

Modern English Writers,

Matthew Arnold

Professor Saintsbury.

R. L. Stevenson

L. Cope Cornford.

John Ruskin

Mrs Meynell.

Alfred Tennyson

Andrew Lang.

Thomas Henry Huxley

Edward Clodd.

Thackeray

Charles Whibley.

George Eliot

A. T. Quiller-couch.

Browning

C. H. Herford.

Froude

John Oliver Hobbes.

Dickens

W. E. Henley.

Preface.

Mr. Matthew Arnold, like other good men of our times, disliked the idea of being made the subject of a regular biography; and the only official and authoritative sources of information as to the details of his life are the *Letters* published by his family, under the editorship of Mr G.W.E. Russell (2 vols., London, 1895) [1]. To these, therefore, it seems to be a duty to confine oneself, as far as such details are concerned, save as regards a very few additional facts which are public property. But very few more facts can really be wanted except by curiosity; for in the life of no recent person of distinction did things literary play so large a part as in Mr Arnold's: of no one could it be said with so much truth that, family affections and necessary avocations apart, he was *totus in illis*. And these things we have in abundance. [2] If the following pages seem to discuss them too minutely, it can only be pleaded that those to whom it seems so are hardly in sympathy with Matthew Arnold himself. And if the discussion seems to any one too often to take the form of a critical examination, let him remember Mr. Arnold's own words in comparing the treatment of Milton by Macaulay and by M. Scherer:—

“Whoever comes to the *Essay on Milton* with the desire to get at the real truth about Milton, whether as a man or a poet, will feel that the essay in nowise helps him. A reader who only wants rhetoric, a reader who wants a panegyric on Milton, a panegyric on the Puritans, will find what he wants. A reader who wants criticism will be disappointed.”

I have endeavoured, in dealing with the master of all English critics in the latter half of the nineteenth century, to “help the reader who wants criticism.”

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Matthew Arnold.

Chapter I.

Life till Marriage, and Work till the Publication of the *Poems* of 1853.

Even those who are by no means greedy of details as to the biography of authors, may without inconsistency regret that Matthew Arnold's *Letters* do not begin till he was just five-and-twenty. And then they are not copious, telling us in particular next to nothing about his literary work (which is, later, their constant subject) till he was past thirty. We could spare schoolboy letters, which, though often interesting, are pretty identical, save when written by little prigs. But the letters of an undergraduate—especially when the person is Matthew Arnold, and the University the Oxford of the years 1841-45—ought to be not a little symptomatic, not a little illuminative. We might have learnt from them something more than we know at present about the genesis and early stages of that not entirely comprehensible or classifiable form of Liberalism in matters political, ecclesiastical, and general which, with a kind of altered Voltairian touch, attended his Conservatism in literature. Moreover, it is a real loss that we have scarcely anything from his own pen about his poems before *Sohrab and Rustum*—that is to say, about the great majority of the best of them. By the time at which we have full and frequent commentaries on himself, he is a married man, a harnessed and hard-working inspector of schools, feeling himself too busy for poetry, not as yet tempted by promptings within or invitations from without to betake himself to critical prose in any quantity or variety. Indeed, by a not much more than allowable hyperbole, we may say that we start with the book of his poetry all but shut, and the book of his prose all but unopened.

We must therefore make what we can of the subject, and of course a great deal more is to be made in such a case of the work than of the life. The facts of the latter are but scanty. Matthew Arnold, as all the world knows, was the son—the eldest son—of the famous Dr (Thomas) Arnold, Head-master of Rugby, and Regius

