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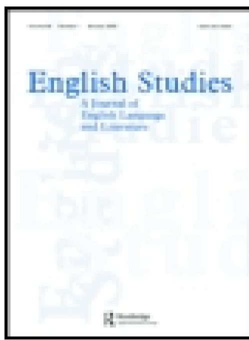

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Matthew Arnold: Pessimist?

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ABSTRACT
This essay proposes both an empirical argument and a (speculative) conceptual one. The empirical argument concerns the question: did the original readers of Matthew Arnold's poetry anticipate later twentieth-century views that he was a Schopenhauer-like pessimist and representative of a deep seam of such thinking in the nineteenth century? The essay can find little evidence for this but rather for an Arnold whose periodical departures into *mélancolie* were assessed as aesthetic errors amid writing that was otherwise viewed to be charming. The essay notes how frequently poems that would seem exemplary of the age to later critics are either only briefly mentioned, not mentioned at all, or made the subject of near-parodic commentary by the original reviewers. The last portion of the essay reflects on the implications—acute for the body of work examined here—of a major difference between original readers' views and subsequent ones and asks an Arnoldian question of Arnold about what the object of criticism in such cases really is—or could be.

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It is easy to think that the great poems of doubt, *Weltschmerz*, and shadowy hopelessness in mid-Victorian poetry are from the pen of Matthew Arnold (1822–88).

There are others, of course. James Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night* (1874), for example, though that poem braces not with its doubt but its certainty. Yet Arnold's lyrical gift—and this essay, I should make clear, is about his poetry—has left a curious legacy to our generations: we are encouraged to think of Arnold the poet recurrently making memorable, sometimes sensuously so, melancholy and, even, despair. These habits have not uncommonly seemed to modern critics to figure something of the spirit of the age. There is a host of lines from Arnold's relatively small corpus of poetry that might seem to clinch this distinctively Germanic, Schopenhauerian dimension: "Oh! then a longing like despair | Is to their farthest caverns sent";[1] "Madman or slave, must man be one?";[2] "Wandering between two worlds, one dead, | One powerless to be born";[3] "Nor does being weary prove that he has where to rest";[4] or, one further

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[1]Allott and Allott, 130, ll. 13–14. All subsequent references to Arnold's poetry are to this edition in the form of *MA*, page number(s), line number(s).
[2]*MA*, "A Summer Night," 285, ll. 74–5.
[3]*MA*, "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse," 305, ll. 85–6.
[4]*MA*, "Empedocles on Etna: A Dramatic Poem," 179, l. 151.

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example, "[the world …] Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, | Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain".[5] Those academics, now, setting examination papers for undergraduate courses in Victorian literature might well turn to lines such as these to start a question on Victorian gloom. And when, symptomatically, Don Cupitt, the then Dean of Emmanuel College Cambridge, was looking for a title for his 1984 BBC series on the alleged decline of, and philosophical challenges to, Christianity, it was to Arnold's metaphor, "The Sea of Faith"[6] from "Dover Beach" (pub. 1867), that he turned. It remains the resonant title of Cupitt's online network for promoting the Feuerbachian idea of Christianity as a human creation, a manmade system of values.[7] This network advocates an idea that is (or at least is intended to be) far from despair. But from the viewpoint of many nineteenth-century Christians, Cupitt's approach could only have been perceived as a negative turn, a removing of foundations, the banishing of the promise of higher meaning (even if, in fact, Cupitt's efforts to remodel Christianity have their roots in what, as a prose writer, Arnold himself wanted to do with, or to, his religion[8]).

Matthew Arnold as an emblem of the age, in one way or another: as the spokesperson, or at least the herald, of intellectual and moral deracination? A proto-Modernist in thought though not in form? A nearly-modern man, at any rate, born too late for faith but still mourning its loss (according to the poetry, that is)? A man who could not access the Romantics' belief in nature yet was not ready to perceive the natural world as random, or accidental, or cruel? Readers recently have certainly agreed with some versions of these views, or even darker ones. On proto-Modernist dismay, for example, Rose Sneyd asserted in 2018 that "Dover Beach" was of the same temper as the profoundly pessimistic Italian Giocomo Leopardi (1798–1837), some of whose words, of course, the atheist Thomson took for an epigraph to *The City of Dreadful Night*.[9] The most doubtful, the shadiest, Arnold recently sketched is by the late Alan Grob in—he takes one of those supposedly exemplary lines as his starting point—*A Longing Like Despair: Arnold's Poetry of Pessimism* (2002). This is a book seeking to place Arnold in a Germanic tradition of "negative" philosophy, particularly Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and on the path to later nihilism. It is neither hard to admire Grob's commitment to bringing attention back to Arnold as a poet after, as he sees it, many years in the waste land, nor hard to disagree with Alison Chapman, reviewing the book for *Modern Language Review* in 2004, that the "detailed close textual analyses make for a relentlessly bleak conception of Arnold's poetry."[10] It is tough work to champion a "forgotten" writer by explaining just how miserable he is.

