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"The Moon Lies Fair": The Poetry of Matthew Arnold

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Raised are the dripping oars,
Silent the boat! The lake,
Lovely and soft as a dream,
Swims in the sheen of the moon.
The mountains stand at its head
Clear in the pure June-night,
But the valleys are flooded with haze.
Rydal and Fairfield are there;
In the shadow Wordsworth lies dead.
So it is, so it will be for aye.
Nature is fresh as of old,
Is lovely; a mortal lies dead.

From "The Youth of Nature"

INTO A SERENE and moonlit world death has intruded. The death is not merely that of a mortal, not merely that of the poet with whom Arnold felt the most sympathy and kinship. When viewed in terms of Arnold's poetry, Wordsworth's passing becomes symbolic of the disappearance of a calm and majestic world-view which expressed "the joy offered to us in nature."1 Arnold's poetry can be defined as an attempt to revisit the Wordsworthian scene and to find there the transcendent significance which revealed itself to Wordsworth. The imagery of "The Youth of Nature"—the moon, the lake, the mountains—is not accidental; it is Wordsworth's at the height of his power and inspiration—literally, at the top of Mount Snowden:

... as I looked up,
The moon hung naked in a firmament
Of azure without cloud, and at my feet
Restored a silent sea of hoary mist.
A hundred hills their dusky backs up-heaved
All over this still ocean; and beyond,

1Arnold, speaking of Wordsworth in the introduction to Arnold's 1879 selection of Wordsworth.
Far, far beyond, the solid vapours stretched,
In headlands, tongues, and promontory shapes,
Into the main Atlantic . . .
That vision . . . appeared to me the type
Of a majestic intellect, its act
And its possessions, what it has and craves,
What in itself it is, and would become.
There I beheld the emblem of a mind
That feeds upon infinity, that broods
Over the dark abyss, intent to hear
Its voices issuing forth to silent light
In one continuous stream; a mind sustained
By recognitions of transcendent power,
In sense conducting to ideal form,
In soul of more than mortal privilege.

(The Prelude XIV.39-47, 64-77)

The landscape in which the moon endows all objects below with beauty is the central setting of Arnold’s poetry. He returns to it again and again as if in search of the Wordsworthian revelation. Instead, as we see in “The Youth of Nature,” he may encounter death, he may discover that the one who should be standing at the mountain top has sunk into the shadow of the valley, he may find a discrepancy between the natural scene and what occurs within it. What has been suggested of “The Youth of Nature” can be applied to much of Arnold’s poetry: “Wordsworth’s Prelude, published shortly before the composition of ‘The Youth of Nature,’ may have initiated Arnold’s reflections, with their Berkeleyan question as to whether nature lives in itself or in the eye of the beholder.” Arnold is unable to adopt the Wordsworthian compromise between perception and creation. Instead, his skepticism prevents him from translating the nature he wants to see into convincing poetry; often, what his eye sees is refuted by what his mind knows.

Arnold’s characteristic sequence involves an expression of surpassing beauty followed by a heavy qualification:

3 Cf. “. . . creator and receiver both,/Working but in alliance with the works/Which it beholds.” Prelude II.258-260. Also II.368 ff., XII.275 ff., XIII.367 ff., XIV.86 ff., etc.
So, in its lovely moonlight, lives the soul.  
Mountains surround it, and sweet virgin air;  
Cold plashing, past it, crystal waters roll;  
We visit it by moments, ah, too rare!

("Palladium")

The moonlit scene can be synonymous with man's communion with his soul. As "Palladium" implies, however, Arnold rarely captures such a moment; instead, aspiration often dwindles towards disillusionment. The central tension of Arnold's poetry, that between hope and despair, is a constant of his poetic career; from 1852 to 1867 there is little apparent development in his attitude or technique. There are, however, a variety of approaches towards the attainment of a vision which might see "on the face of outward things" the sign of "a majestic intellect." The attempt to recapture the significance of the Wordsworthian scene has three manifestations in Arnold's poetry: 1) the expression of man's disillusionment followed by an attempt at resolution, 2) the disillusionment of man defined in terms of lost love, and 3) the alienation of man from the joys of nature.