Professor of Modern History at Oxford, where he had earlier been a Fellow of Oriel. Dr Arnold survives in the general memory now chiefly by virtue of his head-mastership, which was really a remarkable one, whatever distinction it may owe to the loyalty of such a group of pupils as his son, Dean Stanley, Clough, "Tom Brown" Hughes, and others. But he was, if not positively great, a notable and influential person in many ways. As a historian he was alert and intelligent, though perhaps too much under the influence of that subtlest and most dangerous kind of "popular breeze" which persuades those on whom it blows that they are sailing not with but away from the vulgar. As a scholar he was ingenious, if not very erudite or deep. He was really a master, and has been thought by some good judges a great master, of that admirable late Georgian academic style of English prose, which is almost the equal of the greatest. But he was, if not exactly *cupidus novarum rerum* in Church and State, very ready to entertain them; he was curiously deficient in logic; and though the religious sense was strong in him, he held, and transmitted to his son, the heresy—the foundation of all heresies—that religion is something that you can "bespeak," that you can select and arrange to your own taste; that it is not "to take or to leave" at your peril and as it offers itself.

On August 11, 1820, Dr Arnold married Mary Penrose, and as he had devoted his teaching energies, which were early developed, not to school or university work, but to the taking of private pupils at Laleham on the Thames, between Staines and Chertsey, their eldest son was born there, on Christmas Eve, 1822. He was always enthusiastic about the Thames valley, though not more so than it deserves, and in his very earliest letter (January 2, 1848) we find record of a visit, when he found "the stream with the old volume, width, shine, rapid fulness, 'kempshott,' [3] and swans, unchanged and unequalled." He was only six years old when his father was elected to the head-mastership of Rugby; he was educated in his early years at his birthplace, where an uncle, the Rev. John Buckland, carried on the establishment, and at the age of fourteen he was sent to Winchester, his father's school. Here he only remained a year, and entered Rugby in August 1837. He remained there for four years, obtaining an open Balliol scholarship in 1840, though he did not go up till October 1841. In 1840 he had also gained the prize for poetry at

Rugby itself with *Alaric at Rome*, a piece which was immediately printed, but never reprinted by its author, though it is now easily obtainable in the 1896 edition of those poems of his which fell out of copyright at the seven years after his death.

It is an observation seldom falsified, that such exercises, by poets of the higher class, display neither their special characteristics, nor any special characteristics at all. Matthew Arnold's was not one of the exceptions. It is very much better than most school prize poems: it shows the critical and scholarly character of the writer with very fair foreshadowing; but it does not fore-shadow his poetry in the very least. It is quite free from the usual formal faults of a boy's verse, except some evidences of a deficient ear, especially for rhyme ("full" and "beautiful," "palaces" and "days"). It manages a rather difficult metre (the sixain rhymed *ababcc* and ending with an Alexandrine) without too much of the monotony which is its special danger. And some of the tricks which the boy-poet has caught are interesting and abode with him, such as the *anadiplosis* —

"Yes, there are stories registered on high,
Yes, there are stains Time's fingers cannot blot";

in which kind he was to produce some years later the matchless

"Still nursing the unconquerable hope,
Still clutching the inviolable shade,"

of the *Scholar-Gipsy*. On the whole, the thing is correct but colourless; even its melancholy is probably mere Byronism, and has nothing directly to do with the later quality of *Dover Beach* and *Poor Matthias*.

Of Mr Arnold's undergraduate years we have unluckily but little authentic record, and, as has been said, not one letter. The most interesting evidence comes from Principal Shairp's well-known lines in *Balliol Scholars, 1840-1843*, written, or at least published, many years later, in 1873: —

"The one wide-welcomed for a father's fame,
Entered with free bold step that seemed to claim
Fame for himself, nor on another lean.

So full of power, yet blithe and debonair,
Rallying his friends with pleasant banter gay,
Or half a-dream chaunting with jaunty air
Great words of Goethe, catch of Béranger,
We see the banter sparkle in his prose,
But knew not then the undertone that flows
So calmly sad, through all his stately lay." [4]

