



CRITICISM

VOLUME

183

Poetry Criticism

*Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 183

Lawrence J. Trudeau
Editor

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Poetry Criticism

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Preface

Poetry Criticism (PC) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. This series was developed in response to suggestions from librarians serving high school, college, and public library patrons, who had noted a considerable number of requests for critical material on poems and poets. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (CLC), *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (NCLC), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (LC), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (CMLC), librarians perceived the need for a series devoted solely to poets and poetry.

Scope of the Series

PC is designed to serve as an introduction to major poets of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, PC is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research.

Approximately three to six authors, works, or topics are included in each volume. An author's first entry in the series generally presents a historical survey of the critical response to the author's work; subsequent entries will focus upon contemporary criticism about the author or criticism of an important poem, group of poems, or book. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from critics who do not write in English whose criticism has been translated. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a PC volume.

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Each PC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parentheses on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the author's name (if applicable).
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections, book-length poems, and theoretical works by the author about poetry. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. In the case of authors who do not write in English, an English translation of the title is provided as an aid to the reader; the translation is either a published translated title or a free translation provided by the compiler of the entry. In the case of such authors whose works have been translated into English, the **Principal English Translations** focuses primarily on twentieth-century translations, selecting those works most commonly considered the best by critics.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems, poetry collections, and theoretical works about poetry by the

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Citations conform to recommendations set forth in the Modern Language Association of America's *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed. (2009).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** describing each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *PC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *PC* volume in which their entry appears.

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When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as Modern Language Association (MLA) style or University of Chicago Press style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." *Interpreting Blake*. Ed. Michael Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978. 32-69. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism*. Ed. Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 34-51. Print.

The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a bibliography set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." In *Interpreting Blake*, edited by Michael Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. 32-69. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism*. Edited by Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 34-51. Print.

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Matthew Arnold

1822-1888

English poet, critic, and essayist.

The following entry provides criticism of Arnold's life and poetic works. For additional information about Arnold, see *PC*, Volumes 5 and 94.

INTRODUCTION

Matthew Arnold was a dominant intellectual of the Victorian era, known as much for his voluminous literary and cultural criticism as for his poetry, which makes up a relatively small portion of his work. His poems engage with many of the social and philosophical issues treated at greater length in his prose, including the effects of social change and the existential despair caused by the erosion of religious certainty. Arnold gained renown among contemporaries as a diligent, self-conscious chronicler of the concerns and anxieties of his era. His verse bears the influence of Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth in its affinity for natural imagery and symbolic landscapes, but his simultaneous advocacy of detached rationality often clashes with the Romantic style. Because his doubt-laden, pessimistic worldview and emphasis on alienation anticipate modernist concerns, critics have regarded Arnold as a transitional figure in English poetry. His work continues to be widely read and studied both in that context and on its own merits.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Arnold was born in Laleham, Middlesex, on 24 December 1822, the oldest son of Thomas Arnold, a prominent educational reformer and historian, and his wife, Mary Penrose. In 1828, Thomas became headmaster of Rugby School in Warwickshire, and his family took up residence in the headmaster's quarters there. In 1834, the Arnolds began spending holidays in the Lake District, where they became friends with Wordsworth and his sister, Dorothy. Arnold received instruction primarily from tutors until 1836, when he began attending Winchester College, his father's alma mater. He also began writing poetry around this time. A year later, he entered Rugby School, where his work garnered accolades, including the prize-poem that became his first publication, *Alaric at Rome* (1840).

Never an especially diligent student, Arnold nonetheless received a scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford, in 1840. While there, he became close friends with Arthur Hugh Clough, who had been Thomas's most promising pupil at Rugby, and who later became a respected poet. Arnold's father was appointed Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford in 1841 but died suddenly the following year. His death deeply upset Arnold, who committed himself to perpetuating his father's legacy of social consciousness and moral rectitude. Arnold also continued to pursue his poetry, winning the Newdigate Prize in 1842 for *Cromwell* (1843). He graduated with second-class honors in 1844, and the following year he taught for one term at Rugby and was elected to a fellowship at Oriel College, Oxford.