The poems which attempt to reconcile man and his world are often unconvincing. In "A Summer Night," a wanderer moves along "The deserted, moon-blanced street" beneath frowning windows. He watches the moon open up "a whole tract of heaven." He remembers "a past night, and a far different scene," where "Headlands stood out into the moonlit deep / As clearly as at noon." But the memory is not one of those spots of time which illuminates the present with joy; it merely reenforces desolation:

As "Palladium" implies, one of Arnold's most frequent images is that of the virtually inaccessible mountain. He employs it from "Continued" (1849) to "Rugby Chapel" (1867). The relevance of the imagery is suggested by these lines from "Thyrsis":

And long the way appears, which seem'd so short  
To the less practised eye of sanguine youth;  
And high the mountain-tops where is the throne of Truth,  
Tops in life's morning-sun so bright and bare!

These categories are somewhat arbitrary. They are necessary, however, to demonstrate the various ways in which Arnold expressed a problem which was at once aesthetic and spiritual. Without a system of classification, we would be in danger of being blinded like Tristram (II.71) by the moonlight which floods down on the Arnoldian scene.
That night was far more fair—
But the same restless pacings to and fro,
And the same vainly throbbing heart was there. . . .

The poem goes on to define two possibilities for man, madness or slavery. The alternatives are to be avoided only if the frantic optimism of the last lines is valid:

But I would rather say that you remain
A world above man’s head, to let him see
How boundless might his soul’s horizons be,
How vast, yet of what clear transparency!
How it were good to abide there, and breathe free;
How fair a lot to fill
Is left to each man still!

The ending is a significantly rhetorical prayer for the validity of the Wordsworthian vision. Mere rhetoric, however, can impart no sense of the vision achieved; the hope of the closing lines lies crushed beneath the weight of the poem’s pessimism.

“Self-Dependence” involves a similar experience. It opens in despair: “Weary of myself, and sick of asking / What I am and what I ought to be . . . .” The speaker moves out over the sea, crying to the stars and waters,

Still, still let me, as I gaze upon you,
Feel my soul becoming vast like you!

Although “with joy the stars perform their shining, / And the sea its long moon-silver’d roll,” the poem closes with no sense of the “supremacy / That men, least sensitive, see, hear, perceive, / And cannot choose but feel” (Prelude XIV.84-86). Instead, we find rhetoric again:

Resolve to be thyself; and know that he
Who finds himself, loses his misery!

Such a ringing affirmation must be of uncertain comfort to one who began “sick of asking / What I am.” The final lines illustrate Arnold’s dilemma; aphorisms cannot hope to become “recognitions of transcendent power.” Not wishing to surrender to pessimism but failing to achieve a vision of refulgent unity, Arnold must resort to rhetoric.

6An explicit prayer for calmness appears at the end of the Wordsworthian “Kensington Gardens.”
Another example of the poem which attempts resolution is that in which Arnold expresses fully the disillusioning potential of the moonlit scene and then attempts to create through imagery the feeling of nature's harmony. With the shift from rhetoric to imagery comes an increment in power. In "A Southern Night," the speaker stands again in the position of Wordsworth:

The sandy spits, the shore-locked lakes,
Melt into open, moonlit sea;
The soft Mediterranean breaks
At my feet, free.

As in "A Summer Night," he remembers a previous evening and its pain:

Ah! such a night, so soft, so lone,
So moonlit, saw me once of yore
Wander unquiet, and my own
Vexed heart deplore.

Now, however, "that trouble is forgot," but only because all other thoughts are crowded out by the death of the speaker's brother:

Thy memory, thy pain, tonight
My brother! and thine early lot,
Possess me quite.

The poem moves curiously on to discuss the inappropriateness of the grave-sites of the speaker's brother and sister-in-law. The "jaded English" of the "dusty life" should be buried in bustling cities:

Not by those hoary Indian hills,
Not by this gracious Midland sea
Whose floor to-night sweet moonshine fills,
Should our graves be.

