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# "Resignation," "Rugby Chapel," and Thomas Arnold

JONATHAN MIDDLEBROOK

**Abstract.** Matthew Arnold imagines Thomas marshalling the same sort of "wavering line" of marchers in both poems. In "Resignation," an early poem, Arnold keeps a qualifying perspective of time and distance on his father's activity. The effect is to cast some doubt on the value of such vigorous activity. In "Rugby Chapel," because he has set himself the task of rather crude eulogy, Arnold abandons his critical perspective on his father's activity. In so doing he writes a lesser poem, though one recognizably Arnoldian in intention.

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THOMAS ARNOLD is one of the major intellectual and emotional influences on the work of his son, but Matthew Arnold rarely speaks of his father in print. For this reason, "Resignation" and "Rugby Chapel," two poems which *do* speak of Thomas Arnold, are particularly significant in understanding Matthew's complex sense of his famous, dominating father.<sup>1</sup>

"Resignation" moralizes a Wordsworthian walk from Wythburn to Keswick. Arnold has returned to the scene ten years later with a discontented companion ("Fausta"), and he recreates the original walk (ll. 44-85) preparatory to comforting her. "Fausta" is Matthew Arnold's favorite sister, Jane, and Kenneth Allott's note explains that "our leader" is Thomas Arnold and that the walk was a strenuous one.<sup>2</sup> He quotes from Mrs. Arnold's unpublished journal for July, 1833:

Jane, Matt and Tom will remember their walk to Keswick from Wythburn, and how their poor young legs were tried by the stiff sticks of the heath on the mountain, and how they eat oatcake and bathed to refresh themselves—but how poor Jane was still tired, and obliged to lie down—and was far from well at that comfortless Cockermonth. (Allott, p. 86)

Matthew Arnold's poem partly recaptures the strenuousness of the

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<sup>1</sup>For a recent discussion entirely different from this one, see Wendell S. Johnson, " 'Rugby Chapel': Arnold as a Filial Poet," *UR*, XXIV (December, 1967), 107-113.

<sup>2</sup>*The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Kenneth Allott (London, 1965), p. 444. All quotations of poems are from this edition.

effort—the hot, silent, finally lifeless upper regions—and partly modifies it; Jane’s exhaustion (as seen by her mother) becomes Matthew’s “speechless glee” after many dusty miles.

What is important in the landscape of “Resignation” is that the congenial regions are definitely not at the summit of the climb, an arid place endured at noon, but (figuratively anyway) on both sides of it, the shaded pastures of the morning, the wide-glimmering sea of evening. (This is, of course, a recurrent fact of Arnold’s poetry: the wooded slopes of Etna are infinitely more pleasant than the sunburnt summit.) Given this landscape in “Resignation,” Thomas Arnold, leader of the expedition, becomes a vaguely ominous force, leading his children to those unpleasant upper regions where they *must* tread (l. 65) and from which they descend with joy. “Resignation” is an early poem, but Arnold’s poetic touch is sure: there is only a slight, significant penumbra of doubt as he meditates, ten years afterward, on his childhood walk.

When Matthew Arnold wrote “Rugby Chapel” about fifteen years after “Resignation,” his task was eulogy, and his letter of February 27, 1855 (partially quoted by Allott, p. 444) shows that he turned to a well-developed attitude toward Thomas for the terms of praise. He wrote his mother: “But this is just what makes him great—that he was not only a good man saving his soul by righteousness, but that he carried so many others with him in his hand, and saved them . . . along with himself.” This sense of Thomas Arnold appears in “Rugby Chapel” in such passages as this:

But thou would’st not *alone*  
Be saved, my father! *alone*  
Conquer and come to thy goal,  
Leaving the rest in the wild.  
.....

Still thou turnedst, and still  
Beckonedst the trembler, and still  
Gavest the weary thy hand. (ll. 124-133)

In fact, this marshalling ability is the sum of the frequent repetitions of praise in the poem. Thomas Arnold could lead an ordered march through terribly difficult terrain. Like the other rare “sons” of God who know directly their heavenly “Father’s innermost mind” (l. 162), Thomas could

fill up the gaps in our files,  
Strengthen the wavering line,  
Stablish, continue our march,  
On, to the bound of the waste,  
On, to the City of God. (ll. 204-208)



So pray all,  
Whom labours, self-ordained, enthrall. (ll. 1-14)

The scene here is very much like the march which Thomas Arnold reorders and inspirits in "Rugby Chapel":

