient Greek literature is the finest yet produced, and further, that Homer is the finest poet. As in the Preface to Merope, Arnold is chiefly concerned in On Translating Homer with style--here the style appropriate to a translation of Homer's Iliad. Arnold stresses that "the work of great masters is unique; and the Iliad has a great master's genuine stamp, and that stamp is the grand-style."²

¹Douglas Bush, Matthew Arnold (New York: Collier Books, 1971), pp. 88-89.

²Super, I, p. 127.

The marks of Homer's grand-style Arnold delineates are "rapidity...simplicity of style...plainness of thought...nobility."³

It is Homer's nobility in which Arnold is most interested in On Translating Homer. The ballad-manner, Arnold believes, cannot render Homer because it is not noble. The nobility of Homer's grand-style "is something more than touching and stirring; it can form the character, it is edifying."⁴ Further, those few poets who are able to employ the grand-style "can" in Arnold's view "refine the raw natural man, they can transmute him."⁵ Similarly, Arnold had claimed in the Preface to Poems (1853) that a noble action accurately constructed was able to "inspirit and rejoice"⁶ the reader; it added to the reader's knowledge as well as his happiness. Thus, the 1853 Preface and On Translating Homer are alike in their view of the nature and effect of Greek literature.

In the 1853 Preface, Arnold exclaimed:

An allegory of the state of one's own mind,
the highest problem of an art which imitates
actions! No assuredly, it is not, it can
never be so: no great poetical work has
ever been produced with such an aim.⁷

³Ibid., p. 117.

⁴Ibid., p. 138.

⁵Ibid., p. 139.

⁶Super, I, p. 4.

⁷Ibid., p. 8.

Although Arnold's best poetry is often an allegory of the state of his own mind, he was, as a critic, engaged in a lifelong battle against Romantic subjectivity. Merope (1856-57), Balder Dead (1853-54), and Sohrab and Rostum (1852-53) represent Arnold's attempts at writing "sufficiently grand, detached, and self-subsistent"⁸ poetry. Yet Arnold, as I argued in the second chapter, could not maintain this desired objectivity in poetry. He consistently maintained objectivity, however, in his literary criticism. Arnold argues in On Translating Homer that Elizabethan translators of ancient literatures failed because of their subjectivity:

in dealing with works of profane literature, in dealing with poetical works above all, which highly stimulated them, one may say that the minds of the Elizabethan translators were too active; that they could not forbear importing so much of their own, and this of a most peculiar and Elizabethan character, into their original, that they effaced the character of the original itself.⁹

We find the precursor of this argument in Arnold's 1853 Preface. There, Arnold demands that a poet must:

prefer his action to everything else; so to treat this, as to permit its inherent excellences to develop themselves, without interruption from the intrusion of personal peculiarities.¹⁰

Arnold demanded that the man of letters gain a true sense

⁸Ibid., p. 7.

⁹Super, I, p. 113.

¹⁰Super, I, p. 8.

of his subject through an objective love for it.

One notes in On Translating Homer, though, a re-definition of what Arnold means by objectivity and detachment:

Poets receive their distinctive character,
not from their subject, but from their
application to that subject of the ideas
(to quote the Excursion)

On God, on Nature and on human life,
Which they have acquired for themselves.¹¹

Arnold had to account for the distinctive character of separate poet's works. Poets must indeed bring their personal feelings to bear upon their chosen subject. This modification of Arnold's poetics is significant. His stringent demand for complete objectivity gives way to a more realistic view of the nature of literature. That change is mirrored in Arnold's growing concern with the relationship of manner and matter, rather than simply with matter alone.

Whereas Arnold had demanded in the Preface to Poems (1853) that it was the poet's duty merely to communicate the excellent action he chose as the subject of his poem "in an interesting manner",¹² and by way of that action, appeal "to the great primary human affections",¹³ he now states in On Translating Homer that "the noble and profound application

¹¹Super, I, p. 210.

¹²Super, I, p. 3.

¹³Ibid., p. 3.

of ideas to life--is the most essential part of poetic greatness."¹⁴ It is the poets peculiar rendering and emphasizing of the aspects of his subject (Arnold will argue in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" [1864] that a poet's subject is ideas) which is of primary importance. In Homer's case, it is the grand-style which is important.

Indeed, Arnold's Preface to Merope states explicitly that he was attempting to reproduce the effect that a Greek grand-style would have had on its audience, attempting "to come to closer quarters with the form which produces such grand effects in the hands of the Greek masters."¹⁵ As I stated earlier, the view of the nature and effect of Greek literature expressed in the 1853 Preface and On Translating Homer are similar. There is, however, an important change in the way Arnold conceives of that effect as taking place. In the 1853 Preface Arnold considered that a poem's effectiveness was in direct proportion to the excellence of the action it presented. In On Translating Homer, though, it is the grand-style, not the action described which is morally edifying. Homer's great achievement, Arnold argues, was that he was able to employ the grand-style even in describing everyday occurrences. Grand-style has to do both with form and content, but whereas Arnold had concentrated most especially

¹⁴Super, I, p. 211.

¹⁵Super, I, p. 39.

on content in the 1853 Preface, he now begins to treat form as being of equal importance.

While his concentration in his early criticism is upon ancient literature, Arnold passes some telling judgments upon contemporary England and Europe. In "On the Modern Element in Literature" (1857) he states that "the supreme characteristic of a highly developed, a modern age-- [is] the manifestation of a critical spirit."¹⁶ This critical spirit, Arnold felt, was lacking in England. Speaking of English literature in On Translating Homer, he remarks that:

regarded not as an object of mere literary interest-- but as a living intellectual instrument, English [literature] ranks only third in European effect and importance among the literatures of Europe; it ranks after the literatures of France and Germany. Of these two literatures, as of the intellect of Europe in general, the main effort, for now many years, has been a critical effort; the endeavour, in all branches of knowledge, to see the object as in itself it really is.¹⁷

The lack of critical effort in nineteenth-century England was reflected in what Arnold saw as the provincialism of English literature. Essays in Criticism (1865), by its very contents, proposed to tear away some of the insulation which separated English literature from a more vital, more modern European literature. All of the essays (with the exception of "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" and "The Literary Influence of Academies") deal with non-English subjects. In addition, Arnold specifically compares

¹⁶Super, I, p. 25.

¹⁷Super, I, p. 140.

several European authors with their English "equivalents". Thus, Maurice de Guérin is very like Keats, Heinrich Heine is like Byron (and somewhat like Shelley), and Joubert is like Coleridge. Clearly, Arnold is attempting to broaden the Englishman's view of literature by way of the comparison of familiar authors with their foreign counterparts.

Chronologically, the first of these essays is "Maurice de Guérin" (1862). Guérin was, and has remained a minor literary character. What, then, provoked Arnold to devote such a lengthy essay to him? A clue is to be found in Arnold's translations of Maurice de Guérin's works and letters. Guérin, like the characters in many of Arnold's most important poems, withdraws from society:

The longer I live, and the clearer I
discern between true and false in
society, the more does the inclination
to live, not as a savage or misanthrope,
but as a solitary man on the frontiers
of society, on the outskirts of the world,
gain strength and grow in me.¹⁸

One can see that Arnold saw in Maurice de Guérin a kindred spirit.

Maurice de Guérin's literary criticism too has close affinities with Arnold's own cherished precepts. Guérin's judgement of the French Romantic school of literature:

that youthfull literature which has put
forth all its blossom prematurely, and
has left itself a helpless prey to the
returning frost, stimulated as it has
been by the burning sun of our century,

¹⁸Super, III, p. 31.

by this atmosphere charged with a perilous heat, which has overhastened every sort of development, and will most likely reduce to a handful of grains the harvest of our age.¹⁹

is very similar to Arnold's judgement of the English Romantic school in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time":

It has long seemed to me that the burst of creative activity in our literature, through the first quarter of this century, had about it in fact something premature; and that from this cause its productions are doomed, most of them, in spite of the sanguine hopes which accompanied and do still accompany them, to prove hardly more lasting than the productions of far less splendid epochs.²⁰

Indeed, both Guérin and Arnold felt it necessary to invoke "a classical restoration".²¹

"Maurice de Guérin" is most noteworthy, however, in that it explains further what Arnold had meant in "On the Modern Element in Literature", by his comment that "a literature completely interprets its epoch."²² Arnold outlines two kinds of interpretation in poetry, "Poetry is the interpretress of the natural world, and she is the interpretress of the moral world."²³

Arnold describes in a fair amount of detail how poetry can be the "interpretress of the natural world."

