

Christine Pyle

English 3022

Dr. Weltman

April 30, 2009

Pessimistic Longing in Arnold's Water Imagery

The poetry of Matthew Arnold records the emotions of a common phenomenon of the Victorian age, the skeptic, as he comes to terms with the costs of his skepticism. The speakers in Arnold's poems long for the hope and joy of an earlier era, but the isolating modern world has burned the bridge behind them, leaving them alone with their doubt. For Arnold, the happy earlier era is represented by William Wordsworth, a master of deep, joyful poetic emotion. Arnold's own poetry is both derivative from and reactive to that of Wordsworth: Arnold longs for Wordsworth's joy but remains aloof. Arnold's use of nature imagery, particularly of water, illustrates this tense connection with his Romantic predecessor. The poetic images, whether they evoke a river, an ocean, or another element with watery attributes, represent humanity's despairing quest for faith and joy in life and, ultimately, Arnold's conviction that the "sea of faith" has retreated irretrievably. Framed by an exploration of the poet's relation to Wordsworth, this paper examines two instances of Matthew Arnold's water-inspired expressions of loss, the isolating loneliness of "To Marguerite—Continued" and the ambiguous self-searching of "The Buried Life."

Arnold's attitude toward his larger-than-life Romantic predecessor, Wordsworth, is an interesting mix of admiration and cynicism. As a poet, Arnold owes much to Wordsworth. While Arnold's themes and poetic style are derived in part from the myths and rhythms of the ancient Greeks and Romans, Goethe, and remote sources like the Baghavad Gita, he also drew

on the work of the Romantic poets, especially Wordsworth. According to R. H. Hutton, “[Arnold] feels that...while he has something of Goethe’s critical eye for human life and its confusions, he has also something of the meditative thirst and meditative pleasures of Wordsworth....the combination of these two poetic qualifications gives him a distinctive power of his own” (214-215). Knoepfelmacher asserts that Arnold's base of "emotional power" is derived from Wordsworth (46). Because of Arnold’s admiration for and fascination with the older poet, Wordsworthian situations, images and phrases echo strongly throughout his poetry. In fact, he consciously worked to keep alive a strong respect for Wordsworth’s poetry, as in “Memorial Verses,” his encomium to Wordsworth:

Time may restore us in his course
 Goethe’s sage mind and Byron’s force;
 But where will Europe’s latter hour
 Again find Wordsworth’s healing power? (60-64)

Arnold longed for Wordsworth’s inaccessible ability to bring hope and joy out of suffering, but, as Isobel Armstrong observes, “The ethical, stabilizing poetry of joy he wished to create reverses itself” (207). Arnold was one of many Victorians who, pressured by new scientific theories and the increasingly louder voice of cynicism, could no longer hold to hope, whether Christian hope in God or Romantic hope in Nature. He found that Wordsworth’s faith-filled philosophy was not viable in his day. Wordsworth’s optimism seemed irretrievable, in the same way that

The Sea of Faith
 Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore
 Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
 But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,

Retreating....

(“Dover Beach” 21-26)

Because he felt that Wordsworth’s emotionally attractive work could not be reproduced in his or in future ages, Arnold actively preserved Wordsworth’s writings. He published a new anthology of Wordsworth’s poetry, wrote memorial verses about him, and incorporated Wordsworthian ideas, images and phraseology into Arnold’s own work.

Thus, while Arnold revered and imitated the older poet, he reacted to Wordsworth’s vision of life, which he felt could not survive in the modern age. In Romantic poetry, Nature sweetly transforms sorrowful, burdened feelings into hope and optimistic feelings. Wordsworth believed in this transformational power with an almost religious fervor, and his poetry traces Nature’s healing powers on the emotions and soul. Arnold’s cynical Victorian view contrasts sharply with the Romantic worship of Nature. For Arnold, nature is an impersonal force, “meaningless in itself” (Knoepflmacher 51), and capable of engendering neither joy nor Wordsworth’s “holy love” (48). Through “the ‘bleak and grey’ view of nature” (Morgan 429), Arnold wants us to face the fact that nature means nothing special. Swinburne, a Victorian critic, considered Romantic love of Nature to be an offshoot of Christianity. Swinburne lauds Arnold for not tiptoeing around the religion question but disentangling himself from the allied Romantic and Christian faiths and taking the skeptic’s stance, or “stoic agnosticism” (Morgan 429). According to Morgan, however, Arnold holds himself “just at the edge of denying” Wordsworth and Christianity, not wholly dedicating himself to agnosticism (430).

