

*"What You Feel, I Share": Breaking the
Dialogue of the Mind with Itself*

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It would be difficult to find a discussion of Matthew Arnold's critique of modern life and modern sensibility that did not emphatically refer us to his 1853 Preface and to his famous phrase about 'the dialogue of the mind with itself'. This internal colloquy Arnold identified as one of the potentially debilitating characteristics of modern life. In offering his diagnosis, he not only produced what is sometimes too readily used as a hallmark term for the isolation and alienation reflected in modern literature generally, he also, of course, produced a ready-made term for the critical analysis of his own poetry. The poems have been explored in quite illuminating ways as instances of 'the dialogue of the mind with itself'. And yet, as Kenneth Burke would always remind us, every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing. Our preoccupation with the mind's imprisoning dialogue in Arnold's poetry has often diminished critical perception of his attempts to break free of the prison and to encounter the other, to communicate himself to another. The very passage in which his famous phrase appears suggests the ambiguous status of the 'dialogue' in Arnold's mind. 'What those who are familiar only with the great monuments of early Greek genius suppose to be its exclusive characteristics, have disappeared: the calm, the cheerfulness, the disinterested objectivity have disappeared; the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced; modern problems have presented themselves; we hear already the doubts, we witness the discouragement, of Hamlet and of Faust'.

The passage points in two different directions: inwardly, to a heart of darkness where thought moves in a wearying, dispiriting dialectic; and, outwardly, to an audience of witnesses who understand and recognize-'hear'-the dialogue of the mind with itself. The witnesses are all those who share Arnold's view of modernism's trials, who are versed in its typical texts, and who are linked, evidently, by these very assumptions to Arnold himself. The inward and outward directions of the passage are both important. Arnold's poetry explores the dispiriting dialectic of the mind with itself, but it also explores the possibilities of exit, encounter, and engagement. I am not referring here to poems like 'Heine's Grave', in which the scene of isolation and unrelieved self-consciousness is rejected by a speaker who boldly dissociates himself from a life that is 'Bitter and strange' and seeks 'a life/Other and milder' (11.223, 226). Arnold's conscious yearning for a 'wholeness based on intellectual and moral mastery of a complex "modern" consciousness' is a decisive and widely recognized aspect of his poetry and his poetic career.² But there is a dimension of Arnold's poetry that carries out his escape from isolation in a less intellectually prescriptive and less emotionally narrowed form. What Arnold projects, in this other dimension, is rather closer to the doublemovement we have seen in his plangent description of the mind's dialogue with itself: he simultaneously speaks in a voice voided by enclosure and a voice quickened by encounter.

Another way of putting the same point is to say that in Arnold's poetry we often find the dialectic of the mind accompanied by dialogue with an absent other, a figure whom Arnold's speaker turns to, addresses, and engages in discourse even when this 'other' remains more or less a figment. The most compelling instance of this strategy in all of Arnold's poetry occurs, in fact,

in *Empedocles* itself. At the only moment in the poem when Empedocles evinces any sense of exaltation, he says:

And yet what days were those, Parmenides!
When we were young, when we could number friends
In all the Italian cities like ourselves,
When with elated hearts we joined your train,
Ye Sun-born Virgins! on the road of truth.
Then we could still enjoy, then neither thought
Nor outward things were closed and dead to us;
But we received the shock of mighty thoughts
On simple minds with a pure natural joy.³

Empedocles here addresses another poet-philosopher who shared with him the experience of an intellectual dialectic that exhilarated, rather than depressed the mind. The joy that Empedocles remembers depends as much on his sense of companionship in the search for truth as on the 'mighty thoughts' he and his companions received. Two other points should be noted as well. Empedocles speaks directly to his kindred spirit, Parmenides, even though it is the absence of Parmenides that makes the scene so poignant. And, in his address to Parmenides, Empedocles speaks the thoughts of his mentor. This is made clear by the phrases about the 'Sun-born Virgins' and 'the road of truth' which are topoi from the hexameter poem in which the historical Parmenides narrated his philosophy of being. Arnold underscored the borrowing in 1867 when he added a note to the lines in question referring his reader to Parmenides' poem. As I will argue presently, these echoings and quotations involve much more than academic punctiliousness. They involve, at bottom, Arnold's nurturing of his intersubjective self, his faith in the structures of language, literature, and culture to facilitate the self's access to the other.