¹⁹Ibid., p. 21.

²⁰Super, III, p. 262.

²¹Super, III, p. 21.

²²Super, I, p. 22.

²³Super, III, p. 30.

Guérin was able to "make magically near and real the life of Nature, and man's life only so far as it is a part of that nature".²⁴ Arnold defines further the characteristics of this (Guérin's) poetical faculty:

This faculty always has for its basis a peculiar temperament, an extraordinary delicacy of organization and susceptibility to impressions; in exercising it the poet is in a great degree passive (Wordsworth thus speaks of a wise passiveness); he aspires to be a sort of human Æolian harp, catching and rendering every rustle of Nature.... He goes into religion and out of religion, into society and out of society, not from the motives which impel men in general, but to feel what it is all like.²⁵

Arnold's view of Guérin's poetry is spoken in the terms of English romanticism: the aspiration to be what by this time had become a romantic commonplace, an Æolian harp which renders "every rustle of Nature".

This "natural" interpretation is later contrasted with "moral" interpretation. Arnold states that Guérin, because he is strictly a poet of the former:

is thus hardly a moral agent, and, like the passive and ineffectual Uranus of Keats's poem, he may say:

..."I am but a voice;
My life is but the life of winds and tides;
No more than winds and tides can
I avail."²⁶

Because of his preponderance of "natural magic"²⁷ and his

²⁴ Ibid., p. 30.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 31.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 31.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 33.

lack of "moral profundity",²⁸ Guérin is described by Arnold as being "morbid and excessive".²⁹ Arnold was increasingly demanding that a poet actively interpret his age, not run away from it.

This development in Arnold's prose, from arguing in the 1853 Preface that poets do not interpret their age, to the demand that poetry be the "interpretress" of the world in "Maurice de Guérin" (1862) is important. It is, in fact, antithetical to the development I noted in his poetry. Arnold's earliest poetry preached active involvement in, and a full knowledge of, life. His middle and later poetry is poetry of withdrawal from his world. Guérin's poetry was like Arnold's middle and later poetry. Thus Arnold says of Guérin that "it is not in this temperament that the active virtues have their rise. On the contrary, this temperament, considered in itself alone, indisposes for this discharge of them."³⁰ Guérin's poetry could not adequately interpret man's life because it proposed withdrawal from part of that life.

Guérin is, therefore, not a great poet. "He lacked" argues Arnold, "that essential moral profundity, the expressing, with inspired conviction, the ideas and laws of the inward world of man's moral and spiritual nature."³¹ Thus

²⁸Ibid., p. 33.

²⁹Ibid., p. 32.

³⁰Ibid., p. 32.

³¹Ibid., p. 33.

he will be remembered chiefly for the outward form, the "magic of expression"³² of his poetry rather than for his matter. Arnold's sense of the critical effort that he saw as lacking in Victorian England clearly involved a thorough interpretation of his age and of his country. Guérin's poetry (and Keats's) reflects for Arnold such a lack of critical effort.

Heinrich Heine exhibits, as does his great predecessor Goethe, the critical effort which Arnold believed was required in his own time. Arnold argues in his essay "Heinrich Heine" (1863) that:

Heine is noteworthy, because he is the most important German successor and continuator of Goethe in Goethe's most important line of activity. And which of Goethe's lines of activity is this?--His line of activity as 'a soldier in the war of liberation of humanity.'³³

Clearly, Heine was in the highest degree socially motivated in Arnold's view--driven to somehow liberate humanity.

Heine's battle for the liberation of humanity included a concern with interpreting his age. The terms of Arnold's argument show that Arnold was himself involved in a similar process:

Modern times find themselves with an immense system of institutions, established facts, accredited dogmas, customs, rules, which have come to them from times not modern. In this system their life has to be carried forward; yet they have a sense that

³²Ibid., p. 35.

³³Super, III, p. 108.

this system is not of their own creation, that it by no means corresponds exactly with the wants of their actual life, that, for them, it is customary, not rational. The awakening of this sense is the awakening of the modern spirit.³⁴

Such was Goethe's aim in life--to make the people aware of "prescription and routine",³⁵ and to make the people more accessible to ideas, more ready "to move and to alter at the bidding (real or supposed) of reason."³⁶ His was a battle against Philistinism. Arnold outlines the meaning of this term as follows:

Philistine must have originally, meant, in the mind of those who invented the nickname, a strong, dogged, unenlightened opponent of the chosen people, of the children of the light...humdrum people, slaves to routine, enemies to light; stupid and oppressive, but at the same time very strong.³⁷

Arnold argues that Goethe realized the liberation of the Philistines, "though sure, is undoubtedly slow; he came, as Heine says, to be eighty years old in thus working it, and at the end of that time the old Middle-Age machine was still creaking on".³⁸ Heine could not abide this slow, seemingly ineffectual process. Arnold argues that Heine's "counsel was for open war. Taking that terrible modern weapon, the pen, in his hand, he passed the remainder of his life in one fierce battle...a life and death battle

³⁴Ibid., p. 109.

³⁵Ibid., p. 112.

³⁶Ibid., p. 112.

³⁷Ibid., p. 112.

³⁸Ibid., p. 111.

with Philistinism."³⁹

Arnold is quick to point out that Heine's "direct political action was null, and this is neither to be wondered at nor regretted; direct political action is not the true function of literature."⁴⁰ Neither does Arnold here demand complete detachment. As I argued earlier, Arnold's idea of proper detachment and objectivity changed with On Translating Homer. In "Heinrich Heine" Arnold describes exactly the ideal stance for the man of letters. Quoting Goethe, Arnold argues that "'man must live from within outwards, so the artist must work from within outwards, seeing that, make what contortions he will, he can only bring to light his own individuality."⁴¹ Arnold notes that Goethe:

puts the standard, once and for all,
inside every man instead of outside
him; when he is told, such a thing
must be so, there is immense authority
and custom in favour of its being so,
it has been held to be so for a thousand
years, he answers with Olympian
politeness, 'But is it so? is it so to me?'⁴²

Such a stance can hardly be called objective detachment.

We can get a clearer view of the implications of this stance by way of a comparison. Arnold's Empedocles had

³⁹Ibid., p. 111.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 111.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 110.

⁴²Ibid., p. 110.

instructed Pausanias in Empedocles on Etna:

And we feel, day and night,
The burden of ourselves--
Well, then, the wiser wight
In his own bosom delves
And asks what ails him so, and gets
what cure he can.

.....
Once read thy own breast right,
And thou hast done with fears;
Man gets no other light,
Search he a thousand years.
Sink in thyself! there ask what ails
thee, at that shrine. (I,ii, 127-131, 142-146)

Empedocles's counsel to Pausanias was intended to allow Pausanias to live as happily as possible in society. The stance Empedocles suggests is much like that of Goethe.

There is, however, an important difference. Goethe's stance is truly "subversive of the foundations on which the old European order rested."⁴³ His is the stance of the reformer who wishes to change the old order. The stance Empedocles suggests to Pausanias is meant merely to allow Pausanias to live happily within that old order. By way of his stance, Goethe becomes "radically detached from [the old European] order",⁴⁴ and passionately attached to a new order of ideas.

Arnold argues, citing a quotation by Heine, that Heine misunderstood Goethe:

The fashionable coating of ice melts off
from my heart, my soul quivers and my eyes
burn, and that is a disadvantageous state
of things for a writer, who should control
his subject-matter and keep himself beautifully

⁴³Ibid., p. 110.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 110.

objective, as the artistic school would have us, and as Goethe has done.⁴⁵

Heine considered Goethe's detachment to be too complete, and that he was thus passionless. Arnold argues that Heine therefore discarded Goethe's "gradual process of liberation from the old order of things"⁴⁶ in 1830 in favour of a more active war against that old order.