Arnold’s relation to Wordsworth is therefore twofold. He denies Wordsworth’s vision but uses it to produce feeling (Knoepflmacher 47). Because the religion of Nature has been rendered impotent by cynicism, Knoepflmacher writes, the Victorian poet can no longer raise the heart

with genuine faith. The next best thing is to “cling to the ‘eternal note of sadness’....He can share it with Wordsworth and lament his own inability to replace this sadness with new feelings of joy, ‘Wordsworth’s healing power.’ Thus, paradoxically enough, the Victorian poet can engender feeling by bemoaning loss of feeling. He can preserve Wordsworth’s emotional core” (53). Arnold offers a new poetry of loss, loneliness and poignant longing. Nevertheless, recalling Wordsworth’s emotionally uplifting verses, Arnold feels that modern pessimism is a poor substitute. With conflicting cynicism and longing, Arnold mourns the loss of the irreplaceable Wordsworth: “But who, ah! Who, will make us feel?” (“Memorial Verses” 67).

The poems highlighted in this paper track Arnold’s despairing search for who or what will “make us feel”—despairing, because he knows the search will be unsuccessful. Foakes writes that “the journey in Arnold’s poetry has no goal, or only the vaguest hope of a goal. It is a blind journey towards no fulfillment” (150). The “blind journey” of life is often represented by the water motif. First, “Memorial Verses” links Arnold’s longing for Wordsworth to water imagery. “To Marguerite—Continued” illustrates the isolation of human life through an ocean metaphor. Finally, “The Buried Life” attempts to open our blind eyes to the “unregarded river of our life,” the true, inward self that has been suppressed in the rush of modernity (39).

Arnold’s remarkable dependence on images of rivers and oceans, in these poems and others, indicates the significance of water imagery to Arnold’s tension with Wordsworthian faith. A brief review of natural water processes, upon which Arnold bases his metaphors, will clarify this connection. Originating in the hills, a river flows through varying landscapes—both subterranean and sunlit—until it empties into the ocean, which is a vast expanse of heaving water, dotted with islands. Wherever the sea meets land, the sea engages in the phenomenon known as tide. Water from river and sea evaporates to form rain and dew for the earth. From

each of these stages in the hydrologic cycle, Arnold draws images for his poetry.

Moisture is generally a life-giving element in Arnold's poems, whereas dryness represents death. When other elements like fire or earth take on properties of water, these water-like attributes (coolness, liquidity, etc.) are portrayed positively, while aridity is negative (Bidney 46). In "Memorial Verses," Arnold writes that Wordsworth "loosed our heart in *tears*" from the "iron" bonds of the nineteenth century (47). His lyrics placed us on the "*cool* flowery lap of earth" (49), where "our foreheads felt the wind and *rain*" (53, italics mine). Under the poet's soothing influence,

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

The "dead" spirits were "dried up and closely furled," like fallen leaves, until the refreshing moisture of Wordsworth resurrected them. The watery images serve to highlight the comforting, hopeful, life-giving qualities of the great poet. Seamus Perry notes, "It was Wordsworth's gift momentarily to redeem the world from its modern confusion...and return us to 'The freshness of the early world,' so making life worth living"; in his elegy for Wordsworth, Arnold "laments the passing of such power from the earth" (123).

In the final verse paragraph of "Memorial Verses," the speaker addresses the river Rotha, which flows near Wordsworth's burial place (f.n. Norton 1360): "Keep fresh the grass upon his grave / O Rotha, with thy living wave!" (71-72). Again, the adjective "living" contributes to the positive image of water. A deeper meaning to the water metaphor surfaces here, though. Arnold's request to Rotha is, essentially, to keep Wordsworth's healing presence alive even

today. “Sing him thy best!” the poet cries (73). Yet who is “singing” Wordsworth? The river Rotha has multiple levels of meaning—the literal river “sings” near the grave, while the poem itself is the river Rotha which preserves Wordsworth’s poetry and “sings” to the world. In a sense, all of Arnold’s “water poems” are Rotha. These poems are the flowing stream of Arnold’s poetic desire to revive Romantic faith and feeling. Each echoes Wordsworth but “engenders feeling by bemoaning loss of feeling.” Water represents the life that Arnold yearns for but which is unreachable—Arnold’s speakers find “no hope” or the “vague sort of hope.” The poems confirm Arnold’s view that the Romantic way of accessing emotion is gone, and isolating cynicism is the irrevocable replacement. The steady recurrence of rivers, the ocean, and other representations of moisture seems to confirm Arnold’s connection of water to unattainable faith.

