



---

The Young Matthew Arnold 1847-1849: "The Strayed Reveller" and "The Forsaken Merman"

Author(s): Norman Friedman

Source: *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Winter, 1971), pp. 405-428

Published by: West Virginia University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40001505>

Accessed: 24-02-2020 19:23 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

West Virginia University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Victorian Poetry*

# The Young Matthew Arnold 1847-1849: "The Strayed Reveller" and "The Forsaken Merman"

NORMAN FRIEDMAN

**Abstract.** Because the young Reveller turns inexplicably and painlessly away from the teachings, which he himself has just expounded, of Silenus, concerning the poet's need to experience the pain of the world, the poem fails to resolve its stated problem of detachment and involvement. Romantic, Victorian, and Modernist assumptions, as well as Arnold's letters of that time, illuminate the thematic and structural possibilities of this conflict, and these in turn help define what the poem falls short of, and why. Arnold probably supported Silenus' teaching, but he could not resolve the poem because he had not experienced in his inner self what he was writing about—just what Silenus meant. He was no more integrated than his young protagonist. "The Forsaken Merman" deals with a similar conflict, and, because it attributes the same domestic values to both sides of the conflict, is similarly unresolved. A variety of perspectives again throws light on the nature and cause of failure. Feeling unacknowledged sympathy for the anarchic-erotic elements implicit in his sources, Arnold had to disguise it under the mask of its opposite to make it acceptable. Even as one must integrate the self before confronting experience, so must one confront one's own repressions before he can integrate the self.

---

**I**F "The Strayed Reveller" and "The Forsaken Merman" are not failures—and it is often agreed that they are—they at least do not seem to resolve the issues they raise. There is something amiss in each of them, and I would like to try to define the nature and source of the difficulty.

Such inquiries can be made, I think, by conjectures about what the poem's intention might have been, and thus, by seeing what the poem falls short of, we can gain a better idea of what the failure is, and why. It is not impossible to infer the intention of an unrealized work: contrary to Wimsatt and Beardsley, it is *not* the case that, if

a work fails to achieve its intention, we cannot tell what that intention might have been.<sup>1</sup> So long as we have enough in a work to see a partial design, we have enough to infer, by means of the established tendency therein, a possible full design. As with any such problem, we can hypothesize about the plausible alternatives, and then try to decide which is supported by, and throws the most light on, the most evidence. If our deliberations lack the completeness they can have when centered on an achieved work, they nevertheless can make much sense, and extrapolations from what we do have to what we might have had can explain a good deal about what we do have.

Furthermore, although I do not believe that external material is necessarily irrelevant when dealing with achieved works, flawed works do offer an ideal instance of the utility of bringing in relevant material from outside the poem—from the author's letters, for example, and from the cultural commonplaces of the age—which provides links the poem itself does not provide. Such material, in other words, can be the source from which we derive those plausible alternatives. But the benefit is mutual, for in so using this material, we can reciprocate by fashioning somewhat fresher definitions of the author's vision and the period concepts involved.

The result of this little exercise will be, I hope, a slightly clearer idea of Romanticism and Victorianism and Modernism, of their relationships, and of the young Arnold's place therein. For these poems, as we shall see, relate tantalizingly and inconclusively to all three movements, and in so doing, indicate transitionally where these movements are similar and where they are not. My ultimate interest, finally, will lie in showing the continuities, and the meaning of these continuities, between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries in poetry and poetic theory.

## I

"The Strayed Reveller" may be divided into two sections. The first sets the scene for the second, while the second is a speech of almost 170 lines delivered by the Youth. Indeed, it could be said that the poem is an excuse for the speech, but there is, as we shall see, a bit more to it than that.