Like some other persons of much distinction, and a great many of little or none, he "missed his first," in December 1844; and though he obtained, three months later, the consolation prize of a Fellowship (at Oriel, too), he made no post-graduate stay of any length at the university. The then very general, though even then not universal, necessity of taking orders before very long would probably in any case have sent him wandering; for it is clear from the first that his bent was hopelessly anti-clerical, and he was not merely too honest, but much too proud a man, to consent to be put in one of the priests' offices for a morsel of bread. It may well be doubted—though he felt and expressed not merely in splendid passages of prose and verse for public perusal, but in private letters quite towards the close of his life, that passionate attachment which Oxford more than any other place of the kind inspires—whether he would have been long at home there as a resident. For the place has at once a certain republicanism and a certain tyranny about its idea, which could not wholly suit the aspiring and restless spirit of the author of *Switzerland*. None of her sons is important to Oxford—the meanest of them has in his sonship the same quality as the greatest. Now it was very much at Mr Arnold's heart to be important, and he was not eager to impart or share his qualities.

However this may be, there were ample reasons why he should leave the fold. The Bar (though he was actually called and for many years went circuit as Marshal to his father-in-law, Mr Justice Wightman) would have suited him, in practice if not in principle, even less than the Church; and he had no scientific leanings except a taste for botany. Although the constantly renewed cries for some not clearly defined system of public support for men of letters are, as a rule, absurd, there is no doubt that Mr Arnold was the very man for a sinecure, and would have justified the existence of Pipe or Hanaper to all reasonable men. But his political friends had done

away with nearly all such things, and no one of the very few that remained fell to his lot. His father had died in 1842, but the son served a short apprenticeship to school-teaching at Rugby, then became private secretary to Lord Lansdowne, the President of the Council (it is now that we first meet him as an epistoler), and early in 1851 was appointed by his chief to an inspectorship of schools. Having now a livelihood, he married, in June of that year, Frances Lucy Wightman, daughter of a judge of the Queen's Bench. Their first child, Thomas, was born on July 6, 1852, and Mr Arnold was now completely estated in the three positions of husband, father, and inspector of schools, which occupied — to his great delight in the first two cases, not quite so in the third — most of his life that was not given to literature. Some not ungenerous but perhaps rather unnecessary indignation has been spent upon his "drudgery" and its scanty rewards. It is enough to say that few men can arrange at their pleasure the quantity and quality of their work, and that not every man, even of genius, has had his bread-and-butter secured for life at eight-and-twenty.

But in the ten or twelve years which had passed since *Alaric at Rome*, literature itself had been by no means neglected, and in another twelvemonth after the birth of his first-born, Matthew Arnold had practically established his claim as a poet by utterances to which he made comparatively small additions later, though more than half his life was yet to run. And he had issued one prose exercise in criticism, of such solidity and force as had not been shown by any poet since Dryden, except Coleridge.

These documents can hardly be said to include the Newdigate poem (*Cromwell*) of 1843: they consist of *The Strayed Reveller and other Poems*, by "A.," 1849; *Empedocles on Etna, and other Poems*, [still] by "A.," 1852; and *Poems* by Matthew Arnold, a new edition, 1853 — the third consisting of the contents of the two earlier, with *Empedocles* and a few minor things omitted, but with very important additions, including *Sohrab and Rustum*, *The Church of Brou*, *Requiescat*, and *The Scholar-Gipsy*. The contents of all three

must be carefully considered, and the consideration may be prefaced by a few words on *Cromwell*.

This ἀγώνισμα, like the other, Mr Arnold never included in any collection of his work; but it was printed at Oxford in the year of its success, and again at the same place, separately or with other prize poems, in 1846, 1863, and 1891. It may also be found in the useful non-copyright edition above referred to. Couched in the consecrated couplet, but not as of old limited to fifty lines, it is "good rhymes," as the elder Mr Pope used to say to the younger; but a prudent taster would perhaps have abstained, even more carefully than in the case of the *Alaric*, from predicting a real poet in the author. It is probably better than six Newdigates out of seven at least, but it has no distinction. The young, but not so very young, poet—he was as old as Tennyson when he produced his unequal but wonderful first volume—begins by borrowing Wordsworth's two voices of the mountain and the sea, shows some impression here and there from Tennyson's own master-issue, the great collection of 1842, which had appeared a year before, ventures on an Alexandrine—

"Between the barren mountains and the stormy
sea" —

which comes as a pleasant relief, and displays more than once (as he did afterwards in *Tristram and Iseult*) an uncertain but by no means infelicitous variety of couplet which he never fully or fairly worked out, but left for Mr William Morris to employ with success many years later. Otherwise the thing is good, but negligible. It would have taken an extremely strong competition, or an extremely incompetent examiner, to deprive it of the prize; but he must have been a sanguine man who, in giving the author that prize, expected to receive from him returns of poetry.

