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The Poetry of Pessimism: Arnold's "Resignation"

ALAN GROB

IN ONE OF THE MOST PHILOSOPHICALLY TRENCANT ACCOUNTS OF THE great paradigm shift that has carried us from Romanticism to that post-Romanticism we usually think of as modernism, Northrop Frye has represented it as a change in world-views in which "the noumenal world of Fichte turns into the sinister world-as-will of Schopenhauer."¹ In both formulations metaphysical agency remains essentially the same, fundamentally volitional, with the basic stuff of the world conceived of as a noumenal will, flowing, dynamic, vital, impelling. But in the earlier "noumenal world of Fichte," the noumenal will and the human will in its worthiest or sometimes just in its most intense manifestations are understood, at bottom, to be aligned and alike, at one in aim and presumably in essence. In poets like Blake, Wordsworth, and Shelley, and still later in Browning and Tennyson, some privileged aspect of the human psyche—sometimes the poetic imagination, sometimes the passions or even the sexual drives—is seen as finally impelled by, identical with, and the expression of larger cosmic forces that might, in fact, never realize their noumenal ends without the actualizing strivings of the cooperating human will. With the fateful emergence of "the sinister world-as-will of Schopenhauer," this basic relationship is drastically reconstituted, so that now noumena and phenomena, the metaphysical will and human consciousness, are perceived as wholly estranged and antithetical. Every activity of the life of consciousness, and especially its intentional activity, is understood to be mere accident, epiphenomena, a cosmic irrelevancy. Now the metaphysically alienated human psyche finds itself at variance with and in danger of being overwhelmed by the "blind impulse"² of a greater cosmic will that at every turn denies us those desired goods and pleasures to which as humans we believe ourselves entitled. So powerfully, pervasively, and harshly, in fact, do these antithetical noumenal pressures impinge upon the phenomenal world, that Schopenhauer himself in the most sweepingly pessimistic of pronouncements declares: "*all life is suffering*" (1:310).

Of the nineteenth-century poets generally considered major, only Arnold has truly undergone this momentous and decisive philosophic change and works entirely within the pessimistic framework of the Schopenhauerian paradigm, assuming as axiomatic and inarguable a wholly antithetical relationship between human consciousness (whether experienced as thought or desire) and the metaphysical agency that is the ground of all being. Possessed of an intellectual courage with which he is too seldom sufficiently credited, Arnold alone among his major poetic contemporaries can be numbered in that post-Fichtean and post-Romantic intellectual vanguard that he himself knew constituted “the main line of modern development” (*Letters* 2:10), his place there secured not by stylistic innovations or experiments in impersonality but by the far more crucial and daunting test of the choice of *Weltanschauung*. And of the poems of Arnold none is more obviously and centrally of that vanguard than “Resignation.” Philosophically explicit and ambitious, “Resignation” is certainly the first and perhaps the fullest exposition of metaphysical pessimism in nineteenth-century English poetry, probably the only substantial poem of the age to express truly this special and indispensable moment in that intellectual process Arnold knew to be “the main line of modern development.” “Resignation” gives us the Schopenhauerian paradigm at its bleakest, an unflinching comfortless account of human endeavor in a world fatally flawed by the determining agency of the utterly pervasive “something that infects” it (l. 278).³

The present paper, with its expressly philosophic orientation, does not even attempt to do justice to the imaginative richness and speculative amplitude of “Resignation,” a poem paradoxically noteworthy for never having received the attention that would seem obviously its due.⁴ Little attention can be given either to the surprisingly neglected autobiographical origins of “Resignation” conveyed largely by his framing narrative of childhood experience recollected and reenacted by a brother and sister—“Ghosts of that” earlier “boisterous company” (l. 90)—only a year after the death of their father, their “leader” ten years before, a narrative patently charged with psychoanalytic resonances of oedipal struggle, sibling rivalry, and the obvious linkage of mourning and melancholia.⁵ Of necessity, a large number of important topics, familiar and unfamiliar, must be set aside altogether or just barely touched upon in these pages. Not discussed is the Wordsworthian matrix, or, more specifically, “Tintern Abbey,” an admittedly formative presence in “Resignation,” but less absolutely determining than many of its critics assert, at least those like Knoepfelmacher and Sundell and, to some extent, Stange, who would have us read “Resignation” in purely oppositional terms, essentially as a counter-statement, a reflexive response to a far greater precursor.⁶ Not that the parallels between the two

poems enumerated by Knoepfmacher are implausible, (though we must acknowledge that many of these parallels may be accidental, since many of them derive from verifiably real events in Arnold's own life and not from his own reading, and since large and important segments of "Resignation" have no counterpart in "Tintern Abbey," notably the elaborate quasi-allegory of the strivers, the gypsies, and the poet), but rather that even if we concede the plausibility of these parallels, they have shown themselves to possess surprisingly little explanatory value. Critics who maintain that the philosophy of nature in "Resignation" emerges from a Wordsworthian matrix differ strikingly among themselves on every key concept in that philosophy, apart from the obvious fact of its general somberness by comparison with the philosophy of "Tintern Abbey." My own contention is that the most appropriate and useful matrix for explaining the admittedly complex philosophy of "Resignation" is an Arnoldian matrix, that is, that extensive body of writings by Arnold that deal with themes and issues in "Resignation" repeatedly taken up by him elsewhere with no apparent reference to Wordsworth.

The analysis of the poem begins *in medias res* with the appearance of "the poet," the point in "Resignation" at which Arnold first attempts a truly metaphysical explanation of our human situation. That metaphysical explanation should originate here is not surprising, since the poet of "Resignation" is one of the prime instances in Arnold's poetry of that exemplary type A. Dwight Culler has identified as the sage, a figure uniquely privileged both in how he acts and, more importantly to us, by what he knows.⁷ Whether presented in the guise of the gypsy child, Sophocles, or Shakespeare; or in displaced form as the heavens of "A Summer Night" and "Self-Dependence"; or more ambiguously and precariously as Empedocles, the sage is invariably a figure set apart from other men, yet one able to sustain himself in his separateness, primarily through the rare though vaguely delineated powers of mind and depth of knowledge with which he is credited. Hence in Arnold's basic myth he serves as mentor and model, a saving alternative to the ways of the madman and slave, those destructive life choices to which most men succumb. Initially, at least, the poet's role in "Resignation" would seem to be to carry out the structural function of the sage, to serve as a counter-example and model sufficiently appealing to wean Fausta from the attractions of a life of passionate striving that for Arnold is always obsession and madness. In response to the summons to live in action and thereby "attain" (l. 1), voiced not just by the crusader, and pilgrim, and Goth, and Hun of the opening verse paragraph but still more enticingly by a father, recently dead, who had cheered on and guided Arnold and his sister on that original excursion long ago, Arnold points to the poet as one who has attained, but without plunging

into action and who still maintains a detachment never experienced as loneliness. And he has achieved all this, Arnold explains, because his extraordinary gift of double vision has led him to a full and deep knowledge of the true working of things.