The Youth is just awakening in the evening, after having spent the day in a state of semi-sleep. He addresses Circe, who is smiling down on him. She asks where he is from, and this provides him with

---

<sup>1</sup>"The Intentional Fallacy" (1946) rpt. in *The Verbal Icon* (1954; Noonday Paperbound Ed., 1958), p. 4: "It is only because an artifact works that we infer the intention of an artificer."

the occasion for some exposition. She then offers him some more of her magic potion, and he swoons once again. At this point, she calls to Ulysses to come forth, and directs his attention to the sleeping boy. We are apparently in Book X of *The Odyssey*, where Odysseus tells the tale of Circe's palace, but I can find no particular dramatic reason why this setting is chosen, for Ulysses' functional role is slight indeed. He is favorably impressed by the boy's looks, and the boy, when he awakens again, recognizes him. Ulysses remarks that the boy has a sweet voice, and wonders whether he is the disciple of "some divine bard" and "learn'd his songs, / of Gods and Heroes, / . . . If so, then hail! / I honour and welcome thee" (ll. 114-129).<sup>2</sup> Ulysses represents heroic action, and the fact that he honors poets has a thematic if not a structural significance.

However this may be, we have heard the last, not only of Ulysses but of Circe as well. All that can be said for the great hero is that he provided the Youth with the subject of his long speech—Gods and bards. This speech itself falls into three parts: what the Gods see (ll. 130-206), what the bards see (ll. 207-260), and the boy's conclusion (ll. 261-297, which also conclude the poem).

The first part portrays a transcendent and divinely serene view of the world and its inhabitants, the import being that the Gods see all things from a blissfully detached point of view, since all they see appears easy and natural and without pain or suffering. The second part reverses the same imagery, and in a parallel fashion portrays the underside of pain and suffering which the bards, from their human point of view, also see and sing. They behold all that the Gods do, but they must also see the underside as well. Here is the transition between the first and second parts:

These things, Ulysses,  
The wise bards also  
Behold and sing.  
But oh, what labour!  
O prince, what pain!  
(ll. 207-211)

The Youth adds, a few lines later, after showing some of the negative aspects of life:

such a price  
The Gods exact for song:  
To become what we sing.  
(ll. 232-234)

---

<sup>2</sup>This and all subsequent references are to *The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold*, eds. C. B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry (London and New York, 1950).

In the third and concluding part the boy explains that old Silenus, who had dropped by Circe's palace at noon, told him these things, but that he (the Youth) had nevertheless spent his whole day looking serenely out at the passing scene (that is, the Bacchic revels) "Without pain, without labour" (l. 274). Now Houghton and Stange imply, in their introductory note to the poem, that all three parts of this speech are parts of his day-long "dreamy, visionary mood, partly described in lines 270-281 [in the third part], partly reflected in the scenes of lines 130-260 [the first two parts], which were suggested to him by a second uninvited visitor to the palace, old Silenus (see ll. 261-269)."<sup>3</sup> However, it seems clear to me that only the third part, and not the first two, portrays what he himself saw all day: Silenus had interrupted, as it were, the boy's own trance-like vision, and tried to teach him something he was apparently not aware of. The point is that the Youth has not yet registered his teaching:

He told me these things.

But I, Ulysses,  
 Sitting on the warm steps,  
 Looking over the valley,  
 All day long, have seen,  
 Without pain, without labour,  
 Sometimes a wild-hair'd Maenad—  
 Sometimes a Faun with torches—etc.  
 (ll. 269-276)

He concludes his speech and the poem by falling into yet another swoon, and calling for the cup once again. The most that can be said about the relationship between the third part and the first two is that the boy's own vision most closely approximates that of the Gods in the first part. And that is just the trouble.

We are faced with a curious dilemma here, for the poem is split and divided against itself in various subtle ways. The poetic logic of the whole calls for *some* sort of reconciliation, however complex, between detachment and involvement, and yet the Youth not only contradicts Silenus' teaching, in his account of how he saw things during the day, he also simply ignores it, in lapsing flatly and without motivation into his own detached and trance-like state. The poem does not remain true to its own givens. What Silenus tells the Youth, which takes the Youth 130 lines to relate, has no discernible effect upon him whatever. It's not that he fails to accept it; he does not even reject it—he just forgets it. What then is the purpose not only of introducing it, but also of doing so through the Youth's own words?