By 1831, however, a change in Heine's literary stance takes place. The terms with which Arnold describes Heine's new position ties it clearly with Goethe's stance:

After 1831, his hopes of soon upsetting the German Governments had died away, and his propagandism took another, a more truly literary character. It took the character of an intrepid application of the modern spirit to literature. To the ideas with which the burning questions of modern life filled him he made all his subject-matter minister.⁴⁷

The application of modern ideas to life was what Arnold demanded of poetry in On Translating Homer, and that demand is reiterated here. Heine's subject matter was controlled in order to emphasize those essentially modern ideas. It was Goethe's control of his subject-matter that Heine commented upon negatively in 1830. By 1831, Heine had adopted at least this aspect of Goethe's stance.

Arnold's demand that modern ideas be applied to life

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 109.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 111.

⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 118-119.

in great literature causes him to posit a curious valuation of recent English Romantic poets. Shelley and Byron, argues Arnold, attempted "to apply freely the modern spirit"⁴⁸ in their work. Thus, concludes Arnold, they belong to the "main current of the literature of modern epochs."⁴⁹ On the other hand, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott and Keats:

do not belong to that which is the main current of the literature of modern epochs, they do not apply modern ideas to life; they constitute, therefore, minor currents, and all other literary work of our day, however popular, which has the same defect, also constitutes but a minor current.⁵⁰

German Philistinism, the particular form of Philistinism against which Heine battled, is seen by Arnold to be the "feeble and hesitating application of modern ideas to life."⁵¹ Thus, Arnold sees in Heine an ally, one who is battling against the same enemy as Arnold himself was.

Heine, like Guérin, is said to lack "moral deliverance".⁵² Heine was able to tear down the old order, but he could only replace that order with:

his crying faults,--his intemperate susceptibility, his unscrupulousness in passion, his inconceivable attacks on his friends, his want of generosity, his sensuality, his incessant mocking.... he was profoundly disrespectable; and not even

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 121.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 122.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 122. This valuation, as we will see in chapter four, is altered radically in Essays in Criticism (Second Series).

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 122.

⁵² Ibid., p. 132.

the merit of not being a Philistine can make up for a man's being that.⁵³

What Heine lacks is Homeric nobility. Thus, concludes Arnold, "He is not an adequate interpreter of the modern world."⁵⁴

"Maurice de Guérin" and "Heinrich Heine" both deal with authors who Arnold thought lacked moral profundity and the capacity of moral deliverance. In "Marcus Aurelius" (1863), Arnold treats a man who does not lack the capacity of this essential part of any adequate interpretation of modern life. Arnold begins his essay with a discussion of morality:

the object of systems of morality is to take possession of human life, to save it from being abandoned to passion or allowed to drift at hazard, to give it happiness by establishing it in the practice of virtue; and this object they seek to attain by prescribing to human life fixed principles of action, fixed rules of conduct.⁵⁵

The conception of moral ideas rigorously followed as moral rules has a limited application--it is "for the sage only. The mass of mankind have neither force of intellect enough to apprehend [moral rules] clearly as ideas, nor force of character enough to follow them strictly as laws."⁵⁶

Arnold argues that, in order for the mass of mankind to be able to follow a system of morality, inspiration or emotion must be added to that system of morals. Otherwise,

⁵³Ibid., pp. 131-132.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 132.

⁵⁵Super, III, p. 133.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 134.

and this I suspect is the case in Arnold's view of Heine, mankind is oppressed by a "sense of labour and sorrow"⁵⁷ which paralyses him and renders him unable to achieve his goal--to live by that system of morality.

Arnold notes that:

The paramount virtue of religion is, that it has lighted up morality; that it has supplied the emotion and inspiration needful for carrying the sage along the narrow way perfectly, for carrying the ordinary man along it at all.⁵⁸

Morality, and some aspects of religion as defined above, are, according to Arnold, brought together in the writings of Marcus Aurelius:

That which gives to the moral writings of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius their peculiar character and charm, is their being suffused and softened by something of this very sentiment whence Christian morality draws its best power.⁵⁹

Thus, Aurelius is seen by Arnold as a writer who is morally profound. He is therefore both a powerful and valuable author. Marcus Aurelius prescribes action, not withdrawal and escape, "which every sound nature must recognise as right, and the motives he assigns are motives which every clear reason must recognise as valid."⁶⁰

Essays in Criticism (1865) explores and defines

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 134.

⁵⁸Ibid., pp. 134-135.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 136.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 156.

the ways in which poetry interprets life. The earliest of this collection of essays, "Maurice de Guérin" (1862), set out the idea that there are two ways in which literature interprets, and the succeeding essays define more and more exactly what Arnold meant by saying that great poetry must interpret both the natural and the moral world. In earlier essays, Arnold had been quick to state the importance of criticism to society. In "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864) Arnold goes to great lengths to justify this claim.

Arnold, in fact, begins "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" with a quotation from On Translating Homer which had elicited many objections. There, Arnold had stated that "of the intellect of Europe in general, the main effort, for now many years, has been a critical effort,"⁶¹ and further, that the lack of this critical effort in England impaired the "power and value"⁶² of English literature. Arnold feels compelled to answer these objections by determining "what real service at any given moment the practice of criticism either is or may be made to [one's] own mind and spirit, and to the minds and spirits of others."⁶³

Arnold's argument begins with a concession to the objectors, an admission that "the critical power is of a lower rank than the creative."⁶⁴ Arnold quickly points out,

⁶¹Super, III, p. 258.

⁶²Ibid., p. 258.

⁶³Ibid., p. 260.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 260.

however, that the creative faculty may be unprofitably employed--it can go awry just as criticism can. Further, says Arnold, the exercising of the creative faculty in producing great works of art "is not at all epochs and under all conditions possible"⁶⁵ and the creative effort in these epochs is spent in vain. The effort, argues Arnold, could be more profitably employed in rendering great works possible. The effort required is, in Arnold's view, critical.

As proof of this, Arnold defines the creative process involved in literature:

The creative power works with elements, with materials....the elements with which the creative power works are ideas; the best ideas, on every matter which literature touches, current at the time.⁶⁶

The elements with which a poet must work are given. Arnold argues that the "grand work of literary genius is a work of synthesis and exposition, not of analysis and discovery",⁶⁷ that literary genius "must find itself amidst the order of ideas, in order to work freely",⁶⁸ and further that these "elements are not in its own control."⁶⁹

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 260.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 260.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 261.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 261.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 261.

These appointed elements--ideas--"are more within the control of the critical power."⁷⁰ The critical effort "to see the object as in itself it really is"⁷¹ creates "an intellectual situation of which the creative power can profitably avail itself. It tends...to make the best ideas prevail."⁷² Surely, the literature composed with these "best ideas" is the most adequate:

everyone can see that a poet, for instance, ought to know life and the world before dealing with them in poetry; and life and the world being in modern times very complex things, the creation of a modern poet, to be worth much, implies a great critical effort behind it; else it must be a comparatively poor, barren, and short-lived affair.⁷³

Thus, the existence of a previous critical effort is implied by the existence of a great creative age, like that of the Greece of Pindar and Sophocles, or the England of Shakespeare.

Having convincingly established the importance of criticism, Arnold devotes the bulk of the essay to defining the ideal characteristics of criticism. These definitions all had their birth in his earlier criticism--we have seen them all before. The most important characteristic of criticism is "disinterestedness".⁷⁴ The shift in Arnold's

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 261.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 261.

⁷²Ibid., p. 261.

⁷³Ibid., pp. 261-262.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 270.

idea of the proper critical stance which I noted in "Heinrich Heine" is finally given a label. It is this disinterestedness which allows the critic "the free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches."⁷⁵

The definition of disinterestedness becomes clearer as Arnold continues. He argues that:

criticism, real criticism, is essentially the exercise of [curiosity]. It obeys an instinct prompting it to try to know the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics, and everything of the kind; and to value knowledge and thought as they approach this best, without the intrusion of any other considerations whatever.⁷⁶

Disinterestedness carries with it the necessity of valuing one set of ideas over another. Yet objectivity does not allow for such value judgements.