Ah, but the way is so long!  
Years they have been in the wild!  
Sore thirst plagues them, the rocks,  
Rising all around, overawe;  
Factions divide them, their host  
Threatens to break, to dissolve.  
Ah, keep, keep them combined!  
Else, of the myriads who fill  
That army, not one shall arrive;  
Sole they shall stray; in the rocks  
Stagger for ever in vain,  
Die one by one in the waste. (ll. 176-187)

The difference between the two poems, however, is that in "Resignation" the tumultuous struggle of the pilgrims, warriors, Goths and Huns, is the object of criticism and rejection by "milder natures, and more free" (l. 22), Arnold's own; and the poem ends with the assertion that, no matter how lost in action one may become, there still remains "The something that infects the world" (l. 278). In both these poems, Matthew Arnold is looking at Thomas' activity, symbolized in the marshalling of that feeble, wavering line of humanity. "Resignation" as a whole is an oblique criticism of this symbol. First, Matthew openly rejects the struggling efforts in his tableau of pilgrims and warriors, men "enthralled" while he is free. He then describes his father's walk which is something of a small-scale version of the martial struggles just rejected. Matthew Arnold's touch is again as sure as it is subtle: the overt criticism of a scene far from his home and family has the effect of suggesting criticism of the more immediate picture of Thomas leading his family over the Cumberland fells. In "Rugby Chapel," however, there is none of this subtle criticism of Thomas Arnold's work; the poem appears to be an unambiguous glorification of it. Matthew's change in attitude is startling enough to raise questions of motive and technique: why did he change his mind? How does he manage to show the change while using the same symbols?

The technique of Matthew's attempt to change the symbolic value of Thomas' life involves a subtle blending of two different landscapes in "Rugby Chapel."<sup>6</sup> Where in "Resignation" the landscape is a familiar

<sup>6</sup>William S. Peterson, "The Landscapes of 'Rugby Chapel,'" *VN*, No. 25 (Spring, 1964), pp. 22-23. Allott's note, page 449, which quotes A. P. Stanley's description of Thomas Arnold's behavior on his mountain walks, misleads readers in its implication that lines 124 ff. of "Rugby Chapel" depict a mountain landscape.

Arnoldian hill—a minor Etna—in “Rugby Chapel” there is both this hill made more threatening, and a desolate wasteland strongly reminiscent of Exodus, a scenery in which Hebraic virtues of courage, determination, and strength show to their best advantage. In this scenic context, Thomas Arnold becomes a super-Moses who not only leads the children of Israel out of Egypt, but actually delivers them entire into the City of God. Thomas Arnold thus becomes one of his son’s idealized activists, like Wellington, who is able to make a “track, across the fretful foam / Of vehement actions without scope or term, / Call’d history” (“To the Duke of Wellington,” ll. 11-13). Yet, in the sonnet to Wellington and everywhere else in Matthew Arnold’s writing, such straight-line doggedness is subject to criticism.<sup>7</sup> Here are two stanzas from “A Farewell”:

I too have longed for trenchant force,  
And will like a dividing spear;  
Have praised the keen, unscrupulous course,  
Which knows no doubt, which feels no fear.

But in the world I learnt, what there  
Thou too wilt surely one day prove,  
That will, that energy, though rare,  
Are yet far, far less rare than love. (ll. 33-40)

“Rugby Chapel” has no such characteristic criticism of action. In a sense, Matthew Arnold shouts himself down. For what he does in “Rugby Chapel” is raise the level of rhetoric to an enthusiastic pitch rejected in “Resignation” at the same time that he foreshortens his poetic perspective. In “Resignation,” his narrative perspective on the marchers is that of great distance, both in time (ten years) and space: “There climbing hangs, a far seen sign, / Our wavering, many-coloured line” (ll. 60-61); but in the course of “Rugby Chapel” he shortens his perspective. At first, he merely sets the scene: the host of mankind marches, “A feeble, wavering line” (l. 173), but as his excitement increases, he abandons his narrative detachment and joins the struggle: “Ye fill up the gaps in *our* files, / Strengthen the wavering lines” (ll. 204-205, my italics). Arnold ends “Rugby Chapel” in this attitude of enthusiastic identification. He stops the poem at precisely the point where, in the language of “Resignation,” he himself is caught up in “action’s dizzying eddy” (l. 277).