One aspect of his powers, a special capacity for comprehensiveness and fixity of vision, might best be termed Sophoclean, after the most significant of Arnold's mentors and models in "To a Friend," he who, from the perspective provided him by his extraordinary elevation of spirit, "saw life steadily and saw it whole" (l. 12). Granted a similarly figurative "high station" (l. 164), the poet of "Resignation" also comprehensively surveys his world, understanding, indeed appreciating all he surveys, yet remaining distant and detached from those below. Looking down upon the "ruler" of "some great-historied land" (ll. 154-155), the poet "exults" in the image of power he beholds but "for no moment's space / Envy the all-regarded place" (ll. 158-159). When "beautiful eyes meet his," "he / Bears to admire" but does so "uncravingly" (ll. 160-161). And as he "Surveys each happy group which fleets, / Toil ended, through the shining streets" (ll. 166-167), he expresses no wish to share in their observed happiness, never finding in the pleasure or purposefulness of these groups any reason to repent his own solitary situation, to think or say, "*I am alone*" (l. 169).

Compared to other imagined poets given us in nineteenth-century poetry, Arnold's poet in "Resignation" is pointedly unempathic in his creative powers. At the farthest remove imaginable from the poet of Keats who has no identity but is "continually in for and filling some other Body,"⁸ Arnold's poet stands always apart from other bodies, living wholly within himself to preserve an identity that is rigidly bounded, hence autonomous and strong. Yet the apparently liberating absence of empathy ascribed to the poet in "Resignation" is not just a special feature of Arnoldian poetics but, as Arnold intimates in the "Marguerite" poems, a general epistemological restriction placed on all those "mortal millions" ("To Marguerite—Continued," l. 4) consigned to unbridgeable separateness "in the sea of life enisled" ("To Marguerite—Continued," l. 1). Obviously in perception we apprehend others, but only their surfaces, Arnold seems to say, never their depths; we can never empathically possess those other bodies that, in Keats's phrase, the poet is "continually in for and filling." For if we are "not quite alone" in our relations with the things of the world, Arnold tells us in "Isolation. To Marguerite," "yet they / Which touch thee are unmating things" (ll. 31-32). The special circumstances of the poet in his Sophoclean aspect in "Resignation" would seem therefore to derive not merely from the peculiar lack of empathy with which he views the world around him, his inability as artist to enter into and possess those beings he beholds. Such a

consciousness of “unmatingness,” carrying with it a sense of our ineradicable separateness and absolute difference from all others, is, after all, Arnold often tells us, a general feature of all human perception and, most probably, a true representation of the real relationship among things. But when other men become conscious of that “unmatingness” and separateness, they do so in an almost necessary conjunction with a painful sequence of desire and denial, the yearning that our human situation be otherwise, accompanied by the realization that this cannot be so. For Arnold, in almost all cases and in the most fundamental way, knowledge is sorrow, our very apprehension of things in their “unmatingness” inducing anguish for us in almost every instance, confirming over and over the most devastating of Arnoldian truths, that we are to live always in “isolation without end / Prolonged” (“Isolation. To Marguerite,” ll. 40–41). By a seemingly special dispensation, some inborn check upon the feelings, Arnold’s poet, however, can unempathically experience the world, undisturbed by longing to have or to become what he beholds, and even while dwelling in separateness never suffers from the plight of isolation. From the “high station” he has assumed, the poet can maintain an unwavering gaze and comprehensiveness of vision—he can see “life steadily” and see “it whole”—because he is drawn neither by craving nor envy to any single particular; and though living apart, he still does not say, Arnold informs us with italicized emphasis: “*I am alone*” (l. 169).

Almost certainly, one reason the poet remains indifferent to and detached from the doings of mankind below him is the hold exercised over him by the second, yet more special form of knowledge he possesses, indisputably different from and, in its metaphysical significance, superior to ordinary human knowledge. Even in the sonnet on Shakespeare, the mountain with which Arnold identifies Shakespeare does not stand as a metaphor for the poet because it can represent that vantage point from which he surveys life as a whole. Rather the appropriateness of the mountain to the mind of Shakespeare would seem to lie in the secludedness of its heights, an emblem of the remoteness of that psychic inwardness where Shakespeare, with powers of mind “Out-topping knowledge” (l. 3), can gather those never specified secrets of the nature of things, hidden from other, plainly less gifted individuals. But only in *Empedocles on Etna* does Arnold expressly equate this mountain-top knowledge with noumenal understanding. Away from the gaze and chatter of men, high upon the “charred, blackened, melancholy waste” (II.2) that is the summit of Etna, Empedocles—less the poet than the sage in Arnold’s loose conjunction of the two vocations—employs his special endowments to see not “wide” but “deep,” peering into the crater of Etna to learn fundamental truths of the uttermost bleakness formulated in explicitly metaphysical terms.