After some two years of study and European travel, Arnold became private secretary to Lord Lansdowne, the lord president of the Privy Council. Arnold wrote extensively during his four years in that position, anonymously publishing his first collection of poetry, *The Strayed Reveller and Other Poems*, to little notice in 1849. In April 1851, he became an inspector of schools—a post he retained for most of the rest of his life—and in June of that year he married Frances Lucy Wightman, a judge's daughter, with whom he eventually had six children. Critics largely ignored his second anonymously published poetry volume, *Empedocles on Etna and Other Poems* (1852), but many of its verses were reprinted in *Poems* (1853), the collection that established Arnold's reputation. That work's critical preface also attracted significant attention.

In 1857, Arnold was elected to the first of two consecutive five-year terms as professor of poetry at Oxford. Around this time, he began to concentrate increasingly on prose, publishing literary criticism and social commentary. Following the appearance of his final poetry collection, *New Poems* (1867), he wrote almost exclusively in prose, consolidating his status as one of England's foremost public intellectuals with his cultural and religious writings, among them the essays *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) and *Literature and Dogma* (1873). He embarked on lecture tours of the United States in 1883 and 1886, the same year in which he retired from his school inspectorship. He died suddenly of heart failure in Liverpool, England, on 15 April 1888.

MAJOR POETIC WORKS

Arnold's first poetry collection, *The Strayed Reveller*, prefigures much of his later work in its debt to Romanticism, its frequent affinity for classical subjects, and its melancholy, often pessimistic outlook. Several of the collection's longer poems tell gloomy tales of legendary or fantastical figures attempting to cope with death, loss, or spiritual malaise, as in "Mycerinus," which concerns an Egyptian king who finds that he has only six years to live and devotes the rest of his life to unsatisfying hedonism. Likewise, the protagonist of "The Forsaken Merman," a male version of a mermaid, laments the departure of his human wife, who, having borne their children, has abandoned the family and returned to live among her fellow humans upon hearing the Easter church bells. Other poems are more personal in focus. "Resignation. To Fausta," addressed to Arnold's sister, Jane, meditates on some of the same philosophical themes as Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" (1798) but comes to a more pessimistic conclusion, ultimately advocating an attitude of detachment.

Among the most highly regarded works in Arnold's second collection is the long title poem, "Empedocles on Etna," a verse drama about the ancient Greek philosopher Empedocles, who, alienated from the world around him and troubled by his own intellectual decline, decides to commit suicide. Two of his friends attempt to dissuade him, but he is unmoved by their arguments, and, after prolonged introspection, he throws himself into the crater of Mt. Etna. When Arnold reprinted most of that collection in *Poems*, he excluded "Empedocles on Etna" for its failure to adhere to the critical principles expounded in his preface, but many critics regard the poem as superior to those he did include. Some commentators have described Arnold's deliberate suppression of one of his own major works on grounds of aesthetics as a product of internal conflicts in his critical approach.

The 1853 collection also introduced two new poems—"Sohrab and Rustum" and "The Scholar-Gipsy"—that critics consider central to Arnold's literary achievement. Modeled on the verse style of Homer and based on an episode from the Persian poet Abu'l Qasem Ferdowsi's epic *Shah-nama* (c. 977-1010), "Sohrab and Rustum" is the tragic story of a young warrior who, having spent his life searching for his father, eventually faces him in battle. Only after the father has fatally wounded the son do either of them realize their familial connection. "The Scholar-Gipsy," widely hailed for its evocative landscape imagery, recounts the legend of an Oxford scholar who renounces academia in order to travel the world in the company of gypsies.