In the same vein, Arnold argues that criticism must remain in "the pure intellectual sphere",⁷⁷ and leave all questions of practical consequences and applications. Thus Arnold noted approvingly in the Heine essay that Heine's political activity was null. As Arnold argued at the beginning of "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time", the proper sphere of criticism is ideas. The intrusion of any sort of practical considerations implies that the critic had ulterior motives--that he was not disinterested.

Arnold's battle against English narrowness appears

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 270.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 268.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 271.

in this essay as well. Arnold cites the smug comments of a number of Government officials concerning the superiority of the English as a race, and England as a country. It is just this smugness which Arnold is fighting. He argues that criticism's best spiritual work is:

to keep man from a self-satisfaction which is retarding and vulgarizing, to lead him towards perfection, by making his mind dwell upon what is excellent in itself, and the absolute beauty and fitness of things.⁷⁸

The juxtaposition of those officials' self-satisfied comments with the disturbing "Wragg" newspaper clippings is an excellent stroke in this regard.

The most important social application of the critical stance which was developing through Essays in Criticism (1864), and which was most completely expounded in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864), is Culture and Anarchy (1869). Here, we find a reiteration of the demand for disinterestedness, and a new affirmation of the need for action.

Almost immediately, in the first chapter of Culture and Anarchy, "Sweetness and Light", Arnold outlines the now familiar critical stance of Essays in Criticism, the:

desire after the things of the mind simply for their own sakes and for the pleasure of seeing them as they are,--which is, in an intelligent being, natural and laudable. Nay, and the very desire to see things as they are implies a balance and regulation of mind which is not often

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 271.

attained without fruitful effort.⁷⁹

This attempt to see things as they really are is exactly the disinterestedness Arnold proposed in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time".

As he continues with his argument, however, it becomes increasingly clear that Arnold considers that culture requires more than "the sheer desire to see things as they are".⁸⁰

There must be a social-moral concern behind that disinterested quest to see which must show forth:

all the love of our neighbour, the impulses towards action, help, and beneficence, the desire for removing human error, clearing human confusion, and diminishing human misery, the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it--.⁸¹

Arnold concludes that culture, then, "moves by the force, not merely or primarily of the scientific passion for pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social passion for doing good."⁸² In short, culture is the achievement of an active interpretation of the natural and moral world. Arnold quotes a phrase from Bishop Wilson which, for him, defines exactly the aim of Culture: "To make reason and the will of God prevail!"⁸³

⁷⁹Super, V, p. 91.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 91.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 91.

⁸²Ibid., p. 91.

⁸³Ibid., p. 91.

As I noted earlier, Arnold's emphasis in Essays in Criticism (1865) was on disinterestedness, the endeavour to see the object as in itself it really is. In fact, Arnold clearly felt compelled to stress this view. In "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" he theorized that an age of disinterested criticism necessarily precedes a creative age. Arnold applies similar reasoning to culture in "Sweetness and Light":

the moment, I say, culture is considered not merely as the endeavour to see and learn [the will of God], but as the endeavour, also, to make it prevail, the moral, social, and beneficent character of culture becomes manifest. The mere endeavour to see and learn the truth for our own personal satisfaction is indeed a commencement⁸⁴ for making it prevail, a preparing the way....

Just as disinterested criticism could prepare the way for a creative age by providing the interpretation of life which creative literature required, so for culture, "acting and instituting are of little use, unless we know how and what we ought to act and institute."⁸⁵

In Culture and Anarchy, Arnold concentrates on action rather than on disinterestedness. This concentration, given all of the earlier poetry of withdrawal, and given the early poetics of objective detachment, is an important development in Matthew Arnold's criticism. Compare, for example, Arnold's argument in "Heinrich Heine" that the:

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 93.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 92.

enthusiast for the idea, for reason, values reason, the idea, in and for themselves; he values them, irrespectively of the practical conveniences which their triumph may obtain for him; and the man who regards the possession of these practical conveniences as something sufficient in itself, something which compensates for the absence or surrender of the idea, of reason, is, in his eyes, a Philistine.⁸⁶

with the following statement from "Sweetness and Light":

Perfection, as culture conceives it, is not possible while the individual remains isolated. The individual is required, under pain of being stunted and enfeebled in his own development if he disobeys, to carry others along with him in his march towards perfection, to be continually doing all he can to enlarge and increase the volume of the human stream sweeping thither ward.⁸⁷

The change is clear--Arnold now advocates social action, the moral action he upheld in much of his earliest poetry.

Arnold argues that, in general, Europe was becoming increasingly open to enlightenment, and thus to moral action. His argument is phrased in terms echoing "Heinrich Heine":

But now, the iron force of adhesion to the old routine,--social, political, religious, --has wonderfully yielded; the iron force of exclusion of all which is new has wonderfully yielded.⁸⁸

Arnold sees, however, that such a movement can lead to a

⁸⁶Super, III, p. 113.

⁸⁷Super, V, p. 94. This is exactly what Arnold praises his father for in "Rugby Chapel" (1857-60?).

⁸⁸Ibid., p. 93.

new danger--underrating the importance of order, and following "action for its own sake without troubling...to make reason and the will of God prevail therein."⁸⁹ In the movement towards democracy, Arnold sees the danger of underrating that central order. It is a movement which demands for the individual the freedom to do as he likes, to act for the sake of action. The second chapter of Culture and Anarchy, "Doing as One Likes", deals specifically with this problem, positing a social organization based upon reason, the expression of our disinterested best selves, rather than upon a class hierarchy as a means of avoiding the threat of anarchy.

Culture and Anarchy is surely written from a confident, well considered critical stance. This stance, developed in Arnold's literary criticism of the 1860's is next brought to bear upon fundamental religious problems. In the fourth chapter of my thesis, I will discuss "Literature and Dogma" (1873)--Arnold's most important religious work--in this regard. As well, I will consider the second series of Essays in Criticism (1888), and the relationship between these later religious and critical works and his later poetry.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 93.

CRITICISM RELIGIOUS AND LITERARY

Back in 1852, while Arnold was developing the critical creed of the Preface to Poems (1853), he wrote to Clough:

modern poetry can only subsist by its contents: by becoming a complete magister vitae as the poetry of the ancients did: by including, as theirs did, religion with poetry, instead of existing as poetry only, and leaving religious wants to be supplied by the Christian religion, as a power existing independent of the poetical power.¹

The idea of the intrinsic connection of religion with poetry was to remain with Arnold throughout his life. Arnold argued in "Marcus Aurelius" (1863) that Aurelius was a moral author of the highest order because he was able to reproduce the virtue of religion and apply it to morality in his writings:

The paramount virtue of religion is, that it has lighted up morality; that it has supplied the emotion and inspiration needful for carrying the sage along the narrow way perfectly, for carrying the ordinary man along it at all.²

Religion is further connected with culture in "Sweetness and Light" (1869). There, describing religion in the terms with which we are used to hearing him describe poetry, Arnold argues:

¹The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough, ed. H.F. Lowry (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1932), p.124.

²Super, III, pp. 134-135.

religion, the greatest and most important of the efforts by which the human race has manifested its impulse to perfect itself,--religion, that voice of the deepest human experience,-- does not only enjoin and sanction the aim which is the great aim of culture, the aim of setting ourselves to ascertain what perfection is and make it prevail; but also in determining generally in what human perfection consists, religion comes to a conclusion identical with that which culture seeking the determination of this question through all the voices of human experience which have been heard upon it, of art, science, poetry, philosophy, history, as well as of religion, in order to give a greater fulness and certainty to its solution,-- likewise reaches.³

It is not surprising then, that after concentrating his attention on literature and culture in the 1860's, Arnold would turn his attention to religion. Almost the whole of Arnold's important writings during the 1870's concern religion in one way or another.

Arnold was extremely well prepared for this venture. He brought to his religious writings that well developed and firmly established critical stance formed through the course of his literary criticism. That stance is reiterated in the subtitle of Literature and Dogma(1871-73): An Essay Towards A Better Apprehension of the Bible. Clearly, here it is Arnold's aim to see the object (the Bible) as in itself it really is. This is exactly the aim of Arnold's literary criticism.