But my point in this essay is not to argue either that Arnold makes us feel despair at the hopelessness of things or that he does not. I am, in fact, not interested in "us" at all, except in one distinct way to which I will turn at the end. What strikes me in reading nineteenth-century accounts, especially reviews, obituaries, and general evaluations during his life-time, of Matthew Arnold's poetry, is that they never, unless I have

[5]*MA*, "Dover Beach," 256, ll. 33–4.
[6]Ibid., l. 21.
[7]See https://www.sofn.org.uk/ (last accessed 25.i.21).
[8]One wonders about the nature of Arnold's own faith, insofar as such things can ever be known of anybody. One of his last acts before his death was to attend a Presbyterian service in Liverpool. Cf. apRoberts.
[9]See Sneyd.
[10]Chapman, 1040.

missed something, think of pessimism at all. The reviewers simply did not see Arnold like that. This essay is concerned first with what they did see over time and, second, with why and what it all might mean. What emerges in my essay, albeit somewhat speculatively, is a different Arnold from the Schopenhauer-inflected, or infected, writer *de nos jours*. And the Arnold of the journals, periodicals, and essayists in his own time challenges contemporary readers, to a peculiar degree, to reflect on the place not just of altering perspectives, changing priorities, and shifting preferences that usually occur in readings through time but on the possibility, as Sir Frank Kermode would put it, of error in interpretation.[11] Such a challenge might be found amid many other authors in any consideration of the difference between how they were once read and how they are now. But Matthew Arnold is a sharply provocative case.

Any assessment of the notion of Arnold as somehow an exemplary pessimist—an *emblem*, as he is sometimes seen now, of his apparently pensive age—has to remind itself, to begin with, of a rather basic fact. Arnold was barely known as a poet in his life-time—or, at least, his reviewers largely believed that to be the case. The subsequent transformation of some of his lines or poems as a whole into being seemingly synecdochic of an age is, in these terms, a curious *Nachleben*. "For some years", said Algernon Charles Swinburne in his essay on "Matthew Arnold's *New Poems*" (1867), "the immediate fame of Mr Matthew Arnold has been almost exclusively that of a prose writer."[12] It was partly about quantity, of course, for Arnold never published much in verse, and after a while stopped altogether. *The Strayed Reveller, and Other Poems* (1849), the first volume, was received, said one critic a couple of years later, "with general indifference".[13] All that followed, in terms of bulk, was *Empedocles on Etna, and Other Poems* (1852), and *New Poems* (1867), together with some important individual additions including "Sohrab and Rustum" (1853) and "The Scholar-Gypsy" (1853). That slender body of writing was essentially how Arnold the poet was known (and he initially, cautiously, published simply as "A"). The prose, with its august public topics and, apart from anything else, that controversial effort to transform Christianity into a religion of conduct, caught readers' eyes more widely, as Swinburne knew. Looking back in 1904, *Macmillan's Magazine* considered the subject of how widely Arnold the poet had been recognised during his own day in a daringly titled essay on "Arnold as a Popular Poet". Promptly, the essay was obliged to admit that, as Swinburne would have agreed, its title was misleading. "It is bare truth to say", remarked William A. Sibbald, the author, "that when Arnold died in 1888 his poetry, in any popular sense, was absolutely unknown."[14] Things had altered in recent years, Sibbald allowed, but the change of fortune had been slow.

It is hard to think of a comparable example where a poet largely confined to a small group of readers in his or her life-time subsequently seemed to later critics to be not simply important but exemplary of a period. Blake perhaps? In the nineteenth century —to remain there for the time being—unknown poets have subsequently, when finally published or finally acknowledged, seemed, for sure, crucial to the canon, or at least a jewel in it: Emily Dickinson, for example; Gerard Manley Hopkins; and Emily Brontë, to a point, whose first poems, printed with those of Charlotte and Anne, sold but two

[11]See the last chapter of Kermode.
[12]Swinburne 123–4. The essay was originally published with the same title in *The Fortnightly Review*, 2 (1867): 414–45.
[13]"Arnold's Poems," *Westminster Review*, 146.
[14]Sibbald, 385. I have regrettably not been able find any information about Sibbald.

copies. These poets' discovery or, in the case of Emily Brontë, rediscovery, has altered what is thought to be nineteenth-century verse. Yet these poets' peculiar (in both senses of the word) circumstances make it difficult to claim plainly that any one of them could can stand for something metonymic of their day. Let alone stand for something even greater than that which Arnold himself would somewhat loftily claim in 1869 about his own (then hardly read) poetry. That corpus of work, he told his mother in words that would be quoted many times by later critics, represented "on the whole, the main movement of mind over the last quarter of a century".[15] How intriguingly that word "whole" plays in this sentence, as if, it might be, wanting to nudge out "last quarter" and lay furtive claim to a *century's* representativeness. But Arnold is writing, both modestly and confidently, from an acceptance that he was far from there yet, wherever "there" quite is. "I am likely enough to have my turn", he told Frances, and he meant "recognized as combining important elements of both Browning and Tennyson". He did not envisage—or did not say he envisaged—being anything as substantial as emblematic of the age (and he was misunderstood by subsequent readers even in this note to his mother: it took Nicholas Shrimpton in 1988 to point to one of the real meanings of "movement": that is, the revisions to at least one of his poems-of-ideas recorded changing thoughts through time[16]).