Arnold's most famous poem, "Dover Beach," first appeared in his final volume of poetry in 1867, but scholars generally believe that he wrote the poem long before then—probably in 1851. Its precise meaning is the subject of some debate, but its principal subject is widely considered the decline of religious belief—symbolized by the ebbing "Sea of Faith"—before the advance of modernity. The speaker seems to affirm love as a means of overcoming the darkness and malaise of contemporary life, but the overall mood of the poem remains bleak. Like much of Arnold's poetry, "Dover Beach" is irregular in both meter and rhyme scheme, and some critics have suggested that these irregularities and other instances of the poem's avoidance of traditional poetic structures anticipate modernism, as does its emphasis on the sense of disorientation and anomie produced by the destruction of old certainties.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

The critical response to Arnold's poetry was mixed during his lifetime, and his fame as a prose writer consequently overshadowed his reputation as a poet. His verse never achieved broad popular success, and some critics characterized it as derivative and artificial. Nonetheless, he has had adamant defenders, and since his death, he has gained stature for his ability to voice Victorian anxieties. R. H. Stoddard (1888) speculated that Arnold's poetic career was cut short by other concerns, arguing that "if he could have followed his bent, unhindered by the necessities of bread-winning, he might have stood abreast with Tennyson and Browning." Ludwig Lewisohn (1901) found "a strong, manly unaffected simplicity" in the poet's work, but W. C. Wilkinson (1908) argued that "Sohrab and Rustum" was neither "well-conceived" nor "well-executed" despite its "well-chosen theme for a narrative poem."

Scholarly writing on Arnold's poetry often seeks to delineate the general features of his poetic approach. William Robbins (1979) divided the poems into three broad categories, reflective, lyric, and narrative poems, all of which express the conflict between rational detachment and emotional engagement. Gordon Hartford (1999; see Further Reading) argued against the common designation of Arnold as a "stoic" poet, suggesting that it is more accurate to consider him a moralist. Scholars have also sought to identify poets whose work influenced Arnold's literary development. Herbert R. Coursen, Jr., (1964) found evidence in Arnold's work of an abiding desire for the transcendence that is at the heart of Wordsworth's poetics, coupled with skepticism over whether such transcendence can be achieved. Mary Byrd Davis (1977; see Further Reading) posited the French novelist George Sand as a major

influence on Arnold, asserting that a general thematic trajectory ranging from despair to acceptance and, finally, aspiration is discernible in both authors' works.

Other criticism on Arnold is devoted to the detailed examination of specific formal or thematic elements of his poetry. Alan H. Roper (1962) considered the relationship between Arnold's moral themes and his use of landscape imagery. Park Honan (1963) discussed the thematic function of discordance and cacophony in Arnold's verse. Amrollah Abjadian (1989; see Further Reading) traced and analyzed Arnold's use of the poetic device of epic simile (an extended simile used to emphasize the heroic qualities of its subject) throughout "Sohrab and Rustum." Virginia Carmichael (1988) scrutinized Arnold's use of lyric verse in the context of his overall poetic principles, noting that although he was not predominantly a lyric poet, his poems "often contain insets of lyric, . . . and even the philosophical and dramatic passages are continuations, in another register, of the ongoing problem he has with lyric." According to Ingrid Ranum (2009), "Tristram and Iseult" "both acknowledges the appeal of the domestic feminine ideal and seriously questions the capacity of that model of femininity to sustain either a marriage or an entirely vital human self." Tracy Miller (2012) analyzed the use of setting in Arnold's elegies, maintaining that these poems "demonstrate the ways in which place might turn time in on itself, allowing grief to linger in the landscapes of those left behind."

James Overholtzer

Academic Advisor: Jeremy Venema,
Mesa Community College

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Alaric at Rome: A Prize Poem. Rugby: Combe and Crossley, 1840. Print.

Cromwell: A Prize Poem. Oxford: Vincent, 1843. Print.

**The Strayed Reveller and Other Poems.* As Anonymous. London: Fellowes, 1849. Print.

†*Empedocles on Etna and Other Poems.* As Anonymous. London: Fellowes, 1852. Print.

‡*Poems: A New Edition.* London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1853. Print.

Poems: Second Series. London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1855. Print.

Merope: A Tragedy. London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1858. Print.

§*New Poems.* London: Macmillan, 1867. Print.