<sup>3</sup>*Victorian Poetry and Poetics*, eds. W. E. Houghton and G. R. Stange (Boston, 1959), p. 401, n. 1.

It is conceivable that, had Arnold presented the scene with Silenus directly instead of through the boy's narration, the boy's lack of awareness might have made some sense. But having him tell it himself, and in such a way as to imply, until the third part, that he is speaking for himself, and then having him merely turn away and fall into another swoon, does not make for artistic coherence. The fault of the poem is that it sets up a problem which it fails to resolve, or even illuminate or embody successfully.<sup>4</sup>

The question now is whether we can recover the poem's failed intention by drawing upon the relevant period concepts. How would it have had to go if a Romantic poet had written it? a Victorian? a Modernist? In order to proceed along these lines, we will have to keep in mind "ideal" models of each period concept, apply it to the poem, let the poem interact with it, and see if we can emerge with a better idea both of the poem and of the period concept. The first stage is to determine which concept serves to develop the most suitable extrapolation from the evidence as we have it in the poem—most suitable, that is, in unifying what is in the poem with itself as well as with the extrapolation—or least suitable, thereby showing us what Arnold could *not* have been trying to do. The next stage is to ask what this exercise tells us, in suggesting what the poem falls *short* of, about the nature and source of the poem's failure. And finally, we inquire into how such speculations help clarify our sense of these period concepts and their relationships. The reasoning, then, works both ways: if such and such is the definition of Romanticism, for example, and if this is, even if only potentially, a Romantic poem, then the characteristics of the poem ought to match those called for in the definition; and conversely, if the poem doesn't fit the definition, then either the poem is not Romantic, even potentially, or it is, and the definition has to be altered accordingly to include it.

---

<sup>4</sup>Commenting on the ending, both Gottfried and Stange see some sort of resolution. Leon Gottfried, *Matthew Arnold and the Romantics* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1963), p. 122: "For the moment the vision is overpowering in its profusion. The pain is yet to come, on doubt when the Dionysiac reveller . . . begins to bring some Apollonian order into his ecstatic visions and seeks to mould meaning out of the chaos of experience." I fail to see, however, any suggestion of this eventuality in the dramatic structure, such as it is, of the poem. G. R. Stange, *Matthew Arnold: The Poet as Humanist* (Princeton, 1967), pp. 27-28: "But he does not see with either the gods' inhuman serenity or the compassionate insight of the wise bards. . . . The implication . . . is that the reveller sees painlessly, but with the fitful and incomplete vision of a young and intoxicated singer." But the fitfulness which Stange points to in the last two strophes of the poem is caused by yet another cup of wine, while what the Youth saw "All day long, . . . / Without pain, without labour," was the Bacchic procession.

To A. Dwight Culler, for example, the poem is coherent, and he sees it from within the context of a Romantic framework.<sup>5</sup> He says the initial contrast is between a poetry which is “objective, serene, and rather shallow, and another which is profound, inward, and tortured.” The first is of course that of the Gods, and the second is that of the bards, but I do not see the validity of Culler’s opposing terms—especially “shallow” vs. “inward.” It could be that the vision of the Gods is *more* profound because it sees all things in terms of a larger harmony—seeing life steadily and seeing it whole, as Arnold would say—and I do not understand why this reading is not even more plausible. Furthermore, I detect nothing necessarily “inward” in the vision of the bards: they see life in terms of its struggle and pain, and they must enter into that life, but “inward” better describes the third vision which Culler postulates later, that in which what the poet sees becomes some aspect of himself rather than his becoming part of what he sees.

