Chapter - I

Austerity Within
It is often said\(^1\) that the critic in Matthew Arnold stifled the poet in him. Arnold's own unconscious testimony to this effect is revealed in his obiter dicta in 'Sainte-Beuve'.\(^2\)

But the critic in him grew to prevail more and more and pushed out the poet.

But there is a distinction: Matthew Arnold himself was a critic even while he was a poet, in fact, before he was a poet. He remained so after perhaps he ceased to be a poet. His notorious definition of poetry "as a criticism of life under the condition fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty"\(^3\) certainly refers to something deep and abiding within him. The idea is worth re-examining in terms of his own practice.

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In the same series Arnold says, "Poetry is at bottom a criticism of life" in 'Wordsworth', p.35

The Phrase "criticism of life" appears first in his essay on Joubert: "The end and aim of all literature is a criticism of life". (First Series of Essays in Criticism, 1865; 1968/e), p.180
The 1853 preface to the First edition of his poems is then no inauguration to Arnold's career as a critic. It has a longer history. The critical note had appeared in many of his earlier poems which sometimes resemble prose more than poetry. A few examples illustrative of some of his basic themes in criticism may be convincing. Of these the most remarkable would be 'To A Friend' and 'Shakespeare', both published in 1849, 'Shakespeare' written as early as Aug. 1, 1844, clearly years ahead of 1853. The criticism of Homer and Epictetus in 'To A Friend' may not have been serious enough but the strangely memorable comment about Sophocles, "who saw life steadily and saw it whole", though not wholly true, has become classic. The summing up was so significant that Arnold returns to it in the inaugural Oxford lecture. The most comprehensive, yet compact, Arnoldian criticism of Shakespeare's tragic vision is in the concluding three lines of 'Shakespeare':


5. The manuscript in the British Museum is dated 1 Aug. 1844, as stated in Matthew Arnold (ed. John Bryson; Rupert Hart-Davies; London, 1954), p. 782

All pains the immortal spirit must endure,
All weakness which impairs, all griefs which bow,
Find their sole speech in that victorious brow.

The common element in both subjects, one from classical Greece and the other from Renaissance England, points to the critical substratum of aesthetic experience, a fact Arnold himself may not have known. Is this the hidden hinterland of the basics of his own criticism? Arnold regarded one of his early poems, 'Quiet Work' as of primary importance with respect to comprehending or encountering his poetry as well as philosophy of life. Unlike Pater, he was at no time a champion or connoisseur of the "art for art's sake" theory. Except for the Marguerite poems, with their startling, still unexplicated anguish, his stance was consistently critical. A kind of critical spirit rather than creative impulse, provoked him to write almost all his poems before 'The Church of Brou' (1853). Few English poets have displayed, so early in their career, this peculiar manner of talking about life and literature, a fact not fully recognised.

The group of sonnets published in 1849 reveals Arnold more as a thinker than a poet. It is true that the thinking is not serious or original. Arnold is re-stating the dominant philosophical trends and principles of the time as his own

points of view. These are all about human nature and were among the ideas much in the air in "an age morally conservative and intellectually progressive". He finds in his friend, Arthur Clough, "those virtues" which constitute "Man's fundamental life", and he uses this rather prosaic phrase in 'To A Republican Friend, 1848'. This sonnet and the two following form a semantic sequence, connected by a common theme, the liberation of man through an inner awakening. The attitude or doctrine culminates in the "holy secret" of 'Religious Isolation' that man's distinction in the material universe points also to his duty and destiny, obedience to inward life. The idea is re-iterated in 'Written in Butler's Sermons' (1849).

In this Arnold pleads for conscience as the dominating principle in man's life. He says in another sonnet, 'In Harmony with Nature': "Man would be mild, and with safe conscience blest". In 'Emerson' he discovers "A Voice oracular" and asserts after him that "The seeds of godlike power are in us still" ('Written in Emerson's Essays').

Poetry may express a general attitude towards life and sometimes even take up the themes of philosophy. But Arnold seems to be using and shaping philosophical knowledge as verse, and the work of art gets reduced in the process to bare doctrinal statement. Though he says, poetry "is thought and art in one", these early poems are of thought all compact. He

deplored "the deficiency of the beautiful" in Clough's poems and wrote to him, "I doubt your being an artist". Clough might have written the same to him about, at least, four of the poems addressed directly to Clough himself. Arnold had a passion for ideas, or some ideas, and here the intellectual content is what matters. This may be one reason why, with all his interest in ideas, Arnold has never received his due as a philosophical poet, (of whom Santayana, for instance, has spoken).

This is true also of a group of poems published in 1852. For the poetry of this period too suffers, now and then, from a doctrinal bias. 'Revolutions' and 'Self-Dependence', both begin with ideas, and one may hear echoes of Victorian morality in them. 'Revolutions' is comparable to another poem of the same period, 'Human Life'; in both, man fails to carry out in his life what God has willed him to do. This sense of failure, of brokenness, generates the artistic emotion:

But ah! an inextinguishable sense
Haunts him that he has not made what he should.

   'Joubert': "In literature the one aim of art is the beautiful". (Essays in Criticism First Series; 1968/e), p. 174

12. 'To A Friend', 'To A Republican Friend', 'Continued', 'Religious Isolation',
   (Respectively in pages 2, 6, 7 and 8 of Poetical Works ed. by Tinker and Lowry; OUP; 1969)

   (OUP; 1969), p. 239
Can it be said that Arnold achieves poetry when he comes to terms with his own latent romanticism? 'Self-Dependence' presents the voyage on the sea of life, a stock theme with Arnold. There is in it a sincerely passionate address to the waters and the stars to learn the secret of "self-poised" life. But the philosophical thought derived from the Bhagbat Gita is presented in so dull and austere a manner that the poem closes with a lesson:

