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The Reluctant Lover and the World: Structure and Meaning in Arnold's "Resignation" and "Stanzas in Memory of the Author of 'Obermann'"

GEORGE FORBES

While cautioning his countrymen against the dangers of superstition, Arnold remarked in *God and the Bible*: "men inevitably use anthropomorphic language about whatever makes them feel deeply."¹ Everyone would agree that anthropomorphic language, the language of feeling, is the language of poetry. In this article I wish to examine the anthropomorphism, explicit and implicit, in two of Arnold's major semi-dramatic meditations, "Resignation" and "Stanzas in Memory of the Author of 'Obermann.'" "

Both poems are about reality and action: in each the speaker, the Arnoldian hero, strives to define and relate to what is not himself, to what is "out there," the "not I," the universe, non-human and/or human, and so to discover what he can be and do. In each, he speaks of this objective reality as "the world"; and in each, as I hope to show, he imagines this "world" as a female entity.² A careful look at the relation between the speaker and the world will, I am convinced, lead to a more adequate understanding of how these poems are

¹*God and the Bible, The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor, 1970), VII, 395-396.

²Readers might find of some interest this entry from *Webster's New World Dictionary*, College Edition: "world . . . [ME. *werld*, *world*, *world*; AS. *weoruld*, *weorold*, etc., world, lit., age of man < *wer*, a man (cf. werewolf) + base of *old*; basic sense "the age of man"], 1. the earth. 2. the universe. 3. the earth and its inhabitants. 4. a) the human race; mankind. b) the public: as, the discovery started the *world*. 5. a) [also *W.*], some part of the earth: as, the *Old World*. b) some period of history, its society, etc: as, the ancient *world*. c) any sphere or domain: as, the dog *world*, the animal, vegetable, or mineral *world*. d) any sphere of human activity: as, the *world* of music. e) any sphere or state of existence. 6. individual experience, outlook, etc: as, his *world* is narrow. 7. a) secular life and interests, as distinguished from the religious or spiritual; social life and its concerns. b) people primarily concerned with the affairs and purposes of the present life. 8. *often pl.* a large amount; great deal: as, the rest did him a *world* (or *worlds*) of good. 9. a star or planet."

I shall not be directly concerned to show in which of these senses Arnold uses the word on any particular occasion: to do so would, in my opinion, simply tend to

constructed and how they move our emotions. Although a complete history of the relation of the Arnoldian hero with the world is beyond the scope of this study, my readings will suggest the shape such a history might take. Arnold's poems are rewarding when approached as individuals but even more so when viewed in relation to one another—as Arnold wrote to Clough: “the spectacle of a writer striving evidently to get breast to breast with reality is always full of instruction and very invigorating.”³ The erotic image is a happy one and should be kept in mind.

“Resignation,” dated by Kenneth Allott between 1843 and 1848,⁴ expresses more clearly and memorably than any other of Arnold's poems the characteristic response of his wayfaring or warfaring hero to the world. The race, to draw out the allusion, has become a rat-race; there is no immortal garland to be won, and he would just as soon stay out of the dust and heat. To be sure, he does aspire towards a kind of perfection, and above all is determined not to lose himself in the service of some unworthy mistress.

“Resignation” is a prospect poem—the main character climbs an eminence, looks around, and thinks about what he sees. As in Wordsworth's “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,” we find here the double-exposure technique by which a past viewing is contrasted with the present. This double view leads naturally to thoughts about a fundamental condition of human consciousness, the awareness of time, past, passing, and to come. The focus of attention thus shifts from the view to the viewer, from topography to the question of how to live.

Central to “Resignation” are two walks taken by the speaker and Fausta, an intimate woman friend, over a high upland pass between two valleys.⁵ On the first excursion, undertaken ten years earlier, they

unmake rather than describe the poem under discussion. Instead, I shall focus on Arnold's anthropomorphism, on the “world” as a “female fiction,” noting what she is and does. In contradistinction to nature, the world tends to comprehend the human component of the environment; it can be both wider and narrower than nature. When humanized, nature is nearly always a mother; the world, as we shall see, is more protean in her manifestations and roles.

³*The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. H. F. Lowry (1932, rpt. Oxford, 1968), p. 86.

⁴Introductory note to “Resignation,” *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Kenneth Allott (London, 1965), p. 84. All references to Arnold's poems are to this edition.