His first reviewers, in turn, did not see any case of Arnold as metonymic or, if they did, only in very limited ways. There are two essential parts to this. First, simply enough, what struck many of the first readers who committed their views to print was how enjoyable, charming, and moving Arnold's writing at its best was. Arnold comes into the fold of English poetry, in this respect, as a poet to be read with pleasure. Not untypically, for instance, *The Westminster Review*, considering the 1849, 1852, and 1853 volumes in a single long article, admired Arnold's achievement in warm terms. The author puzzled over the flat reception of *The Strayed Reveller, and Other Poems* and found, in the three volumes being considered, "simplicity and healthfulness of moral feeling". There is, the reviewer went on:

> no obscurity, and no mysticism; and we see everywhere the working of a mind bent earnestly on cultivating whatever is highest and worthiest in itself; of a person who is endeavouring, without affectation, to follow the best things, to see clearly what is good, and right, and true, and to fasten his heart upon these. [… In] nobleness of purpose, in a certain loftiness of mind singularly tempered with modesty, he continually reminds us of his father.[17]

That, incidentally, might have been a difficult final line for Arnold to read since, in a remarkably literal version of Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence, his writing frequently negotiated with the shade of the Headmaster of Rugby (to say nothing of his fears of succumbing to a fatal heart disease, which Dr Arnold had inherited from *his* father). But it is moral healthfulness and a mind in search of the best things this reviewer perceives as most consequential. Nothing cognate with a "longing like despair", a line from the poem called in 1852, "To Marguerite, in Returning a Volume of the Letters of Ortis", is documented. (That poem itself is unmentioned in *The Westminster* in a pattern of missing out troubled texts that would continue to be a principle for reviewers throughout

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[15] *Letters of Matthew Arnold*, iii.347.
[16] See Shrimpton "Arnold and the Movement of Mind."
[17] "Arnold's Poems," *Westminster Review*, 150.

much of Arnold's life.) "Empedocles" is thought "not the happiest",[18] for certain, but that is all that is said: there is no discussion. Unmentioned, too, is the now celebrated, if that is quite the right word, meditation on the metaphysical and psychological implications of solitariness, "Isolation: to Marguerite" (called, in 1852, "To Marguerite") as well as "The River"; "Too Late"; and the peculiarly fretful "Stanzas in Memory of the Author of 'Obermann'" with its repeated farewells to a world no longer indispensable. Each might have made for an umbrageous review. Rather, there is an enumeration of what the reviewer for *The Westminster* perceived as poetically inspiring writing of which, for the most part, "it is difficult to speak in too warm praise".[19] There is, *The Westminster* notes, "The Forsaken Merman", "as beautifully finished as anything of the kind in the English language";[20] the "very beautiful" "Mycerinus";[21]and "Tristram and Iseult", which offers "the deepest and most exquisite enjoyment".[22] We do not glimpse here a recognition of a writer beginning to mull over intellectual and moral dislocation, to make his subject bafflement about the incomprehensible, the *dérouté*, ways of "A God" in eternally separating us all into unchangeable loneliness,[23] or beginning an inquiry into what exactly that vague moral miasma was, the "something that infects the world".[24]

Fraser's, reviewing the 1853 volume, said simply that it agreed with *The Westminster Review*. And, for good measure, added its own compliments, steering the reader away, again, from the traces of Arnold's apparent dissatisfactions. Respect was notably for "The Sick King in Bokhara", "one of the wisest, most simple, and most genial of the poems",[25] and "Sohrab and Rustum", "an artistic whole, a more complete one, saving the 'Merman,' than we know of in any poetry which the young men of the present day have produced."[26] That was a real accolade. As for *The Westminster*, the poems that would seem to the later twentieth century emblematic of Arnold's growing sense of the fault-lines in western intellectual and spiritual life—including the two Marguerite poems—are un-noticed. Approaching the most representatively "pessimistic" poem, as it would later be seen, of these early productions, *Fraser's* noted the redaction of "Empedocles on Etna" in 1853 but only to say nothing should be remarked of it. We, "being bound in honour", the reviewer said, "to ignore all words which are retracted by the Author".[27] To my knowledge, a reader in the early 1850s looking for critical opinion on "Empedocles", with its portrait of a philosopher fatally out of time with his age, would have found almost nothing in the periodicals to think about.[28]

Yet perhaps it is in the reception of *Poems* (1867) where the more modern, so-called "pessimistic", Arnold begins to emerge in criticism? After all, 1867 sees "Dover Beach" in print for the first time, though no-one knows for sure when it was written.[29] The answer

[18]Ibid.
[19]Ibid.
[20]Ibid.
[21]Ibid., 148.
[22]Ibid., 151.
[23]*MA*, "To Marguerite—Continued," 131, l.23.
[24]*MA*, "Resignation: To Fausta," 100, l. 278
[25]"Poems by Matthew Arnold," *Fraser's Magazine*, 142. For a re-assessment of the context of this poem, see O'Gorman, forthcoming.
[26]"Poems by Matthew Arnold," *Fraser's Magazine*, 144.
[27]Ibid., 142.
[28]There is a thought-provoking account, a very different perspective from that explored in this essay, about Arnold being "out of time" in Wright.
[29]For a summary of the arguments, see Shrimpton, "Review of Murray."