In Literature and Dogma, Arnold argues that Christian-

³Super, V, pp. 93-94.

ity cannot stand by its miracles. They are not fact. Christianity must stand by what Arnold calls its "natural truth". Such a change is momentous, but not without precedent. England had to abandon the idea of the factuality of miracles, just as the Germanic nations abandoned clericalism and tradition, and yet still hold fast to Christianity. Arnold intended, in Literature and Dogma:

to re-assure those who feel attachment to Christianity, to the Bible, but who recognise the growing discredit befalling miracles and the supernatural. Such persons are to be re-assured, not by disguising or extenuating the discredit which has befallen miracles and the supernatural, but by insisting on the natural truth of Christianity.⁴

His intention was important. Arnold argues that in Christianity "the firm foundation of human life is to be found... and the true source for us of strength, joy and peace."⁵ In fact, in the Preface to the 1883 edition, Arnold calls Literature and Dogma "of all [his] books in prose, the one most important...and most capable of being useful."⁶

The process of insisting on the natural truth of Christianity involved finding a verifiable basis, rather than false assumptions, for the Bible. This, in turn, involved a change in one's view of the Bible. "To understand that the language of the Bible is fluid, passing and literary,

⁴Super, VI, pp. 142-143.

⁵Ibid., p. 144.

⁶Ibid., p. 141.

not rigid, fixed, and scientific, is the first step towards a right understanding of the Bible."⁷ Clearly, Literature and Dogma was concerned considerably with treating the Bible as a work of art--of literature. Literary criticism, then, played an important part in it.

Indeed, much of Literature and Dogma employs Arnold's famous "touchstone" method of literary criticism in order to show morality on the one hand and religion on the other.⁸ As Ruth apRoberts argues in her essay "Arnold and the Metaphor of Religion":

Any of us in the least degree used to literary analysis will recognize in the morality column the literal mode, and in the religion column the metaphorical....he starts, for instance, with the old pagan wisdom for the literal, and the poetry of the OT and NT for the metaphorical--this will carry the religionists along in sympathy. Then he takes a prosy OT Proverb for the literal, and a poetic passage from a psalm for the metaphorical--this breaks the pattern that all the Bible is religious. Then he takes a scientific statement...and sets it against Wordsworth's metaphor,... implying that metaphgr is common to religion and poetry.⁹

This method of literary criticism is only possible for a man of letters who has acquired a disinterested view of literature by way of extensive reading:

⁷Ibid., p. 152.

⁸About the touchstone theory, more will be said later in this chapter.

⁹The Arnoldian, V (Winter, 1978), p. 27.

And thus we come back to our old remedy of culture,--knowing the best that has been thought and known in the world; which turns out to be, in another shape, and in particular relation to the Bible, getting the power, through reading, to estimate the proportion and relation in what we read. If we read but a very little, we naturally want to press it all; if we read a great deal, we are willing not to press the whole of what we read, and we learn what ought to be pressed and what not. Now this is really the very foundation of any sane criticism.¹⁰

Thus, Arnold once again reiterates the connection of religion with both culture and literature. And, as Ruth apRoberts says:

Literature and Dogma is its own best demonstration: here is a great sermon with benefit of literary criticism, by the man who is the greatest literary critic of his time, and the insights demonstrate the value of literary criticism in religion.¹¹

While Literature and Dogma exhibits the disinterested criticism Arnold demanded, it also exhibits the movement towards action which I argue had been taking place in his criticism--a movement which is antithetical to the movement I noted in Arnold's poetry. Arnold argues that the study of the Bible is of the utmost importance because it is bound up with conduct, with action, which Arnold argues is three quarters of life:

Only true culture can give us
[the right interpretation of the Bible];
so that if conduct is, as it is, in-

¹⁰Super, VI, p. 153.

¹¹The Arnoldian, V (Winter, 1978), pp. 28-29.

extricably bound up with the Bible and the right interpretation of it, then the importance of culture becomes unspeakable. For if conduct is necessary (and there is nothing so necessary), culture is necessary.¹²

A proper interpretation of the Bible is important, then, because it can provide an important guide to us--it can show us how to live.

Arnold was very confident in his prose writings by this time. Literature and Dogma exhibits his urbanity and control in prose. But further, in Literature and Dogma, more than in any of his earlier prose works, we see again Arnold the poet. Here, again, is his great sensitivity in the use of language; his statements, though not in verse, have the assured conviction of import and moral profundity characteristic of his finest poetry:

And herein is the advantage of giving this plain, though restricted, sense to the Bible-phrases: 'Blessed is the man that feareth the Eternal!' and 'Who so trusteth in the Eternal, happy is he!' By tradition, emotion, imagination, the Hebrews, no doubt, came to attach more than this plain sense to these phrases. But this plain, solid, and experimental sense they attached to them at bottom; and in attaching it they were on sure ground of fact, where we can all go with them. Their words, we shall find, taken in this sense have quite a new force for us, and an indisputable one. It was worth while accustoming ourselves to use them thus, in order to bring out this force and to see how real it is, limited though it be, and insignificant as it may appear. The very substituting of the word Eternal for

¹²Super, VI, p. 162.

the word Lord is something gained in this direction. The word Eternal has less of particularity and palpability for the imagination, but what it does affirm is something real and verifiable.¹³

Here is the poetical mind at work. Arnold's view that the use of the word "Eternal" is better than the use of the word "Lord" is really an assertion of the quality of metaphorical language over scientific language. The distinction is subtle, but important. The label "Lord" is indeed more particular, yet the metaphor "Eternal" is, paradoxically, a word that embodies an understandable, definable concept.

This distinction is, in turn, an indication of the poetic quality of thought in this passage. Arnold is attempting to evaluate the Bible critically in order to get at the truth of it. The distinction between scientific and metaphorical language is an important step in his argument, serving to alter the way we read and understand the Bible, giving the Bible "a new force for us, an indisputable one." Here is the noble and profound application of ideas to life Arnold demanded of modern poetry. Here is Arnold's finest poetry.

Compare this with the few poems Arnold composed during this time (the 1870's). "New Rome" (1873) and "Rome-Sickness" (1873-75) are both concerned with change: the first with the patronizing attitude of the English--wishing to "modernise Rome!" (l. 10), and the second with

¹³Super, VI, p. 203.

man who "Chafes in his place, and pines for change." (l. 24)
Both are trivial when compared to Literature and Dogma.

"S.S. Lusitania" (1878) which one would expect to be a touching picture of a father worried about his son's welfare, is really a sterile expression of that concern. The most powerful lines are those describing Ulysses's voyage:

'Follow the sun, we set our vessel's head
To the great main; passed Seville on the right

'And Ceuta on the left; then southward sped.
At last in air, far off, dim rose a Height.
We cheered; but from it rushed a blast of might,
And struck--and o'er us the sea-waters spread.' (ll. 3-8)

These lines, especially lines five and six, have a Hopkins-like vitality.

This scene serves but to remind Arnold of his son's voyage, thus Arnold exclaims "'Oh! were that Mount passed'" (l. 12). There is no feeling here, no indication that Arnold was really concerned about his son! The Ulysses passage is meant to define Arnold's apprehension over his son, to give poignancy to his exclamation "'Oh! were that Mount passed'" (l. 12). It actually serves merely to exhibit Arnold's inability to express those feelings of apprehension with any directness. One is relieved at the end, not because the card indicates that Arnold's son is safe, but because it signals the end of a very dry, contrived poem, a poem that merely gestures towards a father's concern for his son rather than expressing that concern.

This is the best argument that can be made against critics like A.L. Rowse, who claims that "Arnold's much

debated, and highly debatable, literary criticism is again far less important than his creative work",¹⁴ or E.K. Brown who prefixed his Matthew Arnold: A Study in Conflict with the following quote from Walter Pater clearly meant to apply to Arnold's prose as well as to Coleridge's:

Coleridge failed in that attempt, happily even for him, for it was a struggle against the increasing life of the mind itself. The real loss was, that this controversial interest betrayed him into a direction which was not for him the path of highest intellectual success; a direction in which his artistic talent could never find the condition of its perfection.¹⁵

Arnold's artistic talent did, indeed, find "the path of highest intellectual success" in critical works such as Literature and Dogma.