⁵All the commentators hasten to inform us that Fausta is Jane, Arnold's older sister, his favorite, and that the two hikes actually took place: in July, 1833, Dr. Thomas Arnold, a certain Captain Hamilton, and “Jane, Matt and Tom” walked from Wythburn over the Armboth Fells to Keswick in the Lake District; ten years later, in July, 1843, Matthew and his sister Jane repeated the walk. Jane, the biographers go on

had a "leader" and were in the company of a lively group; on the second, present walk, they are alone, "Ghosts of that boisterous company" (l.89). On the first, the group of hikers had a goal and "after long perseverance tried" they reached it and experienced a great, intensely blissful sense of fulfillment, a fulfillment recollected by the speaker in these strangely moving words:

And many a mile of dusty way,
 Parched and road-worn, we made that day;
 But Fausta, I remember well,
 That as the balmy darkness fell
 We bathed our hands with speechless glee,
 That night, in the wide glimmering sea. (ll. 80-85)

On the second, there seems to be neither goal nor fulfillment: in what is the foreground action of the poem, they linger near the summit of the pass and talk. (We overhear his monologue.) Fausta is disturbed by the fact that she and the speaker have been over this same ground before; the speaker, in contrast to both Fausta and the earlier hikers, shows no inclination at all to descend from the height—he would be happy to remain in the "grassy upland glen."⁶ When we explore his reasons for wanting to stay up there, for not wanting to go down the hill, we approach the heart of the poem.

It is evident, first of all, that he likes the broader view, that he wishes to cultivate the state of mind symbolized by his position, a state of philosophic detachment from action and of cheerful resignation to limits. Seated beside a brook in the "grassy upland glen" high above the "noisy town," "the highway, and the plain," he can hope to see in perspective himself and his relation with the human and non-human elements of his environment. Near the watershed between the two

to tell us, was at the time of the second walk depressed and fretful owing to a broken marriage engagement and the sudden death of their father on the previous summer; Matthew, as is evident from his poems, was disturbed by discovering himself in a world where death seemed to render futile all human action; what is more, he was reading books such as the *Bhagavad Gita* and had a poet's vocation to deal with. (See Allott, pp. 84, 86.) These facts are not really very much help to us as literary critics; from them we can conclude that Arnold writes well when he sticks closely to his actual experience, when he is most directly personal and most sincere—"Resignation" is a beautiful poem. Admittedly, when we remember that at the time of the first hike Matt was ten and a half years old and his sister not much more than a year older, we feel a certain piquancy in Fausta's complaint (as reported by her companion) on gazing at the familiar features of the landscape: "These are not changed; and we, you say, / Are scarce more changed, in truth, than they" (ll. 106-107).

⁶In stressing the differences between the two excursions, I depart, with some

valleys, he can escape from the mechanistic consciousness of time (one damned thing after another) and, seeing the present in its relation to past and future, can aspire towards the serene wisdom he ascribes to the poet—

To whom each moment in its race,
 Crowd as we will its neutral space,
 Is but a quiet watershed
 Whence, equally, the seas of life and death are fed.
(ll. 257-260)

Detachment and resignation are not ends in themselves, however; what the speaker seeks is not merely freedom from passions and care: with a certain pleasing modest indirection he makes clear in his remarks to Fausta about the ideal poet that what he aspires to is a kind of yoga, a loving union with what he calls the “general life.” This “general life” comprehends both the human and the non-human, the “happy group which fleets,/ Toil ended, through the shining streets” of the “populous town” (ll. 165-167), the landscape in the morning, paradisiac in its freshness, purity, and protectiveness—“Low, woody hill, with gracious bound,/ Folds the still valley almost round” (ll. 174-175), the “murmur of a thousand years” (reminiscent of Wordsworth’s “still, sad music of humanity,/ Nor harsh nor grating”) (l. 188); it is a “placid and continuous whole” (l. 190), somewhat grave, yet very feminine and maternal:

trepidation, from Alan Roper’s interpretation of the poem, which I find for the most part sensitive and convincing. Basic to his reading is the assertion that “*Resignation* is concerned with continuity, not change: both scene and observer are the same . . . On that sameness the whole poem is based. *Resignation* is not, like *Tintern Abbey*, a poem of development.” See *Arnold’s Poetic Landscapes* (Baltimore, 1969), pp. 131-132. Unlike Roper, I am unable to accept Fausta’s complaint at face value: the hikers have changed, and the changes are important. Fausta is unhappy with her lot, and the speaker is no carefree lad. What is more, he changes in the course of the poem, as I hope to make clear. Roper does not give sufficient weight to the note of bitterness which sounds intermittently yet unmistakably throughout the last sixty lines of the poem. It is the bitterness of a lover who has been rejected or who, like Hamlet, believes he has discovered that the object of his affection is unworthy. Roper is quite right, however, when he finds in the poem the lesson that “the fierce pressing on to goals only brings us to death without appreciating life” (136): a major theme is that we should not sacrifice the present to the future, we should allow ourselves to take pleasure in going as well as in arriving. Fausta had much better stop her fretting and enjoy the blue gentians she crushes so carelessly. Roper focuses his attention, I feel, on a level of meaning which is more literal and superficial than the stratum of feeling and action which I am exploring.