Such graves should be inhabited only by figures of romance:

Some girl, who here from castle-bower,
With furtive step and cheek of flame,
'Twixt myrtle-hedges all in flower
By moonlight came
To meet her pirate-lover's ship....
After this judgment, however, the speaker is checked by "the midnight breeze," which descends "to the brimmed, moon-charmed main." He thinks of his sister-in-law's "gentle tongue" and of his "high-souled" brother. Finally, he realizes that intrinsic virtues, not romantic trappings, are the important criteria. And so the poem closes harmoniously:

\[
\text{And what but gentleness untired,} \\
\text{And what but noble feeling warm,} \\
\text{Whatever shown, howe're inspired,} \\
\text{Is grace, is charm?} \\
\text{What else is all these waters are} \\
\text{What else is steeped in lucid sheen,} \\
\text{What else is bright, what else is fair,} \\
\text{What else serene?} \\
\text{Mild o'er her grave, ye mountains, shine!} \\
\text{Gently by his, ye waters, glide!} \\
\text{To that in you which is divine} \\
\text{They were allied.}
\]

While rhetoric remains, the rhetoric is more successfully blended with imagery than that of "Self-Dependence." The fusion of image and conviction helps the poem come closer to capturing the transcendent Wordsworthian mood. That the poem is not more successful is primarily the fault of its concern with the inappropriateness of the grave-sites, which is an ill-timed attack on the Philistines and a transparent contrivance for setting up the resolution of the ending.

"Sohrab and Rustum" offers a similar attempt at resolution. Within the poem we find the moon representing its dual possibilities, presiding over scenes of both love and grief. The effect on Rustum of Sohrab's arrival on the field is described in this Homeric simile:

\[
\text{Like some young cypress, tall, and dark, and straight,} \\
\text{Which in a queen's secluded garden throws} \\
\text{Its slight dark shadow on the moonlit turf,} \\
\text{By midnight, to a bubbling fountain's sound—} \\
\text{So slender Sohrab seem'd, so softly rear'd.} \\
\text{And a deep pity enter'd Rustum's soul} \\
\text{As he beheld him coming. . . .} \\
\]

When Rustum discovers that it is his son he has killed, the moon appears again:
And his soul set to grief, as the vast tide
Of the bright rocking Ocean sets to shore
At the full moon. . . .

Love has turned to destruction; the moon stands for both. The poem succeeds because it balances skillfully the poignancy of lost love against the warmth of love discovered. Ultimately, the suggestion of spiritual union between father and son outweighs the pain of their separation. The dominant sense of reconciliation justifies the symbolism of the ending:

But the majestic river floated on,
Out of the mist and hum of that low land,
Into the frosty starlight, and there moved,
Rejoicing, through the hush’d Chorasmian waste,
Under the solitary moon;—he flowed
Right for the polar star, past Orgunje,
Brimming, and bright, and large; then sands begin
To hem his watery march, and dam his streams,
And split his currents; that for many a league
The shorn and parcell’d Oxus strains along
Through beds of sand and matted rushy isles—
Oxus, forgetting the bright speed he had
In his high mountain-cradle in Pamere,
A foil’d circuitous wanderer—till at last
The long’d-for dash of waves is heard, and wide
His luminous home of waters opens, bright
And tranquil, from whose floor the new-bathed stars
Emerge, and shine upon the Aral Sea.

In this skillful recapitulation of the narrative, the symbolism suggests search and fulfillment, simultaneous reunion and loss. "Sohrab and Rustum" is perhaps Arnold’s most successful effort to reinvoke the Wordsworthian emblem of a universal mind which feeds upon infinity.7

The poems in which the loss of love predominates embody the characteristic shift from a description of beauty to an expression of loss:

7 The celebrated "Thyrsis" is, I believe, a far less successful effort. Its artificiality is at least partially the result of Arnold’s imposition on his material of the conventions of the pastoral elegy.
—Mild shines the cold spring in the moon’s clear light:
God! ’tis her face plays in the waters bright.
“Fair love,” she says, “canst thou forget so soon,
At this soft hour, under this sweet moon?”
(“Tristram and Iseult” 283-286)

Again, fulfillment is impossible. Tristram’s vision is a mocking
dream within a nightmare:

Ah, poor soul! if this be so,
Only death can balm thy woe.
The solitudes of the green wood
Had no medicine for thy mood. . . . (288-291)

The poem contains, however, a magnificent moonlit scene:

. . . far beyond the sparkling trees
Of the castle-park one sees
The bare heaths spreading, clear as day,
Moor behind moor, far, far away,
Into the heart of Brittany.
And here and there, lock’d by the land,
Long inlets of smooth glittering sea,
And many a stretch of watery sand
All shining in the white moon-beams. . . . (362-370)