In 1877 in his Preface to Last Essays (1877) Arnold states that he is giving up dealing directly with questions concerning religion and the Church in order "to devote to literature, more strictly so-called, what remains to me of life and strength and leisure."¹⁶ Still, Arnold's later literary criticism was almost always concerned in some way with religion. The opening paragraph of "The Study of Poetry" (1880) from Essays in Criticism (Second Series, 1888) immediately connects that essay with Arnold's religious

¹⁴A.L. Rowse, Matthew Arnold (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p. 10.

¹⁵E.K. Brown, Matthew Arnold: A Study in Conflict (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1948), p. 1.

¹⁶Super, VIII, p. 148.

writings:

'There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialized itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea is the fact. The strongest part of our religion to-day is its unconscious poetry.'¹⁷

This statement has been quarrelled with endlessly. Vincent Buckley's statement is representative of that quarrelling:

The "high destinies" of which poetry is to be worthy are those which result from its being made a substitute, if not for religion, at least for much of the work which religion has traditionally done.... The substitution apparently does not seem to Arnold as hard to achieve; for religion and poetry have much in common; indeed, "the strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry."¹⁸

Buckley continues later in the same book:

Religion and morals and poetry cannot afford to be separated from one another. But neither can any one of them afford to be reduced to either of the others, or be made a substitute for either of the others. And that is precisely what Arnold intentionally tends to do.¹⁹

¹⁷Super, IX, p. 161.

¹⁸Vincent Buckley, Poetry and Morality: Studies on the Criticism of Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis (London: Chatto and Windus Ltd., 1959), p. 26.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 30.

If Buckley had really considered the connection between Arnold's "The Study of Poetry" and his religious works, this needless bickering would have been avoided.

Buckley fails to take into account Arnold's language. Arnold says "our religion has materialized itself in...the supposed fact" (my emphasis), not religion as a whole. Literature and Dogma is a study of the reasons for Christianity's decline in Arnold's time. He argues that the reason for the decline is that our religion had been founded for centuries upon a belief in the fact of miracles. Those miracles, Arnold states, did not happen; the fact is failing our religion. Thus Arnold proposes to found religion upon the poetic-moral precepts of the Bible. These precepts present a system of morals for mankind to follow. The fact that they are poetically treated in the Bible is important. They therefore supply the emotion and inspiration necessary to, as Arnold argued in "Marcus Aurelius" (1863), "make moral action perfect".²⁰ Indeed, religion is defined by Arnold as being morality touched with emotion. And because the language of such a religion is poetical and metaphorical, its precepts cannot be called into question by scientific "proof" that "the fact is failing it."

Arnold does not, as Buckley will argue, intend to

²⁰Super, III, p. 134.

substitute poetry for religion.²¹ He simply argues that our religion, religion that depends upon the fact of miracles, must eventually decline. Poetry, however, is able to supply the emotion needful for a moral system to be followed by the masses. Further, poetry is at root metaphorical--based on "idea" not "fact". It cannot be called into question in a limiting rational and scientific way. Thus, Arnold states in "The Study of Poetry" that, "More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us."²²

Earlier, I described the movement in Arnold's thought from considering that the ideal stance for a man of letters was one of withdrawal in most of his middle and later poetry, to one of objective detachment in his early prose, and finally (most notably in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" [1864]) to disinterestedness as opposed to objectivity. In "The Study of Poetry" Arnold describes more exactly this ideal critical stance. One must, argues Arnold, avoid two common prejudices in criticism in order to see the object as in itself it really is:

this real estimate, the only true one,
is liable to be superseded, if we are
not watchful, by two other kinds
of estimate, the historic estimate

²¹Literature and Dogma was written, not to suggest that poetry is a substitute for religion, but rather that religion is essentially poetic in nature.

²²Super, IX, p. 161.

and the personal estimate, both of which are fallacious.²³

Arnold continues much as a teacher giving rules to his pupils. Given that "The Study of Poetry" was aimed at an audience largely unequipped to criticize poetry, this method is understandable. Arnold, typically of his prose, is attempting to enlarge the common man's faculties. He warns prospective readers that:

The course of development of a nation's language, thought, and poetry, is profoundly interesting; and by regarding a poet's work as a stage in this course of development we may easily bring ourselves to make it of more importance as poetry than in itself it really is.²⁴

Thus, the critic's judgements may be called into question because of this fallacious historic estimate.

Similarly, "a poet or a poem may count to us on grounds personal to ourselves. Our personal affinities, likings, and circumstances, have great power to sway our estimate of this or that poet's work."²⁵ Thus, the critic can assign undue value to a work or poet by way of a fallacious personal estimate.

The critic, then, must avoid such historic and personal considerations to arrive at a real estimate of poetry. He

²³Ibid., p. 163.

²⁴Ibid., p. 163.

²⁵Ibid., p. 164.

must be disinterested "to make poetry yield us its full benefit."²⁶ Disinterested criticism can give us "a clearer sense and deeper enjoyment²⁷ of poetry.

In the 1853 Preface, Arnold had concentrated almost exclusively on the content of poetry. By the time of the writing of the lectures On Translating Homer (1861-62) Arnold had begun to recognize the intrinsic connection of form with content. This was implied, as I argued earlier, in Arnold's treatment of Homer's grand-style. In "The Study of Poetry" Arnold argues explicitly for the necessary relation of form with content in classic poetry. The characteristics of the very highest poetical quality, argues Arnold:

are in the matter and substance of the poetry, and they are in its manner and style. Both of these, the substance and matter on the one hand, the style and manner on the other, have a mark, an accent, of high beauty, worth, and power.²⁸

Arnold continues, in what is his clearest, most complete statement of his poetics, arguing that "the substance and matter of the best poetry acquire their special character from possessing, in an eminent degree, truth and seriousness."²⁹ Arnold here feels, as he did in the 1853 Preface,

²⁶Ibid., p. 166.

²⁷Ibid., p. 165.

²⁸Ibid., p. 171.

²⁹Ibid., p. 171.

that the content of a poem must be excellent; a poem should have an excellent action which possesses truth and seriousness. But whereas in the 1853 Preface Arnold felt that truth and seriousness were primarily expressed through content, with expression subordinate, in "The Study of Poetry" he argues that:

The superior character of truth and seriousness, in the matter and substance of the best poetry, is inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement marking its style and manner. The two superiorities are closely related, and are in steadfast proportion to one another.³⁰

As a means of recognizing truth and seriousness in poetry, Arnold proposes his famous (infamous?) "touchstone" method of literary comparison. The method was not new to Arnold. He had employed it with great success in two of his very finest works, On Translating Homer (1861-62) and Literature and Dogma (1871-73). In "The Study of Poetry" Arnold simply provides the theory for this well established practice:

there can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, than to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry....we shall find them, when we have lodged them well in our minds, an infallible touchstone for detecting the presence or absence of

³⁰ Ibid., p. 171.

high poetic quality, and also the degree of this quality, in all other poetry which we may place beside them.³¹

Arnold's touchstone method has been almost constantly criticized. These criticisms take essentially two forms. Some claim that great poetry cannot be detected by studying isolated lines (J.S. Eells, Jr. The Touchstones of Matthew Arnold), while others see in Arnold's choice of quotations the fallacious personal estimate (Lionel Trilling, Matthew Arnold). As for the first claim, one need only study Literature and Dogma in order to see that the method is effective. The small quotations are meant, to remind us vividly of what the best is like. And surely these quotations give one a better sense of the poetic quality of such works as the Iliad, Henry IV, or Hamlet than any summary of these works would. As for the second claim, there is surely some truth to it. Arnold's translations of the touchstones resemble Arnold's own poetry, both in their harsh view of the world, and in their withdrawal and concentration upon the past (see especially Super, IX, p. 168, note 2; Super, IX, p. 169, notes 1-3). However, since the 1853 Preface Arnold had been aware of the joy which tragedy could give the reader. While the Arnold poems recalled by these touchstones may not lend joy to the reader, the sources of the touchstones surely do. Clearly then, the choice of

³¹Ibid., p. 168.

touchstones is "tactful" as Arnold demanded. That it recalls Arnold's own poetry, and causes us to value that poetry somewhat lower than the sources of the touchstones, proves that the method is both valid and effective.