The symbolism of moisture and dryness is not always clear-cut, however. What Bidney calls the “interconvertibility of water and fire” means that water (usually a positive element) can be malicious and, conversely, fire can be good, or the two attributes can be melded for a conflicting message of simultaneous fulfillment and loss. Madden comments on Arnold’s dualistic use of imagery: “He attaches to water, which cools, purifies, and mirrors, but also separates, engulfs, and carries away” (qtd. Bidney 46). Nature, which consistently produced pleasure and intense emotion for the Romantics, can turn against the speakers in Arnold’s poems. The ocean—an overwhelming, mindless force—becomes an emotionless enemy in several poems. A quintessential example is “To Marguerite—Continued”:

Yes! in the sea of life enisled,
 With echoing straits between us thrown,
 Dotting the shoreless watery wild,
 We mortal millions live *alone*. (1-4)

The metaphor is simple. We are islands on the sea of life, separated from each other by vast stretches of ocean. From time to time, the haunting, “lovely notes” (11) of another island’s birds reach our ears, and “a longing like despair” (13) overcomes us. In this scene of modern isolation, the sea is a barrier from human affection and, thus, from hopes for happiness. Connection with other people, especially in love, is desirable but unachievable, blocked by the “unplumbed, salt, estranging sea” (24). The ocean imagery in “To Marguerite—Continued” points, not to Wordsworth’s sympathetic Nature, but to an impersonal Nature which works against human desire. Few poems more strongly present Arnold’s utter pessimism as a poet—“Arnold the poet committed to a view of life conditioned by an overriding propensity to bleakness” (Grob 19).

Grasso claims that the “blatant alienation” of the ocean poems “makes them darker and more hopeless than ‘The Buried Life’” (Grasso 12). However, “The Buried Life,” though it appears to end positively, carries a strong undercurrent of the meaninglessness of life. Using water imagery, including a river metaphor, Arnold creates a speaker who seeks heart-to-heart communication but ultimately comes to an ambiguous conclusion. The dramatic monologue sets the stage for pessimism with a touch of melodrama, as the speaker wails to his lover, “Light flows our war of mocking words, and yet, / Behold, with tears mine eyes are wet! / I feel a nameless sadness o’er me roll” (1-3). In these first few lines, Arnold connects moisture with emotions. The lovers’ banter “flows,” tears moisten the speaker’s eyes, and sadness “roll[s]” over him with the smothering force of a sea billow. In lines 10-11, the speaker cries, “Turn those limpid eyes on mine, / And let me read there, love! thy inmost soul.” The etymology of “limpid” traces from Latin *limpa*, meaning “water goddess” or “water,” and the word still carries watery connotations in English usage (“Limpid”). “Limpid eyes” and “inmost soul,” the strongest

phrases in this quotation, are strongly linked. The speaker's tears spring from the river of true emotion, through his eyes, of course; the show of emotion is an indication of his deeply hidden self that is longing to be expressed. The first stanza thus suggests an image that appears later in the poem: the river of each person's life which flows deep in the soul.

In the third verse paragraph, the "river of our life" is introduced. The river is hidden "in the deep recesses of our breast" (38), "unregarded" (39) and "indiscernible" (40), buried beneath "the world's most crowded streets" (45)—the rush of modern life. Because a person's inner life is hidden beneath the surface, Arnold describes it as a subterranean stream. He probably derived this subterranean image from "Kubla Khan," penned, significantly, by Wordsworth's friend, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In Coleridge's poem, the sacred river Alph, which sprang from a terrible chasm, flows five miles to immense caverns and empties into a "lifeless ocean" (28). The terror and mystery of the "sacred Alph" emerges in Arnold's river metaphor. The heart that "beats so wild, so deep in us" (53) in "The Buried Life" recalls the "savage place"—"enchanted" (14), "sacred" (3) and tumultuous—in which the Alph originated. Another segment from "Kubla Khan" seems to have influenced Arnold as well: "And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far / Ancestral voices prophesying war!" (29-30). In Arnold's words, likewise, "From the soul's subterranean depth upborne / As from an infinitely distant land, / Come airs, and floating echoes..." (73-75). The speaker of these lines, like Kubla, hears distant sounds that evoke an emotional response. The speaker hears tantalizing hints from the buried part of himself, and he longs to see and hear himself clearly, because he feels cut off from himself, his personality and his emotions. Just like the "lovely notes" (11) from other islands in "To Marguerite—Continued," the intriguing, distant sounds of the speaker's buried life provoke "a longing like despair" (13).

