



# CRITICISM

VOLUME

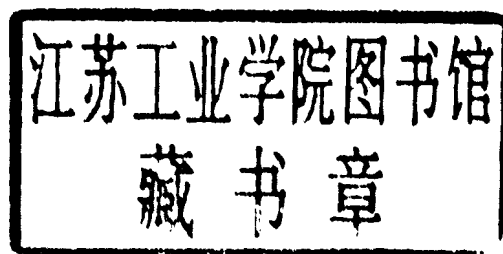
94

# Poetry Criticism

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

**Volume 94**

*Michelle Lee*  
Project Editor



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## Preface

**P***oetry 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. 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)*, *PC* offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by *PC* supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

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- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. 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 parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by the title of the work and its date of publication.
- 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 and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- 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 and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- 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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Linkin, Harriet Kramer. "The Language of Speakers in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." *Romanticism Past and Present* 10, no. 2 (summer 1986): 5-24. Reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*. Vol. 63, edited by Michelle Lee, 79-88. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005.

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

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# Matthew Arnold

## 1822-1888

English poet, critic, and essayist.

For more information on Arnold's life and work, see *PC*, Volume 5.

### INTRODUCTION

A renowned poet of the late Victorian period, Arnold is best known for poetry that reflects his melancholy nature as well as his ongoing crisis of faith. He is equally known for literary criticism establishing the poetic principles that informed his own verse, and for social commentary critical of Victorian culture. His best known poem, "Dover Beach" (1867), has retained a firm place in the literary canon into the twenty-first century.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Born at Laleham on the Thames on December 24, 1822, Arnold was the eldest son of Thomas Arnold, a clergyman, and Mary Penrose Arnold. In 1828, Arnold's father was named Headmaster of Rugby School, and the family moved into quarters at the school in Warwickshire. The family later acquired a summer home in the Lake District where young Arnold became acquainted with William and Dorothy Wordsworth. Arnold's early education consisted of tutors at both Laleham and Rugby, after which he attended Winchester College, his father's old school, for one year before transferring to Rugby. There he won prizes for his Latin verse as well as for both essay and verse in English. In 1840, he was awarded a scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford, where he became friends with Arthur Hugh Clough. In 1844, Arnold received his degree and took a teaching post at Rugby, after which he was elected to a fellowship at Oriel College, Oxford. In 1847, he was appointed as private secretary to the liberal peer, Lord Lansdowne, and served in that post for the next four years. In 1851, Arnold married Frances Lucy Wightman, the daughter of a judge, and accepted a position as inspector of schools. With the exception of a ten-year period from 1857 to 1867 spent as Professor of Poetry at Oxford, he retained that position for the remainder of his life. While at Oxford, Arnold began writing critical essays and by 1867, when he resigned his chair at Oxford, he abandoned poetry completely in favor of literary and

social criticism. Two years later, his most famous work, *Culture and Anarchy*, appeared, establishing Arnold as the foremost cultural critic of the Victorian Age. He continued to produce essays on a variety of subjects over the next twenty years, and in 1883 and again in 1886, he undertook lecture tours of America. Arnold died April 15, 1888, of heart failure; he is buried at Laleham.

### MAJOR WORKS

Arnold's first published work, the prize-winning *Alaric at Rome* (1840), appeared while he was still a student at Rugby. His next work of poetry, *The Strayed Reveller, and Other Poems*, was not published until nine years later; the work, influenced by classical myth, features a free-verse form patterned after Greek lyric poetry. In 1852, Arnold published a poetry collection entitled *Empedocles on Etna, and Other Poems*, which was reissued as *Poems* the following year, without the title poem. He explained his actions in the volume's Preface, which also contained his critical assessment of the Romantic poets and what he considered the dismal state of contemporary poetry. The Preface became as famous as the volume's poetry, which included such critically successful individual works as "Sohrab and Rustum" and "The Scholar-Gypsy," a poem that reflects the contemporary dilemma of the Victorian, caught between the romantic age and the modern age. Many of Arnold's critics believe that his best work—with the exception of "Dover Beach"—was contained in this volume. In 1855, Arnold issued *Poems: Second Series* and in 1858, *Merope*. In 1867, he published *New Poems*, after which he stopped writing poetry completely. "Dover Beach," which has been called Arnold's most modern poem, appeared at this time, although most scholars contend it had been composed many years earlier.