The demand that a poet interpret life, first given in "On the Modern Element in Literature" (1857) and repeated throughout Arnold's literary criticism is another theme taken up in "The Study of Poetry". Here, Arnold argues that "we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us."³² This leads Arnold to a discussion of charlatanism:

Charlatanism is for confusing
or obliterating distinctions between
excellent and inferior, sound and
unsound or only half-sound, true
and untrue, or only half-true.³³

Charlatanism must find no entrance in poetry, because "in poetry the distinction between excellent and inferior, sound and unsound or only half-sound, true and untrue or only half-true, is of paramount importance."³⁴ Thus, Arnold implies that poetry both presents an interpretation of life and passes a value judgement as to the truth of that interpretation.

Arnold's view that poetry must express a value judgement causes him to change his definition of poetry. Whereas he usually said that poetry was an interpretation of life, he here defines poetry as being "a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of

³²Ibid., p. 161.

³³Ibid., p. 162.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 161-162.

poetic truth and poetic beauty." (my emphasis)³⁵ This new definition is another aspect of the movement in Arnold's thought I outlined towards favouring action and involvement over objective detachment. Criticism implies both the attempt to see things as they really are, and the active valuation of those things. Interpretation implies understanding only.

A good indication of the changes in Arnold's poetics can be seen in the alteration of Arnold's valuation of Wordsworth. In "Stanzas in Memory of the Author of Obermann" (1849) Arnold cites Wordsworth as being one of the three poets (with Goethe and Senancour) who had managed "to see their way" (l. 48) in the world. Wordsworth, however, is censured because "his eyes avert their ken/ From half of human fate" (ll. 53-54). Thus Wordsworth's interpretation of life was in Arnold's judgement necessarily inadequate.

In "Memorial Verses" (1850), Arnold eulogises Wordsworth, and compares him with Goethe and Byron. Byron is praised for the strength shown in his exhibition of "the strife.../ Of passion with eternal law" (ll. 10-11). Goethe is commended because:

He took the suffering human race,
He read each wound, each weakness clear;
And stuck his finger on the place,
And said: Thou ailest here, and here! (ll. 19-22)

Wordsworth, however, is praised because he allowed the reader to escape "this iron time/ Of doubts, disputes,

³⁵Ibid., p. 163.

distractions, fears." (ll. 43-44) Wordsworth, argues Arnold, enables us to withdraw into the past and the joy we felt in childhood:

He laid us as we lay at birth
 On the cool flowery lap of earth,
 Smiles broke from us and we had ease;

 Our youth returned; for there was shed
 On spirits that had long been dead,
 Spirits dried up and closely furled,
 The freshness of the early world. (ll. 48-50, 54-57)

The terms in which Arnold praises Wordsworth show the tendency towards withdrawal that was characteristic of Arnold in 1850. As F.R. Leavis argues, it shows Arnold's desire to go "back to an idealized childhood that is immune from the problems of maturity."³⁶

Arnold voices a similar, though somewhat more severe, criticism of Wordsworth in "Heinrich Heine" (1863). There, Arnold discusses the major English Romantic poets. Wordsworth, he says, "plunged himself in the inward life, he voluntarily cut himself off from the modern spirit."³⁷ He is therefore not in the main stream of English poetry.

Arnold clarifies his view of Wordsworth in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864). Here he argues that Wordsworth's poetry had its source "in a great movement of feeling, not in a great movement of mind."³⁸

³⁶F.R. Leavis, Revaluation (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1964), p. 176.

³⁷Super, III, p. 122.

³⁸Super, III, p. 264.

Wordsworth in his poetry simply did not know enough. His interpretation of life is, therefore, necessarily inadequate.

Fifteen years later, in his essay "Wordsworth" (1879), Arnold argues "that the poetical performance of Wordsworth is, after that of Shakespeare and Milton...undoubtedly the most considerable in our language from the Elizabethan age to the present time."³⁹ Arnold states that Wordsworth deserves this lofty valuation because "he deals with life, as a whole, more powerfully"⁴⁰ than other poets. Indeed, "he deals with that in which life really consists."⁴¹

The change in Arnold's view of Wordsworth is startling. It is indicative of a significant change in Arnold's poetics. Part of that change has to do with the shift from an emphasis on "interpretation of life" in the earlier criticism, to an emphasis on "criticism of life" in the later criticism. Arnold's demand for interpretation involved a thorough knowledge of one's own age--thus Wordsworth could be censured for not knowing enough. The demand that a poet provide a criticism of life did not imply an all-encompassing interpretation of one's age. Wordsworth, clearly, knew enough to provide an adequate criticism of life in Arnold's later view.

This shift in emphasis in Arnold's criticism is no

³⁹Super, IX, p. 48.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 47.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 47.

doubt subtle. It shines forth most brightly in his criticism of Wordsworth. That shift in emphasis is at root due to a change in Arnold's view of morality and poetry. In the 1853 Preface, Arnold considered that poetry was morally edifying in direct proportion to the excellence of the action presented in a given poem. In On Translating Homer (1861-62), Arnold argues that the moral effects of Homer's poetry were due to the nobility of his grand-style, which "is something more than touching and stirring; it can form the character, it is edifying."⁴² Thus, in his earliest literary criticism, Arnold gives a somewhat narrow definition of morality in poetry; it has to do with either content, or form. In "Wordsworth" (1879), however, Arnold realized that his early view could lead to the composition of merely "moral and didactic poems;--that brings us but a very little way in poetry."⁴³ Arnold feels compelled here to give "a large sense...to the term moral."⁴⁴ He argues that "The question, how to live, is itself a moral idea; and it is the question which most interests every man, and with which, in some way or other, he is perpetually occupied."⁴⁵ Life and morality are very closely allied for Arnold:

If what distinguishes the greatest poets
is their powerful and profound application

⁴²Super, I, p. 138.

⁴³Super, IX, p. 45.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 45.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 45.

of ideas to life, which surely no good critic will deny, then to prefix to the term ideas here the term moral makes hardly any difference, because human life is in so preponderating a degree moral.⁴⁶

Wordsworth's poetry is so highly valued because of this broader definition of morality. He tackles the question of 'How to live,' "and his greatness lies in his dealing with it so powerfully."⁴⁷

"Wordsworth" (1879) is very like Arnold's earlier criticism in that in it he is attempting to re-form English taste. A manifestation of this aim was his arguing for the recognition of Wordsworth as a very great poet. He bases his judgement here not on a "touchstone" type of study and the narrowness it implies, but rather upon Wordsworth's work as a whole:

But in taking the performance of each as a whole, I say that Wordsworth seems to me to have left a body of poetical work superior in power, in interest, in the qualities which give enduring freshness, to that which any one of the others has left.⁴⁸

This seems to me to be the best argument against those critics who consider Arnold to be a poor critic because of his supposed concentration upon single lines rather than whole poems or

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 46.

⁴⁷ In the same essay, Arnold argues, "we find attraction, at times, even in a poetry of revolt against them [morals]; in a poetry which might take for its motto Omar Kheyam's words 'Let us make up in the tavern for the time which we have wasted in the mosque.' Arnold might just as well have cited his own "Mycerinus".

Ibid., p. 48.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 41.

canons of poetry. Arnold's judgement of a poet is based upon the quality of that poet's canon.