In the poem's final section, the river assumes an appearance of optimism, as the speaker ruminates on the stirring of human affection. In place of isolated hopelessness, he imagines a reawakening of feeling through deep companionship: "Only—but this is rare— / When a beloved hand is laid in ours / ...A bolt is shot back somewhere in our breast, / And a lost pulse of feeling stirs again" (77-78, 84-85). It appears that the speaker has found a way to escape, at least temporarily, from isolating hopelessness and revive the formerly dead, dry "pulse of feeling." Human touch and affection release the river from the unknown, shadowy recesses of the soul and allow the stream to gently flow in the sunlight. When this occurs, "A man becomes aware of his life's flow, / And hears its winding murmur; and he sees / The meadows where it glides, the sun, the breeze" (88-90). In Arnoldian imagery, the meadow setting of this river recalls the sunny, breezy fields associated with Wordsworth in "Memorial Verses." Apparently, the speaker hopes that it is possible to achieve an emotional fullness like that of the Romantic writers. If the speaker can indeed find a measure of Romantic hope and awakened emotions, though, where is the modern cynicism with which Arnold usually concludes?

In order to arrive at a conclusion about this dramatic monologue, one must continually ask: Is the poem's speaker truthful? How does he measure up to his own standard of saying what one means to say (87)? The end of his speech may be just another instance of a man "tricked in disguises" (21), another vain attempt "to speak and act / Our hidden self"; by his own admission, "what we say and do / Is eloquent, is well—but 'tis not true!" (64-66). With his references to meadows and sunshine, beloved voices, and true meaning, the speaker may be using a common human strategy to counteract despair—making a situation seem better than reality proves it to be. By trying to fabricate hope, he highlights the impossibility of hope. Though the speaker claims a revival of human feeling, the affectionate communication that he describes in the above passage

does not fully satiate his “unspeakable desire / After the knowledge of our buried life” (47-48). The speaker’s desire to know himself and connect with another is achieved—in part. “The potential is realized, yes, but rarely, and then only partially....It was a desperate hopefulness,” observes Baum (106). Ryals notes that, in Arnold’s description of deep human communication in the above passage, the situation appears to be hypothetical (97). An examination of context reveals that the passage is a mere mirage of relief.

This seemingly hopeful section of the poem is shot through with irony. The opening qualification “but this is rare,” referring to the experience of mutual understanding with a beloved person, is an evident use of irony (“The Buried Life” 77). The rarity of the desired situation exposes the slimness of the speaker’s hope. In the person whose feelings revive, “the eye sinks inward, and the heart lies plain” (86). The eye imagery here is rather grotesque, which would be inappropriate for a purely optimistic segment. The passage concludes with Arnoldian doubt: “And then he thinks he knows / The hills where his life rose / And the sea where it goes” (96-98). The “hills” symbolize man’s origins, or creation in the religious tradition, and the “sea” symbolizes the afterlife. The word “thinks” implies agnosticism. Man “thinks” he knows his origins and destination, but he cannot truly know, so doubt reigns. Therefore, even “The Buried Life” confirms that, in Arnold’s view, Romantic faith has departed permanently.

Unlike Wordsworth’s speakers, for whom Nature was a constant source of pleasure and peace, the speaker of “The Buried Life” can obtain only a rare, momentary “lull in the hot race” (91). The speaker is filled not with an effusive joy or Wordsworth’s “sweet calm,” but with, in Arnold’s phrase, an “unwonted calm” (95). Grasso sees this “unwonted calm” as a permanent peace, a “deeper hum that runs quietly through the stream” and is achieved by accepting one’s imperfections as part of life’s journey (22). The positive, watery aspects of calm are evident in

the words “coolness” and “shadow,” as contrasted with the fiery, “hot race” and the blazing picture of an eternal “chase” (91-92). However, the poem gives no indications of the permanence of calm. On the contrary, “unwonted calm” is a fleeting moment in which the speaker captures “that flying and elusive shadow, rest” (93).