Before I develop this view, I wish to consider a somewhat different approach to the same questions. The most sensitive reading of Arnold's effort to overcome the circular dialogue of the mind is William A. Madden's discussion of the poems, especially those in the 'Switzerland' series, that construct direct dialogues with a beloved. Madden finds that in such poems the crucial experience is 'the discovery that union with another through love, or knowledge, is rare if not impos- Moreover, this discovery leads in time to a recognition 'that it is scarcely possible even to know oneself. ¹⁴ In a particularly trenchant comment, Madden compares Arnold's love poems to the dough letters and concludes that both the poetic and the epistolary sequences 'reveal a consciousness exploring itself in the presence of another rather than in communion with the other.'⁵

The difference between Arnold's exploring himself in the presence of another rather than in communion with another is quite fundamental. But while Arnold only fitfully succeeds, as 'The Buried Life' testifies, in finding his way to the other person through love, he is not altogether without alternative resources. Though he rarely achieves the intensity of connection that the love poems desire, there yet occurs for Arnold a genuine connection that moves him from isolated selfexploration to a deeply experienced communion. The form of this communion is, in a special sense, intellectually conversational. Arnold internalizes the discursive expression of another, reproduces it, and projects into the world around him the drama of his encounter with a *comprehending* companion.

If Arnold's letters to dough often move us because they reflect his difficulties in attaining communion with another, his letters to sister Jane ('K') suggest the closer, more interdependent relationships that Arnold could, at times, construct in his poetry. Writing, probably, in the winter of 1849-50, he addresses Jane as an ideal, responsive partner who has enabled him to imagine and then to enact his escape from paralyzing isolation:

I am subject to these periods of spiritual eastwind when I can lay hold only of the outside of events or words You my darling have been a refreshing thought to me in my driest periods: I may say that you have been one of the most faithful witnesses (almost the only one after papa) among those with whom I have lived & spoken of the reality & possibility of that abiding inward life which we all desire, most of us talk about & few possess.⁶

These are not light words, nor is Arnold's comment in another letter: 'I never think a performance of mine is fairly launched until I have your opinion of it You generally lay your finger on points where at any rate I can understand what you mean, which one cannot always do apropos of one's critics' objections. '

Arnold is clearly casting his sister in the role of an ideal reader, one whom he can summon up in his imagination (as a 'refreshing thought') to act as authenticating witness to the reality of his buried self. It is only through such authentication that the buried self can surge beyond the mind's dialogue and externalize its presence or experience its true nature. In the role of ideal reader, Arnold's sister could reflect back to him the difference between an empty colloquy of the mind and a resonant conversation with another. If Arnold was unable to move toward resonant conversation in the love poems, he was at least able to do so in situations where he could model authentic communion on the literary interchanges, the conversations of authors and auditors, that form so dominant a part of his poetry. The poems that successfully dramatize conversations of this kind may be said to suspend the dialogue of the mind with itself in favor of a dialogism that releases the isolated self and opens the way toward the communion that Empedocles once experienced with Parmenides and that, in another form, Arnold himself experienced with his sister Jane.

Dialogism is a term now almost exclusively associated with the writings of the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975). Bakhtin has, in recent years, become extraordinarily influential. He has explored, cogently and imaginatively, the complex ways in which our language practices attempt to deal with the pluralism and flux of our experience. At the heart of his thought is his consideration of the personal and social dynamics that make human dialogue possible. He conceives of 'dialogue', comprehensively, as the intricate set of conditions-social, linguistic, psychological, cultural-that attend any actual exchange between persons. 'Dialogism' is a term which attempts to capture the contingencies and the plurality of voices that are orchestrated, consciously and unconsciously, in our discourse. Indeed, discourse of all kinds appears in Bakhtin as, essentially, conversation.

The alliance made in 'Self-Dependence' is paradigmatic for Arnold's poetry. The poem's title refers to its theme: the speaker must learn to overcome his restless self-consciousness and imitate the abiding poise and self-containment of the stars.

Bounded by themselves, and unregardful
In what state God's other works may be,
In their own tasks all their powers pouring,
These attain the mighty life you see.