Poems of Wordsworth. Ed. Matthew Arnold. London: Macmillan, 1879. Print.

Poetry of Byron. Ed. Arnold. London: Macmillan, 1881. Print.

The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold. Ed. C. B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry. London: Oxford UP, 1950. Print.

The Poems of Matthew Arnold. Ed. Kenneth Allott. London: Longmans, 1965. Print.

Other Major Works

England and the Italian Question. London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1859. Print. (Nonfiction)

On Translating Homer: Three Lectures Given at Oxford. London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861. Print. (Lectures)

The Popular Education of France, with Notices of That of Holland and Switzerland. London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861. Print. (Nonfiction)

On Translating Homer: Last Words; a Lecture Given at Oxford. London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1862. Print. (Lecture)

Heinrich Heine. Philadelphia: Leypoldt, 1863. Print. (Essay)

A French Eton; or, Middle Class Education and the State. London: Macmillan, 1864. Print. (Nonfiction)

Essays in Criticism. London: Macmillan, 1865. Print. (Criticism)

On the Study of Celtic Literature. London: Smith, Elder, 1867. Print. (Criticism)

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Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism. London: Smith, Elder, 1869. Print. (Criticism)

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*Includes the poems "The Forsaken Merman," "Myceus," "Resignation. To Fausta," and "The Sick King in Bokhara."

†Includes the poem "Tristram and Iseult."

‡Includes the poems "The Scholar-Gipsy" and "Sohrab and Rustum."

§Includes the poem "Dover Beach."

||Includes the poem "Westminster Abbey," originally published on 25 July 1881.

CRITICISM

R. H. Stoddard (essay date 1888)

SOURCE: Stoddard, R. H. "Matthew Arnold as Poet." *North American Review* 146.379 (1888): 657-62. Print.

[In the following essay, Stoddard offers an appreciation of Arnold's poetic career, which he argues was cut short by other concerns. Stoddard speculates that "if he could have followed his bent, unhindered by the necessities of bread-winning, he might have stood abreast with Tennyson and Browning."]

The poetry of Matthew Arnold differs from the poetry of all the later English poets in several important particulars, and this differentiation, while it closed against him the doors of contemporary popularity, opened before him the shining portal of permanent fame. When he is at his best,

his poetry is so good—not merely in the kind that it illustrates, but in every kind—so luminous, so lovely, so noble, that one cannot but regret there is not more of it. There is nothing that he might not have done, we think, if only he could have devoted his life to poetry, instead of being devoted by it to the *res augusta domi*. If he could have followed his bent, unhindered by the necessities of bread-winning, he might have stood abreast with Tennyson and Browning, instead of behind them, as he did, after gaining his first poetic triumphs.

Arnold did not rush into verse lightly, for he was twenty-six when his first volume, **“The Strayed Reveller and Other Poems,”** was published. Nor boldly, for he concealed his identity under the signature of “A.” Precisely what this collection contained, and by what qualities it was characterized, it is not easy to determine, since the chronological order of Arnold’s verse has been disturbed by its arrangement under different classes in the later editions; but judging from the leading poem it was distinguished by a classical spirit which had been absent from English poetry since the days of Milton, and which could be thoroughly appreciated only by those who were imbued with classical scholarship in its purest form. This spirit is supposed by most unlettered readers to be dominant in the poetry of Keats, but scholars know better; for “Endymion,” though a charming poem of a careless Elizabethan sort, is not Greek, except, perhaps, in the Hymn to Pan. Nor is the art of “Hyperion” Greek, but Gothic, though Gothic of the severest order. The only living poets from whom Arnold could have learned anything classical were Landor and Tennyson, with whose “Hellenica” and “Ænone” he was no doubt familiar, though there is no trace of any such familiarity in his verse. The inspiration of **“The Strayed Reveller”** was drawn from no modern source, from no trickling rills in the gardens of English poetry—but from the fresh springs and lucent fountains of old Greek song. The chief excellence of this poem, apart from the classical feeling which was the motive of its composition, is a curious suggestiveness wherein everything is seen as in a mirror, and nothing is reproduced as in a painting, a power of conveying picturesque impressions without description, and of conveying only what is most essential in these, the subtle hints of color and the delicate touches of light and shade which authenticate nature in its translation into art. If we may judge from his practice, “word-painting,” that brilliant but meretricious mannerism of so much recent verse, was Arnold’s abomination. The visions of antique life which come and go before the dazed eyes of the strayed reveller, drunken with the magic wine of Circe, have no parallel in English poetry, unless it be in the shifting groups on the glorious Grecian Urn, which Keats has

