

# Introduction:

## Matthew Arnold:

### The Writer as Touchstone

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Matthew Arnold died in 1888. So too did Sir Henry Maine, Edward Lear, and Bronson Alcott. The year marked the centenary of Byron's birth. The *Times* celebrated its one hundredth anniversary. Mr. and Mrs. Gladstone celebrated their fiftieth. There was bitter cold in July. John L. Sullivan fought to a draw in a match lasting thirty-nine rounds. Biographies of Hannah More and Elizabeth Barrett Browning appeared in the Eminent Women Series. And Mr. Rennell Rodd published *The Unknown Madonna and Other Poems*.

The question immediately provoked by such a miscellany is, insistently, the question of significance. How much do any of these occasions matter in 1988? Some matter a great deal, some not at all. The essays collected in this special issue of *Victorian Poetry* are, in their various ways, reflections on why Matthew Arnold matters one hundred years after his death. The reflections, direct or indirect, acquire a particular edge not only from the centenary but from the charged dialectical weather surrounding-some would say engulfing-it. Appropriately, then, the essays printed here help us to refocus our attention on specific issues and specific texts, to clarify our understanding of Arnold's aims and achievement, and, indeed, to call into question some aspects of his fame.

A review of Arnold scholarship during the last fifteen years maps the main approaches to the present state of Arnoldian affairs. It implicitly points to a continued emphasis on Arnold's probings of the self in crisis and the world in conflict. It is a bit ominous that no major re-evaluation of Arnold's poetry has been published in fifteen years, though the inevitable deconstructive ceremonies have begun. Arnold's criticism has been more closely studied and more aggressively confronted than the poetry, but the results are very mixed. Perhaps Arnold's contemporary position as critic is most accurately reflected in the fact that two books emphasizing his errors also derive their titles and their sense of context from his work: Geoffrey Hartman's *Criticism in the Wilderness* and Terry Eagleton's *The Function of Criticism*.

New documents and new contexts for studying basic documents are provided in this issue by Jerold Savory and Sidney Coulling. Coulling incorporates in his essay on "The Scholar-Gipsy" some unpublished and very poignant letters. In one of the letters, Arnold remarks on the sparse attention given to *The Strayed Reveller and Other Poems*: "Sometimes I feel disheartened by the universal indifference: sometimes I think it good for me." The sentence forms a commentary on the sorts of strains, divisions, and disillusionments that so many of the following essays, including Coulling's own, identify in Arnold's life and work. Thomas Mann, thinking of Goethe, asked: "Who is a poet?" And he answered: "He whose life is symbolic." Arnold certainly felt his own life to be both symbolic and ironic the more he saw his experience reflecting the impossibility of a poetic vocation. A fundamental tension between symbolic poignancy and ironic pointlessness governs almost all of Arnold's commentary on his life and is especially worth recalling at the present time which finds contemporary critical discourse more or less preoccupied with turning into a polemic on cultural dissonances what Arnold offered as a diagnosis. The salient symptom for Arnold was the dialogue of the mind with itself. This particular problem is much discussed by our contributors. The polemic, however, is only glanced at here-though it has been set out in beguiling form by J. Hillis Miller in the searching analysis of *Empedocles on Etna* that appears in *The Linguistic Moment*.<sup>1</sup> Of course, Arnold's sense of tension and division can be, and has been, assessed in a variety of ways. Alan Grob, in a reading of "Resignation," traces the fundamental conflict to an ontological crisis illuminated best by Schopenhauer. Clyde de L. Ryals encloses some of the themes and problems observed by Grob (and by Miller) within the framework of Romantic irony. Ryals concentrates on the ironist as opposed to the Romantic, a development in Arnold criticism that will surely become more prominent.

The essays on the prose writings are more diverse in the issues they raise and the perspectives they offer. Yet all of them, except for Mary Schneider's, focus more, perhaps, on Arnold's concern with the activities of the critical mind than on the objects of his criticism. Schneider provides the background for Arnold's comments on Burns's poetry by showing how J. C. Shairp's praise of Burns influences "The Study of Poetry."