Significantly, this vision would be available only to children
and only at the expense of their even fairer dreams (371).
The lines form a direct contrast with Tristram’s nightmare
within a nightmare; the children have dreams more beautiful
even than the resplendent scene beyond their windows. This
scene contrasts also with the death of love, the fulfillment
of Tristram’s nightmare:

You see them clear—the moon shines bright.
Slow, slow and softly, where she stood,
She sinks upon the ground;—her hood
Had fallen back; her arms outspread
Still hold her lover’s hand; her head
Is bow’d, half-buried, on the bed . . .
The air of the December-night
Steals coldly around the chamber bright,
Where these lifeless lovers be. . . . (ll.101-106 and 148-150)
The scene is beautiful, but the moon emphasizes the coldness of death—as if shining down on marble.

As might be expected, the "Switzerland" poems, dealing as they do with unfulfilled love, glow with bitter moonlight. In each poem, the moonlight suggests hope and emphasizes subsequent despair. In Number Four, for example, the passion of Luna for Endymion becomes a metaphor for the impossibility of human love. In Number Three, the characteristic movement towards disillusionment suggests a discrepancy between man's aspirations and the limitations which the world imposes:

How sweet, unreach'd by earthly jars,
My sister! to maintain with thee
The hush among the shining stars,
The calm upon the moonlit sea!
How sweet to feel, on the boon air,
All our unquiet pulses cease!
To feel that nothing can impair
The gentleness, the thirst for peace—
The gentleness too rudely hurl'd
On this wild earth of hate and fear;
The thirst for peace a raving world
Would never let us satiate here.

In Number Five, the shift towards despair suggests the sense of profound loss shared by parted lovers in a world this side of Eden:8

But when the moon their hollows lights
And they are swept by balms of spring,
And in their glens, on starry nights,
The nightingales divinely sing;
And lovely notes, from shore to shore
Across the sounds and channels pour—
Oh! then a longing like despair
Is to their farthest caverns sent;
For surely once, they feel, we were
Parts of a single continent!

8As if in explicit denial of the unified scene which Wordsworth viewed from Mount Snowden, the central metaphor of Number Five is the island separated from contact with all others. The poem reverberates also, of course, against Donne's famous island-continent passage.
While moonlight here is subsidiary to the flowing song of the nightingales, it adds a visual unity to the scene and helps to deepen the disillusionment of an imagination rebuffed by the realities of alienation and loss.\(^9\)

The poetry of lost love suggests the ultimate implications of Arnold's theme of disillusionment—man's exclusion from the joys of nature, and, inevitably, the refutation of the Wordsworthian vision. The Scholar Gipsy may

On some mild pastoral slope  
Emerge, and resting on the moonlit pales  
Freshen thy flowers as in former years  
With dew, or listen with enchanted ears,  
From the dark dingles, to the nightingales.  

(216-220)

Man, however, infected with modern life's "strange disease" (203) would only contaminate Eden's freshness:

But fly our paths, our feverish contact fly!  
For strong the infection of our mental strife,  
Which though it gives no bliss, yet spoils for rest;  
And we should win thee from thy own fair life,  
Like us distracted, and like us unblest.  

(221-225)

The situation is that of Luna and Endymion again; mortal man and immortal beauty are incompatible. Nature and man have become alien entities.

The contrast between man and nature is perhaps best illustrated by Empedocles, who enunciates a philosophy of stoic moderation ("Because thou must not dream, thou need'st not then despair," I.426). The irony enforced by Act II, however, is that man cannot stop dreaming, cannot choke his response to beauty. The doctrine which avoids disillusionment ignores beauty—and beauty will not be ignored. Empedocles is trapped between the philosophy which tells him to expect nothing and the beauty which implores him to desire everything. When the world reasserts a beauty for which his philosophy cannot account, Empedocles can view the world only as the hieroglyphic of his deadness:

\(^9\)In "The Forsaken Merman" (an 1849 poem which could not have been influenced by The Prelude, published in 1850) moonlight sharpens the poem's expression of the Merman's loss of love. The poem does not imply, however, the interaction between scene and emotion characteristic of the later poems.
... the sea of cloud,
That heaves its white and billowy vapours up
To moat this isle of ashes from the world,
Lives; and that other fainter sea, far down,
O'er whose lit floor a road of moonbeams leads
To Etna's Liparean sister-fires
And the long dusky line of Italy—
That mild and luminous floor of waters lives,
With held-in joy swelling its heart; I only,
Whose spring of hope is dried, whose spirit has fail'd
I, who have not, like these, in solitude
Maintain'd courage and force, and in myself
Nursed an immortal vigour—I alone
Am dead to life and joy, therefore I read
In all things my own deadness. (II.308-322)