Yet they came. If we did not know that the middle of this century was one of the nadirs of English [5] criticism, and if we did not know further that even good critics often go strangely wrong both in praise and in blame of new verse, it would be most surprising that *The Strayed Reveller* volume should have attracted so little attention. It is full of faults, but that is part of the beauty of it. Some of these faults are those which, persevering, prevented Mr

Arnold from attaining a higher position than he actually holds in poetry; but no critic could know that. There is nothing here worse, or more necessarily fatal, than many things in Tennyson's 1830 and 1832 collections: he overwent those, so might Mr Arnold have overgone these. And the promise—nay, the performance—is such as had been seen in no verse save Tennyson's, and the almost unnoticed Browning's, for some thirty years. The title-poem, though it should have pleased even a severe judge, might have aroused uncomfortable doubts even in an amiable one. In the first place, its rhymelessness is a caprice, a will-worship. Except blank verse, every rhymeless metre in English has on it the curse of the *tour de force*, of the acrobatic. Campion and Collins, Southey and Shelley, have done great things in it; but neither *Rose-cheeked Laura* nor *Evening*, neither the great things in *Thalaba* nor the great things in *Queen Mab*, can escape the charge of being caprices. And caprice, as some have held, is the eternal enemy of art.

But the caprice of *The Strayed Reveller* does not cease with its rhymelessness. The rhythm and the line-division are also studiously odd, unnatural, paradoxical. Except for the "poetic diction" of putting "Goddess" after "Circe" instead of before it, the first stave is merely a prose sentence, of strictly prosaic though not inharmonious rhythm. But in this stave there is no instance of the strangest peculiarity, and what seems to some the worst fault of the piece, the profusion of broken-up decasyllables, which sometimes suggest a very "corrupt" manuscript, or a passage of that singular stuff in the Caroline dramatists which is neither blank verse, nor any other, nor prose. Here are a few out of many instances—

"Is it, then, evening
 So soon? [I see the night-dews
 Clustered in thick beads], dim," etc.

["When the white dawn first
 Through the rough fir-planks."]

["Thanks, gracious One!
 Ah! the sweet fumes again."]

["*They see the Centaurs
In the upper glens.*"]

One could treble these—indeed in one instance (the sketch of the Indian) the entire stanza of *eleven* lines, by the insertion of one "and" only, becomes a smooth blank-verse piece of *seven*, two of which are indeed hemistichs, and three "weak-ended," but only such as are frequent in Shakespeare—

"They see the Indian drifting, knife in hand,
His frail boat moored to a floating isle—thick-
matted
With large-leaved [*and*] low-creeping melon-plants
And the dark cucumber.
He reaps and stows them, drifting, drifting: round
him,
Round his green harvest-plot, flow the cool lake-
waves,
The mountains ring them."

Nor, perhaps, though the poem is a pretty one, will it stand criticism of a different kind much better. Such mighty personages as Ulysses and Circe are scarcely wanted as mere bystanders and "supers" to an imaginative young gentleman who enumerates, somewhat promiscuously, a few of the possible visions of the Gods. There is neither classical, nor romantic, nor logical justification for any such mild effect of the dread Wine of Circe: and one is driven to the conclusion that the author chiefly wanted a frame, after his own fashion, for a set of disconnected vignettes like those of Tennyson's *Palace of Art* and *Dream of Fair Women*.