celebrated in his deathless Ode. Both are classic, but with the difference that separates sculpture from painting, the chisel of Phidias from the pencil of Apelles. **“The Strayed Reveller”** is in a pure but not in a high style of Greek, and being at most but a lyrical venture therein. It was an experiment, in that the form into which it was molded suggested rhyme, which was avoided in accordance, of course, with the laws of classical verse, to which Arnold was committed, and which he was determined to maintain here at all hazards. The question of unrhymed measures in English poetry, outside of its crowning glory, blank verse, is too large a one to be entered upon in these pages. But one thing is certain, and that is that no poet, great or small, has ever yet succeeded in so writing them as to make them satisfactory to English ears, and so naturalizing them in the language. Arnold would not admit this fact, then or later, and his violation of it has diminished the charm of some of his most exquisite poems.

Arnold’s next volume, **“Empedocles on Etna,”** was wrought under classical influences which necessitated a darker conception and a larger handling than **“The Strayed Reveller.”** [*The Strayed Reveller and Other Poems*] The Sicilian Greek whom he chose for his hero belonged to the same class of unhappy mortals as Hamlet, Faust and Manfred, of whom he was the poetic forerunner. A philosopher whose philosophy had forsaken him, a worshiper of gods concerning whose existence he was skeptical, sick of himself, whom he pitied not, and of mankind, whom he pitied much, discontented, despairing, desperate, oppressed, maddened, overwhelmed with his intolerable burden, the insoluble riddle of the world, the impenetrable mystery of life and death,—such was the hero of this soul’s tragedy of Arnold’s. Nothing in earlier English poetry with which we are acquainted could have suggested the form of **“Empedocles on Etna,”** which is rather romantic than classical, consisting of a framework of blank verse, interspersed with rhymed passages, and consisting of what may be called a lyrical interlude which Empedocles is supposed to speak in the highest skirts of the woody region of Etna, while he accompanies himself in a solemn manner on his harp. We have here the first specimen of Arnold’s blank verse, which is noticeable for precision as well as ease; fluent, yet compact, melodious and harmonious, but without the individuality it was soon to attain. It is tentative, not distinctive. The lyric upon which so much depends, in that it is meant to disclose and declare, to embody and express, the whirl and stress of the spiritual agonies which are sweeping the wretched philosopher to destruction, chasing each other through his darkened mind like the shadows of a rack of thunder clouds,—this long-drawn lyric, which occupies some eighteen or twenty pages, is confused and

ineffective. It measured the limitation of Arnold, who was not a lyrical poet, in the sense that Coleridge and Shelley were, and Byron in the *Thyrza* poems. His ear failed to detect their illusive secrets of melody.

But there are graver defects in this poem than are implied in technical deficiencies or a faulty structure. There is the fatal defect which inheres in the personality of Empedocles himself, and in the situation in which he is placed,—one of those situations in which the suffering finds no vent in action, in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance, in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done. "In such situations there is inevitably something morbid, in the description of them something monotonous. When they occur in actual life, they are painful, not tragic; the representation of them in poetry is painful also." Speedily condemned by Arnold himself, for the reasons just stated, "**Empedocles on Etna**" was excluded from his next collection of verse.