In speaking of the initial contrast, Culler says Arnold doesn’t tell us which sort of poetry we ought to prefer, but he does tell us that the “inward” kind is the only kind open to the modern world. Then Culler relates this idea of poetic suffering to Christ, the nineteenth-century notion of the *poète maudit*, and the modern notion of the wound and the bow: the poet’s artistic power is gained by a compensatory loss of power in life. But I do not see what this idea of compensation has to do with the poem, which entails the poet’s involving himself *in* the sufferings of life as the price of his song—not cutting himself *off* from them. I suspect that Culler, in equating empathic projection with inwardness, has now deceived himself into applying to projection terms which are appropriate mainly to inwardness. It seems to me that not only are these terms different, they are also in certain cases opposites.

Culler then goes on to see Circe as a “symbol . . . of a pure formal beauty,” and having already told us that Arnold does not give us his poetic preference, now claims that in his letters of this period Arnold is in the line leading to Rossetti, Pater, Swinburne, and Wilde, in opposing didacticism and choosing perfection of art. I cannot vouch for my interpretation here, for Culler’s argument becomes indistinct at this point, but it seems to me that this notion of aesthetic distance can only mean that Arnold prefers the serene vision of the Gods.

---

<sup>5</sup>*Imaginative Reason: The Poetry of Matthew Arnold* (New Haven, 1966), pp. 68-79.

Having muddled his terms, and then having reversed his own account of Arnold's attitudes, Culler now would have us believe that Arnold rejects the false extremes in each side of the contrast, and really seeks a middle way. This middle way is what, at last, the Youth's final position represents—that in which “the passion of the modern subjectivist poet glows through his sharp, chiselled, Parnassian forms.”

Culler has gone to Arnold's interest at this time in Lessing's distinctions concerning poetry as a mediator between painting (objective) and music (subjective), but he doesn't explain how the Youth gains the passion of the subjectivist poet, which he combines with his chiselled forms, without involving himself in life as Silenus had taught.<sup>6</sup> The Youth, Culler explains, doesn't become what he sees, rather what he sees becomes some aspect of himself; his vision is not the realistic and varied one of the Gods, but is rather composed of the Dionysian forms of his own mind. Since not only many of the Romantics but also most of the Modernists preferred the chameleon-poet as opposed to the egotistical-sublime, to use Keats's terms, it would seem that Culler's implied notion of Romanticism and its relation to the twentieth century needs further consideration. His reading fails to unify Arnold's poem, and it is inconsistent within itself. Nor does he do justice, as we shall see, to Arnold's letters of the period.

Perhaps we should look more closely at the structure of the poem itself. Because its culmination rests on the Youth's trance, the most likely extrapolation is that Arnold intended him to reject the teachings of Silenus, and I think that this could be taken in two ways: the Youth could be making a mistaken and self-destructive choice in turning from involvement to detachment, or he could be making an affirmative and creative choice in favoring the inner life of the artistic imagination as opposed to external and sterile involvements. Either way, the structure would turn upon character, for the Youth's thought includes both possibilities, and he is therefore to be regarded as responsible for whichever course he adopts. It's not what he knows

---

<sup>6</sup>Kenneth Allott, in his annotated edition of *The Poems of Matthew Arnold* (New York, 1965), seems to imply an even more Romantic interpretation than Culler's: “Silenus, the satyr companion and instructor of the youthful Dionysus, is represented as having prophetic powers when drunk. Arnold here accepts poetry as an intoxication that is also a true insight into the human condition” (note to l. 261, p. 74). While it is true that the Youth mentions, at one point, how poets must feel “the maddening wine” of the Centaurs (ll. 223-226), it is mentioned, as with the other examples of this part, only in the context of pain. Surely Allott is confusing Silenus with Circe—at least as far as Arnold's poem is concerned.



or doesn't know, that is, which would determine the outcome, but rather what he chooses. Therefore the effect of the poem will vary as his choice varies, or rather as the meaning of his choice is variously interpreted. The question, then, is what are the possible ways in which this choice could be interpreted, and the answer, as we will see, is quite complicated.