But if the title poem is vulnerable, there is plenty of compensation. The opening sonnet—

"Two lessons, Nature, let me learn of thee" —

is perhaps rather learnt from Wordsworth, yet it does not fail to strike the note which fairly differentiates the Arnoldian variety of Wordsworthianism—the note which rings from *Resignation* to *Poor Matthias*, and which is a very curious cross between two

things that at first sight may seem unmarriageable, the Wordsworthian enthusiasm and the Byronic despair. But of this [6] more when we have had more of its examples before us. The second piece in the volume must, or should, have struck—for there is very little evidence that it did strike—readers of the volume as something at once considerable and, in no small measure, new. *Mycerinus*, a piece of some 120 lines or so, in thirteen six-line stanzas and a blank-verse *coda*, is one of those characteristic poems of this century, which are neither mere “copies of verses,” mere occasional pieces, nor substantive compositions of the old kind, with at least an attempt at a beginning, middle, and end. They attempt rather situations than stories, rather facets than complete bodies of thought, or description, or character. They supply an obvious way of escape for the Romantic tendency which does not wish to break wholly with classical tradition; and above all, they admit of indulgence in that immense *variety* which seems to have become one of the chief devices of modern art, attempting the compliances necessary to gratify modern taste.

The Herodotean anecdote of the Egyptian King Mycerinus, his indignation at the sentence of death in six years as a recompense for his just rule, and his device of lengthening his days by revelling all night, is neither an unpromising nor a wholly promising subject. The foolish good sense of Mr Toots would probably observe—and justly—that before six years, or six months, or even six days were over, King Mycerinus must have got very sleepy; and the philosophic mind would certainly recall the parallel of Cleobis and Biton as to the best gift for man. Mr Arnold, however, draws no direct moral. The stanza-part of the poem, the king’s expostulation, contains very fine poetry, and “the note” rings again throughout it, especially in the couplet—

“And prayers, and gifts, and tears, are fruitless all,
And the night waxes, and the shadows fall.”

The blank-verse tail-piece is finer still in execution; it is, with the still finer companion-*coda* of *Sohrab and Rustum*, the author’s masterpiece in the kind, and it is, like that, an early and consummate example of Mr Arnold’s favourite device of finishing without a finish, of “playing out the audience,” so to speak, with

something healing and reconciling, description, simile, what not, to relieve the strain of his generally sad philosophy and his often melancholy themes.

One may less admire, despite its famous and often-quoted line,
"Who saw life steadily, and saw it whole,"

the sonnet *To a Friend*, praising Homer and Epictetus and Sophocles, for it seems to some to have a smatch of priggishness. Nor am I one of those who think very highly of the much longer *Sick King in Bokhara* which (with a fragment of an *Antigone*, whereof more hereafter) follows, as this sonnet precedes, *The Strayed Reveller* itself. There is "the note," again, and I daresay the orientalism has the exactness of colour on which, as we know from the *Letters*, Mr Arnold prided himself. Yet the handling of the piece seems to me prolix and uncertain, and the drift either very obscure or somewhat unimportant. But about the *Shakespeare* sonnet which follows there can be no controversy among the competent. "Almost adequate" is in such a case the highest praise; and it must be given.

The companions of this sonnet are respectable, but do not deserve much warmer words; and then we turn to a style of poem remarkably different from anything which the author had yet published and from most of his subsequent work. It is not unnoteworthy that the batch of poems called in the later collected editions *Switzerland*, and completed at last by the piece called *On the Terrace at Berne*, appeared originally piecemeal, and with no indication of connection. The first of its numbers is here, *To my Friends who Ridiculed a Tender Leave-taking*. It applies both the note of thought which has been indicated, and the quality of style which had already disengaged itself, to the commonest—the greatest—theme of poetry, but to one which this poet had not yet tried—to Love. Let it be remembered that the thought has the cast of a strictly pessimist quietism—that the style aims, if it aims at any single thing, at the reproduction of the simpler side of classicalism, at an almost prim and quakerish *elegance*, a sort of