Among the sages of Arnold's poetry, only the poet of "Resignation" appears to understand things in both their Sophoclean and Empedoclean aspects. In addition to a comprehensiveness of vision that enables him to survey inclusively realms of love and power and worldly enterprise, the poet also possesses a gift of metaphysical insight by which he can apprehend, if not the thing-in-itself in its immediacy, at least that form of phenomenal existence that most closely approximates and perhaps most fully partakes of the purely noumenal. Turning from the social and historical diversity of a human world he admires but for which he feels no profound attachment, the poet of "Resignation" finds only in the purely elemental and ongoing order of nonhuman nature a life worthy of his deepest longings. Out there in what is clearly a pristine nature, unspoiled by the disfiguring activities of men, the poet perceives an essentially pure flow of duration into which the particularity of events has virtually dissolved: a confluence of sounds, where none is individualized or signifying, "The murmur of a thousand years" (l. 188); a field of vision in which nothing is focused upon, so that all instead remains "A placid and continuous whole" (l. 190). In this undifferentiatedness which the poet apprehends, there are—despite the cautiousness of Arnold's language—intimations of an intuition of the noumenal, either through resemblance and correspondence or possibly even as actual manifestation, an incursion by and a showing forth of the noumenal in the phenomenal, visible at least to those possessed of a lucidity sufficient to observe it:

That general life, which does not cease,
Whose secret is not joy, but peace;
That life, whose dumb wish is not missed
If birth proceeds, if things subsist;
The life of plants, and stones, and rain,
The life he craves—if not in vain
Fate gave, what chance shall not control,
His sad lucidity of soul. (ll. 191-198)

Yet in the responses of the poet of "Resignation" to the "general life," however much we might be tempted to ascribe them to a Romantic attachment to nature, we are plainly on the way to the life-imperiling conclusions of *Empedocles on Etna*.⁹ To the poet, the "general life," the life of coming into being and sheer existential subsistence that is expressed most clearly in the least complex phenomena, "The life of plants, and stones, and rain" (l. 195), is not just an object of contemplation but an object of desire. It is what he "craves" and what he could indeed have and be if his own natural and elemental self might somehow be divested of its complicating and estranging human consciousness. At crucial places in the poetry of Arnold, he displays what can only be called deeply anti-humanistic tendencies inevitably implicit in any genuine metaphysical pessimism.

These occur almost invariably in conjunction with ontological longings, the wish to overcome metaphysical estrangement by achieving union with the noumenal (or its phenomenal approximation) in its guise as “the All” (*Empedocles on Etna*, II.353), “the life of life” (*Empedocles on Etna*, II.357), or “the general life” (“Resignation,” l. 191). But to achieve this union Arnold indicates that we must sacrifice all of those attributes and values in which we customarily assume our humanity resides: consciousness, reason, interest in, concern for, and love of others of our kind. Empedocles himself is our prime example of these tendencies, and in “the analysis of [Empedocles’] character and motives” in the Yale manuscript, Arnold explains the suicide of Empedocles in just these terms: as the result of his desire “to be reunited with the universe, before by exaggerating his human side he has become utterly estranged from it” (see *Poems*, p. 155). And if the poet of “Resignation” is a far less desperately ambiguous figure than Empedocles, he is, nonetheless, moved by the very same passions, although he does not choose to follow Empedocles in taking them to their logical conclusion: union with the “general life” even at the cost of suppressing “his human side” is what the poet too “craves” in “His sad lucidity of soul” (l. 198).

At this climactic moment in a poem that reads very much like a summing up, a position paper, Arnold would seem to have come to crucial conclusions not only about his pessimistically based inquiry into the metaphysical itself but about the attitudes we are to take, the responses required by these metaphysical findings, and on both matters he offers conclusions of the most astonishingly anti-humanistic character. What is identified as the ontologically real, “the general life,” would appear to be so designated because it is life stripped to sheer subsistence, an utterly unanthropomorphized ongoingness, existence wholly devoid of all of those human attributes that we customarily suppose give life its meaning and value. And authenticating the truth and value of the general life is the poet, superior to the rest of us by “His sad lucidity of soul.” But what seems most surprising in “Resignation” and indeed most dismayingly anti-humanistic is that what the poet teaches by example from his privileged position is not the characteristically resolute Romantic response, Promethean steadfastness in the face of a reality so plainly inhumane, but submission, the disciplining of our individuated wills to seek union with that reality, though the price of such participation in the ultimate would appear to be the sacrifice of the life of consciousness itself. Elsewhere however, it should be noted, in “Human Life” and “To Marguerite—Continued,” for example, Arnold does provide spokesmen who recoil against the pressures and pull of the noumenal, siding with a beleaguered humanity, and especially with the deep-seated human need for the “joys,” the “friends,” the “homes” we

would make ours despite the prohibiting will of "unknown Powers" and an unloving "God," severing, estranging, commanding that it be otherwise. In fact, the preliminary signal from the seemingly privileged poet notwithstanding, the remaining sections of "Resignation" grope towards just such an attitude to the noumenal, choosing resistance rather than participation, standing fast against a reality deemed the enemy of life rather than seeking union with what the poet craves.

Such a shift in attitude has its corollary in a basic revision in poetic method in the last eighty lines of "Resignation." The symbolic opposition of the "imperious traveller" (l. 37), on the one hand, and the gipsies and the poet, on the other, up to this point had been the primary vehicle by which Arnold had worked out the ideas and concerns of "Resignation." But in the last section of the poem that basic Arnoldian myth clearly recedes, and the argument in behalf of resignation is made more abstract, more purely meditative, reflections by the speaker that are understood to be his own thoughts in his own voice. Initially though, these thoughts seem to be little more than reiteration as rules and precepts of what the poet has already symbolically embodied. Typically, of course, the Arnoldian sage appears as an authoritative presence, one whose gifts of mind and strength of character establish him as an ideal to be imitated by those usually faint-spirited Arnoldian narrators who apostrophize him. Paradoxically though, the model, while deserving of emulation, is most often represented as uncommunicative and essentially inimitable, endowed with extraordinary powers and exceptional knowledge evidently different not just in degree but in kind from those who would emulate him. So it is that the tragic understanding acquired by the gipsy child, presumably through some process of prenatal recollection, is inaccessible to the speaker who observing the child's depths of gloom, must admit that his own dark imaginings are, by comparison, "Moods of fantastic sadness, nothing worth" (l. 18). And though "We ask and ask" ("Shakespeare," l. 2) an unanswering Shakespeare remains totally concealed in the seemingly transcendent recesses of his own consciousness, spectacularly "Out-topping knowledge" (l. 3) by his faculties of genius. And even the scholar-gipsy, who in power of mind seems much like ourselves, nonetheless remains "pensive and tongue-tied" (l. 54) and clearly reluctant to disseminate the arts taught him by "the gipsy-crew, / His mates" (ll. 44-45). But if the special knowledge imputed to the sage is usually untransmitted, Arnold rarely doubts whether it is knowledge finally worth having. Only once in *Empedocles on Etna* (a solitary exception perhaps but one crucial to our purposes) does Arnold question the notion that the sage in his enlightenment deserves discipleship, providing in Callicles a clear countervoice to challenge the wisdom and example of Empedocles.