While "Wordsworth" (1879) and "The Study of Poetry" (1880) strike me as being the finest works of Arnold's later literary criticism, "Thomas Gray" (1880) is, I think, the poorest. Both critics generally favourable and generally unfavourable to Arnold's criticism feel obliged to make excuses for this essay. R.H. Super's comments are representative:

The essay is perhaps too dependent on Gray's letters, too biographical, too little substantial as a piece of criticism. But Arnold must have viewed his task in terms of his function--to give appropriate introductory matter to help the uninformed reader understand what sort of man wrote the poems; like Johnson's own Lives, this was a preface biographical and critical, not a critical essay.⁴⁹

John Eells's argument from The Touchstones of Matthew Arnold is somewhat more harshly worded, but voices basically the same complaint:

It was important, says Arnold, "to go for aid as we did, to Gray's life and letters, to see his mind and soul there, and to corroborate from thence that high estimate of his quality which his poetry indeed calls forth, but does not establish so amply and irresistibly as one could desire." It is important, that is to say, to look over the fence, to search far and wide, to find high seriousness blooming in a distant field, to uproot it, to transplant it into the garden of Gray's poetry, and

⁴⁹Super, IX, p. 386.

then to judge the poetry.⁵⁰

Indeed, Arnold is a propagandist for Gray in the essay, searching wherever he can to find in Gray, "knowledge, penetration, seriousness, sentiment, humour...the equipment and endowment for the office of poet."⁵¹

This alone does not necessarily make for poor criticism. One cannot, as Eells seems to think, separate the poet from the man. It is valid to corroborate one's opinion of Gray by a study of his letters. That is what Arnold intends to do. But, Arnold's valuation of Gray violates a basic critical precept for which Arnold argued in "Wordsworth" (1879):

If it were a comparison of single pieces, or of three or four pieces, by each poet, I do not say that Wordsworth would stand decisively above Gray, or Burns, or Coleridge, or Keats, or Manzoni, or Heine. It is in his ampler body of powerful work that I find his superiority.⁵²

Clearly, Arnold felt that to value a poet as of classic status that the poet must have produced a substantial canon of excellent poetry. What about Arnold's valuation of Gray?

High as is ~~the~~ praise due to the Elegy, it is yet true than in other productions of Gray he exhibits poetical qualities even higher than those exhibited in the Elegy. He deserves, therefore, his extremely high reputation as a poet, although his critics and the public may

⁵⁰John Eells, The Touchstones of Matthew Arnold (New York: Bookman Associates, Inc., 1955), pp. 238-239.

⁵¹Super, IX, p. 197.

⁵²Super, IX, p. 43.

not always have praised him with perfect judgement.⁵³

Arnold declines to tell us which of Gray's other works are finer than the Elegy--we are left merely with a reiteration of the claim voiced in "The Study of Poetry" (1880), that Gray "is the scantiest and frailest of classics in our poetry, but he is a classic."⁵⁴ It's simply an assertion.

Arnold justifies his valuation of Gray by placing him in his historical context--the eighteenth century--"an age of prose."⁵⁵ Throughout his career, Arnold was consistent in his views of Dryden and Pope, and the eighteenth century. In On Translating Homer (1861-62), Arnold describes Pope's translation of Homer:

One feels that Homer's thought has passed through a literary and rhetorical crucible, and come out intellectualised; come out in a form which strongly impresses us, indeed, but which no longer impresses us in the same way as when it was uttered by Homer.⁵⁶

Later, in "The Study of Poetry" (1880) Arnold elaborates on this judgement. He argues that men of letters in the eighteenth century were primarily concerned with developing a fit prose. Further:

The needful qualities for a fit prose are regularity, uniformity, precision, balance. The men of letters, whose destiny it may be

⁵³Super, IX, p. 191.

⁵⁴Super, IX, p. 181.

⁵⁵Super, IX, p. 200.

⁵⁶Super, I, p. 109.

to bring their nation to the attainment of a fit prose, must of necessity, whether they work in prose or in verse, give a predominating, an almost exclusive attention to the qualities of regularity, uniformity, precision, balance. But an almost exclusive attention to these qualities involves some repression and silencing of poetry.⁵⁷

Thus, argues Arnold, "Dryden and Pope are not classics of our poetry, they are classics of our prose."⁵⁸ Gray, on the other hand "had the equipment and endowment for the office of poet."⁵⁹

This surely, is a poor judgement of eighteenth-century poetry. It has its root in Arnold's basic conception of poetry, a conception largely Wordsworthian⁶⁰--largely Romantic. Because Gray is the eighteenth-century poet most nearly Romantic in temperament, Arnold can state explicitly that Gray, although he "produced so little, found no full and sufficient utterance",⁶¹ is nevertheless a classic of English poetry. As John Eells argues, "Further than this the exercise of the personal estimate could not well go."⁶²

⁵⁷Super, IX, p. 180.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 181.

⁵⁹Super, IX, p. 197.

⁶⁰As I argued in the second chapter, Arnold's poetics bear a striking resemblance to Wordsworth's Preface to the second edition of Lyrical Ballads (1800).

⁶¹Super, IX, p. 199.

⁶²John Eells, The Touchstones of Matthew Arnold (New York: Bookman Associates, Inc., 1955), p. 239. Arnold's argument is a striking precursor of T.S. Eliot's conception of a dissociation of thought and feeling in English poetry, the change from intellectual poets to poets of reflection:

The poetic language of our eighteenth century in general is...language merely

The essay on Gray, then, reveals the one weakness of Arnold as critic. He, despite his consistent and sometimes successful attempts at attaining disinterestedness, is a man of his time, a Victorian man of letters. Nowhere is this more evident than in his judgement of Gray.

recalling the object....The language of
genuine poetry...is the language of one
composing with his eye on the object. (Super, IX, p. 202.)

Conclusion

I have been arguing that Matthew Arnold's poetics changed twice, and that the two changes were antithetical. His poetics, as revealed by his earliest poetry, demanded an active moral involvement in the world. His middle and later poetry preached withdrawal from the world. Arnold's earliest criticism is his justification of his poetry of withdrawal, and the refusal to interpret his age. As Arnold devoted more of his energy to criticism, however, his poetics changed again. He again demanded morally active participation in society. The poet must, says Arnold, interpret and criticise life.

Arnold, then, was constantly reconstructing himself.

Leon Gottfried argues that Arnold:

saw the Romantic cult of the individual as a dangerous extension of prevailing English provinciality and cultural anarchism. Thus in Arnold we find a deep split between his inherited conditioning toward Romanticism as the only available 'great tradition' at once modern and English, and his belief that it was a tradition inadequate to the needs of the modern world.¹

Indeed, some of Arnold's poetry is a direct response to Romantic poems. "To a Gipsy Child by the Sea-shore" (1843) is a refutation of Wordsworth's Intimations ode. "Resignation" (1843-48?) is clearly a reply to Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey",

¹Leon Gottfried, Matthew Arnold and the Romantics (London: Routledge and Paul, 1963), pp. 3-4.

showing Arnold's inability to accept a Wordsworthian view of a benevolent nature.

"The Strayed Reveller" (1847-48) exhibits two tendencies present in Arnold's poetry--toward the gods' detached view:

The Gods are happy
They turn on all sides
Their shining eyes
And see below them
The earth and men. (ll. 130-134)

and toward the bards' active involvement in life:

These things, Ulysses,
The wise bards also
Behold and sing.
But oh, what labour!
O prince, what pain! (ll. 207-211)

The difference in the two modes of perception consists in the fact that while the bards can see the gods' vision as the gods do, they must also "become what [they] sing" (l.234).

As Gottfried argues:

the reveller comes perilously close to describing poetry as 'a true allegory of the state of one's own mind in a representative history', the view Arnold so sternly reprov'd in his 1853 Preface. For if the poet becomes what he sings, then he is singing himself in an allegorical representation.²

One might expect that Arnold, given his reaction against Romanticism,^{would} opt for the disinterested view of the gods. However, it is the more complete world view of the wise bards, the subjective view, that must be upheld. Arnold here delineates a Romantic view of poetry, a view he upholds

²Ibid., p. 123.

over the intoxicated visions of the reveller, and the disinterested, limited view of the gods. This view of poetry is essentially Wordsworth's in the Preface to the second edition of Lyrical Ballads (1800).

Arnold, then, was so steeped in the Romantic tradition of poetry that, although he could recognize its weaknesses in his criticism, he could not escape it for long in poetry. Arnold therefore gave up, for the most part, the writing of poetry after "Thyrsis" (1864-65). He devoted more and more time to criticism, where he was able to consistently maintain disinterestedness without withdrawing.

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