Here on one of the most explicit evocations of the Wordsworthian scene and one of the most emphatic refutations of its significance. "Empedocles" is a projection of Arnold's own dilemma—his desire to emulate "Wordsworth's sweet calm" stunted by the "depression and ennui" of his times. Disposing of Empedocles in the crater of Etna did not resolve the dilemma.

That Arnold was not satisfied with the resolution of "Empedocles" is suggested by his exclusion of it from the 1853 edition because it provided no catharsis, only pain. Much of Arnold's best poetry, however, is based on an equally bleak view of man's status in the world. That he could not resolve his dilemma is indicated by "Dover Beach," written some fifteen years after "Empedocles on Etna." The years between

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10"Stanzas: In Memory of the Author of 'Obermann,'" I.79. In "Memorial Verses: April, 1850" Arnold writes of Wordsworth's poetry as if it constituted a return to Eden:

> Our youth return'd; for there was shed
> On spirits that had long been dead
> Spirits dried up and closely furl'd,
> The freshness of the early world. (54-57)

11The phrase is often employed out of context. In "On the Modern Element in Literature," Arnold is questioning the adequacy of Lucretius's modernity. His conclusion is that Lucretius is "overstrained, gloom-weighted, morbid; and he who is morbid is no adequate interpreter of his age." On these grounds, Arnold eliminated "Empedocles" from the 1853 Edition. He could not, however, eliminate the weight of gloom from subsequent poetry. It is instructive to note that while Arnold could advocate the exercise of "sweetness and light," he could do so only in prose. In "Empedocles," the lovely songs of Callicles have only a painful effect on Empedocles. Arnold's poetry is pessimistic, his prose inclines towards optimism. Hence—his abandonment of poetry for prose.
the poems constitute the span of Arnold’s career as a mature poet. The landscape which spreads below the speaker in “Dover Beach” is that which Empedocles saw from Etna, that on which Wordsworth gazed from Mount Snowden:

The sea is calm to-night
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits;—on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.

But where Wordsworth found in the “roar of waters” a mighty affirmation of the unity implied by the shining scene below him, this man hears in the sound of grating pebbles a note of sadness which denies the transcendent possibilities suggested by the light which gleams down on Dover Beach:

. . . the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain. . . .

While the poem offers a fragile stay against anarchic darkness (“Ah, love, let us be true . . .”), the desperate hope has been refuted convincingly by many Arnold poems. In “Dover Beach” the fact that the moon lies fair only sharpens the recognition that the moon lies.12

Arnold’s significance as a poet grows from his inability to become a Victorian echo of Wordsworth. He was too honest to surrender to his desire for a shining unity in which he didn’t believe. He was too close to the world and its problems to evoke a world which didn’t exist.13 His greatness as a poet lies in the tension between the fierce yearning for the perfection suggested by a resplendent landscape and the tough-minded recognition of the refutation beneath all fair appear-

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12 That there is little development in Arnold’s view of the world is suggested again by comparing “Dover Beach” with this section of “Empedocles”:
   The world, a rolling flood
   Of newness and delight,
   Draws in the enamour’d gazer to its shining breast . . .
   (1.354-356)

13 It is significant that one of the more successful poems which ends with suggestions of Wordsworthian unity, “Sohrab and Rustum,” is placed remotely in time, place, and, of course, in style.
ances. In that he can be placed "between two traditions," Arnold might be called the representative Victorian poet; he is Romantic in his use of the symbolic landscape, Modern in his finding there only negation. His poetry is an answer to the question he puts to Philomela:

And can this fragrant lawn
With its cool trees, and night,
And the sweet, tranquil Thames,
And moonshine, and the dew,
To thy rack'd heart and brain
Afford no balm?

In Arnold's poetry, as in "Philomela," the moon is the great illusionist, begetting "Eternal passion!" which must be followed inevitably by "Eternal pain!"

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