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

For all his serenity and philosophy of 'disinterestedness', Krishna is a multiple poet and person, at once a law-giver and a cosmic principle (tatva), touching the transcendence quite beyond Arnold's grasp. The same inadequacy marks several poems such as 'Self-Deception' (1852) 'Progress' (1852), 'Morality' (1852). In fact, in spite of all his sincerity Arnold is here more reflective than emotional. The poems are more didactic than dramatic. Yet a new spirit begins to invade them from this period. The ideas are getting tinged with emotion. It is the beginning of that weltschmerz which Arnold carried as his cross all his life, in poetry as in criticism, if only one looks for it. Ideas remain no more as raw material; these become 'constitutive', and underscore his approaches to artistic sensibility.

by way of critical spirit. This sea-change of the critic turning artist has rarely been suspected or investigated. Yet this critical spirit is dominant. Sir Edmund Chambers was forced to observe: "Probably his poetic impulse never flowed easily". Whenever the critical spirit gains control Arnold suffers as an artist; but when it produces the fruitful emotion, he is a true 'maker'. And paradoxically it is the critic who ushers in the artist.

The increase of emotion with time may be traced from a starting point in reflection. The three poems, written at intervals, on the same theme, help to trace out the reflection-emotion curve. Of the early 'poems of ideas' 'Stagirius' (1849) is one in which the thoughts have little or no emotional context. Stagirius, the young melancholy monk, is implored to save the people from the many ills of life, which are so described as to build a criticism of life;

From doubt, where all is double;                      (1.39)

..............................
Where sorrow treads on joy,
Where sweet things soonest cloy,
Where faiths are built on dust,
Where love is half mistrust,

Hungry, and barren, and sharp as the sea-

Oh! set us free.17                                          (11.43-48)


17. Poetical Works; p. 39
But the 'criticism of life' here hardly makes for poetry. The thoughts are not projected through any poetic organisation. These have no emotional 'field'. As Middleton Murry has observed: "The thoughts which have no emotional 'field' are by nature alien to poetry".\(^{18}\) The passage quoted from 'Stagirius' may be set against the third stanza of Keats' 'Ode to A Nightingale'. The thought content in both Keats and Arnold is almost the same. Yet the thought in "Where but to think is to be full of sorrow/ And leaden-eyed despairs" brings with it a new and complex order of emotions. The language of intense emotion comes through "Where youth grows pale and spectre-thin, and dies". "Image becomes concept and concept image",\(^ {19}\) and language and thought 'fertilize' each other. But in the passage from 'Stagirius' ideas do not incandesce in artistic intensity. The passage presents only a loose unity of experience, more abstract than concrete, in which a general feeling of worldweary sadness pervades. To use Collingwood's words:

The poet converts human experience into poetry not by first expurgating it, cutting out the intellectual elements and preserving the emotional, and then expressing this residue; but by fusing thought itself into emotion:

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18. 'Pure Poetry' in Countries of the Mind, 2nd Series; 1931; in 20th Century Eng. Critical Essays; p.316

thinking in a certain way and then expressing how it feels to think in that way". 20

An attempt in the same direction is made by Arnold in 'Human Life' (1852) rather than in 'Stagirius', though thought is more or less the same. He proceeds, step by step, to reach a conclusion where thought and emotion are only "faintly discernible aspects of a single and entire mental act". 21

Even so we leave behind,

The joys which were not for our use design'd ;-
The friends to whom we had no natural right,
The homes that were not destined to be ours. 22

(11. 25-30)

Yet the entire experience is not communicated throughout the poem. In the beginning thought and imagery predominate over emotion, and do not combine into a balanced whole. Man in his "Life's voyage" cannot follow exactly "The inly-written chart", and such is the lot "charter'd by some unknown Powers". This is part of the poet's intellectual experience which lacks in the requisite 'emotional charges' and reduces the first three stanzas of the poem to a mere 'brooding over the ideas'. Nor do

22. Poetical Works, p. 41
the ideas leap towards insight that is more than mere emotion. "The habit of contemplating and brooding over the ideas of great geniuses till you find yourself warmed by the contact is the true method of an artist-like mind",23 and this warming is done by emotion. But from 'Stagirius', 'Human Life' is one step closer to aesthetic achievement in that the succession of the poet's ideas gets gradually subordinated to the course of his emotions. "The link: that binds together the ideas ... is most often the link of emotion",24 and it is here that one finds


This bit of poetics becomes strengthened with the help of a citation from Joubert in Arnold's essay on the French moralist in Essays in Criticism 1 1865:

And elsewhere he speaks of those "spirits, lovers of light, who, when they have an idea to put forth, brood long over it first, and wait patiently till it shines, as Buffon enjoined, when he defined genius to be the aptitude for patience. 1968/e ; p. 170


John Stuart Mill has said the same in identical language in Poetry and its varieties : "Whom then, shall we call poets ? Those who are so constituted, that emotions are the links of association by which their ideas, both sensorius and spiritual, are connected together".


One may well remember Wordsworth's contention in the Preface to Vol. I (of 1800) of the Lyrical Ballads; 1798-1805 :

"Poems were never produced ... but by a man who being posessed of more than usual organic sensibility had also thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings. " ( ed. G. Sampson, Methuen's English Classics, 10/e, 4/1 1959, Appendix III ), pp. 373-74
the link. Matthew Arnold continues to be a critic of life, and he makes 'Human Life' a vehicle of thought; but the 'thinking of the thought' has become poetic only towards the end, and a quality of emotion is restored: "The homes that were not destined to be ours". One is reminded of Santayana's statement: "... the first element which the intellect rejects in forming its ideas of things is the emotion which accompanies the perception; and this emotion is the first thing the poet restores".25 This does not, however, imply that intellect and emotion are totally alien to each other.26 For the emotions arise in a thinker only because he thinks in a certain way. This is what

25. 'The Elements and Function of Poetry'
   Interpretations of Poetry and Religion, p. 262

26. John Heath-Stubbs makes a neat statement regarding the relation between intellect and emotion in his poem 'Ars Poetica':

   The intellect shapes, the emotions feed the poem,
   Whose roots are in the senses, whose flower is imagination,
   (Quoted from Neglected Powers by Wilson Knight), p. 20

In Inner Life of Art (1865) G.H. Lewes observes the relation between intellect and emotion which cannot be ignored:

The domain of art is not the intellect, but the emotions—not thought but feeling; it occupies itself with thoughts only as they are associated with feelings... a thought is sometimes the root of which the feeling is the flower....

happens at the end of 'Human Life'. Arnold thinks about life in a manner that gives rise to a particular emotion, and that emotion readily gets incorporated with thoughts and words.