At the beginning of his meditation, the speaker of "Resignation," does conform to the general pattern of Arnoldian speakers who appeal for guidance to a sage invested with special moral and intellectual authority. Innately endowed with "natural insight," the poet of "Resignation" is obviously preeminent even among those exemplary few whom "birth hath found, resigned" (l. 27), and therefore an ideal if perhaps difficult model to follow. Yet despite admittedly radical epistemological differences between the poet who knows innately and intuitively and the ordinary run of humanity for whom knowledge derives only from experience, the poet of "Resignation" is almost surely the most imitable of Arnoldian sages. Though denied "The poet's rapt security" (l. 246), the speaker, nonetheless, assures us that what is known innately can also be acquired, that the attitude of resignation the poet was born to can also be acquired through "schooling of the stubborn mind" (l. 26). And by putting aside "passionate hopes" (l. 243), and judging "vain beforehand human cares" (l. 232), in short, by following the example of the poet and foregoing action and involvement in the world, Fausta too, we are told, can gain a wisdom like the poet's and thus enjoy the freedom and serenity that come about through resignation. Even those temptations from which the poet remains particularly aloof are specifically singled out as unworthy and untrustworthy as objects of her concern, enticements to which Fausta can and should remain indifferent. Just as the poet is able to look upon the "ruler" at his moment of absolute command and "yet for no moment's space / Envy the all-regarded place" (ll. 158-159) and can meet the gaze of "Beautiful eyes" but yet "admire uncravingly" (ll. 160-161), so too is Fausta pointedly told she can forsake these most basic of all human objectives, "love and power," by knowing what they are: "Love transient, power an unreal show" (ll. 235-236). In metaphysical understanding too, the speaker again counsels Fausta to look to the poet, to pursue what he in his enlightenment craves, "That general life, which does not cease, / Whose secret is not joy, but peace" (ll. 191-192). By keeping their distance from "men's business" (l. 250), the speaker even suggests that he and Fausta can narrow the gulf between the phenomenal and the real, move towards ontological reconciliation, and "Draw homeward to the general life" (l. 252). Indeed, going yet further, he implies in one of the most startling lines of the poem that they can be as if they never were and live "Like leaves by suns not yet uncurled" (l. 253). With this last line, we can recognize how profoundly regressive the impulse behind "Resignation" is, how strongly Arnold resists conventional developmental and adaptational assumptions about human goals and responsibilities. Earlier a regressive impulse was already evident in the contrast that hinges on the word "craves," a bit of seemingly casual word play in which we actually find libido redirected from its normal sexual channels towards curiously meager,

de-eroticized and, perhaps, in their generality, implicitly infantile objects. It is not the woman whose eyes meet his the poet craves—for he can admire her “uncravingly.” Instead, he “craves” (and the word obviously is deliberately chosen not only to show contrast but intensity of affect) the most austere, elemental, and impersonal form of being, life utterly devoid of consciousness or feeling, “The life of plants, and stones, and rain” (l. 195). It is here, the speaker would have Fausta believe, that man’s true home is to be found, with life reduced to its most absolute rudimentariness until we arrive at that point at which opposites converge and being in the world is most like not having been at all.

In all of this, the wish to “Draw homeward to the general life” (l. 252) and to be “Like leaves by suns not yet uncurled” (l. 253), there is what can only be termed a drift towards narcolepsy, the working out of a logic that inexorably pulls us toward extinction. If less frenzied than Empedocles and never openly advocating suicide, the speaker of “Resignation,” nonetheless, in telling Fausta to seek union with “the general life”—which is, after all, “The life of plants, and stones, and rain” (l. 195)—counsels her to pursue a course of self-negation that must surely require the overcoming and elimination of the consciousness that makes her so different from and estranges her from “The life of plants, and stones, and rain” (l. 195). Almost certainly it is advice that can be best accomplished by death. Moreover, in a surprising effort to lend what would appear to be some kind of theological sanction to claims that until now had been made on purely philosophic grounds, the speaker invokes one of the stranger gods in Arnold’s poetry. Utterly devoid of that special concern for the interests and obligations of humanity we associate with the God of the Christians and Jews, the deity who appears to rule over the world of “Resignation” contemplates the spectacle of earthly existence with the most austere neutrality: “in His eye” (l. 256), the speaker explains, each humanly crowded moment of time is not an occasion for Him to judge and perhaps forgive but merely “a quiet watershed / Whence, equally, the seas of life and death are fed” (ll. 259–260). But if from the perspective of this all-seeing and all-knowing deity the division between life and death ultimately is ontologically meaningless, we may (so the implications of the speaker’s theology would seem to run) cross that dividing line when we choose, yield to that craving for absorption into the noumenal even if it entails the eradication by death of our estranging consciousness, without fear that we are violating prohibitions against suicide that have been set down by God. Yet at this very point in the poem when life has surrendered its precariously privileged status as a self-evidently intrinsic good, and the lure of extinction seems most seductively compelling, with the traditional God who might inhibit us effectively supplanted and removed, the speaker of “Resignation” unexpectedly shifts his stance and pulls back

from the logic of Empedocles, and the argument of “Resignation” takes its last and most critically important turn. In this reversal, this peripety, the speaker, in effect, draws the line, issues the imperative that invokes against the seemingly irrefutable logic of self-negation the one great command that must govern men, that we must endure and carry on, with or without inducement from or even belief in God. On this matter, there can be no debate, no choice, no further appeal. “Enough—we live!” (l. 261) the speaker commands in the simple phrase that reverses the previous drift to self-annihilation and shifts the poem in the direction it finally takes.