That life, whose dumb wish is not missed
 If birth proceeds, if things subsist;
 The life of plants, and stones, and rain. . . .

(ll. 193-195)

The speaker uses a beautiful phrase to denote what must be the source of the poet's craving for union with this life and the means by which this union may be consummated—a "sad lucidity of soul" (ll. 196-198). The phrase points rather onimously, we might think, towards his own failure to attain the visionary union, a failure only too evident throughout the last seventy-five lines of the poem. (I am assuming, allow me to repeat, that when the speaker talks about the ideal poet, he is talking about what he wants to be himself—and what in his best moments he may have been. It will be evident that I concur with Alan Roper when he says [p. 133], "*Resignation* is too often taken as a poet's manifesto, whereas it is more properly seen as the manifesto of Arnold the man.")

Here is what happens. Observing Fausta's "wandering smile" and her eyes as she watches the bubbles of foam being carried "eddy" down the "wild brook" towards the valley, and sensing that she sees in the bubbles of foam an emblem of human life, the speaker tells us what he supposes to be her thoughts. These consist of some sentimental stuff—the poet is "*more, than man . . . he/ Breathes, when he will, immortal air, / Where Orpheus and where Homer are*" (ll. 204, 206-208)—some rather predictable female skepticism concerning the practicability of her companion's spiritual aspirations, and some real doubts concerning the adequacy of the poet's vision—"Not deep the poet sees, but wide" (l. 214).⁷ Because he does not have to contend with death, the poet can flee and escape from "*the common life of men,*" a state of affairs which is all very well for him but which nullifies any exemplary quality that might be attributed to his life-style. (The Scholar-Gipsy will later invert this situation—he flees so that he may live, or is told to do so, at any rate.) The speaker attempts to answer Fausta's objections, to persuade her that the poet's way is indeed a viable way to live. But in the course of his defense of the poet's stance towards the universe we observe a remarkable process: the "general life" dwindles into the "world in which we live

⁷Fausta is, of course, the mouthpiece of Arnold's own uncertainties and skepticism, and of his worldly ambitions. Persons who are unable to forget her supposed identity as Arnold's sister "K" should in all fairness correct any inferences by keeping in mind these words Arnold wrote to "K" on January 25, 1851: "I am by nature so very different from you, the worldly element enters so much more largely into my composition." See *Letters of Matthew Arnold*, 1848-1888, ed. George W. E. Russell (New York, 1895), I, 17.

and move," "the ever full/ Eternal mundane spectacle" (ll. 215, 227-228). This world, however, is no wife—with her there can be no happy union: she

Outlasts aversion, outlasts love,
Outlasts each effort, interest, hope,
Remorse, grief, joy; and were the scope
Of these affections wider made,
Man still would see, and see dismayed,
Beyond his passion's widest range,
Far regions of eternal change.

(ll. 216-222)

We feel a cold breath of fear, of repulsion, of bitterness. It is like watching the dimming of a light, the light of the speaker's mind.

This lover feels himself repelled by the vastness and indifference of the universe; he is overcome by a consciousness of his inadequacy, his mortality. Here as in so many of Arnold's poems it is death that impairs man as a lover, "death, which wipes out man" (l. 223)—the harshness of the verb betrays the speaker's sense of impotent outrage and alienation. The best he can do is propose to Fausta the wisdom of renunciation, a wisdom having far more to do with prudence or sour grapes than with the "mighty heart" of the poet. Although he still talks of those who have "conquered fate," who "to men's business not too near,/ Through clouds of individual strife/ Draw homeward to the general life" (ll. 250-252), these brave words carry little conviction: they are uttered in what W. A. Madden had described as the tone of a "young man preternaturally weary."⁸ What we have here is a rather grim retreat into the arid citadel of the self. He has "seen the moment of [his] greatness flicker"; Fausta is holding his jacket for him. Perhaps this is going a bit too far, but these words of the social psychologist Erving Goffman surely apply: "There seems to be no agent more effective than another person in bringing a world for oneself alive, or, by a glance, a gesture, or a remark, shrivelling up the reality in which one is lodged."⁹

The "general life" and the world are, from the point of view of God or a computer, the same thing—everything that is "out there," the universe, including man and his works. But they are as different as night and day. The "general life" can be loved—in fact, love makes her, informs her with "light and life . . . / Actual, divine, and true," to

⁸See *Matthew Arnold: A Study of the Aesthetic Temperament in Victorian England* (Bloomington, 1967), p. 220.