But 'Dover Beach' (published first in 1867), containing the same thought as that in 'Human Life', defies any such analysis. For analysis cannot locate its energy. Here Arnold the artist appears in full form and control. Not that he ceases to be a critic; but the criticism has itself become an art here. It is the highest criticism which, as Oscar Wilde says, is "the record of one's own soul", and such a one "bears within himself the dreams, and ideas and feelings of myriad generations".27 In 'Dover Beach' one discovers the creative artist emerging out of or at one with a critic who deals with the thoughts of life, with the spiritual moods and imaginative passions of the mind. The 'thought' hinted at in the sound of the receding sea is transformed straight and flows into the emotion of "Ah, love, let us be true/ To one another". The intellectual content acts in combination with the changing sensuous mould and appeal.

If art means the expression of emotion, the artist as such must be absolutely candid; his speech must be absolutely free .... It does not mean the artist ought

27. 'The Critic as Artist', Complete Works (Collins; 1970), p. 1041
to be candid; it means that he is an artist only in so far as he is candid".28

Here Arnold is candid, if anything. For what he says here has been felt in the blood, and felt along the heart:

And we are here as on a darkling plain.

A tremendous generalization; the words do communicate, as Middleton Murry would say, a 'thought' in the 'emotional field'. Obviously the thought and its emotional field are inseparable. But such a line as

We mortal millions live alone ('To Marguerite')

has not this 'condensation of an emotional atmosphere'. In 'Dover Beach' Arnold is not just another artist, he is a major one. "Great artists are said to reveal us to ourselves", 29


R.G. Collingwood in 'Conclusion' of The Principles of Art says that art must draw a subject-matter from its audience themselves. "It must be prophetic. The artist must prophesy not in the sense that he foretells things to come, but in the sense that he tells his audience, at risk of their displeasure, the secrets of their own hearts". p.336

Keats and Tolstoy have insisted upon that the 'note' of the poetic experience "should be a wording of our own highest thoughts and come to us almost as a remembrance". (M. Murry in XX Century Eng. Critical Essays), p.321
they tell us the secrets of our hearts. Arnold speaks out here what the major movements of modern life and ideas have forced upon a civilization in crisis. It is a blending of cosmic despair and sheer honesty giving it almost a new heroic dimension. Arnold delighted in writing elegies. 'Dover Beach' is probably his best. He has summed up both an age and an aspect of the human condition in these lines:

for 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.

(11. 30-34)

It is a rare combination of the classical and the romantic. Here the critic and the artist swap places. At its highest, the office of criticism is the same as that of poetry. Thus Phyllis M. Jones:

If the mind of man is only capable of grasping finite things, yet its destiny ... is with something which it will never apprehend. It is the true business of the critic, as of the poet, to make this apprehension as complete as possible. 30

30. 'Introduction' 20th Century English Critical Essays (CUP; 1964), p. XI
The preceding analysis shows how the critical verve pre-
possessed Arnold before he turned a poetic practitioner. An
attempt may now be made at accounting for the genesis of
criticism as well as of poetry. In Arnold's case, however, it
is humanism, a deterministic awareness of life's inevitable
destiny, which made him critical, and in due course made him
an artist. Life and art, for him, are not far apart. Life
appeared to him in two aspects—social and individual. The
social aspect led him to criticism—not free from snobbery
and banter—whether in poems or in prose-writings. He was
conscious of it as early as 1848 when he addressed Clough:

If thoughts, not idle, while before me flow
The armies of the homeless and unfed—
If these are yours, if this is what you are,
Then I am yours, and what you feel, I share.

(11.11-14, 'To A Republican Friend, 1848')

But Arnold, like Wordsworth, could plunge into inward life,
and yearned to know "Whence our lives come and where they go"
('The Buried Life'). The social and the individual aspects
come sometimes close to each other and fuse to produce such
poems as 'Dover Beach' and a few others. Thus Arnold is a
critic first, a poet next, and at rare moments both at the
same time.

Eliot places Arnold "with reservations" in the category of critics "whose criticism may be said to be a by-product of his creative activity". This placement may perhaps be made more readily if one looks carefully without arrière pensée into some of Arnold's early, and a few of his later poems. In these poems he is primarily a poet, but he is, in effect, a critic of the art of poetry. He had better be called a 'critic-poet'. Frank Kermode calls him a "critical poet" with regard to the criticism made in these poems. In writing them he has the genuine passion of a poet, but instinctively he passes into criticism. The criticism is not only of the times and society but primarily also of the function of poetry.

Of the early poems 'Resignation' (1849) and 'The Strayed Reveller' (1849) deserve mention. 'Memorial Verses' (1850) has a well-known passage on Wordsworth, a good piece of criticism and of poetry. The companion comments made on Byron and Goethe also form a compact critical judgement. Arnold discloses his ability as a succinct literary critic with a wide range of interests. Wordsworth and Goethe had also been commented upon in an earlier poem 'Stanzas in Memory of the Author of Obermann' (1849). In these two, as in his other elegies, Arnold weaves the strands of criticism into a fine web. This early impression

32. To Criticize the Critic (Faber and Faber; 1965), p. 13
33. Romantic Image (Collins; Fontana Books; 1971), p. 32
of Byron, Goethe and Wordsworth is not altered but merely elaborated later in Essays in Criticism. As for Byron, "He taught us little", a prosaic, pedestrian line, perhaps not wholly of the stuff of poetry. This, however, remains, Leon Gottfried observes, "the burden of the Byron criticism in Essays in Criticism". Arnold does not dwell at great length on this point in prose criticism but definitely expands it quoting Goethe on Byron:

Byron is quite too much in the dark about himself; nay, the moment he begins to reflect, he is a child.