The concluding seventeen lines of “Resignation,”—the verse paragraph beginning “Enough—we live!” (l. 261)—is the section that philosophically belongs most fully to the speaker and not the poet, and in those lines he clearly qualifies and changes much that came before them.¹⁰ Indeed as the outcome of that “mind’s dialogue with itself” that is worked through, the poem becomes metaphysically darker yet ethically more positive (at least in the sense of being morally committed) than the preceding portions. While Arnold retains the general schematic design of pessimism with its metaphysical division between the world as will and the world as idea, what comprises the noumenal and what comprises the phenomenal are subtly but significantly reconstituted in the shift from the conception of the poet to that of the speaker. Such a change is most evident in the radically disparate meaning each educes from what both designate as their principal source of revelation, a silent and insensate nature. Looking out upon the vast expanse of a nature stripped almost entirely of particularity and complexity, the poet discovers in nature an otherness wholly unlike ourselves, but in that unlikeness a worthy object of human desire, possessing in full just what man needs and lacks. In nature at its most elemental the poet finds, “That general life, which does not cease / Whose secret is not joy, but peace” (ll. 191–192). But the nature that despite its muteness still manages to convey its secret meanings to the speaker, communicates by those soundless utterances a very different, indeed contradictory message than the one the poet draws from nature. The “secret” disclosed here at the close of the poem makes plain that nature not only does not possess “joy,” it does not even possess the “peace” claimed for it earlier. The speechlessness of nature is now construed as the silence of a suffering long endured, the unspoken cautionary tale of lives that “Seem to bear rather than rejoice” (l. 270).

From these two radically different presentations of nature we can draw a number of important conclusions about the internal philosophic conflicts of “Resignation” and how they are resolved. Looked at from the perspective of the poet, “Resignation” conveys an apparent metaphysics of immanence, an elemental naturalism in which the true and the good (the most normative of values and the ontologically most real) are perceived to be

objectified in nature at its most diffuse and invariant, in what is apprehended as simply nature's vital ungoingness and designated by Arnold to be "the general life." Absolutely "placid," the "continous whole" that stretches before the poet is intuitively recognized as example and ideal, the effortless realization of the "repose" so desperately sought through action by the strivers of the opening, and the goal and good, no doubt, that all men would and should pursue. And in its virtual undifferentiatedness and sheer undirected flowingness, "the general life" seems to exemplify and, indeed, to embody a notion of will as the ground of being, the ontologically real, that is at the core of Arnold's pessimistic metaphysics. To the poet in his metaphysics of immanence, the distinction between noumenal will and phenomenal idea is really an opposition between elemental nature and human consciousness, with "the general life" identified with and in some sense participating in the real; and the world of idea—at variance with the noumenal, therefore unreal and illusory—implicitly understood to be the individuating, particularizing and hence estranging consciousness of man. Quite possibly the basis of the craving by the poet for the general life might well be some corresponding elemental core of being in himself, his own "buried life" or "buried self" that calls out to its likeness in nature, and that could "Draw homeward" to true fullness of existence in the real, if only he could shake off the disabling burden of consciousness. All of this is only sketchily implied by the metaphysics of immanence of "Resignation," but is, of course, clearly and fully expressed in *Empedocles on Etna*, the poem in which Arnold's metaphysics of immanence is most thoroughly drawn and followed out to its logical conclusions. There, of course, Empedocles plainly places the blame for his estrangement from "the All" on an imprisoning human consciousness and its "forms, and modes, and stifling veils" (II.354), and he goes on to assert the identity of man's "buried life" with the "general life" in his overpowering wish to recover that core of ontological being, that real in himself, the wish to

at last, be true
 To our own only true, deep-buried selves,
 Being one with which we are one with the whole world. (II.i.370-372)

Renouncing consciousness and pursuing the merger of the buried life in man with its counterpart in nature, the general life, is an act fraught with the utmost peril as we learn from the example of Empedocles, but it is, nonetheless, an act faithful to the logic and spirit of a metaphysics of immanence. By locating the metaphysically real in the natural order, whether we designate what we find there the buried life or the general life, Arnoldian immanence would seem to hold out hope for man, hope of satisfying our longings for the real and hope of achieving ultimate ontological reconciliation. At any rate, that is what Empedocles and possibly

even the poet of "Resignation" would appear to tell us. To overcome the suffering induced by our metaphysical estrangement, so their argument would presumably run, we need only do as Empedocles does, in a single act divest ourselves of consciousness and thereby revert to the elemental. Though such a course might appear despairingly suicidal, it is, according to this argument, a choice prompted by hope, by faith that we can exchange our metaphysically estranging thought for a metaphysically authentic life, the apparent for the real. But hope so conceived remains dismayingly anti-humanistic and finally must be read as duplicitous. What we are actually offered in this metaphysics of immanence is not really an argument in behalf of life carried out on some other plane but repudiation of our specifically human life, the only life we know or have. Plainly in *Empedocles on Etna* and only somewhat more obliquely in "Resignation," what we sense in the doctrine of the "buried self" and the "general life" is a desperate reaching out for relief from a human existence felt to be unendurable by the only sure remedy for such suffering, the release that is extinction.

The poet of "Resignation" never actually attempts to act out these desires as Empedocles does, nor do Fausta and her brother, who, in any case, are kept from pursuing the logic of immanence any further by the restraining imperative and rallying cry, "Enough, we live!" (l. 261). But in this assertion of steadfastness against the pull of the general life, in turning away from that earlier passages described as a craving for it, the speaker not only establishes his independence of the poet, but also shifts the grounds of argument in the poem. Here in this concluding verse paragraph, Arnold undertakes a final revamping of the philosophic scheme that he has until now presented us with in "Resignation," though it is a revamping carried out within the basic structural framework of philosophic pessimism. Most important, he still retains the opposition between the world of noumenal will and the world of phenomenal idea, but that opposition is no longer represented as the difference between the individuated human consciousness and nature apprehended as elemental, functioning at a level of pure subsistence, and therefore seemingly undifferentiated, so that it can be understood somehow as an authentic expression of the noumenal. Instead, at the conclusion of "Resignation," nature and consciousness are treated, not as antithetical, but as essentially alike, conjoined by the common denominator of a shared plight and a common capacity to endure it. Together man and nature comprise the phenomenal, the world of idea, "the general lot" (l. 275). Furthermore, in this revised interpretation, what nature most deeply and truly expresses is not the placidity and peacefulness seen there by the poet but a manifest attitude of resistance against the implacable energies of a cosmic will that ordains suffering. But if the objects of nature do no more than "Seem to bear" (l. 270), they remain, nevertheless, a precedent and example for

humanity. For us, too, existence is something to be borne, “bearable,” though “hardly worth / This pomp of worlds, this pain of birth” (ll. 263–264). And it can be borne—that is, we can and should do as nature does—by remaining as we are now, affirming the necessity to live and repudiating that craving for the general life that demands the extinction of consciousness.