Arnold's most successful prose works are *Essays in Criticism* (1865), *Essays in Criticism: Second Series* (1888), and *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism*. He also produced studies of Celtic literature and of the educational system in France, as well as a number of essays devoted to theological issues. Arnold also published two books based on his trips to America: *Discourses in America* (1885) and *Civilization in the United States: First and Last Impressions of America* (1888). *The Works of Matthew Arnold*,

consisting of fifteen volumes of criticism, essays, lectures and poetry, was published in 1903-04.

### CRITICAL RECEPTION

Arnold's poetry has typically been considered inferior to his prose. William A. Madden reports that Arnold "was persuaded very early in his career that he would never be a popular poet, and history was to prove him right." For Murray Krieger, most of Arnold's poetry—with the exception of "Dover Beach"—suffers from "surface triteness," and even in his most successful poem, his "failure to exploit this image [of the sea] freshly or even to show an awareness of the need for doing so accounts in large part for his poetic weaknesses elsewhere." U. C. Knoepfelmacher (see Further Reading) characterizes Arnold's poetry as "derivative," claiming that it is heavily influenced by the classics, by Goethe, by the *Bhagavad Gita*, and by numerous other sources. However, the critic contends, "the core of Arnold's emotional power is Wordsworthian . . . Arnold's poems avail themselves of situations that are Wordsworthian, images that are Wordsworthian, phrases that are Wordsworthian." Sidney Coulling reports that several contemporary critics remarked how heavily Arnold's poetry was influenced by Tennyson; Arnold did not take kindly to these observations and, according to Coulling, such comments "could have acted only as reinforcements of Arnold's decision to write a preface defending a poetical practice essentially opposed to Tennyson's aims."

Many critics, Coulling among them, point to the central dichotomy in Arnold's work: between his desire to achieve critical detachment versus his determination to make "reason and the will of God prevail"; between the spontaneity of Hellenism versus the strictness of Hebraism; and between his insistence on poetry that featured simple language versus his commitment to poetry that featured serious subject matter. Miriam Allott notes "the habitual juxtaposition of differing or opposing ideas which shapes so much of Arnold's work," such as "the necessity to speak with the true voice of personal feeling," as opposed to the requirement that the poet provide "something of significant public use and value." Allott contends that Arnold moved between polarities—between Hellenism and Hebraism, between criticism and creativity—based on what he believed were "the needs of successive 'epochs' of cultural history."

Despite the many negative assessments of Arnold's verse, critical interest in his poetry has remained strong and scholars continue to debate its merits, many of them concentrating on recurring themes and on the evolution of the poet's ideas on religion and morality. William Robbins (see Further Reading) contends that

Arnold's work is characterized by two major themes—"the need for moral authority and for personal integrity"—and that discussion of these themes was largely missing from much Arnold scholarship until recently. Madden lists the primary themes of Arnold's poetry as "the need for stoic detachment . . . the primacy of universal law over personal desire, the inadequacy of romantic love, the transiency of human life. . . ." Krieger accounts for Arnold's well-documented melancholy, calling him "the man of little faith in a world of no faith, who still hopes to maintain the spiritual dignity which the world of no faith now seems to deny him." John S. Reist, Jr. has also studied Arnold's ongoing spiritual struggle, reporting that following the composition of "The Last Word" (c. 1864-67), "his life and thought comprised one 'long contention,' largely in prose, about religion, poetry, and culture." Adam Kirsch points out Arnold's considerable influence, even over such vocal critics as T. S. Eliot, noting that to the nineteenth century Arnold was "the poet, literary critic, social commentator, and man of letters who sat at the center of the Anglo-Saxon literary universe." Today, however, Arnold's influence and standing among literary historians and scholars appears to be waning. Alan Grob claims that even "Dover Beach," long a staple of the literature curricula of major universities, is still taught but is no longer regarded as a "universal" text, particularly by feminist critics.

### PRINCIPAL WORKS

#### Poetry

*Alaric at Rome* 1840  
*The Strayed Reveller, and Other Poems* 1849  
*Empedocles on Etna, and Other Poems* 1852  
*Poems: A New Edition* 1853  
*Poems: Second Series* 1855  
*Merope* 1858  
*New Poems* 1867  
*The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold* 1950  
*The Poems of Matthew Arnold* 1965

#### Other Major Works

*On Translating Homer* (lectures) 1861  
*The Popular Education of France, with Notices of That of Holland and Switzerland* (essay) 1861  
*Essays in Criticism* (criticism) 1865  
*On the Study of Celtic Literature* (criticism) 1867  
*Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (essay) 1869