34. Speaking of Arnold's early criticism in letters and poetry Leon Gottfried observes:

As with Wordsworth, Arnold's abiding attitudes toward Byron were first expressed in poetry; although these were amplified later in prose criticism, and some new points, such as the matter of style, were taken up, there was little alteration or revision of these attitudes.

Matthew Arnold and the Romantics (Routledge and Kegan Paul; London; 1963), p. 80

35. Essays in Criticism 2nd Series, p. 110:

Leon Gottfried notes that the statement is the Goethe Quotation which is most misleadingly wrenched out of context, as William Hale White pointed out. ibid., p. 243

But Arnold himself is not capable of such comments and analysis. Goethe's words on Byron could as well be used about Arnold. He does not clarify his order of preferences or the relation, for instance, between 'daring' (Byron), 'feeling' (Wordsworth) and 'healing' (Goethe). In a sense, he does not judge his own judgment, though one suspects, he is closer to Wordsworth than to the other two, but without Wordsworth's extra-ordinary sensibility. Arnold was an exile from both ecstasy and illumination.
The same poem reveals that Arnold "has a good deal of poetry in him", and this comes out in the lines on Wordsworth:

Others will teach us how to dare,
And against fear our breast to steel;
Others will strengthen us to bear
But who, ah! who, will make us feel?

( ll. 64-67 )

Later, in the Wordsworth essay he announces the greatness of the poetry in the same 'feeling way:

Wordsworth's poetry is great because of the extraordinary power with which Wordsworth feels the joy offered to us in nature, the joy offered to us in the simple primary affections and duties; and because of the extraordinary power with which, in case after case, he shows this joy, and renders it so as to make us share it.

But what is material in the critical matter of these early poems is, of course, Arnold's conception of the poet's function. Not that he is putting forward any special theory, or that he is writing always to and from that standpoint. The criticism


37. Essays in Criticism 2nd Series, p.91
stands out in its own light which is reflected in his verse. Arnold was a Professor of Poetry much before he got the Chair in 1857 at Oxford. He could confidently hold forth in 'Obermann' on the role of a poet in society. The poet may tell "some secrets" but "To tell too deep ones is not well" as the world cannot appreciate them. (Eliot's "Humankind cannot bear too much reality". MC) He tells the master of his "wandering youth" why the world loves so little his "strain". Obermann disclosed secrets too deep for man. J.M. Murry in 'Pure Poetry' discusses the functions of a poet and observes that a great poet can do for us something limited, and "If more could be done, we should be incapable of receiving it". It is ironical that Arnold had also this pervading passion of Senancour, the passion for Permanance tinged with an egotistic melancholy. He also preferred to search for the ultimate secret as did the Scholar Gipsy. The Scholar Gipsy, on whom Arnold wrote so nostalgically even violating his own civilized critical principles, was a bit of his own persona. Sohrab and Rustum is not the only poem where Arnold resembles the schizophrenic and re-enacts the death of a part of his being. He also describes his own situation when he analyses Obermann's dilemma:

Ah! two desires toss about
The poet's feverish blood.

38. Countries of the Mind, 2nd Series; 1931; XXth Century English Critical Essays, p. 323
One desire drives him to the world without
And one to solitude.39

The poet with a divided self has both a social passion and
lyric propensity. Yet he cannot uncover the ultimate truth,
or the hinterland of poetry. This is the dilemma of Obermann,
of Empedocles, of Arnold. Is it because they do not know them-
selves? Thus observes Mrs Sells,

Torn between the exigencies of his sensibility and his
reason he can find no satisfaction in renouncing either.
The struggle is a painful and weary one. 40

Douglas Bush from the other side of the Atlantic traces in
Arnold

the many-sided struggle between his soul and the world,
between Hebraism and Hellenism, between his wistful
idealizing of the past and his effort to find guidance
for the future .... 41

39. What Arnold has said in these lines has been borne out by
Thomas Blackburn in The Price of an Eye (1961). The
descent into the dark underworld of the mind in solitude
is a prerequisite to poetic vision:

The poet has the double vision of the god Odin; with his
blinded eye he beholds what goes on in the night of him-
self; his other eye watches the outer scene. In fact,
poetic creation blends the two worlds and interprets them
to each other. (from Wilson Knight, Neglected Powers), p.29

40. Matthew Arnold and France (Cambridge; 1934), pp. 44-45
Tinker, C.B. and Lowry, H.F., A Commentary, p. 257

41. Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry,
( Harvard University Press; Cambridge; 1969), p. 254
In fact, it is the same conflict between his attitude in 'Obermann' and that in 'Obermann Once More'; he may not dramatize it, but it is there. What Arnold speaks of "two desires" applies really to many poets, even of his own generation. But this generalization has limited scope in respect of Matthew Arnold. When one desire drives him to solitude, mining all within, he is a true poet, a quester of 'the buried life'; when another drives him to the world without, he almost ceases to be a poet; he is a critic, an apostle of culture and reason. From this see-saw he could really never escape.

If in 'Resignation' the 'poet' identifies himself with the life of others, it is, as Trilling says, "not to increase his sense of self-hood but rather to lose it." In 'Obermann' Arnold allows the same function to the poet:

He only lives with the world's life,
Who hath renounced his own.

(11. 103-104)

42. "Arnold ... with the conflicting impulses in his own nature, tried to win serenity and failed. His failure made him a poet; in his later years he gained a partial victory and became a journalist and a classicist". Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry, p. 247

The situation has been critically analysed by Frank Kermode in Romantic Image. Arnold himself was such a poet as portrayed by him in 'Obermann' and in 'Empedocles'; "But he had some confidence that the intolerable situation of himself and his like would end when hastened by criticism a new social order would make poetry possible, and a "Joy whose grounds are true". Therefore "Empedocles abandons contemplation, acts and dies; Arnold acts and lives, as a critic". pp. 26-27.