The remaining essays contemplate and explore the Arnoldian style of thought. All of them do so, to some extent, by looking at Arnold in relation to another eminent Victorian (or pre-Victorian). Joseph Carroll returns to the Arnold-Newman relationship, in order to argue that Arnold's notion of a "universal order" is assimilated from Newman's model of discourse which relies heavily on the imagery of a clearly structured cosmos. David J. DeLaura has made the Newman-Arnold-Pater connection so prominent in Arnold studies that it seems inevitable there should be discussion of Arnold and Pater to go along with Carroll's discussion of Arnold and Newman. In fact, two of the essays, those by Wendell Harris and U. C. Knoepfelmacher, use Pater extensively. Harris is engaged on a double front. He aims both to clarify some egregious misrepresentations of what Arnold said about criticism and to observe the persistence of Arnold's critical attitudes, often "transmogrified," in the work of later writers. Harris looks closely at Arnold's propositions and gives useful attention to his Schillerian emphasis on "the free play of the mind." Pater appears in Harris' essay as the first significant transmogrifier of Arnold's positions. U. C. Knoepfelmacher offers a fundamental reassessment of the Arnold-Pater relationship. Knoepfelmacher is interested in reading both critics with a focus on how they shape their very different acts of perception and self-presentation. In using this approach, Knoepfelmacher defines Arnold's habitual concentration on the disjointed and fragmentary in contrast to Pater's effort to reveal "sameness in difference without overlooking difference in sameness." In a very different essay, George Levine calls upon another kind of figure entirely, John Herschel, in order to assess the strategies of Arnold's thinking. Levine sees Herschel's sensitivity to modern scientific method and his awareness of how the effects of prejudiced observation can compromise even the strictest science as lessons Arnold could have heeded when he tried to enlist "science" as an ally in his campaign for disinterestedness, selflessness, and flexibility. Arnold's actual commitment, Levine argues, is to "imprecision" which, in effect, frees him from submission to anything like the spirit of science. As with several of the other essays in this collection, Levine's contribution raises questions about the very matter that so often disturbed Arnold himself, and, at times, disheartened him—questions about the adequacy of his powers in relation to the enormity of the problems he saw.

If the Arnold who emerges in these essays one hundred years after his death is a familiar figure, he would also have been a familiar figure to himself as he appears in the wider scene of modern criticism, poetics, and cultural ideology. For in this scene Arnold is just what he always felt himself to be in his own lifetime: a wanderer between two worlds, one not ready to be dead and the other impatient to be born. The world not ready to be dead still seeks access to the sacred in one form or another, and Arnold is still taken as a primary spokesman for the view that we have pathways to the sacred and that by adhering to good practice we can reach, if not the sacred itself, at least its warming radiance.

The other world, the world impatient to be born, hungers for the apocalypse of full demystification. Arnold speaks, reluctantly, for this world too since he played so large a role in the nineteenth-century's **drama** of demystifying agents. Arnold lingered on the darkling plain where this drama was staged, and he allowed himself to concede that its process certainly meant the loss of joy, love, light, certitude, peace, and help for pain until a reconstructive process could begin.

But while Arnold saw himself as driven between these worlds, in the contemporary context he is more accurately to be seen as driven by them, the older world with its investment in the sacred still claiming him as a sainted spokesman, the other world, in full possession of its disbelief, elaborately stepping over his corpse as a way of ritualizing its maturity. Arnold's standing is perhaps equally threatened by devoted mummification and formulaic denigration. Only his inherent subtlety and complexity keep him free of these contrary devaluations, but they are always ready to hand as the present time re-conceptualizes the function of criticism and re-enacts the battle of the ancients and moderns.

Victorian Verse (1987), edited by Christopher Ricks, greets the Arnold centenary by according him fewer pages than it gives to William Barnes, Lewis Carroll, and John Gray, and far fewer pages than it gives to Arthur Hugh Clough. Ricks's sin of omission was anticipated by Peter M. Sacks. Sacks's recent, very well received work on *The English Elegy* finds no place for Arnold.

In "Thyrsis," Matthew Arnold, a dogged proponent, if not consistent practitioner, of invigorating poetry, tried to deal with problems similar to those faced in *In Memoriam*, but in an elegy of conventional length. "Thyrsis" is, however, equally burdened by the Victorian elegist's almost novelistic fidelity to the empirical details of his own experience and by his need to win some pledge of untransformed personal continuity .... It is as though Arnold were reluctant to yield up his recalcitrant personality in favor of an immortal but allegorical identity.<sup>4</sup>

Such a criticism, in the particular case of Sacks's thesis, may be worth discussing either for its application to Arnold or its usefulness for sorting out what Sacks wants to say about elegy as an evolving genre. But as a ground for disposing of Arnold's famous elegiac poetry, the criticism is itself dogged and recalcitrant.