⁹*Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction* (Indianapolis, 1961), p. 41.

borrow a phrase from Wordsworth which he might have applied to her; the world cannot, not in this poem. We have already seen in part why the speaker recoils from her—she is too big, too various, too enduring. He feels that he cannot hope to master her.¹⁰ But if these were the only impediments, she would still be a splendid challenge to the erotic capacities of a lover; unfortunately, there is a further obstacle to any happy marriage—she corrupts, she is “infected.”

The last lines of the poem tell us about this infection. Pointing to the elements of the natural scene that encloses Fausta and himself, the “mute turf,” “the solemn hills,” the stream, the “strange-scrawled rocks,” and “the lonely sky,” all of which, he says, “Seems to bear rather than rejoice,” he turns to her and delivers his final reason for declining heroic action:

And even could the intemperate prayer
 Man iterates, while these forbear,
 For movement, for an ampler sphere,
 Pierce Fate's impenetrable ear;
 Not milder is the general lot
 Because our spirits have forgot,
 In action's dizzying eddy whirled,
 The something that infects the world.

(ll. 271-278)

“Nothing to be done.” There is nothing a person can do to lessen the general suffering of mankind—because passionate involvement with the world corrupts. (The last four lines can be read in more than one way. They may simply assert the futility of any action the speaker and Fausta might undertake and imply a debasing effect of action in

¹⁰From passages in his letters to Clough we know that Arnold felt a great need to “master” the world, both as a man and as a poet. In a letter dated by H. E. Lowry after September, 1848, to 1849, he reproved Keats and Browning for failing to make the necessary effort: “They will not be patient neither understand that they must begin with an Idea of the world in order not to be prevailed over by the world's multitudinousness”; and on September 23, 1849, during what must have been the crisis of his affair with Marguerite, he listed for his friend some of the circumstances which made mastery of the world so difficult: “My dearest Clough these are damned times—everything is against one—the height to which knowledge is come, the spread of luxury, our physical enervation, the absence of great *natures*, the unavoidable contact with millions of small ones, newspapers, cities, light profligate friends, moral desperadoes like Carlyle, our own selves, and the sickening consciousness of our difficulties.” See *Letters to Clough*, pp. 97, 111. That he continued to think in such terms can be seen from this pronouncement on Celtic poetry, written in 1866: “Celtic poetry seems to make up to itself for being unable to master the world and give an adequate interpretation of it, by throwing all its force into style.” See *On the Study of Celtic Literature, Complete Prose Works*, III, 306.

general. Then the stress will be on “our” in the line “Because our spirits have forgot.” Or these lines may tell explicitly why any action they undertake will be futile. Then the stress will be on “because.” The two readings are not incompatible; I favor the second: “Have forgot,” while present perfect in form, is future perfect in meaning.) Action will be futile because action brings distraction, dizziness, a forgetfulness, a loss of awareness of reality: the would-be hero tarnishes the means by which he might hope to serve and transform the world, his “sad lucidity of soul”; like the pilgrims, crusaders, or conquerors mentioned at the beginning of the poem, he would lose himself in bondage to an obsession—his life, like theirs, would become a mad flight from death that turns out, ironically, to be a mad flight from life, a mad pursuit of death, of some permanently satisfying goal “this side the all-common close.” Or, losing his clarity of vision, he would accept the world as she is and would become her slave. A victim of the damsel he set out to liberate, he would end up an idolater, a whoremonger. Better to leave the world to her own devices. Better to stay on the height and, free from all illusions, endure with what remains of the vision of the general life, with the mute, inscrutable elements of nature, the “long-vexed mother” of “In Utrumque Paratus” who offers no real communion and little comfort. (The hero might have found some support in these words of the oracular Professor Norman O. Brown: “All walking, or wandering, is from mother, to mother, in mother; it gets us nowhere.”)¹¹

A word more about the world. The following passage from a letter Arnold wrote in 1856 to his sister Jane describes the world and the threat she poses to anyone who seeks integrity and peace of mind: “‘Hide thy life,’ said Epicurus, and the exquisite zest there is in doing so can only be appreciated by those who, desiring to introduce some method into their lives, have suffered from the malicious pleasure the world takes in trying to distract them till they are as shatter-brained and empty-headed as the world itself.”¹² Or take this vignette from the Yale Manuscript: “the eternal tumult of the world mingling, breaking in upon, hurrying away all.”¹³ Finally we might recall the imagery of disease in “The Scholar-Gypsy”: “modern life,” life in the world, is a “strange disease” “With its sick hurry, its divided aims,/

¹¹*Love's Body* (New York, 1966), p. 50.