- St. Paul and Protestantism, with an Essay on Puritanism and the Church of England* (essay) 1870  
*Friendship's Garland: Being the Conversations, Letters, and Opinions of the Late Arminius, Baron von Thunder-ten-Tronckh* (fictional letters) 1871  
*Literature and Dogma: An Essay towards a Better Apprehension of the Bible* (essay) 1873  
*God and the Bible: A Review of Objections to "Literature and Dogma"* (essay) 1875  
*Last Essays on Church and Religion* (essays) 1877  
*Mixed Essays* (essays) 1879  
*Irish Essays, and Others* (essays) 1882  
*Discourses in America* (lectures) 1885  
*Civilization in the United States: First and Last Impressions of America* (essay) 1888  
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*Letters of Matthew Arnold, 1848-1888* (letters) 1895  
*The Works of Matthew Arnold*. 15 vols. (criticism, essays, lectures, and poetry) 1903-04  
*Complete Prose Works*. 11 vols. (criticism, essays, and lectures) 1960-77

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## CRITICISM

### Murray Krieger (essay date 1967)

SOURCE: Krieger, Murray. "Dover Beach and the Tragic Sense of Eternal Recurrence." In *Critics on Matthew Arnold: Readings in Literary Criticism*, edited by Jacqueline E. M. Latham, pp. 40-47. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973.

[In the following essay, originally published in 1967, Krieger explores the reasons why "Dover Beach" has retained a prominent place in the literary canon when so many other Victorian poems have fallen into obscurity.]

What are the characteristics of Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach' that have earned a place for the poem so far above that of those maligned Victorian works which critics commonly consign to our wilful neglect? To what extent has it earned its exemption from the common charges they bring against many of its contemporaries?

It would seem clear enough that in 'Dover Beach' Arnold brings along his usual equipment, or, I might better term it, his *impedimenta*. The usual techniques and the usual patterns of thought which infect much of his verse and render it unsuccessful are apparent at once. The surprise is that the joining of them in this poem proves as happy as it does. There is, first, the well-

known Arnold melancholy: the man of little faith in a world of no faith, who still hopes to maintain the spiritual dignity which the world of no faith now seems to deny him. There is also the typical nineteenth-century didactic formula which Arnold rarely failed to use by allowing his 'poetic' observer to extort symbolic instruction from a natural scene. Finally there is here as elsewhere the mixture, perhaps the strange confusion, between a poetic diction and a diction that is modern, almost prosaic.

Arnold's easy but uneven rhetoric of melancholy often leads these characteristics to fail as he compounds them, but here they succeed, and in a way that reaches beyond the limitations of Arnold's period and of his own poetic sensibility. 'Dover Beach' bears and rewards contemplation from the vantage point of the modern, and yet ancient, concept of time which has stirred our consciousness through writers like Mann, Proust, Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot—a concept of time as existential rather than as chronologically historical, as the flow of Bergson's dynamics, as the eternal and yet never-existing present. This awareness which we associate with our sophisticated contemporary can be seen somehow to emerge from Arnold's highly Victorian 'Dover Beach'. We must determine how it manages to do so, how the very weaknesses that generally characterize Arnold's poetic imagination serve here to create this tragic and extremely modern vision. It is a vision which Arnold achieves neither as a nineteenth-century optimist nor as a vague and confused rebel of his period who turns to an equally nineteenth-century pessimism and simple melancholy; it is a vision which he achieves by transcending his period and foreseeing the intellectual crisis which we too often think of as peculiar to our own century.<sup>1</sup>

A cursory reading of the poem discloses that all the stanzas but the second are built on a similar two-part structure and that each recalls the ones which have gone before. The first section in each of these stanzas deals with that which is promising, hopeful; the second undercuts the cheer allowed by the first section and replaces the illusory optimism with a reality which is indeed barren, hopeless. In these subdivisions of stanzas there is also a sharp contrast in tone between the pleasant connotations of the first section of these stanzas and the less happy ones of the second. In each of them too, there is a contrast between the appeal to the sense of sight in the first section and the appeal to the sense of hearing in the second.

And yet, these three stanzas are not, of course, mere repetitions of each other. Each marks a subsequent development of the image—the conflict between the sea and the land. With each succeeding stanza the sea takes on a further meaning. I said earlier that this, like most of Arnold's poems, deals with a natural scene and the

moral application of the meaning perceived within it: the vehicle of the metaphor and then the tenor carefully stated for us. In this poem, however, the development from the natural scene to the human levels into which it opens is much more successfully handled than elsewhere in his work. Each level grows into the succeeding one without losing the basic natural ingredients which initiated the image.