—and this is the second part of my consideration of the first critics—is both "yes" and "no". Yes, the shadows in Arnold's writing begin to be more plainly considered; and no, because these shadows are seen, where they are seen at all, as poetic faults or personal limitations. If they are anything more, they are only in the most strictly curtailed and even parochial sense associated with something generalisable about Arnold's own day. The brooding sadness—often judged as no more than that—of *Poems* (1867) is noticed, not least, by *The Saturday Review*. But, retaining the impressions of the reviewers of the early 1850s, the initial context offered by this periodical is one of encouragement and the recognition of pleasure. "Those who know Mr Arnold", the author began,

> as the author of one of the most exquisite and delightful poems in the language will turn with eagerness to his new volume. To have written *Sohrab and Rustum* was to win the lasting admiration and gratitude of every lover of poetry. The fine harmony of the verse, the stately imagery, the nobly tragic manner of the story, its sombre yet elevated pathos, fill the mind with that joy which it is the poet's chief glory to give.[30]

This sounds like a reprise. But, *The Saturday Review* allows, Arnold has moved into a sunless place. Yet this is, for the reviewer, not some indication of mid-period intellectual history, of the main movement of the mind over the last few years, but an aesthetic weakness. Empedocles, that is, is not a suitable subject for a dramatic poem as the story of Sohrab and Rustum *was* suitable for a fragment of an epic. (Arnold, of course, had restored "Empedocles" in 1867, claiming, even acclaiming, Robert Browning's opinion as the reason.) The "unfitness of the story of Empedocles for dramatic treatment", the reviewer at *The Saturday* went on, is first that it simply offers us "a helpless and enervating distress", which is hardly what poetry is for, and second that it is "fatally wanting in what may be called social interest […] of love and human sympathies and relations [… without which it] is impossible to affect the outside mind tragically."[31] Empedocles has, in Arnold's poem, no emotional connections and, in turn, it is impossible for the reader sympathetically to bond with him. The poem is not, according to this review, symptomatic of the age but—a failure (even if it does have, the reviewer admits, some charming individual lyrics). Sometimes, it is a very bad failure. When Empedocles soliloquises in the second half, *The Saturday* observed robustly, "the monotony is irredeemable".[32] Representative of the age? No: boring.

The story does not significantly alter. *St James's Magazine* in February 1868 said, for instance, more about aesthetic failure and had an explanation for why Arnold was in the unlit valleys in the first place. There was no sign of cultural metonymy in the poetry here but the traces of a personal issue. "Does the utterance of these dreary truths tend to anything?"[33] the reviewer—Isadore G. Ascher (1835–1914), Scottish-Canadian poet and fiction writer—inquired of Empedocles's enervated speeches. Not really, was the answer. The temper of "Empedocles" tended to suggest that the author was feeling out of sorts. We "cannot help remarking", *St James's* said, "that this poem is merely the offspring of a discontented mood of the poet."[34] Such a response—its implications

[30]"Mr Matthew Arnold's New Poems," *Saturday Review*, 319.
[31]Ibid.
[32]Ibid.
[33]"Matthew Arnold's *New Poems*," *St James's Magazine*, 376.
[34]Ibid., 378.

fully skeined out—might un-nerve many a reader looking for "exemplary" texts that are thought to capture the *Zeitgeist*. Arnold's situation here is cognate with, though not identical to, approaches to *The Waste Land* (1922) that try to by-pass what we are encouraged to take as Eliot's ingenuous remark to his brother. "Various critics", Eliot apparently said, in words that Valerie Eliot reminded the reader of in her facsimile edition,

> have done me the honour to interpret the poem in terms of criticism of the contemporary world, have considered it, indeed, as an important bit of social criticism. To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling.[35]

What should a critic do with *that*? The reader's struggle, and I turn to this again at the end, to make a moment's monument into the monument of more than just a moment—whether with Arnold alleged to be in a sad mood or Eliot allegedly declaring himself to be so—reveals something, for sure, about how difficult it is for modern criticism to find ways of approaching single texts in relation to private authorial histories and psychic states.[36] Metonymy, certainly, can be an easy way out of that problem—or apparently out of that problem—as it can be a way seemingly around the challenges of tackling the local specificity of a poem's viewpoint with all its possible tensions and complexities.

There was much else for *St James's* to admire in the volume (which did not mention "Dover Beach", in another example of that pattern of keeping silence) and, "Empedocles" aside, the reviewer welcomed the descriptive powers, the verbal control, and the emotional range of the 1867 collection. The conclusion of the review was to counterpoint the sorrows with the sense. "Such a book", said the reviewer,

> as the one we have attempted to notice hardly inspires hopefulness; but, on the other hand, it awakens reflection. The brightness and beauty of external nature do most often find their counterpart in human nature. The loveliness of the external world contrasts, alas, too often, with the terrible glooms of the world around us, and it is only right that in rending the veil of self-complacency, which so often blinds our vision to the drear realities in our midst, we should look at life as it is, instead of dreaming of it was we should like it to be. The truths which our glance may reveal to us may be sad enough, Heaven knows; still better be alive to them than to the bright falsehoods of the optimist.[37]

Arnold's *grisaille* contemplativeness in 1867 is perceived from a perspective that is meant to endear us to it. Not taken merely as itself, that contemplation is acknowledged, finally, as something that points up a contrast: Arnold's manner both highlights the sources of real pleasure, including his delight in the real not oneiric natural world, and is a position of greater integrity than the false promises of the overly cheerful. Arnold stands enablingly, according to this review, against the kinds of vapid positivity that, nearly 150 years later, Terry Eagleton would dismantle in *Hope without Optimism* (2015).