(11.25-8)

But the poem, at the very peak of its Emersonian resolve, turns into a dialogic performance. The poet only finds himself by gazing at the stars and discovering the form of their utterance to him. Even the lesson he is to learn-how to imitate the stars which are 'Undistracted by the sights they see' (l. 18)-does not reach him until he disrupts his initial mood of internal colloquy and begins to imagine himself in dialogue. Moreover, the voice that comes to him, the voice of prophetic wisdom, is, precisely, his own voice sedimented with cultural texts that speak through him in order to speak to him.

o air-born voice! long since, severely clear,
A cry like thine in mine own heart I hear

(11.25-9)

Arnold's move toward 'self-dependence' is, then, both an engagement and a disengagement. The poem seeks the condition of anti-selfconsciousness only for the purpose of breaking the mind's dialogue with itself. The counter-movement of the poem is to deepen dialogue, to make the aloof stars speak, to listen for voices in the rustling wind, to utter the buried life, to echo words of the other, to respond to the self's dependencies on other selves. Another poem, 'To a Republican Friend, 1848,' concludes with a line that names a recurring assertion in Arnold's poetry: 'What you feel, I share'.

Arnold certainly felt isolated and clearly experienced a drama of rejection as he tried to fit himself into his historical time or find himself reflected in his natural and cultural environment. But his recourse was not, as he himself said, to long for Empedoclean oblivion. Instead, the severity of Arnold's estrangement generated, dialectically, a searching study of how contact and connection might occur. The line I have quoted just now and also used in the title of this paper suggests the degree to which Arnold shares with Bakhtin the contention that 'everything internal gravitates not toward itself but is turned to the outside and dialogized, every internal experience ends up on the boundary'. In other words, even a dialogue of the mind with itself will push the self beyond solitude and prompt the *solitaire* to a dialogic interaction. 'The very being of man (both external and internal) is the *deepest communion*. *To be* means to *communicate*.'¹⁰

An extremely interesting and illuminating example of how Arnold's poetry can be approached from Bakhtin's perspective is provided by the figure of Etienne Pivert de Senancour as an absent other in Arnold's work, the poetry as well as the prose, and whose text, *Obermann*, became the centre-point of a complex dialogue that allowed Arnold to free himself from his sense of

isolation and re-imagine himself as speaking to '*someone actually present, someone who hears him and is capable of answering him.*' In this respect, it is important to remember, as Kenneth Allott has demonstrated, that the figures of Empedocles and Senancour are counterparts in Arnold's poetic world. Both are gripped by modern *ennui*.¹² Arnold situated both of them in forbidding locales. However, while the ashen summit of Etna images the barren internal colloquy that condemns Empedocles to his tragic isolation, Senancour's mountain is a place where voices do interlace and where discourse becomes redeeming.

'Stanzas in Memory of the Author of "Obermann" ' was written in the autumn of 1849, and it begins with Arnold's evocation of the Alpine fastness where Senancour locates Obermann, his fictional persona. Arnold's description of the vast scene breaks off abruptly:

--Yes, Obermann, all speaks of thee;
I feel thee near once more.

(II. 11-12)

These lines, simple enough in themselves, allude to an involved context surrounding the poem, since the speaker is identifying himself as one already perfectly familiar with Obermann. The surrounding context will help us to recognize the deeply dialogic or polyphonic quality of the poem. Of course, that quality is sharply evident in the poem itself, for its radical opposition is the contrast between the terrible remoteness of the scene and the striking intimacy of communication that unites the figures who inhabit it. Nevertheless, the surrounding context gives us an even clearer account of what is at stake in the poem. Arnold formally recognized this feature of his poem when, in late editions, he himself supplied a sketch of the context by adding a prose headnote to the poetic text. The headnote highlights the bond of familiarity that the original poem had taken for granted.

The headnote brims with significant material, but we will have to confine ourselves to three key points. The first point is its deliberate shunning of Lord Byron. Here the headnote follows the lead of 'Stanzas', one of whose main, but unacknowledged purposes is to curtail the power of Byron's voice. The extraordinary influence of Byron on Arnold, and the anxiety the influence caused him, is well documented).¹³ In *Empedocles on Etna* Arnold relied heavily on allusions to Byron in order to define Empedocles's bitterness and despair. But, though still compelled by Byron, Arnold was trying to heroicize a milder, more sympathetic version of *ennui* in Senancour. Part of Senancour's appeal for Arnold was his appropriation of a symbolic site that Byron had identified imperiously with his own version of gloom. Arnold's need to replace Byron with Senancour as the presiding Alpine spirit was intensified by the fact that the journey of September 24-27, 1849, that inspired Arnold's first poem on Senancour, retraced a segment of Byron's travels in the Alps. The details of Byron's itinerary were given in the guidebook Arnold carried with him, John Murray's *Handbook to Switzerland*. Arnold's emotional effort to cast off Byron is clearly reflected in the hyperbole of an attack on Byron that he made in a letter he wrote at the time to Clough. The 'whole locality,' Arnold says, 'is spoiled by the omnipresence there of that furiously flaring bethiefed rushlight, the vulgar Byron.'⁴ The casting off of Byron continues, incidentally, in the brief essay on *Obermann* that Arnold contributed to *The Academy* in 1868.