The most obvious possibility is to see the choice from the point of view of "standard" Victorianism, and thereby to say that detachment is wrong, pointing, for example, to Tennyson's "The Palace of Art," "The Lotos-Eaters," and "Locksley Hall," as well as to the teachings of Silenus, Arnold's 1853 Preface, and some of his letters written during the time of the publication of the 1849 volume of poems. He writes to Clough, for example, "that to *re-construct* the Universe [in poetry] is not a satisfactory attempt,"<sup>7</sup> and Houghton and Stange think that Arnold thus rejects the Romantic-Modern notion of recreating life through the artistic imagination (p. 544, n. 4), but I feel that Arnold is rejecting rather the sentimental molding of reality closer to the heart's desire, an idea which one finds favored in the young Newman's essay on Aristotle and Greek drama some eighteen years earlier, and which is not the same thing at all. Yet Culler's theory that the poet composes out of the Dionysian forms of his own mind cannot be right either. In another letter to Clough, Arnold says: "One does not always remember that one of the signs of the Decadence of a literature, one of the factors of its decadent condition indeed, is this—that new authors attach themselves to the poetic expression the founders of a literature have flowered into, which may be *learned* by a sensitive person, to the neglect of an inward poetic life." This passage could hardly place Arnold in the line leading to Wilde. "For in a *man* style is the saying in the best way *what you have to say*" (*Letters*, pp. 64-65).

Arnold wants ideas in literature, then, which grow out of experience, and forms which grow out of content. What he actually *means* by form becomes clearer in several more letters to Clough. He says of Browning and Keats that they were possessed by a desire for "movement and fulness," yet that they achieved "but a confused multitudinousness." What they lack, he thinks, is not so much a sense of style as the power to form conceptions which can organize experience. "They will not be patient neither understand that they must begin

<sup>7</sup>Shortly after Dec. 6, 1847. *The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. H. F. Lowry (London and New York, 1932), p. 63, hereafter cited as *Letters*. All italics in Arnold's letters are his own.

with an Idea of the world in order not to be prevailed over by the world's multitudinousness: or if they cannot get that, at least with isolated ideas: and all other things shall (perhaps) be added unto them" (*Letters*, p. 97). As Arnold has previously rejected the attempt to reconstruct the universe, he can only mean here, not that poetry should be didactic in the obvious sense, but rather that it should be shaped by an informing vision.

Thus Arnold speaks, in another letter, of "Form of Conception" as well as "form of expression," suggesting that there is more to it than simply diction, rhyme, meter, and figures. Form in a poem also includes, and more importantly, the structure of the embodied experience and its significance. "Form of Conception comes by nature certainly," he says, "but is generally developed late: but this lower form, of expression, is found from the beginning amongst all born poets, even feeble thinkers" (*Letters*, p. 99).

The evidence so far indicates that Arnold did not favor a poetry divorced from experience or from ideas, just as he did not favor a concern for form apart from content. So too with "standard" Victorianism generally: isolation of the self from the community, retreat into trance and dream ("The Lotos-Eaters" deals, of course, with the similar effects of a Homeric potion or drug), obsessive concern with personal problems, divorce from reality, the neglect of human suffering, giving way to morbid moods—all are anathema. Nor is this rejection of detachment simply a stuffy form of philistinism: it calls for courage in facing up to all the facts of life and experience, and is only philistinism when it entails, as it too often does, as much of a retreat from the realities of the inner self as that from mankind's struggles which it deplures. Indeed, some of the Romantics themselves were not entirely certain where the balance was to be found, and concerned as they were with the inner life and the problems of art, Wordsworth and Keats, for example, were always concerned with the problems of humanity and of the relation of the Beautiful to the True and the Good.

If the Victorians were ostensibly un-Romantic (and un-Modern) in placing their emphasis upon Duty and the Public Life, the fact remains that the inner self would not stay down, and its claims are eloquently if implicitly voiced in many of the very works which appear to deny them.<sup>8</sup> The insidious relation between money-values and sexual repression is very movingly, if futilely, expressed in "Locksley

---

<sup>8</sup>Cf. E. D. H. Johnson, *The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry* (Princeton, 1952).