Questions like this one, of poetic technique, also raise questions of success: did Arnold get away with his attempt to set his habitual

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<sup>7</sup>In the sonnet, the criticism is carried in the contrast between the grandiose concepts—“genius,” “history,” “general law”—and Wellington’s achievement as Arnold flatly describes it: he “saw one clue to life and followed it” (l. 14).

image of his father in a eulogistic context? Finally, I think not for someone who reads all of Arnold's poetry. What seems to me to happen in "Rugby Chapel" is that Arnold tries to make exclamatory fervor disguise the abandonment of his own, on-going criticism of the unthinking active life. Major poets create their own symbolic contexts, contexts which extend from poem to poem, and their readers come to expect—even demand—a certain sort of consistency and cross-fertilization among individual poems. I think it is precisely this lack of larger resonance which leads sensitive readers of Arnold to find "Rugby Chapel" thin and uncertain.<sup>8</sup> We come to Arnold's poetry for its painful introspection and tense joining of antagonistic emotions and symbols. Arnold cannot write a poem of direct affirmation. In the attempt, he destroys half his poetic self.

Matthew Arnold, perhaps even consciously, attempts to shut off one-half his poetic vision. Why did he do so? The answer is in his letters and in his sense of duty to his father's memory. John Duke Coleridge once wrote that "almost all the male Arnolds except Tom have been injured by being the sons of a celebrated father."<sup>9</sup> I shall not rehearse the more famous signs of the father-son conflict between Thomas and Matthew.<sup>10</sup> What is not generally remarked, however, is that even within his family correspondence, Matthew was trying to work out some mode of accepting his dead, celebrated father. To Thomas' youngest daughter, Matthew naturally writes as a man consciously carrying on his father's good work: "I have often thought . . . about dear papa's pamphlets. Whatever talent I have in this direction I certainly inherit from him, for his pamphleteering talent was one of his very strongest and most pronounced literary sides, if he had been in the way of developing it."<sup>11</sup> To Thomas' wife, Matthew writes in gratitude to "dear Papa." (No decent Victorian, and I hope modern, would do anything else.) Yet there is a real, unresolved struggle in this apparently successful emergence from the shadow of Thomas Arnold. It shows in such comments as this one to his brother William: "I too have felt the absurdity and disadvantage of our hereditary connexion in the minds of all people with education," or in the relief with

<sup>8</sup>Wendell S. Johnson, *The Voices of Matthew Arnold* (New Haven, 1961), p. 67. Johnson finds the "thinness and uncertainty," though he says that "we need hardly go outside the poem itself" to detect it. Johnson changes his evaluation of the poem in his *UR* article (see fn. 1).

<sup>9</sup>*Forty Years of Friendship . . . The Correspondence of John Duke, Lord Coleridge, and Ellis Yarnall*, ed. C. Yarnall (London, 1911), p. 25.

<sup>10</sup>See Lionel Trilling, *Matthew Arnold* (New York, 1939), ch. ii.

<sup>11</sup>*The Letters of Matthew Arnold*, ed. G. W. E. Russell (London, 1895), I, 125.

which, several years later, he can write to his mother that he is at last beginning to possess the significant name *Arnold* on his own merit: "I find the memory and mention of dear papa everywhere—far oftener than I tell you—among the variety of people I see. . . . I find people are beginning to know something about *me* myself, but I am still far oftener an object of interest as his son than on my own account."<sup>12</sup> Or, finally, the unresolved struggle between dead father and living son is perhaps most subtly suggested by the fact that, in 1867, Matthew still had not done what he knew would give her pleasure, recited "Rugby Chapel" to his mother.

What emerges from these two poems and the letters is a particular, I suppose even Arnoldian, filial affection. Matthew knows what he should do: reassure his mother, tell his younger sister of her father's virtues, publicly celebrate the great man in poetry. He does all these things, but his poems, and his letters well read, tell us that he has not yet buried his father. (This is, after all, the time when he wrote *Merope*, a drama in which an avenging son kills his father's murderer and frees his mother from the murderer's twenty-year attempt to marry her.) In the late 1850's, Matthew is still in the shade of his mighty father, and when called on for a public display, the most devotional thing he can do in eulogy is attempt the sacrifice, as he did in the Preface to the 1853 *Poems*, of his own poetic imagination for a larger, unrealizable ideal. "I think I have done something," he wrote his mother in 1867, "to fix the true legend about Papa, as those who knew him best feel it ought to run" (*Letters to Clough*, p. 164). I hope the precise equivocation of the last phrase shows that Matthew Arnold knew that propaganda was not poetry.

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<sup>12</sup>*Unpublished Letters of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Arnold Whitridge (New Haven, 1923), p. 32; *Letters of Matthew Arnold*, I, 161.