It is, in fact, George Eliot in the same review just cited, who offers the most helpful corrective to critics like Sacks. "You must become familiar with his poems before you can appreciate them as poetry" (p. 130). Eliot was thinking of "felicities," but her point applies on a broader scale. As several modern studies, especially those by A. Dwight Culler and William A. Madden have shown,<sup>5</sup> it is familiarity with the interplay of Arnold's poems as an integrated series that opens up their achievement as poetry. Arnold, even more than the early Browning and Tennyson, generated poems out of the experience of intellectual crisis and the drama of the mind moving, poignantly and fatefully, beyond its depths. Arnold's distinctive, though quite shattered, ambition as a poet was to face Coleridgean labyrinths and yet discover Wordsworthian elations. It was not a casual moment when Arnold, in his essay on Wordsworth, rejected Wordsworth's "philosopher" side. For Arnold depended on Wordsworth to safeguard the self's access to joy, and thus to be unbowed by intellectual toil. The antitype to Wordsworth was Coleridge whom Arnold, like Carlyle, held at extreme and unconvincing distance all his life. Arnold attempted in his poetry to conduct a dialectic on the model of Coleridge's conversation poems, but one that was inspired by Wordsworth's comprehensive confidence in poetry as an act that terminated the dialectic not in synthesis but in sublimity.

This colossal project failed, but Arnold made what he could of the failure, and, in doing so, made much that is indelible for us. The poetry of his poems offers us irreplaceable imaginative knowledge of what can occur for the truth-seeking individual when mind reaches the end of its tether.<sup>6</sup> It should be said, however, that the distinctive nature of Arnold's poetry does not insist upon our attention solely because of the self-imprisonment it portrays. Arnold also compels his readers to recognize how the loss of self becomes a loss of kinship. In his excellent book on lyric modes, W. R. Johnson writes that "fragmented persons fashion fragmented worlds, and fragmented worlds produce fragmented persons."<sup>7</sup> Johnson goes on to identify, in poets like Whitman and Yeats, a "choral" poetry, genuinely similar to classical forms, which "attempts ... to put an end to [fragmentation] and to reestablish the great metaphors for communitas as the proper and central metaphors for the human condition" (p. 178). Arnold's poetry never creates communitas. But it persistently dreams of community's harmonic life. All of Arnold's singers remember for us the choral voice. Some of them prompt us to it.

The contemporary status of Arnold's critical prose is dominated by very mixed signals. Arnold's criticism discerns essentials without essentializing (to borrow terms from Kenneth Burke) while much criticism essentializes without essentials. Arnold always refused to ally his criticism with any form of discourse or intellectual charter except poetry itself. His criticism, even his biblical criticism, is a prosaics of pure poetry. Thus, for example, his high esteem for disinterestedness in criticism and detachment in poetry, or for canonical reverence in criticism and high seriousness in poetry. The circularity of this approach is very suspect at a moment when criticism, as a discipline, has done its best to liberate itself from mere literariness in order to become a branch of the human sciences. Frederic Jameson can refer, indifferently, to "some Arnoldian

E. D. Hirsch certainly knows Arnold's work, but studiously avoids the Arnoldian high ground. His book attempts to be practical and pedagogical both in its analysis of the "literacy" problem and in the solutions it offers. Nevertheless, one can't help but suspect that Hirsch is quite caught up in Arnold's view of a shared fund of knowledge as the base from which critical and cultural illumination springs. In the very interesting address Arnold delivered at the University of Pennsylvania in 1886, "Common Schools Abroad," Arnold makes a number of statements that might easily have served as an introduction to Hirsch's book. "I found in the common schools abroad entire classes familiar with the biography of great authors their countrymen; capable of comparing and discussing their production, and of indicating the sources whence these productions draw their power to move and delight us" (CPW, 11:100). Arnold especially admired the European common schools because they provided for a national "literacy" in Hirsch's sense.

Granted, such symmetries between Arnold's impressions of sound education and Hirsch's view of "what every student should know" do not in themselves establish Arnold as the *eminence grise* behind Hirsch's popular success in 1987. However, in 1976, Hirsch, concluding his *The Aims of Interpretation*, very significantly, offered Arnold as the figure who could help us escape from the "dizzy oscillation" between aesthetic and moral claims that shifts in literary theory always reflect: As the patron saint of literary education, my candidate is Matthew Arnold, whose contraries Sweetness and Light seem especially appropriate for describing the recurrent tensions of literary criticism. Arnold saw that neither the aesthetic nor the moralistic attitude to life and literature can be reduced to its contrary. He also perceived that the function of criticism is determined by the needs of the present time, not by some eternal formulation. Yet he was not an historical relativist. The aims of criticism change with history only because the deeper principle of balance is absolute and therefore requires different applications at different times.<sup>10</sup>

It seems evident enough that Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* is fundamentally, if somewhat furtively, instructed by the patron saint of literary education. Hirsch may even have been prompted to his risky device of explicitly listing a cultural vocabulary by having persuaded himself that the "needs of the present time" require a criticism so rudimentary in its aims and aspirations.