More severely than *The Saturday Review*, though, *The Athenæum* thought the 1867 volume in general indicated not the melancholy long withdrawing roar of the sea of faith but the departure of Arnold's poetic gift.[38] An article on Arnold in *The Times* in

[35]Eliot, 1. The somewhat suspicious and possibly unlikely nature of this statement, or certainly its provenance, is usefully discussed in Unger, esp. 158.
[36]Note that are some suggestive points about this general issue, though not related to Arnold or Eliot, in the Introduction to Vendler.
[37]"Matthew Arnold's *New Poems*," *St James's Magazine*, 382.
[38]Out of interest, one adds that Matthew Arnold had been elected to the actual Athenæum, 107 Pall Mall, in 1856.

1975 described him—extending the observation in "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse"—as a man in three minds, a peculiarly doubtful, divided intelligence, and said that his "poetic vein" ran out after 1870.[39] *The Athenæum* was sure it had run out well before then. Arnold "might have been a bright-eyed and hopeful singer", the reviewer said. But he suffered decline. "It is [in turn] clear", the reviewer went on, "that we have lost a poet—not a burning and shining luminary, but a sweet lesser light, which would have helped many a straggler through the darkness."[40] Arnold's own favoured vocabulary of "sweetness and light", essential to *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), is proleptically assembled against him in this impatience with a poetic retreat from the field where, it seems, glory did not stay.

Again, *The Athenæum* reviewer's objections to the 1867 volume are objections to a failure to live up to an expectation of what a poet should do and be (and such reviewers had, obviously enough, a far more ambitious sense of what poetry was, and what it should do for readers, than Dr Johnson's disappointingly etiolated definition, so different from his own dazzling criticism, of poetry merely as "metrical composition"[41]). Dispiriting readers is not a poet's business. And this was Swinburne's more boldly spoken opinion that same year, as he looked over the career which *New Poems* represented. "Nothing which leaves us depressed is a true work of art", Swinburne said (though readers of *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865) might have raised an eye-brow at that, remembering the exceptional poetic drama which had, nevertheless, a dark, fatalistic plot). "We must have light", Swinburne continued,

> though it be lightning, and air though it be storm. Where the thought goes wrong, the verse follows after it. In Mr Arnold's second book there was more of weak or barren matter, and more therefore of feeble or faulty metre.[42]

The problem, once more, is bad poetry. And that cannot be redeemed by somehow imagining the verse speaks of its cultural or spiritual moment.

This recognition of a weakened poetic gift was nowhere more clear for *The Athenæum* than in "Dover Beach", which, for once, was commented on. *The Athenæum*'s criticism was so uncompromising it, as was surely intended, became comic. There was something of Bernard Shaw's satirical wit, here, before his time. The reviewer quoted the first half of Arnold's poem (to "The naked shingles of the world"[43]) and then proclaimed, like a doctor making a note about a patient, or, rather, a landlord contemplating a prone customer who has taken too much beer, "Mr Arnold is really very far gone." Mr Arnold cannot, the review continues,

> stand on the beach at Dover, and hear the solemn music of the sea, but the fatal weakness seizes him, and he must begin twaddling about Sophocles and the "sea of faith."[44]

It is not quite the objective, officially *Athenæum* voice of criticism because—the point is—this is not quite proper poetry. And the rebuke continues. Arnold is not emblematic of his age as a whole. But if he *is* emblematic, it is of a small group of men who are hardly in

[39]"Literature and Religion: 27," 14.
[40]"New Poems," *The Athenæum*, 266.
[41]See entry in *A Dictionary of the English Language*.
[42]Swinburne, 162.
[43]*MA*, 253, l.28.
[44]"New Poems," *The Athenæum*, 266.

the mainstream of national life. "Here", continued the reviewer about a poem that would seem to later generations as, in the slightly ungainly words of H. Wayne Schow in 1998, a "pessimistic lamentation relative to the possibility of human happiness in a time bereft of faith":[45]

> Here is the penalty of his culture,—to see, to hear, to feel nothing without making it the vehicle of intellectual self-consciousness,—to carry the shadow of Oxford everywhere, and find no deeper pleasure in ocean [*sic*] than a suggestion of the "Essays and Reviews."[46]

Representative of the age? No, for "culture", here, means something much more limited. The reviewer signifies not something like "the Victorians", or any kind of generalised state of nineteenth-century spiritual life as Schow imagines it, but the fractious, and fractured, uncertainties of religious doubt associated with a small cluster of Oxford men in the middle of the century, including, presumably, J.A. Froude and A.H. Clough, as well as Arnold himself. Arnold, in fact, as far as *The Athenæum* sees it, is *too* far gone. But these troubled graduates and dons, for the journal, are hardly representative of the far-goneness of a national state of mind. The liberalism of Oxford-associated biblical critics in 1860 (emblematically gathered around John William Parker's edited collection *Essays and Reviews*) has not provided a window on the movement of any collective mind but resulted in a narrowed and depleted poem whose interests, *The Athenæum* implies, are too local. Insularity of mind is dogging, and bogging down, this somewhat constrained text of unpoetic "twaddling". Arnold has, it appears, become self-parodic; his voice of melancholy has over-done itself (it is difficult not to think of the occasional witty parody of W.G. Sebald as a more extreme example of what *The Athenæum*'s reviewer sees Arnold doing to himself[47]). What would strike Michael Timko, for instance, in 1973 as a decisive poem, in this case, in the shift from Romanticism to the Victorian, a "synecdochic statement concerning the changing view of Nature from the 1830s [*sic*] on", a poem representative of the transformation of nature from the revelatory to the "immoral",[48] from the divinely designed to the materialist, appeared as nothing like that—certainly as nothing to do with synecdoche on this matter or on any other —to *The Athenæum*. The journal said frankly after its grimly amusing discussion of "Dover Beach": "The poet is dead."[49] This was not, the journal's advice reads, the way for Matthew Arnold to write if he hoped to be taken seriously, and perhaps being too serious was, anyway, what he should not be.