¹²*Letters*, ed. Russell, I, 62-63.

¹³Yale MS., cited from Allott, p. 277. See also R. H. Super, *The Time-Spirit of Matthew Arnold* (Ann Arbor, 1970), p. 16.

Its heads o'ertaxed, its palsied hearts" (ll. 203-205); the speaker urges the seventeenth-century dropout (and nineteenth-century flower-child) to

fly our paths, our feverish contact fly!
For strong the infection of our mental strife,
Which, though it gives no bliss, yet spoils for rest.
(ll. 221-223)

Such are the consequences of commerce with the world; such are her wages. No need to multiply instances further.

There is a great deal in "Resignation" that I have said little or nothing about—the pilgrims and the other obsessed activists, "Whom labours, self-ordained, enthrall" (l. 14), the "milder natures," and the gipsies, for example, all of whom serve to define by a process of comparison and elimination the poet's stance towards reality, the stance which, as we have seen, the speaker aspires to and which, in a sadly modified form, he tries, with no sign of success other than having the last word, to persuade Fausta to adopt. Here I might remark on the importance of Fausta's ironic criticism and womanly inscrutability: they not only serve to bring about the speaker's lapse of vision; they also occasion his intimate, intense, persuasive manner, a tone of voice which lends the poem, particularly the latter part of it, so much of its subdued charm. Delightful in an altogether different way is the speaker's tone in the first thirty-nine lines, confident, exuberant, almost mock-heroic as he implicitly compares his companion and himself, cultivated, middle-class English hikers, to pilgrims, crusaders, or members of barbarian hordes. Nor have I had much to say about Arnold's seemingly casual repetition and modulation of incidental images throughout the poem, a technique which makes it, as Roper says (p. 136), "richly rewarding." But before leaving "Resignation" I wish to call attention to one passage, hitherto unremarked on so far as I know, which seems to support in a most oblique fashion my general interpretation of the hero and his reluctance to get out here and slay a dragon.¹⁴ I refer to the lines concerning the "milder natures" and time:

¹⁴At this point a reader might feel some bewilderment concerning the relation of the "world" to those central archetypes of myth and romance, the damsel in distress and the dragon. As can be seen from the Book of Revelation, the apocalyptic imagination, in its absolute rejection of time and death, splits the damsel into Babylon and Jerusalem, a "city yet a woman," and identifies the wicked damsel with the dragon—the figures merge in the Whore of Babylon "arrayed in purple and scarlet colour" seated "upon a scarlet coloured beast," as they very nearly do in the figure of the world in Arnold's

These claim not every laughing Hour
 For handmaid to their striding power;
 Each in her turn, with torch upreared,
 To await their march; and when appeared,
 Through the cold gloom, with measured race,
 To usher for a destined space
 (Her own sweet errands all forgone)
 The too imperious traveller on.

(ll. 30-37)

These images certainly suggest an imperial victory march, the ultimate in worldly success. But might not Arnold also have been half thinking of the ten virgins, five wise and five foolish? Could the "too imperious traveller" be the bridegroom? Could Arnold be preparing his reader for a hero who most emphatically will not redeem the world? A son who will not rise? "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son . . . For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved." Such passages from the fourth Gospel can seldom, I believe, have been far from Arnold's consciousness when he wrote of the world. Nor can her hero.

The hill of detachment (A. Dwight Culler would call it a "forest glade") proves, accordingly, to be a less than comfortable vantage ground or refuge for the Arnoldian hero. Unwilling to commit himself to activity that might be both futile and dehumanizing, and intent on retaining his clarity of vision unsullied and his self-possession intact, he nevertheless does not find it easy or, ultimately, possible to stay seated up there, even with what remains of mother for company. His conscience (he will call it Fate) will not allow any such premature repose. It is all very well for him to say that the world is unredeemable, but might not this judgment be the rationalization of cowardice, or of a reprehensible fastidiousness, or of an attachment unbecoming to a man? Arnold's heroes spend a good deal of their time on hills, climbing up or down, or up and down—witness the lover in "Parting" in full flight up an alp away from the arms of Marguerite to those of mother: "Fold closely, O Nature! / Thine arms round thy child"; the tourist in "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse," who discovers on the top of the mountain a "living

sonnet "The World's Triumphs." But the damsel, dragon, and world are "such stuff as dreams are made on"; the relations of damsel to dragon and of both to the world necessarily remain ambiguous and shifting. It is the eternal task of the imagination to distinguish among them and to redeem whatever of the world is redeemable—perhaps all of it.