Of course, it can only be a vulgarization of Arnold to represent his continuing influence as contingent on the vagaries of the best-seller list, and perhaps there is even greater jeopardy in aligning him with critics like Bloom and Hirsch who are, in some aspects of their work, blustering reactionaries. Still, at a time when Arnold's view of literature, criticism, and culture, which frequently dominated discussion of these matters, has been virtually retired from active duty among professorial critics, it becomes important to observe that Arnold's issues continue to receive a good deal of public attention. And it is very likely that the continuing power of Arnold's insight will, in the next phase of our cultural history, be re-assimilated from the civic consciousness for the sake of a more balanced development of academic criticism.

Arnold, as a critic, because he so consistently discerned the essentials, cannot easily be exiled from the new worlds of critical discourse. Arnold is, above all, a critic concerned with the real effects of literature in society and, thus, with the real effects of literature for the individual as a social being. For Arnold the identity of a literary text is not an issue settled by some vague, "Arnoldian" set of aesthetic norms but a question both raised and resolved by what the text acts out and what an audience may act out under its prompting. The literary text cannot disappear into the language systems that compose it because the literary text turns language into action. Arnold was always more concerned with what the literary text could do than with what it said because he understood that literature constructs us much more powerfully than we construct it. He did not disown *Empedocles* because the poem was melancholy; he disowned it because it failed to convert language into action. He did not celebrate poetry because it was a repository of great ideas. He celebrated its efficacy. Ideas counted a great deal in Arnold's estimate of the poetic powers, but his central interest as a critic is in the motions of a poem rather than in its meditations.

Almost all contemporary criticism that is concerned with relations between the literary text and

As a writer of expository and critical prose Arnold's eminence depends most visibly on the variety of his interests and the intelligence and literary tact he brought to bear with such single-mindedness on the discussion of literary, social, educational and religious issues. He touched his age at more points than almost any other Victorian writer and is saved from the reproach of mere miscellaneousness in his prose works ... by the concern that runs through them all for the quality of civilization around him... and for the quality of lives Englishmen were able to lead when the material conditions of their existence were being rapidly altered and most of the values by which an earlier generation had lived were being disconcertingly questioned.<sup>11</sup>

Arnold remains, then, so valuable to us because he puts us in touch with so much of what is always elusive and yet compelling in the life of poetry, in the life of criticism, and in the life of both his age and ours. He himself has best identified why the work of his life is to be celebrated a hundred years after his death. Writing to his brother Tom about the insensitivity of J. A. Froude's response to Newman's Apologia, Arnold said: "[Froude] makes the common mistake (so I think, at least) of taking as the interesting thing in a man the positive result at which he finally arrives; this does not matter much and is always more or less inadequate; what does matter is the power of life and spirit which he develops on his way to it."<sup>12</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Cited in Lawrence Lipking, *The Life of the Poet: Beginning and Ending Poetic Careers* (Chicago, 1981), p. 113.
- 2 J. Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stephens* (Princeton, 1985), pp. 28-35.
- 3 *Westminster Review* (July 1855) collected in *Matthew Arnold, The Critical Heritage: The Poetry*, ed. Carl Dawson (London, 1973), p. 129.
- 4 Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore, 1985), pp. 202-203.
- 5 A. Dwight Culler, *Imaginative Reason: The Poetry of Matthew Arnold* (New Haven, 1966); William A. Madden, *Matthew Arnold: A Study of the Aesthetic Temperament in Victorian England* (Bloomington, 1967).
- 6 My point here really derives from Lionel Trilling, "Mind in the Modern World" in *The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews, 1965-75*, ed. Diana Trilling (New York, 1979), pp. 100-128.  
W. R. Johnson, *The Ideas of Lyric: Lyric Modes in Ancient and Modern Poetry* (Berkeley, 1982), p. 177.
- 8 Frederic Jameson, "Criticism in History" in *The Weapons of Criticism*, ed. Norman Rudich (Palo Alto, 1976), p. 36.
- 9 Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (Boston, 1987), p. 6i.
- 10 (Chicago, 1976), p. 139.
- 11 Kenneth Allott, "Matthew Arnold (and A. H. Clough)" in *The Victorians*, ed. Arthur Pollard (London, 1970), p. 43.
- 12 For this letter of June 16, 1864, see Sidney Coulling's essay in this issue, p. 19.