The question of speaking for, or of, an age—of being somehow synecdochic—came in a different way into view for other writers on Matthew Arnold in the periodicals immediately after his death. But the result, broadly speaking, underlined *The Athenæum*'s conviction that reading Arnold as "representative" of an age was not a sensible thing to do. Looking back on Arnold's career in the days and weeks after his untimely demise, running to catch a tram in Liverpool, writers had often enough to confront difficult matters where the poetry was concerned. Issues adumbrated in this essay came to a new prominence in surveys of what the recently deceased man had achieved: the

[45]Schow, 26.
[46]Ibid.
[47]See, for example, *Private Eye*.
[48]Timko, 53.
[49]"New Poems," *The Athenæum*, 266.

matter, for example, of whether Arnold was known as a poet at all; of whether his poetic gift survived for long; of what delights his poetry could have; and—of most relevance to my argument—of what troubles he found himself in when writing bleakly of modern life. *The Times*, in the official obituary from the major national newspaper, had nothing to say about pessimism or hopelessness (that might have been tact but more likely it was simply in keeping with the usual ways in which Arnold had been described during his life). But *The Times* did observe of Arnold the poet that he had not obtained popularity. "His Muse is too austere", the newspaper noted with an odd remark: odd, given how exceptionally emotional Arnold's poetry was.[50] Perhaps, though, "austere" was a cover word for "unhappy". But, whatever the case, the subject of popularity was the tonic note of much else that was expressed at this point. The lack of popularity—that awkwardness in the subsequent raising of Arnold's poetry as illustrative of his times—obliged *The Contemporary Review* in June 1888, summing up Arnold's career, to remark wryly that Arnold as a poet had been caught in a paradoxical relationship with his audience. In order to be popular, as some now prophesized, Arnold would have to be remembered "for those achievements which have failed to attract the attention of the public which is to remember him."[51] This was obviously contradictory. And it was also more than a pity, the article continued, returning to the language of the reviews from the 1850s, because the poetry was magnificent. It was, *The Contemporary Review* said, in absolute admiration of the author of "Sohrab and Rustum" and "Tristram and Iseult", "of flawless perfection".[52]

But what, the periodical continued, was all this business about poetry as a "criticism of life", that criterion expressed by Arnold himself not least in the 1888 version of "The Study of Poetry" (originally published in 1880)? Arnold, there, had praised poetry as, among other things, that practice of writing possessed of "a higher truth and a higher seriousness".[53] Yet, if that was largely to do with style, poetry needed also to be alert, so it seemed, to the conditions of life itself (whatever exactly that meant). "[C]riticism of life", he had said, "will be of power in proportion as the poetry conveying it is excellent rather than inferior, sound rather than unsound or half-sound, true rather than untrue or half-true."[54] Perhaps only a poet who had long ceased to write can be so emphatic about what poetry should do, though, obviously, Arnold had defined poetry in other ways earlier in his career. And, equally obviously, what *The Contemporary Review* picks out as important is not the only thing Arnold says in "The Study of Poetry". Most memorably, for instance, he also had asserted there that "The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry."[55] But, reviewing the argument about the "criticism of life", on which it concentrated, *The Contemporary Review* was not at all persuaded.

It would be easy to think that a requirement to write poetry that was a "criticism of life" licensed a reading of poetry that recognised it could be capable of summing up elements of its historical moment. It would be easy to think, in other words, that subsequent critics looking at Arnold's poetry as somehow exemplary of his day could find

[50]"Death of Mr Matthew Arnold," 10.
[51]"Matthew Arnold," *The Contemporary Review*, 86.
[52]Ibid. 872.
[53]Arnold, 21.
[54]Ibid. 5.
[55]Ibid. 18.

Arnold, in such a critical formulation, legitimating them. But *The Contemporary Review* doubted such a move. Certainly, elsewhere, *The Athenæum*'s obituary essay observed that Arnold's writing was, indeed, a "criticism of life" in which "his work touched the deepest problems of his time, problems social and problems theological."[56] But *The Athenæum* here was talking about Arnold's prose, not his poetry. And, for *The Contemporary Review*, the whole notion of poetry as a "criticism of life"—picking up on the vagueness of Arnold's idea—was either almost fatally limiting or meaningless. The celebrated Edinburgh critic George Saintsbury would speak in 1902 of Arnold's "unlucky and maimed definition of poetry as 'a criticism of life'":[57] *The Contemporary* had fifteen years earlier put a similar point more obliquely. It is worth quoting in full. "His own poetry", *The Contemporary* said,