We can see that the natural scene described in the first stanza is value-laden from the beginning. It is clear that nature itself—or at least nature as sensuously perceived—does have immediate significance, and moral significance, so that when the development and application are made later, we do not feel them as unnatural. By the third stanza the sea has of course become the 'Sea of Faith',<sup>2</sup> but the human relevance of the sea-land imagery is justified by the transitional second stanza. In addition, the image is handled completely in the terms which characterize its natural use in the first stanza. The sea-land conflict is still with us, still the motivating force of the insight the poem offers. And in the last stanza the sea-land conflict exists in the present, but, for Arnold and for these lovers, representative here of humanity at large, the historical present. The aphoristic impressiveness of the final lines of the poem is again justified in terms of the initial image of the first stanza, which they here recall and bring to its final fruition. The archetypal image of the sea, of the tides, and of the action of these as the sea meets the land—all these have been merged with the destiny of that humanity to which they have meant so much throughout its mythopoetic history.

As nature has thus—if I may use the word—*naturally* merged with man, so, through the use of the middle part of the poem, has history merged with the present, has the recurrence, of which the sea, the tides, the meeting of land and sea have always stood as symbols, merged with the ever-historical present. This is why the second stanza of the poem is excluded from the parallel development of the others. It is the stanza which makes the poem possible, which brings us to 'the ebb and flow of *human* misery', and brings us to the past even as we remain in the present. The image and its archetypal quality are indispensable to the poem. For the tidal ebb and flow, retreat and advance, and the endless nature of these are precisely what is needed to give Arnold the sense of the eternal recurrence which characterizes the full meaning of the poem.

But now to examine some of these general comments in greater detail by looking at the poem more closely. The first eight lines give us the scene as it appeals immediately to the sight of the poet viewing it. It is a good scene, one which finds favour with the poet. The value of the scene is indicated by adjectives like 'calm', 'full', 'fair', 'tranquil', 'sweet', 'moon-blanced'. There

is a sense of satisfaction, of utter completeness about the scene. But of course it is the sea which gives the feeling of ultimate pleasure. In the two places in which the land is mentioned there is something a bit less steady in the impression. The light on the French coast is not, after all, a steady light, and as it gleams and is gone so the cliffs of England, which seem to stand so steadily, yet are glimmering even as they are vast. The land, then, provides the only inconstancy, indeed the only qualification of the perfection of the scene.

The word 'only' in line 7 introduces the contrasting mood which will characterize the later portion of the stanza. But before this later portion is given to us, there is the remainder of line 7 and all of line 8, which serve as a reminder of the satisfying first portion of the stanza, although 'only' has already been introduced as a transition—one which serves to awaken us to the more unhappy attitude that is to follow. And with the word 'listen' at the beginning of line 9, we are to be shocked out of our happy lethargy even as the poet is shocked out of his. The sharp trochaic foot and the long caesura which follows re-enforce this emphasis. And with this word we are transferred from the visual world to the auditory world.

One might almost say that the poet, until this point remarking about the perfection of the scene, has been remarking rather casually—that is, after an almost random glance at it. But here he meets the scene more intimately. He does not merely glance but comes into closer rapport with the scene by lending the more contiguous sense, that of his hearing. He now pays close attention to the scene, and what he hears replaces what he has merely seen as a casual onlooker. What he discovers is far less satisfying, and yet it is more profound than his earlier reaction because he now begins to catch the undertones and overtones of the scene before him, which he before was content to witness superficially. And here the sea is used much as, for example, Conrad and Melville use it. Its superficial placidity, which beguiles its viewer, belies the perturbed nature, the 'underground' quality, of its hidden depths. As the more intimate, more aware, and more concerned faculty of hearing is introduced, the turmoil of sea meeting land becomes sensible. The shift in tone from the earlier portion of the stanza is made obvious by Arnold's use of 'grating roar' immediately after the appeal to the ear has been made.

One may see in the shift from the eye to the ear also another purpose. It is Arnold's way of moving us from the here and the now to the everywhere and always, from the specific immediacy of the present scene to the more universal application his image must have to serve the rest of the poem. What we *see* must be a particular scene which is unique and irreplaceable, while our *hearing* may be lulled by similarities to identify the sounds



of other places and other times with those before us now.<sup>3</sup> No sight is completely like any other; sounds may be far more reminiscent and may thus allow us to fancy that we are in another time, in another country. Identity of sound may lead the imagination to an identity of occasion.<sup>4</sup> Then not only is the sense of sight inadequate to grasp the profound perplexities of the situation so that the more subtle sense of hearing must be invoked, but, unlike the sense of hearing, the sense of sight is also incapable of permitting us to break free of the relentless clutch of the present occasion to wander relaxedly up and down the immensities of time.