43. Matthew Arnold (George Allen & Unwin Ltd.; 1955), p. 99
He should watch, nor share the strife; he is a spectator, not a participant of the "general life". The idea is elaborated in 'Resignation'. Arnold's insertion of the passage on the role and nature of a 'poet' may at first sight appear to be paradoxical. Yet the passage has its relevance. The 'poet' has an "admirable life" as contrasted with that of the gipsies given in the immediate context. The real motive is to spot-light a life which alone can offer peace and serenity. Arnold's sister, Fausta, to whom the poem is addressed wants a life of adventure and accomplishments. So to check her longing for an untramelled, and perhaps uncivilised life, he contrasts the romantic adventures with the more admirable life of the poet.

In his conception of a poet, Arnold admits first of a divine inspiration: "Heaven doth a quicker pulse impart". (1.145). The poet must have a "mighty heart" as a worthy vehicle of that divine instinct. Arnold is anticipated in this respect by such critics as Coleridge, Goethe and Keats, a fact Cleanth Brooks notices in Modern Poetry and the Tradition, "The poet for both Coleridge and Arnold is possessed". The idea

44. (OUP; 1965), p.19

Brooks traces the idea of a possessed poet to Plato, and quotes the part of a long passage from Ion: "For all great poets ... compose their beautiful poems not as works of art, but because they are inspired and possessed". Wilson Knight has observed in Neglected Powers, "that most if not all, great writers have been aware of an inspiratory power needs no argument. The ancients talked of the Muse or Muses; the word "genius" itself indicates, according to the dictionary, a "tutelary spirit"." PP.26-27
of "energy" is possibly derived from Goethe and Keats. Goethe was wont to designate it 'daemonic', and Keats in 'Sleep and Poetry' speaks of the might of poetry like a giant half-sleeping on his right arm (1.237). In fact, it goes back to the old Platonic theory of poetry as a daemonic force. From Plato this might have percolated into English Poetry and the examples of such echoes are easy to trace. "True native poetry" is a product of "this tour entrejeant, this poetic energy". This daemonic force, which Arnold calls "energy" is to be subdued, curbed and rudder to have a non-personal vision of the world. Thus Arnold follows the tradition in associating the poet with divine "pulse" and "immortal air". While accounting for the best poetry of Byron and Wordsworth, Arnold's "only recourse was to the doctrine or metaphor of inspiration". Byron is at his best when "a higher power took possession of him and filled him". He says of Byron: "when he warms to his work, when he is inspired, Nature herself seems to take the pen from him as she took from Wordsworth". Arnold has, no doubt,


46. It may be rewarding to read in this connection the distinction made by Sir W. Davenant in Preface to Gondibert, (1650) between the Greek Poets and the Hebrew prophets who got this 'spiritual fit'. The Hebrew prophets were inspired to be of use to others while the Greek Poets prophesied for themselves. Here Arnold's poet is more Hebrew than Greek. (The Theory of Poetry in England), p.8

47. Leon Gottfried, Matthew Arnold and the Romantics (Routledge & Kegan Paul; London; 1963), p.107
in mind the Socratic theory about the poets. It is in the second speech of Platonic Socrates in The Phaedrus that the third kind of inspiration, divine 'frenzy' is said to have come from the Muses. The poet has to depend on divine madness. Arnold might have been theoretically close in his "imaginative reason" to what Socrates had stated in this connection. For "Madness which comes from the gods expresses in mythical language much the same as passion directed by reason". The critics in England have admitted the theory of inspiration as the probable source of poetic creation except perhaps the classical. Thomas Lodge is an advocate of the ancient dictum "poeta nascitur, orator fit". "Poetry cometh from above, from a heavenly seat of a glorious God, unto an excellent creature man" (Defence of Poetry, 1579). Sir Philip Sidney affirms it as "a divine gift" in Apology for Poetry (1583). For Puttenham Poesy cannot grow but by "some divine instinct" which the Platonics call 'furor'. Ben Jonson admits the authority of Seneca and Plato regarding the 'poetical rapture' (Discoveries, 1620-1635). The theory of inspiration has however been ignored by many scholars. To one such criticism by Sir J. Reynolds that "all pretence to inspiration is a lie or deceit", William Blake replied "If it is deceit, the whole Bible is madness". For

48. 'Pagan and Medieval Religious Sentiment', ed. Bryson, John, p.426


50. William Blake, 'Notes on Reynolds' 1820 (Theory of Poetry in England; 1914), p.28
the Romantics it was "the heavenly Muse who dictates the poem". Imagination is the deciding word, key to their achievement, and not exactly 'inspiration'. They might speak of it in a variety of ways, but essentially they do not differ from Blake (on whom Arnold was strangely silent), in some ways the greatest among the Romantics, for whom "The imagination is nothing less than God as He operates in the Human soul". Matthew Arnold is not far away from them when he says later in the manner of a critic, "... genuine poetry is conceived and composed in the soul". It would be interesting to speculate how many of Arnold's poems were really conceived and composed in the soul. He was referring to an ideal which often escaped him as a fact. His reflective elegies may have reflected his own soul but that is, perhaps, not the sense in which the word is usually employed by all. To his advantage or not, the Arnoldian Soul always was a critic both hidden and open. The drama of this conflict between head and heart would be an interesting study, but that is another story.