In asserting this essential likeness of man and nature, treating both as ontologically the same, Arnold manages to maintain his antithetical pessimistic framework, merely shifting the uncontestably real into a realm other than the phenomenal, presumably beyond “the world.” In the closing lines of “Resignation” Arnold would seem to point us towards the customary conception of a noumenal outside time and space, substituting for a metaphysics of immanence predicated on the “general life” a metaphysics of transcendence (that is, a depersonalized Kantian transcendence) predicated on the life-opposing activities of “The something that infects the world” (l. 278). Beyond time and space, according to this emerging hypothesis, is an essentially volitional reality that we can never know directly but whose agency we constantly experience in our ongoing suffering. With this as a brief and preliminary exposition of the metaphysics of transcendence, we are ready to turn to Arnold’s last and probably most authoritative metaphysical pronouncement in “Resignation.” What binds man and nature most closely together, what finally constitutes their basic identity in spite of all other differences, is their sharing of the common affliction, their pandemic susceptibility to the universal principle that “infects” all phenomenal existence, “The something that infects the world” (l. 278).

This last crucial line of “Resignation” is probably the most profoundly and audaciously pessimistic metaphysical utterance to be found in Arnold. But in its reach towards the noumenally indescribable, it is undoubtedly the most cryptic formulation of Arnoldian metaphysics, so that commentary has been understandably sparse and tentative.¹¹ Most certainly Arnold does bracket phenomena, setting aside diverse phenomena under the category the world, its varied particulars taking their common identity from the infectedness that presumably is suffered by all. But accurately defining or delineating the key term, “The something that infects” (l. 278), is obviously far more difficult. We should not judge Arnold too harshly for falling back on the elusive and perhaps empty signifier, “The something” in his attempts at metaphysical elucidation. Far more rigorous thinkers lapse into similar imprecision when they venture forth into metaphysically unknowable realms that serve as the ground of experience: Locke, for example, who declares the material substance that is the basis of perception but is in itself inapprehensible to be “an uncertain supposition of we know not what”;¹²


and even Kant who must finally forego his penchant for precision and identify the noumenal by the intentionally unspecific term, *ding an sich*. But Arnold does complicate the commentator's difficulties by leaving unclear whether "The something that infects" (l. 278) refers to the cause or to the consequence of the operations of the noumenal as they manifest themselves in the world. On the one hand, the critical "something" of the closing line may refer to pure noumenal agency, the unconditioned that exists apart from time and space, beyond the world and yet its determining ground, the origin and generative source of the general infection that besets all phenomena. On the other hand, Arnold's "something" may signify an intrinsic attribute of the phenomenal, present always within each particular, perhaps emerging in the very process of objectification and individuation, instantiated within each phenomenal object at the very moment of its coming into being. (Indeed, in keeping with the larger argument of "Resignation," that intrinsic attribute, "The something that infects" [l. 278] may very easily be thought of as temporality, the necessary condition of phenomenal existence, of objectification, yet a condition that conveys with every pulse, every interval, the note of our continuing estrangement from the timelessly noumenal.) Yet in choosing between these admittedly undecidable options, in determining whether this "something" is external noumenal cause or intrinsic noumenal consequence, the first seems the more probable. For in assigning a cause for universal suffering or even for man's general plight, Arnold most often adverts to some form of external agency, frequently a personified otherness: the God who ordains our severance in "To Marguerite—Continued," or the "unknown Powers" (l. 26) to whom we find ourselves "chartered" in "Human Life," or "the Powers that sport with man" (l. 4) in "Destiny," or the "Fate" whose "impenetrable ear" never hears man's prayer in lines that come just before the closing line of "Resignation." So too in "Resignation" the most probable and plausible cause of the common suffering, the likely source of infection that endangers all, the presence designated by the name "something," is our cosmic antagonist, hostile and superior, alien yet intrusive, an otherness, outside and beyond, that impedes and thwarts the innate propensity of life toward mildness.

In arriving at this pessimistically conceived metaphysics of transcendence, Arnold would seem only to have made the situation of man more desperate, since nothing that, like him, exists in the world and in time, nothing that can properly be called life, offers any hope of escape from or even amelioration of that plight which we now know all life in time must suffer. Yet in a curious turn of attitude, only briefly enunciated but profoundly important, by adopting this metaphysics of transcendence Arnold is able to shift the ethical stance of the poem, introducing a note

of general concern not really heard before in "Resignation" and infrequently sounded elsewhere in his poetry. In "Resignation" we do come very close to ending where we began, with a last critical glance at the strivers, those passion-driven men observed once more at their "intemperate prayer" (l. 271) this time, specifically "For movement, for an ampler sphere" (l. 273). Once again we are told that their goals are unattainable, their prayers unregarded, by definition deemed incapable of ever piercing "Fate's impenetrable ear" (l. 274). In fact, Arnold now intimates that actions and ends are contradictory concepts: if we choose to embark on that course we conceive of as striving, we shall find ourselves not reaching our goals but lost instead in the flux that action produces: "In action's dizzying eddy whirled" (l. 277). Yet Arnold's closing strictures against the life of striving in "Resignation," are directed not at a misplaced faith in the efficacy of action that the strivers cling to, their belief that the good of life is "to attain," but rather at the moral narrowness that the life of action fosters, the obliviousness to all concern for others the strivers display. In the most meticulously and cautiously crafted of allegations, Arnold charges that because of the forgetfulness of the common plight induced by our plunge into action, "Not milder is the general lot" (l. 275). By this allegation, he never suggests that so behaving, entering "action's dizzying eddy" (l. 277) and neglecting all else, in any way aggravates the suffering of "the general lot" nor conversely does he really intimate that refraining from action, practicing resignation, can ever effect any fundamental change in conditions or in some way make the general lot milder. All that can actually be done under the grim and irremediable metaphysical circumstances that prevail in Arnold's world is to show attention towards and concern for others, a seemingly modest obligation but the basis, nonetheless, for that primary virtue towards which "Resignation" would finally direct us, compassion.