Arnold's third volume—the first collected edition of his Poems, as the two volumes published by Tennyson twelve years before were the first collected edition of his Poems—consisted, like the collection of the elder poet, of selections from his earlier productions, ballasted and freighted with what he had since written in the shape of verse. That the scope of his intellectual vision had been enlarged, and his powers matured, was evident on every page. Actuated in the beginning by classical impulses, the spirit in his feet had led him into broader realms of song, the mediæval kingdom of womanly affection which builded the Church of Brow, the legendary empire of tumultuous passion of which *Tristram and Iseult* were the victims, the world of heroic actions where *Sohrab and Rustem* engaged in that desperate duel, which, end as it might, would break the heart of the victor. Given as a starting point what is known, or imagined, respecting any particular period, classic, romantic, realistic, and what is known, or imagined, respecting the personages who figured therein, in history or legend, the first business of the poet who purposes to exercise his talents upon the facts or fancies thereof, is critical, not poetical. He must discover the spirit of that period and the individuality of its personages, and these once discovered, and mastered, must be kept constantly before him. Before writing "**Tristram and Iseult**" Arnold had to settle his conviction with regard to the poetic impression it ought to produce, and settle at the same time the method by which this impression should be created. What qualities distinguished the romances of chivalry of which the story of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table was the most notable example? Tennyson was the

first modern poet who sought to solve the Arthurian problem, and in solving it to revive the spirit of chivalrous romance. Beginning with "*The Lady of Shallott*," continuing with "*Morte d'Arthur*," and ending with the "*Joyes of the King*," he has devoted more than half his life to this enchanting subject. That his poetic renderings thereof are beautiful is certain; that they are faithful is not so certain, as the readers of Sir Thomas Malory have long known, and the readers of Arnold and Browning also. He has missed the significance of the old legends which he has summoned from their centuried sleep, and to which he has imparted a life that is not their own, and in missing it he has shown the limitation of his critical and poetical powers. What this significance is is felt by the readers of Browning's "*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*" and Arnold's "**Tristram and Iseult**," which transport us to another world than our own, remote, unfamiliar, surrounded with alien influences, peopled with visionary shapes, haunted with mysterious shadows, the world of fantasy and dream, glorious with life, and ruinous with death. The difference between Tennyson and Arnold in their treatment of chivalrous subjects is the difference between a well lighted parlor whose walls are hung with choice pictures and the darkened chamber of an old castle whose walls are hung with rude arras.

The critical judgment which directed Arnold in this creation of romantic art directed him in the larger art that created "**Sohrab and Rustem**." The episode which it embodies is one of the noblest that ever fed the imagination and fixed the soul of a poet. It is one of those great human actions that appeal to the great human affections, to those elemental feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time and place. He selected the most touching situation in the national epic of Firdousi, and recast it in English verse without sacrificing its Persian spirit. He reproduced his original with scholarly as well as poetic fidelity. To those who can read the recital of heroic actions without emotion it is nought; but to those who are capable of being moved with feeling and passion—the pathetic and tragic elements of life—it is the noblest poem in the world. It fulfills the old definition of tragedy, in that it awakens pity and terror, and it fulfills the highest definition of poetry, in that it is admirably planned, orderly in its development, transparently clear and vividly picturesque, manly, majestic, dignified, and, more than all, vital with human interest. Written in the grand style of Homer, there is a distinction in it which no other English narrative poem possesses.

Other influences than those of Persian history and chivalrous story were manifested in this third collection of Arnold's verse, and among them may be mentioned that of