> from first to last had been far too much of a criticism of life—too much so at least for its popularity and for the vigour and permanence of its inspiration; and the dictum I have cited partook largely of the character of one of those after-thoughts by which the "human nature in man" is apt to persuade him that any shortcomings of which he is conscious have followed inevitably from the nature of things. There is, of course, a sense in which it is true that poetry is and must be a criticism of life, but interpreted in that sense it becomes so absolutely uninforming and unfruitful that it would be unjust to suspect Mr Arnold of having dealt with such insistence on a proposition of such futility. Poetry is only a criticism of life in the indirect fashion in which every human art, or for that matter every human science, is and must be so; and it would be just about as instructive and important to say that the execution of a song by Madame Patti is an illustration of the physical and physiological laws of vocalization. The poet must describe life—either the life within him or the life without—in order to poetize, just as the singer must breathe to sing; but a poem is no more a critical deliverance on life than a song is a lecture on the respiratory functions.[58]

Poetry, in other words, must be in "contact" with life insofar as it concerns, in whatever way, human beings (though only a very peculiar poem could be judged not to do that). Any further requirement under this criterion, beyond this obvious one, was, as *The Contemporary* saw it, more than misleading. Arnold's late insistence on poetry as a "criticism of life", if extended beyond the need to speak of human existence, was maimed—Saintsbury's term—perversely.[59] Rather enjoy, advised *The Contemporary Review*, the elegant art of the poet himself, including "that most perfect of all his poems", the "exquisite picture" of "The Scholar-Gypsy".[60] This was a poem in touch with human life, for sure, but not some kind of clunking "criticism" of it. To think of poetry like that would be the equivalent of regarding singing for what it reveals about the lungs. Forget the "criticism of life", *The Contemporary* concluded, and look instead at what magic Arnold has wrought with words.

Everything considered so far, then, can in some way be taken as a summary of notable and recurrent strands in the responses to Arnold's poetry from the first published volume in 1849 to the months immediately following his death. Aside from all the other matters

[56]"Mr Mathew Arnold," *The Athenæum*, 501.
[57]Saintsbury, 26.
[58]"Matthew Arnold," *The Contemporary Review*, 877. Adelina *Patti* (1843–1919), Italian opera singer.
[59]Cf. the reviewer's assertion that "criticism of life" was "one of a few critical perversities" that deformed Arnold's thinking about poetry (ibid.).
[60]Ibid. 875.

adduced here, the issue most visibly present is the avoidance of, or criticism of, a sense that Arnold, being in his age, was also importantly of it. "Teachers and prophets", said Lytton Strachey in the essay on Arnold's father in *Eminent Victorians* (1918), "have strange after-histories; and that of Dr Arnold has been no exception."[61] Something similar might be said of Dr Arnold's son, whose poetry was largely applauded—where it was noticed—in his life-time for its emotional literacy and verbal appeal before it became, for later readers, an epitome of the spiritual and moral troubles, apparently, of the Victorian period. A strange after-history indeed.

So what was happening? What might be inferred from this shift in the reading practices of Matthew Arnold's verse? Two obvious matters. The first is to observe that—to speak in considerable generalisations—Arnold's poetry has seemed of appeal to critics in the twentieth century who prefer the content of poetry to the poetry. The terms of judgment almost unanimously across the nineteenth-century periodicals considered here have been about the effectiveness of poetry as poetry—as metrical composition, as attentive to mood, description, human situation, and involving aptness of perception, rhythmic subtlety, and appropriate manner of expression. The best person to set the critical terms for admiring Arnold's poetry was, for *The Westminster Review* in 1894, Arnold himself. "Arnold illustrates", the reviewer, Thomas Bradfield, said, "by a clear, delicate, penetrating insight, and by graces of language, rare and inexhaustible, the truth upon which he insists with such unfailing freshness and charm as a prose writer."[62] Arnold was, in this appreciation of enduring poetic achievement, his own best guide—a kind of touchstone for himself and literary quality more amply. Yet it could be argued that Arnold, in insisting in the 1880s on poetry as a "criticism of life", had in fact achieved the opposite. He had, in conjuring that misty formula, invited subsequent critics to examine not so much the poetry as what the poetry was about. The instinctive assumption, evident in most of the reviews and articles quoted here, that poetry was a particular practice of language which needed first and foremost an aesthetic response, and an act of evaluative judgment, could be thought transformed by the legacy of Arnold's own preference, late in the day, for poetry as a "criticism of life". In this respect, it is worth observing *The Saturday Review* in 1877, negotiating with what would become Arnold's apparent privileging of intellectual content in "The Study of Poetry". "Criticism of poetry", the journal said,

> when it has decided that the things are worth saying, resolves itself into asking the question —Are they beautifully, impressively, effectively said? Indeed the world seems in this case to have answered affirmatively; for this demand for new editions [of Arnold] can hardly be put down to a spread of quietism in our busy, passion-stirred times, and it must be the loveliness of the expression that wins readers at least as much as the ideas.[63]

Relinquishing the priority of, as it were, loveliness, in preference for reading what Arnold had seemingly to say about the Victorians' "busy, passion-stirred times" is but a single, albeit prominent, example of a major shift in what the criticism of literature, and particularly, poetry looked like from the nineteenth century to the present. *The Saturday*

[61]Strachey, 213.
[62]Bradfield, 650. I have not been able to find out anything about Thomas Bradfield.
[63]"Matthew Arnold's Poems," *The Saturday Review*, 394.

Review's perspective is reversed amid the altered assumption, still dominant now for many readers, that poetry means rather than is.