The 'eternal note of sadness', then, caused by the endless battle without victory and without truce between sea and land; this note representing the give-and-take of the tide which symbolically echoes the basic rhythmic pattern of human physio-psychology—this eternal note of sadness, heard also by Sophocles, connects the past at once with the presentness of the past and connects also this rhythmic pattern with the humanity who has taught it to serve them and yet ironically, as the Greeks among others have shown us, has instead served it. Even in the first stanza we saw nature as animated by the human mind, as immediately meaningful in human terms. In the second stanza its human relevance is made explicit. The word 'turbid' (line 17) effectively joins the natural sense of the image to its human application as it combines the meaning of 'muddied' with that of 'confused'. As Sophocles serves to read man into the natural image of the first stanza, thus making him one with the natural world, so with the final word ('we') of line 18 the present is read into the past;<sup>5</sup> and the circle of the natural order, now including within its circumference the wheel of human destiny and man-made time, is closed.

The third stanza, in a manner parallel to the first, breaks into two contrasting parts. The first three lines present the promise of the visual image, the last five the despair of the auditory. In the first portion, to the sense of fullness and perfection which was ours in the first lines of the poem is now added the illusion of protectiveness—hence the 'girdle' image. Not only is the sea characterized by its complete and self-sufficient perfection, but, like the divine 'One' of Plotinus, it must overflow its bounds to salve, indeed to anoint, the imperfect land. Thanks to the passage on Sophocles, the extension of the sea to the human problem and hence to the 'Sea of Faith' is now literally as well as metaphorically justified, although the image must remain true to its earlier formulation. And it does. After the 'but' (line 24), which here has the same qualifying function as the disappointed 'only' in the first stanza, we are returned to the sense of hearing and to the struggle between land and sea which it first introduced. The inevitable cycle must continue and every resurgence be followed by the equally necessary retreat. The advance we have made

from the sea to the sea of faith and the added quality of protectiveness given by the 'girdle' image bestow a new dimension to the hopelessness of the 'naked shingles of the world', the words which close the stanza.

While the first line and a half of the last stanza, in which the poet addresses his beloved, may seem digressive, although they are prepared for in line 6 of the first stanza, they are involved in the development of the poem by the crucial adjective 'true,' which here means 'faithful': the poet is posing the only and the hardly satisfying alternative—the personal alternative of mutual fidelity—for our abandonment by the sea of faith. And again there follows the antithesis between the vision which yields the Apollonian attitude and the cacophony of Dionysian turmoil. Here, however, the balance is swung more heavily than before in the direction of despair. For, we are told explicitly, the world of perfection now merely 'seems' (line 30); the world of chaos exists 'really' (line 33). The final image of battle, though far-grown from the land-sea conflict of the latter lines of the first stanza, is thoroughly consistent with it and can take its meaning only in terms of it. We are returned in effect to the pre-human natural world of the first stanza and to its primitivism as the clashing armies are finally characterized by the poet as 'ignorant'. The clash is endless, as endless as time and tide, and, viewed without faith, in terms of nothingness, is as purposeless. Man himself has now drawn his circle closed or rather has acknowledged the closedness of nature's circle—perhaps the same thing—and has joined with an undergrounded nature to assert his ignorance, his irresponsibility, his doom. But the doom man carries with him he carries only to assert with it his eternal recurrence, even if that which recurs does so but to be doomed again. For paradoxically, doom too is eternally recurrent.

We are, then, worse than returned to what I called a moment ago the pre-human natural world of the first stanza and its primitivism. For the 'nature' of the first stanza, being, as we have seen, value-laden, existing only in terms of human perception, was indeed a nature that was humanized. It was seen as meaningful, indeed as purposive. The telic quality of the human was read into nature and, by animating it, made it also telic. But in the primitivism of the 'ignorant armies' humanity is seen as atelic. The relationship has been reversed as the non-purposive quality of the nature of modern science has been read into man. As nature was humanized at the start, so here man is naturalized and, thus, deprived of his purposiveness, deadened. He has indeed become part of nature and hence, in the words of Keats, 'become a sod'. The poet, of course, rises above this death-in-life by his dedication to the personal, the I-and-Thou, relationship to his beloved, now that any more inclusive relationships have been shut off from him. But, more important, the poet's assertion of his still-lingering humanity consists primarily in his insistence on real-

izing fully the sense of its loss, in his refusal to be 'ignorant' of it.