To go back, the poet of 'Resignation' sees in front of him "life unroll" in three successive visions: the first is that of a ruler "in some great-historied land", the second is "a populous town" at sunset, but the best is reserved for the

53. Essays in Criticism, Second Series, p. 57
third and last, when the lovely vision of dew-drenched landscape is conveyed in music as exquisite as itself. For Sir Edmund Chambers "It calls home the heart to quietness". But in each vision the poet recognizes a part of the whole—"A placid and continuous whole" (l. 190). It is the "general life" "whose secret is not joy but peace" (l. 192). It is this life in plants, stones and rain that brings to the poet the "sad lucidity of soul". Arnold makes next a curt but debatable comment: "Not deep the poet sees but wide" (l. 214). The poet feels deeper than the gipsies feel and he can breathe "immortal air"; "he is not bound" "In the day's life. "He has the "rapt security", and so he can indulge without involving himself. Arnold asks his sister Fausta to be quiet and resigned, and follow the example of the poet who has this resigned attitude. The conception of the poet as enunciated in 'Resignation' may not be consistently present in the Arnold canon. Arnold who recommends a kind of ascetic severity writes as a social critic on an entirely different note, sceptical, urbane, even supercilious, but never quite resigned. If one would be severe, one might damn him as an amateur who dabbled in sociology, theology, and education. Maybe part of his appeal depends on the fact that he is not a specialist in any field, nevertheless he includes each in some way or the other in his own poetic corpus. This early conception, though a good piece of criticism, is born of a particular mood or situation and is not part of

54. 'Matthew Arnold' (20th Century Eng. Critical Essays), p.163
any coherent critical meditation. The mood, he would like us to believe, is one of calm resignation;

Yet they, believe me, who await
No gifts from chance, have conquer'd fate.

(11. 247-48)

The mood gathers momentum in Empedocles on Etna:

Nurse no extravagant hope;
Because thou must not dream, thou need'st not then despair.

(11. 425-26)

It is this very mood that impels Arnold to find 'peace' in 'life', and not 'joy' which Wordsworth seeks and finds. It is again for this that "Not deep the poet sees, but wide", as this is one way to lose the self in the sensuous scene. 55

That the peace that passeth understanding would pass Arnold by is obvious. The loss of religion may have hurt him; all the same his was not a religious soul.

It is usual to compare the conception of the poet in 'Resignation' with that in 'The Strayed Reveller'. 56 In both,

55. Arnold speaks of the "sensuousness of poetry" and quotes this line in one of his letters to A.H. Clough, Feb. 1849:

"Not deep the poet sees, but wide": Think of this as you gaze from the Gummer Hill toward Cirencester and Cheltenham.

56. Tinker & Lowry, A Commentary, p. 67

Trilling Lionel, Matthew Arnold, pp. 99-100
the poet empathetically identifies himself with the life of others, sees the life unroll before him and draws closer to "general life". But the distinction is that in 'The Strayed Reveller' the poet-protagonist's self-hood becomes the theme; in 'Resignation' he does not increase his selfhood, rather he loses it. In a sense, the life of the poet in 'The Strayed Reveller' suggests a contrast with that in 'Resignation'; it is in the nature of a contrast between centripetal and centrifugal forces. In 'Resignation' the poet is more of a spectator who spreads at ease his self and sight over each object around him from a central position. But in 'The Strayed Reveller' the poet has to concentrate and bear within him the burden of suffering. The shepherd-poet, the reveller, gives to Ulysses in Circe's palace a long discourse on the Gods and the poets, the two being in many ways kin. The poets can have the god-like vision but they are not as happy as the Gods. For the Gods demand a suffering from the human poets:

such a price

The Gods exact for song:

To become what we sing. (ll. 232-34)

The poets must become what they sing, must suffer with Tiresias and toil with the Heroes. The Indian reader may wonder if the Western gods too create in joy, an idea that runs perhaps counter to the Crucifixion. This suffering is the price for poetic power. This is also his glory, the inevitable
price. If the poet has to suffer the pain of others, he enjoys also kinship with them; the empathy helps him unite with his kind. "'The Strayed Reveller' is Arnold's celebration of the painful glories of man's bondage to the strength of the emotions". Here the artist is seen as the hero-victim. He is rather like the poet in Keats's 'Hyperion' who also drank from an enchanted vessel and stayed apart from other men. He "venoms all his days,/ Bearing more woes than all his sins deserve". Yet this suffering of the poet has its reward in the joy of creation, ("dramas of delight and plots of pain"). It is an open secret. "Joy cannot be had without anguish", and for Arnold this is the joy of creation, "whose grounds are true".

The reflections on the life of the poet in these two early poems may be considered polar. But the polarity does not lie, as Trilling holds, in the losing or in the increasing of the

57. That the poet must pay for his second sight, by suffering the pangs of those whom he sees appeared later in a meaningful way in the figure of Tiresias in Eliot's 'The Waste Land' (1.243). Imagination, the poet's vision, says Arnold, is a rare gift:

But oh, what labour!
O Prince, what pain! (ll. 210-11)

Gilbert Highet in The Classical Tradition (CUP; 1957) observes how Arnold in a later poem 'Philomela' used almost the same words in almost the same rhythm, of that other Greek symbol of poetry, the nightingale:

What triumph! hark! What pain! (l. 4) p. 699

58. Trilling, Lionel Matthew Arnold, (George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London), P. 100
59. Kermode, Frank, Romantic Image, p. 22
60. Ibid., p. 22
poet's self-hood. If the poet in 'Resignation' loses his self in the spectacle, he does also leave his kind, "o' erleaps their pen,/ And flees the common life of men" (11. 211-12). This is, in a sense, what Arnold says about Wordsworth in his essay on Heinrich Heine:

The gravest of them, Wordsworth, retired (in Middle-Age phrase) into a monastery. I mean, he plunged himself in the inward life, he voluntarily cut himself from the modern spirit. 61

In 'The Strayed Reveller' the poet suffers the pain of others, and he has to lose his selfhood to bear the misery in him. For one cannot absorb the pangs of others and retain one's selfhood at the same time. It is "To become what we sing". The concept of a poet in these two poems is, then, not opposite. One may say that all this belongs to the organisational part of Arnold's poetic self: striving for classical sanity a la Sainte-Beuve and at the same time casting himself in "a role of lonely suffering", 62 "the image-nourished by his reading of Senancour"; it may be called 'romantic', in a sense. In 'Resignation' the poet achieves a "sad lucidity of soul" "which is less than joy and more than resignation" as Arnold himself speaks of the sentiment of Marcus Aurelius. But in 'The Strayed Reveller' the

poet continues to have the sense of "labour" and "pain". The irony is that Arnold has rarely achieved the status in his verse as the poet of 'Resignation'. Yet he asks his sister in the same poem to abandon the romantic temperament. As Edmund Chambers put it, "He can arrive at no coherent vision of the scheme of things entire". Yet the coherent, critical vision was what he preached, even if he did not quite seek for or practise it.