The other obvious, and general, remark to make about the business of reading Arnold as exemplary of his age (I avoid, still, the enormous question of what exactly an "age" might be and whether the Victorian period really is a "period" in a historically meaningful sense) is to observe, as I have already mentioned, the place of metonymy in critical reading. The elevation of a single work of literature into representative status is ubiquitous in much criticism now and perhaps it gained powerful impetus—a whole history is beyond the scope of a single article—from the turn to identity politics in contemporary criticism, and Marxism notably. A commonplace assumption of Marxist criticism, that is to say, was (is) to regard a single text as exemplifying; as figuring the class relations, and discourses of classed power, not of the author necessarily but of his or her historical moment. Similarly, feminist criticism as it established itself in the academy underlined the same mode of reading so that, for instance, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar early on could make *Jane Eyre* (1847) into an epitome of what they perceived as the gender relations of (early) Victorian England.[64] Much later, New Historicism gave explicit authority to a critical approach that read individual literary texts as manifestations of prevalent historical discourses, of the so-called circulating energies that defined the character of their times. The collective force of these, and cognate ways of describing literary works, has certainly penetrated into working assumptions about what to do with literary texts for many modern students of texts. One does not have, now, to be directly concerned with identity politics or to find in New Historicism compelling ways of describing the relationship between a text and its age, to see literary works as primarily metonymic. Matthew Arnold, like W.B. Yeats, with his—Yeats's—habit of clinching what would subsequently seem to be national or international attitudes of mind or cultural *mores* in a single line or sentence, makes himself peculiarly available for such ways of reading.

But there is something else, less obvious and harder to define (and confine), and it involves a question as seemingly unanswerable as it is disquieting. The question, in its unvarnished form, is: at what point does a critic need to re-evaluate his or her reading of an author by placing it against that author's reception, if that reception markedly differs? How do we calibrate our sense against *their* sense, the environment in which the author was writing, the people to whom, directly or indirectly, he or she addressed his or her words? Each generation, naturally, reads freshly and finds in significant writing new ways of understanding it. There is little subversive in accepting that each new group of readers is capable of re-casting earlier writers to answer to, to fulfil or reward, the needs and aspirations of their own, rather than the writer's, time. On this conceptual topic, Tom Mole in *What the Victorians Made of Romanticism: Material Artifacts, Cultural Practices, and Reception History* (2017) has, for instance, most recently explored the subsequent "availability" and manipulability of, in this case, Romantic texts for the Victorians, particularly in terms of material history as well as *Rezeptionsgeschichte*. The model is a suggestive but also a familiar one. Yet something requiring less critical docility is surely needed to accommodate, or at least to begin to wonder about, so remarkable a change of view as that experienced by the poetry of Matthew Arnold. In *Forms of Attention: Botticelli and "Hamlet"* (1985), Frank Kermode

[64]See Gilbert and Gubar, Part IV, section 10. The volume was first published in 1979.

courageously examined the role of opinion as distinct from knowledge in the preservation or destruction of objects of, or for, criticism (his primary interest in this respect is Sandro Botticelli). What interests Kermode is the place of hunches, prejudices, guesses, and unevidenced estimates in the history of the reception, and evaluation, of art objects through time, for better or for worse. Now it is possible, as I have suggested, to identify the broad movements of mind, so to speak, in the habits of criticism in the twentieth century that have changed Arnold from how he first seemed in the periodicals. And, in this case, it is also possible to see the assertion of opinion as a preservative of Arnold's writing rather than as its destroyer: those who prefer to see Arnold as synecdochic have, whatever else they have done, secured Arnold's work as an object of criticism even though we might be hazy about the exact identity of that object itself.

But a fascinating problem remains. The change in modes of reading Arnold's poetry—which might be gesturally summarised as the difference between the original near invisibility of "Dover Beach" and its later claimed recognition as an epitome—unnerve because they invite the reader to be self-conscious not simply about what history can do to reading but whether readings at different points in history all have the same weight. If a poet's audience responds largely consistently and in particular way, we might need to entertain the idea—and see what happens to it—that, since the poet might have been writing *for* that audience, meanings as then perceived might have a special kind of loading. Kermode divided the responses to art between knowledge, opinion, and error. But what new critical pressures and possibilities are opened up by admitting *knowledge* of earlier *opinions*? We know, for sure, that looking at a strand of modern Arnold criticism, we are not hearing of what was once "Matthew Arnold": the poet of grace, beauty, and charm, and a writer who occasionally misjudged what poetry was by going on too long about sadness.

A revisionist, historicist, and aesthetically-centred criticism of Matthew Arnold might, then, be one which took us back to this start to think afresh—or, rather, to think as of old. Returning Arnold to history along these lines would be paradoxically about releasing him from history; it would be, more exactly, about freeing him from the assumption that it is history he is most frequently exemplifying. These are Arnoldian questions to ask, prompted by, and asked of, Arnold. What, as he would surely have said of the critical readings and rereadings mapped in this essay, *is* the object as it in itself it really is?[65] Arnold is a rather extreme "case study" in reception, in the struggle to find the object. In turn, he challenges us, I think, better to take into account, to allow space for, how an original audience saw its object. The very least this could involve, as far as Arnold is concerned, is the acceptance that, if we want to make Arnold emblematic, we must minimally acknowledge that it is us who are making him so. For it might be—distracting thought—that the object, like the freshness of the early world, can be best known by those who see it first.

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[65]For another approach to the question of rereading Arnold, see O'Gorman, "Matthew Arnold and Rereading."

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