tomb" infested with white, monstrously aged babies; or Empedocles, who "wild with pain" like the children of the Forsaken Mermaid, finds at last the way into "the unallied unopening earth" and, presumably, fulfils his erotic aspirations—"Oh, that I could glow like this mountain!" As Shelley wrote to Maria Gbsorne, "Incest is like many other *incorrect* things a very poetical circumstance." The problem of action will not disappear. What is worth doing? What can one reasonably hope to accomplish? How can one act and yet remain "unspotted by the world"? The "dialogue of the mind with itself" goes on and on, the "Stanzas in Memory of the Author of 'Obermann'" being a key document.

The action of the "Stanzas," which can be dated with some precision in late September to November, 1849,¹⁵ is minimal yet effectively symbolic. The speaker, a solitary wanderer (I am tempted to call him Arnold—Culler does, and with good reason), again climbs a hill, this time the "rocky stair" of an "awful Alpine track"; in a "stern Alpine dell" he encounters Obermann through reading Senancour's epistolary confession (the autumn leaves strewn on the valley paths modulate into the leaves of the book he is carrying); he compares Obermann with other sages, Wordsworth and Goethe, explains why he prefers Obermann, and reflects on the advantages of living with him as an anchorite in the mountains; and then suddenly he has second thoughts about this way of life—he excuses himself, pays Obermann a compliment, bids him farewell, and (presumably, for this part of the action is not explicitly described) climbs back down the "rocky stair." He returns to the world.

"Stanzas in Memory of the Author of 'Obermann'" is often read as a record of a crucial event in Arnold's spiritual life or as a versified vehicle for some of Arnold's critical judgments. Again I wish to focus on the mythic and erotic component, which, when the poem is looked at closely, looms surprisingly large—indeed it is what gives the poem life and movement, what makes it happen. We see this component most clearly in the speaker's motives for fleeing to the mountains and the fellowship of Obermann, in the character given to Obermann himself, and in the speaker's reasons for parting from Obermann. The key figure in this little drama is, of course, the world.

The speaker does not give direct utterance to his motives for climbing up to the region of Obermann; instead he depersonalizes and generalizes his plight by attributing to a whole class of men the inner drive which propels him up the mountain, the class here being

¹⁵See Allott, p. 129.

denominated, as it was in "Resignation," by the label "poet." Here are the key lines, duly italicized by Arnold, which describe the goal of the poet's quest: "*The glow, he cries, the thrill of life, / Where, where do these abound?*" (ll. 97-98). To the poet's question he immediately gives this answer: "Not in the world, not in the strife / Of men, shall they be found" (ll. 99-100), an answer which he elaborates in the succeeding quatrain:

He who hath watched, not shared, the strife,
 Knows how the day hath gone.
 He only lives with the world's life,
 Who hath renounced his own.

(ll. 101-104)

And to this bit of cryptic reasoning he adds, addressing Obermann, the decisive conclusion, "To thee we come, then!" The speaker, it is evident, is not merely in flight from a contentious, confusing world, from what he describes as "the hopeless tangle of our age" (l. 83); he is on a quest looking for erotic fulfillment; he is a lover on the prowl. Moreover he has certain definite ideas about how to get some satisfaction. By joining Obermann in his mountainous retreat, by renouncing action and devoting himself to philosophic contemplation, he hopes, it would appear, to gain a panoramic knowledge of the world and so to convert the world into something like the "general life" which allegedly appeases the poet's craving heart in "Resignation." This process of transmutation evidently requires that the lover establish a certain physical and psychic distance between himself and the object of his desires, and that he give up all egotistic striving. Paradoxically, it is by removing himself from the "world's life," by climbing the mountain and by renouncing all personal desire, that he will be enabled to "live with the world's life"—"For whosoever will save his life shall lose it." (A coherent alternative reading is conceivable. According to this reading, he who renounces his own life and who consequently "only lives with the world's life" has suffered the disaster most to be feared and shunned—he has lost his integrity, his true self. When the speaker chooses to live with Obermann, then, he is not at all renouncing his own life as a means of attaining union with the world's life; rather he is "hiding" his life from a destructive, devouring world, he is preserving and clinging to his own threatened identity. This alternative, unorthodox reading might gain some support from the fact that the speaker does change his mind, he does decide to return to the world.)