These two early poems are enough to show that by 1849 Arnold had already formed his opinion about the nature and scope of poetry, and specially the function of a poet. He carries forward the practice of telling about poet and poetry in many of his later poems where he performs the double role of poet and critic so that the poet and the critic could be separately enjoyed and understood. These poems were published in 1867, and these are rather short poems except 'Epilogue to Lessing's Laocoon'. The views on aesthetics expressed in the 'Epilogue' are taken to be only a part of the considerable body of criticism interest in which increases with time in Arnold's poetry. While walking through Hyde Park Arnold gives his companion a commentary on the nature and function of painting, music and poetry. They talked, by chance, of Lessing's Laocoon. The difference between fine arts and poetry is made clear by Lessing; the same critical issue is raised and discussed in this poem. Arnold is asked by his friend why fine

63. 'Matthew Arnold' (20th Century Eng. Critical Essays; OUP), p.168
arts display more success than poetry. Even in Greece good poems are rarer than good statues. In Rome too painting is more important than poetry. In his own time, such musicians as Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn seem to be more soothing than Goethe and Wordsworth. Arnold replies that a painter gives "A moment's life of things that live" (l. 58)—the passing group, the summer morning, the grass, the elms, the blossomed thorn and the cattle with shining flanks and liquid eyes. The musician is inspired at the rustling breeze coming across the garden trees and sparkling waters. He gives voice to the unutterable spell of those things. A good musician can make any word infinitely significant. But the poet has his sphere elsewhere. It is "the human tide", the "stream of life", "the long, unpausing spectacle" about him. The poet has to tell the 'movement' of life in all the aspects—in happiness and sorrow, in youth and age, in smiles and tears, in pain and pleasure, in rest and strife. He traces it from its "source" to "the last repose" through "its mid career" (l. 150). It is, in other words, to see life steadily and see it whole. But to see such is not enough; the poet also broods on it and becomes one with it. This is close to Plato's remark: "We become like what we imitate". In the last section of 'Epilogue' Arnold sums up his argument that the poet explores "the life-stream's shore", and follows "its windings to the end", and in doing so gets a deep pleasure, "delighted ecstasy". This is beyond the power of the painter and the musician. So the poets are given "the first, the fairest place".
But a certain incompleteness of critical reorientation may perhaps be seen in Arnold's argument. For the respective spheres of the painter, musician and poet are not enough to make out the differences between them. One should consider the effect of each and all in building up the aesthetic culture. Perhaps one of the subtlest distinctions in this respect is given by Sri Aurobindo:

Poetry raises the emotions and gives each its separate delight. Art stills the emotions and teaches them the delight of a restrained and limited satisfaction.... Music deepens the emotions and harmonizes them with each other. Between them, music, art and poetry are a perfect education for the soul; they make and keep its moments purified, self-controlled, deep and harmonious. (National Value of Art, 1953/e, p. 43)

Such a unified view of an aesthetic, traditional culture is beyond Arnold. Sartre in What is Literature? observes that the arts of music, painting and poetry are not parallel:

.... it is not only the form which differentiates, but the matter as well. And it is one thing to work with colour and sound, another to express oneself by means of words. ('What is Writing?'), p. 1

Joseph Conrad in the preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus attempts a synthesis that literary art "must strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting, and to the magic suggestion of music". (Penguin; 1975), p. 12
The conception of the poet's "sphere" and function as given in the 'Epilogue' binds together the statements in 'Resignation' and 'The Strayed Reveller'. The poet must have the totality of vision. He sees the general life unroll before him, "A placid and continuous whole" ('Resignation'). He must tell of life's movement, "The thread which binds it all in one/ And not its separate parts alone" ('Epilogue'). "The long, unpausing spectacle" is only another version of the "continuous whole". In 'The Strayed Reveller' the poet has to pay a high price for his gift — he has to become what he sings; and in the same way the poet in the 'Epilogue' has to live the life of the objects he sees and follows: "He follows home, and lives their life". Arnold could find such a poet. It was Sophocles, the poet of his ideal, who "saw life steadily and saw it whole" and who felt in his mind "the turbid ebb and flow/ Of human misery". This Sophocles, of course, is made in Arnold's own image. The dramatic conflict, the medium is subordinated to a Stoic conclusion. Arnold saw as requisite for the artist the attainment of a superior, Goethean vision of human life. But he knew well that he himself had not achieved that breadth of vision and unity of spirit.64 And even for him Goethe is perhaps not the greatest poet. He rationalizes this

64. This idea is corroborated by Evelyn Barish Greenberger in A.H.Clough, Growth of a Poet's Mind (Harvard Uni. Press; 1970), p.189
self-realization in a letter to his sister, Kay, "that my poems are fragments - i.e., that I am fragments". Yet for once the Muses were kind to him and gave him one reprieve, and that is observable in 'Dover Beach' where the fragment is more than whole. For once the stoical soul turns epic and human. But Arnold could not have made the admission about himself without being a critic, be it in verse or prose.