There he explicitly identifies Byron as a poser in comparison to Senancour's authenticity (CPW v 296).

There is much more to be said on this matter, but the main point is that Arnold's creation of Senancour as a poetic hero is dialogically framed by an unspoken exorcism of Byron. Arnold closes his Byron, as Carlyle advised, but instead of opening his Goethe, an option that 'Stanzas' specifically rejects (ll. 55-68), he initiates a dialogue with Senancour, who had Byron's passionate character, melancholy temperament, and existential isolation, but in a de-eroticized and attractively Pascalian nature. The first bond that facilitates the dialogic relations of Obermann and Arnold's speaker is simply, but very significantly, their shared ability (or desire) to occupy inevitable Byronic spaces without yielding to Byron's malaise.

The second critically contextual point that Arnold offers in his headnote to the *Obermann* poems is his explicit dissociation of Senancour from the 'sentimental school' of his European contemporaries, Chateaubriand and Madame de Staël in particular. 'Senancour has a gravity and severity which distinguishes him from all other writers of the sentimental school. The world is with him in his solitude far less than it is with them; of all writers he is the most perfectly isolated and the least attitudinising.' These remarks are also casting a cold eye on Byron, but Arnold is here chiefly concerned with establishing Senancour's sincerity. Senancour's detachment from the world has an ascetic quality which makes him 'perfectly' isolated. Arnold stresses these qualities because the terms he uses set up an emotional and polemical link to the headnote's major claim for Senancour, one that is very nearly paradoxical:

His chief work... has a value and power of its own, apart from these merits of its author. The stir of all the main forces, by which modern life is and has been impelled, lives in the letters of *Obermann*; the dissolving agencies of the eighteenth century, the fiery storm of the French Revolution, the first faint promise and dawn of that new world which our own time is but now more fully bringing to light—all these are to be felt, almost to be touched, there.

The potential paradox involves, of course, Arnold's conversion of his isolated Alpine hero into a master of historical consciousness. But Arnold serves no paradox because in his view the ascetic, severe, 'perfect' quality of Obermann's isolation means that he encodes the several voices of the Zeitgeist faithfully, leaving his text untinged by any wayward egotism or mere modishness. Arnold's claim is extremely audacious, and is the equivalent to the claim in 'Stanzas' that Senancour, not Wordsworth or Goethe, is, provisionally, the safest guide for those who have been swept up in the powerful negatives and faint hopes of the modern age. Behind these claims is Arnold's conviction that his own poetic discourse has the same pure and uncompromising recognition of the modern spirit that he finds in Senancour. Senancour and Arnold thus become allies in a project whose *content* is authentic representation of modernism's doubts and discouragements, but whose form, which Bakhtin would regard as 'co-consciousness', transcends the frequently embittering dialogue of the mind with itself.⁵

The third point of context, which actually comes first in the headnote, implicitly comments on the central theme of 'Stanzas'. In the poem the speaker comes to a point in his address to Obermann when he announces that he must live in the world and thus, in a sense, repudiate Obermann's reclusiveness. However, a deeper bond with Obermann is immediately forged: Obermann, together with a 'small, transfigured band', ultimately to include Arnold himself, form

a new alliance, 'The Children of the Second Birth' (1. 143). The headnote enforces the primacy of this theme by representing just such a 'band' as the few but knowing and appreciative readers of Senancour. The 'profound inwardness' and 'austere sincerity' of Obermann 'have attracted and charmed some of the most remarkable spirits of this century, such as George Sand and Sainte-Beuve, and will probably always find a certain number of spirits whom they touch and interest'. In The Academy article these 'spirits' are redefined as 'friends [who] will never fail him' (CPW v 303).