In these lines that touch upon the troubled existence of "the general lot," the call for compassion that is voiced is a concern rarely expressed in the poetry of Arnold. The reason such concern is normally absent is obvious and probably understandable. The poetry of Arnold usually has as its governing premise the fact of an unbreachable isolation. Sometimes that isolation comes about, at least at first glance, because of the indifference or inconstancy of others, a Marguerite or a Margaret or an Iseult of Ireland who withholds or withdraws her love. But more often isolation is recognized as a feature of our existence rooted in the very nature of things, exemplified by our confinement to the "darkling plain" (l. 35) in "Dover Beach," or our enislement "in the sea of life" (l. 1) in "To Marguerite—Continued," or the denial to us of "The friends to whom we had no natural right" (l. 29) "by some unknown Powers" (l. 26) who rule over us in "Human Life." As a result of this emphasis on isolation as a necessary condition of man's

existence, the personal values promoted by the poetry tend to be largely inward looking and self-concerned. In general, Arnold instructs us to overcome our sense of isolation by making a virtue of necessity, insulating ourselves from the cares and needs of others and turning our island into a fortress, or rather into a star where we can acquire and practice detachment, autonomy, and self-dependence.

But in "Resignation," Arnold, however cautiously, does appear to chide the life of mere self-concern, in this case by criticizing the man of action, now not for engendering further disquiet in himself, but for being so totally absorbed in the intensely private quest "For movement, for an ampler sphere" (l. 273) that he remains heedless of and unmoved by the suffering that is "the general lot." As an alternative to self-interest, what Arnold commends may not seem like one of the heroic virtues, yet it does bear the distinguishing mark of a true existential humanism: in the face of metaphysical absurdity, a universe inhospitable to human interests, aims, and values, the primary criterion of our moral intentions is that they express concern for others. Of course, the ethic of concern Arnold introduces at the close of "Resignation" may seem inconsequential, even futile, if we assess moral acts by utility rather than intention. But the ethical posture Arnold finally adopts surely invests the practice of resignation with a dignity it plainly lacked prior to this point in the poem. Earlier resignation had been conceived of as a means to a purely self-interested end, an anxiety-driven way of drawing "homeward to the general life" (l. 252), a strategy designed to enable us to retreat from consciousness into a mode of being that by its utter vacancy promises us freedom from pain. Now in this final version of the concept, resignation requires that we retain our receptivity of consciousness and bear that pain which is now more certain and inescapable than ever. We are to bear it, Arnold now indicates, because we belong to the earth and are thereby obligated to those other beings who comprise "the general lot" (l. 275) and must endure the common fate of suffering and, moreover, will continue to endure it even if we somehow gain respite from our own. Once before, it should be noted, in "In Utrumque Paratus," Arnold had spoken out in behalf of the need for man to declare his solidarity with the natural order, urging him to remember that "Thy brother-world stirs at thy feet unknown" (l. 38) so that he might forsake illusion and vanity and maintain a "brother's part" (l. 39). Now in the closing lines of "Resignation," Arnold, in effect, reasserts the claims of community, not simply as a relationship among men but as one that encompasses all life, and by reasserting that claim vastly enhances the humanity of his poem without compromising its unflinching metaphysical candor. 

Notes

- 1 "Foreword," *Romanticism Reconsidered*, ed. Northrop Frye (New York, 1963), p. viii.
- 2 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (Mineola, New York, 1969), 1: 149.
- 3 It should be noted that Arnold's pessimism is not something derived or borrowed from Schopenhauer, since at the time Arnold wrote "Resignation" he had almost certainly not read and probably never heard of the German philosopher whose philosophy was not really introduced into England until an 1853 essay on Schopenhauer by John Oxenford in the *Westminster Review*. Rather it is a matter of affinity, a convergence of philosophic inclinations, shaped both by temperament and intellect and a climate of ideas that, despite differences of nationality and vocation, both writers to a considerable extent shared.
- 4 Upon surveying the criticism of "Resignation" in 1973, David J. DeLaura reached just this conclusion, "Considering its inherent merits and importance in Arnold's development, 'Resignation' has received very little close analysis." "Matthew Arnold," in *Victorian Prose: A Guide to Research* (New York, 1973), p. 276. Since 1973 commentary on "Resignation" has been sparse; certainly no sustained analysis has appeared that would lead us to modify DeLaura's judgment.
- 5 Jonathan Middlebrook describes Thomas Arnold as "a vaguely ominous force" in "Resignation" in "'Resignation,' 'Rugby Chapel' and Thomas Arnold," *VP* 8 (1970): 292. Otherwise there has been little discussion of "Resignation" as autobiography and none whatsoever of the poem as psychobiography.
- 6 Even before Harold Bloom began theorizing upon the anxiety of influence, discussions of "Resignation" were carried on in what now seems strikingly Bloomian terms. As U. C. Knoepfelmacher, probably the most influential critic of the poem, puts it: "Arnold's 'Resignation' is his version, or more properly his inversion, of Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey.'" "Dover Revisited: The Wordsworthian Matrix in the Poetry of Matthew Arnold," *VP* 1 (1963): 17. Other critics who read "Resignation" essentially as a counter-statement to "Tintern Abbey" are M. G. Sundell in "'Tintern Abbey' and 'Resignation,'" *VP* 5 (1967): 255-264; William A. Madden, who describes "Resignation" as "consciously anti-Wordsworthian" in "Arnold the Poet" in *Matthew Arnold: Writers and their Background*, ed. Kenneth Allott (Athens, Ohio, 1976), p. 53; Robert Langbaum, who reads "Resignation" as a record of "Arnold's break with Wordsworth's ideas about nature and the organic connection between nature and human identity" in *The Mysteries of Identity* (Chicago, 1982), p. 68; and most recently, Thais E. Morgan, who (apparently unmindful that *The Prelude* was first published a year later than "Resignation") cites *The Prelude* and "Tintern Abbey" as the two poems by Wordsworth whose "proleptic rhetoric of experience" it is that "in 'Resignation,' Arnold undoes," in "Rereading Nature: Wordsworth between Swinburne and Arnold," *VP* 24 (1986): 435. Only William Buckler really takes exception to general practice, unpersuasively arguing that "Resignation" is a dramatic monologue, and thus "closer to poetic experiences like those contained in Browning's *Cleon* and *Bishop Blougram's Apology* than to that of *Tintern Abbey*" in "Radical Reconstructions