The poem may seem at first, despite some sideroads, to have a unilinear chronological development. After the natural scene of the present is given us in the first stanza, the word 'eternal' in the last line of this stanza permits the poet to move back to Sophocles. Then, after briefly returning to the present in the latter part of the second stanza, the poet moves us back again in time, but now to the Christian Middle Ages.<sup>6</sup> With the introduction of the modern world and its scepticism in the latter part of the third stanza, the poet has prepared us to return to the present dramatic scene of the last stanza. But whatever sense of chronology this arrangement allows us is seen to be purely illusory because of the return in the final image of the poem to the primitivism and everlastingness of the image of tidal conflict with which we began. Similarly, in the very close parallelism of structure of the first, third, and concluding stanzas we feel the unprogressiveness of man's ever-repetitive circular history.

The handling of the metrics and rhyme scheme reflect the other elements we have observed in the poem. The inexorable quality of the unending struggle as it is felt in such passages as

. . . the grating roar  
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,  
At their return, up the high strand,  
Begin, and cease, and then again begin . . .

is obvious enough. But perhaps more significant is the development of the patterns of line-length and rhyme, which begin as relatively undefined and conclude as firm and under full control. Through the first three stanzas the intermixture of pentameter lines with shorter ones is unpredictable, and, similarly, there is no determinate rhyme scheme. While the poem clearly is written in rhyme, the echoes of the final syllables of the lines surprise us since there is no pattern which enables us to foresee when the sounds will recur. And yet they continually do recur in this seemingly undetermined way. Only the final word of line 9 ('roar') seems not to have any rhyme in its stanza; and even this may be claimed to be an off-rhyme with 'fair' (line 2) and 'air' (line 6), functioning to set up a tension between this line and the earlier pleasant portion of the stanza—precisely what we should expect of the noun which is characterized as 'grating'.

Thus until the last stanza is reached, the patternless rhymes suggest a continual recurrence, but one on which human meaning and form have not yet been bestowed. The echoes multiply, but they have not yet been cast into a significant mould. In the final stanza a clear rhyme scheme at last emerges (*abbacddcc*), and,

further, for the first time the line-lengths even out. Between the initial trimeter and the concluding tetrameter are seven consistently pentameter lines. The problem of the poem, while certainly not resolved (poems rarely resolve problems, or ought to), has at last emerged as fully comprehensible, in terms of the poem at least. The meaning of the recurrence has become tragically and profoundly clear.

It may—and perhaps with some justice—be claimed that, if my prosodic analysis is valid, this manipulation of line-length and rhyme is, after all, a not very cunning trick, indeed is a highly mechanical contrivance. Or the poet's attempt to make the technical elements so obviously expressive may be charged and booked under Yvor Winters' 'fallacy of imitative form'. I shall skirt these issues since my purpose here is primarily explicative. In terms of this purpose it is enough to say that the versification, like the structure, the diction, and the archetypal imagery, marks out the repetitive inclusiveness of the human condition and its purposeless gyrations. The poem's form thus comes to be a commentary on the problem that is being poetically explored, a mirror which allows the poem to come to terms with itself.

But if the form helps indicate the price of eternal recurrence for a world robbed of its faith—the fate of being pitilessly bound by the inescapable circle—in the regularity it finally achieves, it indicates, too, the sole possibility for victory over the circle and freedom from it: the more than natural, the felt human awareness of its existence and its meaning. The tragic is at least an attainment, an attainment through the painful process of utter realization, realization of self, of nature, and of history. And the contemporaneity of the Western tradition in the poem is Arnold's way of proving that he has realized *it* and himself as its child.

#### Notes

1. This paragraph may seem to imply that Nietzsche, whose phrase I have borrowed for my title and my theme, is a twentieth-century mind. In the sense in which Arnold is predominantly a nineteenth-century mind, Nietzsche may very well appear rather to belong in our own century.
2. The surface triteness of this phrase is typical of Arnold's frequent and stereotyped use of a metaphorical sea, as in the many variations on 'the Sea of Life' which dot his poems. (See, for example, 'To Marguerite', 'Despondency', 'Human Life', 'Self-Dependence', 'A Summer Night', and 'The Buried Life'). His failure to exploit this image freshly or even to show an awareness of the need for doing so accounts in large part for his poetic weaknesses elsewhere. We shall see later that 'Dover Beach' is distinguished by Arnold's ability here to make his usual conception come

alive through his manipulation of the central image of the poem.