The quest for the "*glow . . . the thrill of life*" leads the speaker into fellowship with Obermann; twenty-five lines later he bids adieu to his

“sad guide” and, pleading his subjection to “fate” and “some unknown Power,” declares, “I in the world must live.” What then has happened? Has he discovered something about the “melancholy shade” of Obermann or about himself which he did not know before? Has he given up the quest for the glow and the thrill of life? What have we here? A growth of consciousness? A knuckling under? These questions are not easily answered. Before we pass any judgments we must look carefully at Obermann to see who he is and why he is up there in the “stern Alpine dell.”

First of all, he is a figure of truly heroic intellectual integrity, a Theseus of the mind. He has scanned the “hopeless tangle” of the age; like Wordsworth and Goethe, he has attained to see his way. But he has paid a high price for his clarity of vision: the “realm of thought” which he inhabits is “drear and cold”—he is literally frozen stiff:

Immoveable thou sittest, still
As death, composed to bear!
Thy head is clear, thy feeling chill,
And icy thy despair.¹⁶

(ll. 85-88)

Not much chance of getting a glow on here, one would think. Obermann proves to be, on closer inspection, not merely a martyr to the service of reason or mind: he is a failure, an unsuccessful lover of the world. Roper remarks how “the different aspects of Obermann . . . are almost Petrarchist in their contradictions: cold langour and fevered pain, virgin freshness and human agony,” and he asserts that “The working out of the meditation is the process of resolving these light contradictions”;¹⁷ but he seems not to recognize in this

¹⁶Obermann is a victim of a belief Arnold held at the time concerning the inherent hostility of reason towards what he called “the religious mood.” Here is a note from the Yale MS. (cited from Allott, p. 262): “I cannot conceal from myself the objection which really wounds and perplexes me from the religious side is that the service of reason is freezing to feeling, chilling to the religious mood. And feeling and the religious mood are eternally the deepest being of man, the ground of all joy and greatness for him.” In the summer of 1848, more than a year before the “Stanzas” were written, Arnold admonished Clough, who was unemployed at the time, that “since the Baconian era wisdom is not found in deserts: and you again especially need the world and yet will not be absorbed by any quantity of it” (*Letters to Clough*, pp. 88-89); and five years later in September, 1853, he wrote to his friend this praise of warmth and rejection of frigidity: “If one loved what was beautiful and interesting in itself *passionately* enough, one would produce what was excellent without troubling oneself with religious dogmas at all. As it is, we are *warm* only when dealing with these last—and what is frigid is always bad” (*Letters to Clough*, p. 143). My point is that no one should be amazed at the brevity of the speaker’s stay with Obermann: the temperature tells all.

¹⁷Roper, pp. 233-234.

“wounded human spirit” the ghost of the “starved lover” of the courtly tradition. For that is what this “melancholy shade” is. Like the courtly lover of old, he has been scorned for his pains. The world does not care for his music; agony, and honesty, and truth are not for her, or so we learn from the speaker’s question and answer:

Is it for this, because the sound
Is fraught too deep with pain,
That Obermann! the world around
So little loves thy strain?

Some secrets may the poet tell,
For the world loves new ways;
To tell too deep ones is not well—
It knows not what he says.

(ll. 37-44)

The world, “colder yet” than Obermann’s “realm of thought,” wants to be amused, diverted, flattered; like the faithless mistress of Wyatt’s poem she chases after “newfangledness.” It is worth noting, however, that her coldness towards Obermann stems more from a defective understanding than from any positive perversity or wickedness. The world “knows not what he says” when he tells her “too deep” secrets. (I suspect here an allusion to the “oriental wisdom” of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arnold’s “personal treasure from the east” which he was unable to share even with Clough.)¹⁸ Allott detects here an echo of Luke 23.34, “Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do,” and adds the comment, “Perhaps the implication is that the poet who tells ‘deep secrets’ is crucified by the world’s neglect.”¹⁹ And perhaps the implication is also that the world is not beyond redemption, that she is educable, that, for all the speaker’s assertions that she is “colder” than the “realm of thought” to which Obermann has betaken himself, she is potentially susceptible to the charms of the right lover.

At any rate, it would appear that to dwell with Obermann proves not to be a paradoxical or devious means of living with the world’s life after all; rather it proves to be an admission of amatory failure, of impotence. All that Obermann has to offer his disciple is what seems to be a less than edifying necrosis: “*Greater by far than thou are dead; / Strive not! die also thou!*” (ll. 91-92). Or is perhaps this death a dying “to the law of the flesh” in order to live “to the law of the mind”? Is

¹⁸The phrase is from Culler, p. 192.