- of Three Arnold Poems: *The New Sirens, Resignation, and Dover Beach*," *Arnoldian* 8 (1981): 32.
- 7 A. Dwight Culler, *Imaginative Reason* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1966), p. 43.
 - 8 *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1958), 1: 387. The rejection of Keats implied by the account of the poet in "Resignation" is noted by G. Robert Stange in *Matthew Arnold: The Poet as Humanist* (Princeton, 1967), p. 62; and William A. Madden in *Matthew Arnold: A Study of the Aesthetic Temperament* (Bloomington, 1967), p. 127. Both Stange and Madden believe the source of Arnold's detached poet is to be found in Goethe, while James A. Berlin maintains that Arnold's poet "conforms closely to Schiller's naive model" in "Arnold's Two Poets: The Critical Context," *SEL* 23 (1983): 622. Yet neither of these explanations really explains why the poet detached from human society should so deeply crave "the general life."
 - 9 The likeness of "the all" of the cosmos in which Empedocles seeks absorption through suicide and the general life of "Resignation" has been pointed out by Warren Anderson, *Matthew Arnold and the Classical Tradition* (Ann Arbor, 1965), p. 44. Otherwise Arnold's concept of the general life is rarely analyzed in these terms: Stange, for example, explains it, as "the primal beauty at the heart of things" (p. 64); Langbaum puzzlingly says that "Arnold seems to be saying that the poet should know . . . he cannot share nature's life" (pp. 68-69); Knoepfmacher probably comes closest to the mark in his cursory definition of the "general life" as "an impersonal power which demands the submission of all men" (p. 19). But there has been no detailed explanation of the metaphysics involved in Arnold's notion.
 - 10 Alan Roper takes "Resignation" to be not "a poet's manifesto" but "the manifesto of Arnold the man" in *Arnold's Poetic Landscapes* (Baltimore, 1969), p. 133. But Roper does not draw the distinction between poet and speaker I find here.
 - 11 Interpretations of the last line of "Resignation" vary radically. Park Honan, for example, regards it as nothing more than the suffering induced by the spirit of the age: "a tension in the individual who is at the mercy of the analytic *Zeitgeist*" in *Matthew Arnold: A Life* (New York, 1981), p. 179; Roper, who reads "Resignation" as a poem mixing the pleasures of landscape with social protest, takes the last line to be an extension of that protest, a generalizing indictment against the "harshness of the general lot" as that lot is defined by the human characters in the poem (p. 137); and Langbaum cautiously gives Arnold's cryptic line an essentially psychological emphasis, admitting uncertainty as to whether Arnold's "something" refers to the "necessity that thwarts desire" or "desire" itself (p. 70). But none of these critics who see the closing line in essentially human terms seems willing to include within that "world" (l. 278) that has undergone this seemingly general infection the nature that we were told only a few lines earlier seems "to bear" (l. 270), and hence must surely suffer from the general malady along with earth's human inhabitants. Knoepfmacher, while certainly broader in his description, is not very helpful in his analysis, describing "the something which infects the world" as "the aggregate of all that is visible, an impersonal and tyrannical power which offers 'not joy but peace' to him who apprehends its operations" (p. 20). The only critics who deal with Arnold's conclusion in genuinely pessimistic terms are Stange, who believes the

closing line points to “an evil immanent in things” (p. 68); and Fraser Neiman who declares Arnold’s “something that infects the world” to be “a metaphysical evil” that is the “source of a malaise that is not attributable to death or chance” in *Matthew Arnold* (Boston, 1968), p. 44.

- 12 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison (Oxford, 1956), p. 39.

Refocillation

Punch did not exactly consider Arnold one of its literary heroes, appreciating his urbanity but slightly resenting his intellectual superciliousness. Yet the magazine’s obituary, cast in the “Thyrsis” stanza, praises the value of his crusade against Philistinism and the beauty of his elegiac poetry:

He who sang “Thyrsis,” then, shall sing no more
 This side the stream that stills all earthly notes!
 Whilst April wakes the woodland’s tardy song,
 On morn’s mild breeze the throstle’s fluting floats
 To ears long waiting and attentive long.

But near the shy Thames shore
 Mute lies the minstrel who with mellowest reed
 Piped of its sunny slopes and wandering ways,
 Singer of light and of large-thoughted days,
 And the soul’s stillness, art thou gone indeed?

Great Son of a good father, Laleham’s Tower,
 Neath which thou liest, is not firmler set
 Than thy well-founded surely growing fame,
 The budding briars with April drops are wet,
 Anon the river-fields with gold shall flame;
 The fritillary flower
 Shall spread its purple where thy frequent feet
 Lovingly lingered. For thy Muse’s flight
 The light of Nature’s gift is yet more light,
 The Sweetness of Earth’s boon is still more sweet.

The Python of Stupidity is slain
 By Phoebus’ shafts; the Philistine must fall
 To lucid wit and lambent irony;
 And hot unreason yieldeth, if at all
 To arms of light. Well, the world owes to thee
 This gospel, and its gain
 Perchance is greater than from all the noise
 Of Boanerges. Men at least may turn
 To thee the gracious ways of calm to learn,
 High Culture’s bland repose and blameless joys.

“The night as welcome as a friend would fall,”
 So didst thou sing, and lo! to thee it came
 Like a friend’s sudden clasp, and all was still.
 Sleep well by thy loved, Thames; henceforth thy fame
 With that of “Thyrsis” blent shall haunt each hill
 Each reach, each islet, all
 That spreading scene which CLOUGH and
 ARNOLD loved;

And men of English mould will love it more,
 Thinking, on silvery flood and verdant shore,
 “Here ARNOLD sang, here gently *Thyrsis* roved!”
 (*Punch*, April 28, 1888)