3. I am indebted to Michael W. Dunn, who first suggested to me that Arnold is here using the greater dependence of the sense of sight on a single time-and-place occurrence.
4. One can see a similar conceit operating in Wordsworth's 'To the Cuckoo' and Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale'. In each of these works, too, the poet (who here cannot use his sense of sight since he is unable to see the bird) allows himself to fancy, because only the sound of the bird's song reaches his senses, that the bird itself is somehow immortal even while it has temporal existence, that it has sung in other times and in other places. The illusion fostered by this romantic operation of synecdoche could become a valuable poetic instrument in the hands of such writers as these.
5. The effecting of this union may be aided by what may seem to be something like an unusual internal rhyme between two neighbouring vowels, between the last syllable of 'misery' and 'we'. (It would of course be difficult to maintain this as an internal rhyme if one admits that the last syllable of 'misery' is probably unstressed.)
6. Here we see Arnold managing to return to one of the favourite laments of so much of his prose as well as his verse: the irreplaceable psychological efficacy of the Christian medieval unity which, unfortunately, had to turn out to be so scientifically erroneous, and thus to him unacceptable, in its theological foundations.

#### Alan Roper (essay date 1969)

SOURCE: Roper, Alan. "Mount Etna." In *Arnold's Poetic Landscapes*, pp. 183-208. Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969.

[In the following essay, Roper discusses Empedocles on Etna as an ambitious and complex effort and claims that it is Arnold's finest poem.]

*Empedocles on Etna* is Arnold's greatest poem. It is more ambitious, more complex, and more inclusive than anything else he wrote. It projects through its compound of history, legend, and fiction a total myth of Victorian England as Arnold saw it. Moreover, this is a myth whose separate elements—the value of the active and contemplative lives, the function of poetry in its lyrical and didactic modes, the nature of the heroic, the historical consciousness, the sense of landscape—are fully congruent with each other. But even those who have admired the poem have usually expressed at least

moderate dissatisfaction with the long homily delivered by Empedocles to Pausanias in the second scene. Their dissatisfaction is with the homily's quality of expression and, less often, with its quality of thought. The diction of this long speech has been variously described, but perhaps the usefully imprecise adjective "prosaic" best sums up what most readers feel when they compare this speech with the rest of the poem. It is not difficult to explain why, if it is to perform its proper function in the whole work, this speech must be comparatively prosaic in expression. But even after such an explanation there is residual dissatisfaction with a speech which is so consistently prosaic and which comprises, moreover, almost a third of the poem's lines. For evaluative purposes, we can say that the speech accords with the standard of conspicuous holism advocated by Pope in his *Essay on Criticism*: the speech, while more than a slight fault, plainly contributes to the joint force and full result of all. But the speech fails to accord with the more exacting standard of unisistent holism advocated by Coleridge in the fourteenth chapter of *Biographia Literaria*: however much it contributes to the delight of the whole, the speech does not offer distinct gratification as a component part.

There are, in fact, several overlapping explanations of why the speech must be comparatively prosaic if it is to make its proper contribution to the whole work. If properly phrased, these explanations will confirm the sense we should have that *Empedocles on Etna* differs in kind as well as degree from Arnold's other poems. Unquestionably, each of the poem's elements recalls, when taken separately, a similar element in another of Arnold's poems. We can trace the lines of the Strayed Reveller in Callicles, or of Obermann in Empedocles. The brief descriptions of Catana in the hot plain recall Bokhara; the glen of Callicles recalls the haunts of the Scholar Gypsy and the palace of Circe. Typho is an Arnoldian Byron; Cadmus and Harmonia rest as peacefully after a painful life as the Duke and Duchess of Savoy in *The Church of Brou*. Empedocles' homily against hedonism inverts the arguments of Mycerinus, and the place where he delivers it to his disciple may remind us that *Progress* in the 1852 volume deals with the Sermon on the Mount. The persistent concern with good and bad times, with the difference between epochs, is reminiscent of both the Strayed Reveller's paired vignettes and the historicism of *The Future*, *The Youth of Nature*, and *The Youth of Man*. The association of Wordsworth in *The Youth of Nature* with Tiresias by "the spring of Tilphusa" could have made another song by Callicles. Even the prosaic quality of the homily to Pausanias finds a parallel of sorts in Arnold's frequent use of a section of fairly straightforward discourse to precede or follow a section of imaginative absorption into landscape. But a full explanation of the homily involves matters which cannot be paralleled elsewhere in Arnold, and thus helps us determine in what way

*Empedocles on Etna* differs from the poems it recalls; why so many of the same parts should make a different whole. One reason is that *Empedocles on Etna* has a crucially different subject.