Arnold's emphasis is unmistakable. Senancour's fictional figure, Obermann, is the coalescing agent of a partly imagined and partly real set of secret sharers who produce a dialogically integrated world of responding and corresponding selves. This process was already exemplified before Arnold knew about Senancour. In 1833 Sainte-Beuve was writing an essay about Senancour, and he interested George Sand in Obermann. In the same year George Sand composed *Lélia*, a novel that 'could also quite fairly be called *La Pensée de Senancour*'.¹⁶ The novel possessed Arnold's youthful imagination. 'How the sentences from George Sand's works of that period still linger in our memory and haunt the ear with their cadences' (CPW viii 220). From George Sand's novel Arnold learned of Senancour. From this followed his meeting with George Sand and his friendship and correspondence with Sainte-Beuve. All of this is only to say that Arnold both wrote and used 'Stanzas in Memory of the Author of "Obermann"' in response to a sense of shared participation in a world where a group of kindred 'spirits' were internalizing each other's language, creating interdependent texts, echoing 'cadences', and forming a discourse not out of the mind's lonely isolation but out of the word's communicative power. Arnold's poems on Senancour emerge from, and look toward, the formation of a common understanding. They are, quite specifically, what Bakhtin means by 'utterances': 'Each utterance is filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances to which it is related Every utterance must be regarded primarily as a *response* to preceding utterances of the given sphere.'¹⁷ Even Arnold's attempt to silence his Byronic voice must be viewed as part of the dynamic interplay of utterances that converge in the *Obermann* poems.¹⁸

Arnold's poetic strategies in the *Obermann* poems are dominated by his search for dialogical alliance. He attempts to make his poems responsive utterances that play off Senancour's text. Senancour composed *Obermann* in epistolary form; the 'letters' are addressed to a distant correspondent. Arnold clearly takes on the role of the figure addressed and thus situates himself as Obermann's ideal reader. But he also, of course, takes on the role of Obermann himself. What we see in Arnold's poems is an exchange of discourses through which Arnold projects himself as Obermann's disciple while the figure of Obermann, in the structure of each poem, grows more and more Arnoldian.

Notes

1 CPW i 1.

2 William A. Madden, *Matthew Arnold: A Study of the Aesthetic Temperament in Victorian England* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1967), 76.

3 See *Empedocles on Etna*, 11235-43 (Poems 196-97).

4 Madden, 80.

5 Ibid., 85.

6 Unpublished letter, first printed in A. Dwight Culler, *Imaginative Reason: The Poetry of Matthew Arnold* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1966), 134. On Arnold's sister 'K', see below p. 106 4n.

7 *Unpublished Letters of Matthew Arnold*, ed. A. Whitridge (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1923), 41.

8 M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 293.

9 Ibid., 295.

10 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 286.

11 Ibid., 63. Italics in the original.

12 'A Background for *Empedocles on Etna*,' *Essays and Studies* (n. s. 21, 1968), 86.

13 See Kenneth Allott, 'Arnold's *Empedocles on Etna* and Byron's "Manfred",' *N&Q* (n. s. 9, 1962), 300-3; Leon Gottfried, *Matthew Arnold and the Romantics* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), chapter 3; and my 'Arnold, Byron, and Taine', *English Studies* (55, 1974), 435-9. See also in this volume Bernard Beatty, 'Empedocles and Byron Once More' (pp. 80-95).

14 CL 92; and see Culler, 128-129.

15 For the term "co-consciousness", see Katrina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 77.

16 Patricia Thomson, *George Sand and the Victorians* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 98. For the 'ineffaceable impression *Lélia* made on Arnold,' see Thomson's discussion, 97-109, and in this volume Ruth apRoberts, 'Arnold and George Sand' (pp. 96-107)

17 M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. V. W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press), 91.

18 The matter of intersecting or multiple voices in Arnold's poetry has been examined from different perspectives by W. Stacy Johnson, *The Voices of Matthew Arnold: An Essay on Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961); by Miriam Allott, 'Matthew Arnold; "All One and Continuous"' in *The Victorian Experience: The Poets*, ed. Richard A. Levine (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981), 67-93; and by Kenneth and Miriam Allott, 'Arnold the Poet: (ii) Narrative and Dramatic Poems' in Kenneth Allott, ed., *Matthew Arnold, 'Writers and their Background'* (London: Bell & Sons, 1975), **70-71**.

19 For these details, see *Commentary* 266-7.