Arnold makes his observations on poet and poetry once again in a few shorter poems, all published in 1867. These poems show the critic as not being far from the poet, nor the poet from the critic. Of these 'A Caution to poets' and 'Persistence of Poetry' are aphoristic, even curt. In 'A Caution' he is speaking of what he has said already in 'The Strayed Reveller'. The poet becomes what he sings and recaptures the emotion which, in its turn, is contained in his creation. The reader experiences the same emotion while reading the poem. It is obvious that the work of art has in it the very emotion of the poet and it transmits the same to the reader. If the poet fails to evoke the pleasure in creation, naturally the reader will not respond. Of course, the reader should have the sensitivity to enjoy and experience the pleasure even in forms of things unknown. Arnold's caution to poets is all right but it holds a caution to the readers of poetry as well. And yet

65. Letter to Mrs Forster (K.), London, Saturday (?) 1853
66. Mr. Lowry observes, Arnold "is reflecting upon his recent Empedocles and its failure to give joy". p.116
the arousing of emotion may not be all; the emotion should have artistic value. Elsewhere speaking of poetic truth and poetic law Arnold might have said the same. It should give intensity and reality to the experience. This idea may be traced back to classical poetry, for example, Euripides. In the Suppliants Adrastus addresses Theseus:

So must a minstrel if he composes a poem, be himself joyful; if he is not, but is filled with private woe, he cannot bring joy to others. 67

In chapter 17 of his Poetics, Aristotle says the same about the dramatists in the form of a casual advice:

... those dramatists are most convincing who themselves feel the emotions they are trying to communicate.

"Persistency of Poetry" is a stanza of four lines only like 'A Caution to Poets'; and it was prefatory to the volumes of 1867-69. Arnold regrets the unpoetic zeitgeist of which he wrote in one of his letters to Clough, and in his essay on Gray. 69 He complained that the time was not for poetry. The stanza may not be expressing any views on aesthetics; yet

69. "Gray with qualities of mind and soul of a genuine poet was isolated in his century ... the want of a genial atmosphere, the failure of sympathy in his contemporaries, were too great". (Essays in Criticism, 2nd Series), p.55
Poetry has a special time for its production and appreciation. Of course, in the closing line, though in another sense, Arnold is probably hinting at the romantic view so well articulated by Keats, that the poetry of earth is never dead. But alas, he knew that "For Nature there is renovation, but for man there is none". Earth may have the poetry at times and ever, but man loses his poetical powers with age. This is the theme of 'The Progress of Poesy'. To a young man the power of poetry is full; he can make the fount of poetry out of the rock. But when advanced in years, he cannot, even with hard labour, hold the flow; it passes out of hand. At the last stage when a man is old enough, he finds the source dry, the channel dry. The subtitle, A Variation, refers to Gray's Ode of the same title. It is, of course easy to detect here Arnold's personal feeling of the loss of creativity. This was known to Wordsworth except that his 'spots of time' were not available to Arnold. But poetry can ressurect at any time and anywhere. Certain circumstances may help it, but no circumstances can stop it.

The finest of the group is the sonnet 'Austerity of Poetry'. It is based on an anecdote Arnold found in Antoine-Frederic Ozanam. The poetic Muse, should have a gay, radiant outside with a hard core of thought and austerity. Here "young, gay,/ Radiant ... outside" refers to the pleasing, attractive appearance of poetry. But this attractive outside will lead

ultimately to thought and austerity, which is the goal of poetry. Some scholars of Aesthetics have drawn a distinction between 'easy beauty' and 'difficult beauty'. It is interesting that Arnold wishes to combine both, a thing which he rarely achieves. It may be said that poetry must have beauty and truth. Arnold echoes medieval aesthetics: Beauty is the expression of truth, splendor-vrae. He demands of poetry something uncommonly or paradoxically great, even if it proved to be beyond his powers.

In a contemporary 'Report on Elementary Schools' Arnold makes the same demand:

Some people regard this my high estimate of the value of poetry in education with suspicion and displeasure. Perhaps they may accept the testimony of Wordsworth with less suspicion than mine. Wordsworth says, "To be incapable of a feeling of poetry, in my sense of the word, is to be without love of human nature and reverence for God". And it is only through acquaintance with poetry, and with good poetry, that this feeling of poetry can be given.

Arnold's ideas about poets and poetry as expressed in the poems are clear, if not consistent. While the three long poems deal with the function of a poet, the sonnets treat of the nature of poetry. It is interesting to note a structural similarity in each group of poems. In the long poems, Arnold creates a dramatic situation in a setting of excursuses. Revisiting a

rural scene at Wythburn, he indulges in a monologue ('Resignation'), while only his sister, Fausta, patiently listens.

'Epilogue to Lessing's Laocoön' is a documentary poem in the form of a dialogue between the poet and "his friend" as they stroll through Hyde Park. The shepherd poet in 'The Strayed Reveller' comes down from mountain pastures to attend the rites of Iacchus and wanders into the courtyard of Circe's palace. He finds there the "goddess" (Circe), and recognizes Ulysses with whom he enters into a conversation. The poem is given a dramatic form. Arnold, in all three poems, makes the protagonist stir out of doors with a companion, if only for the sake of a corroboration of his views on the function of a poet. The connection with the society is maintained by the presence of a companion, the escape from society by nature, which, however, is never magical. Arnold is not actually a solitary soul, in society or in nature. He is sad rather than alone. Criticism is given here the semblance of Art. Arnold forestalls what he subsequently prescribes in 'Austerity of Poetry':

Such, poets, is your bride, the Muse young, gay,
Radiant, adorn'd outside; a hidden ground
Of thought and of austerity within.

(11, 12-14)

This description applies also to the sonnets. The sonnets are in the nature of an allegory. 'Austerity of Poetry' has its meaning in "A robe of sackcloth" found when the garments of the fair bride killed in a crash are drawn off. The allegory
lies in the poet's thesis that poetry should have a hard core of thought ("sackcloth") with a pleasant outlook. In 'The Progress of Poesy' poesy is a stream flowing from the rock to a young man but it gets gradually feeble to a man growing old. In 'Persistency of Poetry' it is the Muse who once moved the earth and now her words are only "harp(ed) on". Such similarity points to "the complex unity of Arnold's thought"72 about poets and poetry.

72. Lionel Trilling, Matthew Arnold, 'Introductory Note', p. xi