## I

Unlike Matthew Arnold, Empedocles of Agrigentum had a developed metaphysic, a theory of noumenon informing and making comprehensible the confusing multiplicity of phenomena. Arnold's Empedocles is sufficiently Arnoldian to have learned to doubt his metaphysic, but sufficiently un-Arnoldian to be capable of a final assertion that his metaphysic still has validity. Empedocles of Agrigentum had also an ethic of sorts; at least there are in his fragments some gnomic rules of conduct based upon his view of the delusive partiality of phenomena and of mortality as a painful exile from immortal bliss. Arnold's Empedocles expands those gnomic rules into a developed ethic with the aid of large accessions from Lucretius and the Stoics.<sup>1</sup> Arnold's Empedocles is an Arnoldian man distinguished from his fellows by some important traces of the antique Sicilian. The conjunction of the two figures makes to some extent explicable a spectacular suicide which appears in the records as a highly supposititious story.<sup>2</sup>

Arnold discounted in later life the identity of his Empedocles and himself, pointing out that Empedocles incontestably fails to produce a creed for himself to live by. He admitted, however, to "a sympathy with the figure Empedocles presents to the imagination," and explained that, being "greatly impressed" by Empedocles, he "desired to gather up and draw out as a whole the hints which his remains offered."<sup>3</sup> Authorial comment fifteen years after the fact should not be received without question: in his homily to Pausanias Empedocles does, after all, offer a creed for men to live by, a creed, moreover, obviously similar to that given elsewhere in Arnold's poems. But in several important ways this late letter accurately describes what happens in the poem. Arnold draws upon the leading Empedoclean doctrine of four elements forever combining and dissolving into warring antinomies under the contrary influences of love and strife, of the whole as an eternally adjusted relationship between elements and influences, and of the part as a temporary mixture of elements into a particular form. Certainly there are differences. The attractive and harmonizing influence of love largely disappears from Arnold's poem to be replaced by a Romantic joy in the oneness of all things. Joy, indeed, is a due sense of the activities and manifestations of Empedoclean love. The influence of strife emerges in the poem as anything which tends to dissociation and disintegration: hate, emulation, an over-busy mind, or an over-indulged appetite. But behind these differences, important as they are, there is still something of the original metaphysic, showing itself in

allusive references to metempsychosis and especially in the exultant suicide carried out in the belief that something may still be salvaged from a wrecked life. For Empedocles of Agrigentum each mortal existence is a purgatorial probation either for immortal bliss<sup>4</sup> or, if the conditions are not met, for still another existence as "boy, girl, plant, bird, and dumb sea-fish."<sup>5</sup> Death is not an end, "but only a mixing and exchange of what has been mixed."<sup>6</sup> Arnold's Empedocles is principally in the condition set out in the first fragment of the edition used by Arnold: an exile from bliss because he trusted in furious strife.<sup>7</sup> In such a condition he is evidently far from the highest state of mortality which the original Empedocles elsewhere claims for himself, that state of prophet, bard, physician, prince which is the prelude to deification.<sup>8</sup> Arnold's Empedocles, indeed, disclaims his role as physician and lays down the insignia of bard, prophet and prince. He commits suicide to avoid dying in "despondency and gloom" (II, 414). He commits suicide while he can still feel at one with himself and "with the whole world" (II, 371-72), while he can still hope to escape the dreary cycle of metempsychosis through ever more fruitless lives (II, 373-90, 404-16).

It is reasonable to assume that Arnold did not reproduce the Empedoclean doctrine of metempsychosis as a "magister vitae" for himself and his public. It is also reasonable to enquire into the presumed relevance of such a doctrine for Arnold's generation. Arnold described himself as impressed by Empedocles and possessed of an imaginative sympathy with his figure. We have to deal once more, in fact, with an emotional and imaginative response to a human situation. That is the primary concern, the tenor. The Empedoclean metaphysic is to a large extent present in the poem as a vehicle for the emotion, as an explanation and motivation of human response and action. We may apply, indeed, at least to the second act, in which the metaphysic is concentrated, the judgment of Arnold's own Empedocles on Callicles' song of Typho: "he fables, yet speaks truth" (II, 89). The "truth," as Arnold insisted in the 1853 preface, is the modernity, the relevance, of Empedocles' feelings, when doubt and discouragement have replaced calm and cheerfulness.<sup>9</sup> The "fable" is the conceptual system through which he expresses those feelings. Empedocles did not have to believe literally in the story of Typho's revolt in order to find in it a widely applicable truth. Arnold's readers do not have to swallow metempsychosis in order to see the validity and relevance of Empedocles' situation and feelings.

That is not to say the metaphysic is some curious, antiquarian appendix irrelevant to the working of the poem. Its status is quite otherwise. The metaphysic "explains" existence; it identifies a single process working through all things, human and non-human. If it holds, and it is of course at the point of breaking, it makes for a symbolic world, in which all phenomena