Contrasted with the strong, positive feelings evoked in Wordsworth’s poetry, Arnoldian “calm” is an emotionless, neuter state. It denotes merely an absence of the panicked rushing of the world—not the presence of something better. An uncertain, suspicious peacefulness settles on the speaker. Ryals remarks, “Poise, peace, rest, calm—those qualities which speaker after speaker claims to desire—are, as Arnold knows, attributes of death” (98). For instance, “Dover Beach” opens: “The sea is calm tonight” (1). Here, “calm” could be construed as either a pleasant peacefulness or an impending storm. By the end of the poem, the “temporary, almost deceptive, calm of the sea in Dover Beach” (Grasso 22) ultimately presents a world that has neither “certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain” (“Dover Beach” 34). In another instance, the speaker of “Lines Written in Kensington Gardens” addresses the “calm soul of all things” (37) with the impassioned prayer, “Calm, calm me more!” (43). The speaker betrays a hint of desperation, of being trapped in a world of “impious uproar” (25). He begs for “the power to feel” (42), which had been so fruitfully cultivated by the Romantics but remains elusive to Arnold’s poetic speakers. Finally, in “Youth and Calm,” Arnold speaks of the neutrality of calmness: “Calm is not life’s crown, though calm is well. / ‘Tis all perhaps which man acquires / But ‘tis not what our youth desires” (23-25, qtd. in Ryals 98). These examples, which illustrate the longing for calm and the dubiousness of its existence, lend a melancholic, temporal connotation to the word. Clearly, a calm state does not fulfill the desires of Arnold’s speakers, but it is the best that they can obtain. In the end, this questionable, fleeting peace is the only

Arnoldian emotional state that attempts to replace the strong Romantic emotions of the previous age.

In the poetry of Matthew Arnold, pessimistic doubt has the final say. Through water imagery, his verses expose the results of nineteenth-century cynicism: engulfing solitude and deep-seated alienation. Even if the “river of our life” is exposed to the sunshine of human love, as suggested in “The Buried Life,” the self-knowledge thus gained by the speaker is just another vain attempt “to speak and act [his] hidden self,” for “deep enough, alas! one never mines” (56). While expressing loneliness and despair, Arnold’s poems reveal a deep longing for an era recently past, in which faith and feeling were yet alive, represented by the poetry of William Wordsworth. In the world of Arnold’s poetry, the faith espoused by Wordsworth has become impossible. Though Arnold’s poems offer a vague, momentary calm, the speakers’ unfulfilling consolation does not “hold water” next to Wordsworth’s strong faith. Nevertheless, Arnold’s water-inspired verses still reach toward his predecessor’s joyful emotional power. The poems sing the song of the river Rotha; they water the grass on the great Romantic poet’s grave.

Works Cited

- Armstrong, Isobel. "The Liberal in Crisis: Arnold." *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993. 205-231. Print.
- Arnold, Matthew. "Dover Beach." Greenblatt and Abrams 1368-1369.
- . "Lines Written in Kensington Gardens." Greenblatt and Abrams 1360-1361.
- . "Memorial Verses." Greenblatt and Abrams 1358-1360.
- . "The Buried Life." Greenblatt and Abrams 1356-1358.
- . "To Marguerite—Continued." Greenblatt and Abrams 1355-1356.
- Baum, Paul F. "The Buried Life." Ten Studies in the Poetry of Matthew Arnold. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1958. Print
- Bidney, Martin. "'A Dream' as Key to a Reverie Pattern in Matthew Arnold: Interactions of Water and Fire." Victorian Poetry 26.1/2 (1988): 45-60. Print.
- Foakes, R.A. The Romantic Assertion: A Study in the Language of Nineteenth Century Poetry. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958. Print.
- Grasso, Anthony R. "A River Runs Through: Water Imagery and Spiritual Integration in Arnold's 'The Buried Life.'" Proceedings: Northeast Region Meeting of the Conference on Christianity and Literature. Pleasantville, NY: Pace UP, 2001. 11-24. Print.
- Greenblatt, Stephen and M.H. Abrams, eds. The Norton Anthology of English Literature. 8th ed. Vol. 2. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006. Print.
- Grob, Alan. A Longing Like Despair: Arnold's Poetry of Pessimism. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002. Print.
- Hutton, R. H. "The Poetry of Matthew Arnold." Matthew Arnold: The Critical Heritage, The Poetry. Ed. Carl Dawson. London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973. 211-232. Print.

Knoepflmacher, U.C. "Dover Revisited: The Wordsworthian Matrix in the Poetry of Matthew Arnold."

Victorian Poetry 1.1 (1963): 17-26. Print.

"Limpid." Online Etymology Dictionary. Douglas Harper, 2001. 27 Apr. 2009.

<<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/limpid>>. Web.

Morgan, Thaïs E. "Rereading Nature: Wordsworth between Swinburne and Arnold." Victorian Poetry

24.4 (1986): 427-439. Print.

Perry, Seamus. "Elegy." *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*. Ed. Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman and

Antony H. Harrison. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002. 115-133. Print.

Ryals, Clyde de L. "Romantic Irony in Arnold's Poetry." Victorian Poetry 26.1/2 (1988): 91-102. Print.