Wordsworth, whose manner was marked in “**Mycerinus**,” which was pitched in the same key as “**Laodamia**,” and that of Keats, the manner of whose Odes was marked in “**The Scholar Gipsy**.” The train of thought which runs through “**Mycerinus**” is one which the contemplation of life forces upon all serious minds. It concerns itself with the insignificance of human actions in the large order of the universe, and the indifference with which they are regarded by the higher powers, who, superior to man in intelligence, are inferior to man in the sense of justice. It is the old, old riddle of the earth, and it is as insoluble now as when the young Egyptian king brooded over it in the luminous shadow of his palm groves along the mysterious Nile. Whether Arnold would have written “**The Scholar Gipsy**” if Keats had not written his “**Ode to a Nightingale**” may be doubted. It is true that he might have written a poem about the poor Oxford scholar, concerning whom Glanvil wrote two hundred years before, but it would not have been the same poem that he did write, so absolute throughout is the inspiration of Keats. In no sense an imitation, for poets like Arnold do not imitate, it is a reproduction of the pastoral element which Keats introduced into English verse—the light, consummate flower of his glorious seed, and as such as distinctive of Arnold as of Keats, who might have bequeathed it to his unborn successor, when on that dark February morning in Rome he closed his wearied eyes in their last slumber. The charm of a poem like “**The Scholar Gipsy**,” or a poem like “**Thyrsis**,” which is a graver rendering of the same general effect, is indescribable—so many and so diverse poetical qualities are interfused therein. Primarily a pastoral, in that it is filled with glimpses of English rural scenery, which, beautiful everywhere, are exquisite in the neighborhood of Oxford, it is more than a pastoral, in that it is flooded with personal feelings, which flow from the loveliness of nature as it steals into the mind of the poet, or from the mind of the poet as it casts the lights and shadows of its moods over this loveliness. “**The Scholar Gipsy**” is a vision of the perfect landscapes of England; and “**Thyrsis**,” with its sad sincerity and its manly reticence of sorrow, is worthy of the pen that wrote “**Adonais**,” or the greater pen that wrote “**Lycidas**.”

The meditative poetry of Arnold has been variously estimated by those who accept and those who reject meditative poetry. It was the natural, the inevitable outgrowth of one who had known the spiritual unrest of his period, and who, while he was crushed, was wounded by it. It is melancholy, but not misanthropical; not consolatory, perhaps, but certainly not cynical. It is profoundly serious, its morality is of the highest, and one feels in reading it that the poet was greater than his poetry.

Ludwig Lewisohn (essay date 1901)

SOURCE: Lewisohn, Ludwig. “A Study of Matthew Arnold: I. His Poetry.” *Sewanee Review* 9.4 (1901): 442-56. Print.

[In the following essay, Lewisohn endeavors to “stick to facts” in examining Arnold’s poetic career. He finds in Arnold’s poetry “intensity, a strong, manly unaffected simplicity, perfect sincerity, and, at its best, a peculiar elevation.”]

1

The function of the critic of literature is twofold: to judge and to interpret—to judge what is best in literature, and then to interpret that best. If this be true, it may seem superfluous to say that the critic, in order to be a judge and interpreter of literature, must have sound and thorough knowledge. And yet there is perhaps no kind of intellectual activity in which the stock of knowledge is so shallow, so lacking in soundness, as in ordinary criticism.

I say shallow, for there is often no lack of comprehensiveness in the critic’s knowledge. He has read widely and appreciatively; but he does not, as a rule, bring to the consideration of a particular author a sufficiently conscientious care to discover by close and disinterested observation all that there is to be known about the author and his works.

Perhaps the average critic does not attempt to do this, but relies solely on impressions, often vague enough, oftener totally misleading. And this method, too, has in it something presumptuous. We are grateful for the impressions of an extraordinary mind, for the impressions of a Carlyle or an Arnold, but surely we lose time in considering the mere impressions of every professor of literature who possesses a clear style and a goodly outfit of well-expressed prejudices. Nor has such a one the right to obtrude his impressions upon the public. If he is to judge and to interpret literature, he must do it upon a tangible and visible basis of observed and demonstrated fact.

A good example of the worthlessness of the mere impressions of even a brilliant and eminent critic, and one whose range of reading is simply enormous, is offered by Prof. George Saintsbury’s monograph on Matthew Arnold. Consider a few of Prof. Saintsbury’s critical remarks.

In Arnold’s poetry, for instance, Prof. Saintsbury finds a blending of “Wordsworthian enthusiasm and Byronic despair.”¹ Undeniably this looks plausible. If, however, we confine ourselves disinterestedly to the actual facts in the poetry of Arnold upon which such a dictum should be