¹⁹Allott, p. 131.

there perhaps indeed a more abundant life to be had with the frigid seer? We are given a brief glimpse of some of the solitary pleasures Obermann enjoys in his Alpine retreat: he has seen "healing sights" and

Heard accents of the eternal tongue
Through the pine branches play—
Listened, and felt [himself] grown young!
Listened and wept. . . .

(ll. 125-128)

But at this point, with a fine Byronic gesture, the speaker exclaims, "Away!" and bids a hurried farewell to his "sad guide" and "the dreams that but deceive." It is all very curious. We are in no doubt, however, concerning who it is that Obermann has been listening to while he felt himself "grown young": he has been listening to Nature whisper through the pine branches; he has fled from the cruel, cold world back to mother—he has become a child again! No wonder the speaker is beside himself with agitation: in Obermann he has encountered what he himself would become were he to remain on the mountain—a frozen philosopher, a failed lover, a child. A suicide, even. Would this be a consummation devoutly to be wished? Would this be perfection, the pursuit of which is man's happiness? No. Clarity of intellectual vision, innocence, what are these without love, without warmth? They are a great deal: they are surely the most powerful temptations the Arnoldian hero will ever have to withstand. But withstand them he does; he tears himself away from Obermann, who about now seems to be taking on the features of a most sinister enchanter (the speaker later refers to himself as "him who obeys thy spell/ No more")—he tears himself away, leaving, he tells Obermann, "Half of my life with you," the half that never wanted to grow up.

The speaker, we suspect, is hard put to it to extricate himself with dignity and at the same time to do honor to Obermann. He hits upon an expedient or insight which permits him to do both and at the same time define his future relationship with the world. Obermann, he discovers, is really not there at all: he has gone "away from the earth" with the "Children of the Second Birth," a small group of spiritual heroes "Whose one bond is, that all have been/ Unspotted by the world" (ll. 155-156). When he speaks of the "common land" these heroes inhabit, we know that he is referring to a "paradise within," a region of the mind where the world has no power. He understands, then, that it really does not matter where he chooses to live: all that

matters is that he rest, like Obermann, “unsoiled.” With a huge sense of relief, a sense almost of being upheld by providential powers, he can return to live in the world. He has undergone something like a rebirth himself. He will not need to run away any more.

A final word on the meaning of the speaker’s resolve to live in the world. Many scholars, Hugh Kingsmill, F. L. Lucas, and Kenneth Allott among them, have seen in the speaker’s decision to leave Obermann a stoical renunciation of personal happiness, the triumph of duty over inclination, of the puritan moralist over the irresponsible, youthful poet and lover. To the speaker’s assertion that he leaves “half of [his] life” with Obermann, Allott, for instance, provides the following gloss: “The poetic half of the divided self, but A[rnold] is also thinking of Marguerite”; and on the final lines of the poem, the speaker’s “last farewell” to Obermann, he comments: “The lines are A[rnold]’s farewell to youth, insouciance and Marguerite—and also, in the long run, to the writing of poetry.”²⁰ Culler also links Marguerite with Obermann, quite unfairly, to my mind—I did not notice any young lady clinging to the speaker’s arm as he fled up the mountain path, quite the contrary—but his account of the speaker’s renunciation is closer to the mark than Allott’s: “This act—the act by which Arnold separated himself from Obermann—was certainly the most important spiritual act of his entire life, for it put behind him all the turbulence and unrest, the *Sturm und Drang*, that had troubled him in previous years. It also, of course, involved a separation from Marguerite, for she represented the same kind of spiritual morbidity as did Obermann.”²¹ Leaving Marguerite out of the picture, we may say that Culler is right: what we see in the speaker’s decision to “live in the world” is Arnold making the most difficult of all renunciations—he is giving up his unhappiness. As to Allott’s assertion that Arnold left his poetic self behind with Obermann, well, it is true that Arnold as poet is pre-eminently the distressed child. But surely, if he is now going to try to learn neither to strive nor cry, we may not feel that this resolve is the self-betrayal of an unprofitable servant. Arnold did not, as W. H. Auden would have us believe, “thrust his gift in prison till it died”; on the contrary, he outgrew it, he resolved to grow from a son into a lover, to seek out in the disorder of his experience what Auden implies he never allowed his “gift” to find—“a whole world to praise.”

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²⁰Allott, pp. 135, 138.

²¹Culler, p. 130.