Hall," and the lament of the mariners in "The Lotos-Eaters" that their families are probably getting along quite well without them, is plausible enough. Indeed, it is clear that the morbidity which Arnold comes to reject in 1853 is something with which he is quite familiar. Furthermore, there are even Victorian works which openly assert the primacy of the self and the inner life, albeit sometimes with confusion and in bewilderment—Tennyson's "Ulysses," for example, and Arnold's "Scholar-Gipsy." One of the main emphases in the latter's "Function of Criticism" is away from the precipitous forcing of ideas into action, and toward a disinterested contemplation. Or again, as in "Dover Beach," the thrust is clearly toward personal fulfillment as opposed to the distractions of the Age.

Returning to Arnold's letters makes clear, accordingly, that his emphasis on reality and ideas and content must be seen in the context of his concern for art and the self, a concern which Culler, I'm afraid, took somewhat out of *its* context. Arnold tells Clough of "all the exacerbation produced by your apostrophes to duty" (which Houghton and Stange [p. 544, n. 2] take to be something such as "Duty—That's to Say Complying," but which I think is better represented by a poem such as "Say Not the Struggle Nought Availeth").<sup>9</sup> But Clough's ideas do not trouble Arnold so much as his lack of art in expressing them: "Shakespeare says that if imagination would apprehend some joy it comprehends some bringer of that joy: and this latter operation which makes palatable the bitterest or most arbitrary original apprehension you seem to me to despise." Great ideas do not necessarily make great poems, just as mere stylistic skill does not make them either: "to solve the Universe as you try to do is as irritating as Tennyson's dawdling with its painted shell is fatiguing to me to witness" (*Letters*, p. 63). This is just before the appearance, of course, of *In Memoriam*.

In another letter to Clough, he pushes on with his theories toward the formulation of a very Modernist distinction: "A growing sense of the deficiency of the *beautiful* in your poems, and of this alone being properly *poetical* as distinguished from rhetorical, devotional or metaphysical, made me speak as I did." Clough is suffering, Arnold feels, from a "systematic tendency" toward "direct communication, insight, and report" (*Letters*, p. 66). Or again, in a letter to his sister Jane, he says: "More and more I feel bent against the

---

<sup>9</sup>The former poem is dated 1840, the latter 1849.

modern English habit (too much encouraged by Wordsworth) of using poetry as a channel for thinking aloud, instead of making anything."<sup>10</sup>

As for action and involvement, he explains to Clough that "I have never yet succeeded in any one great occasion in consciously mastering myself." What he feels he needs is a sense of self-possession before committing himself to anything, unlike many others "who set to work at their duty self-denial etc. like furies in the dark hoping to be gradually illuminated as they persist in this course." Arnold's "one natural craving," on the other hand, "is not for profound thoughts, mighty spiritual workings etc. etc. but a distinct seeing of my way as far as my own nature is concerned" (*Letters*, p. 110).

Arnold's position here, then, runs directly counter to the youth's in "Locksley Hall" and the aging hero's in "Ulysses," to Browning's constant emphasis, and to what Arnold himself is later to imply in his 1853 Preface, and these latter attitudes are strangely like the current "existential" concern, among certain elements of the Radical Left, on self-definition through action, even violence. Which perhaps goes to show how "Modern" "Victorianism" really is, or rather, more accurately, how "Victorian" "Modernism" really is. Or more seriously, that each period, as well as the relationships between them, must be defined in terms of complex relativities rather than simple absolutes.

However this may be, it would seem that Arnold clearly sees that his age is hostile to the self:

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. (*Letters*, p. 111)

Is not the telling cut at Carlyle due to the latter's gospel of work before thought?

It seems to me that even from a purely Victorian point of view, "The Strayed Reveller" could have gone in either direction. But the issue is not so simple as that: we cannot merely talk abstractly about involvement vs. detachment, for everything will depend upon what these terms refer to. Certain kinds of detachment can be right or wrong from the same Victorian standpoint. The *meaning* of the conflict is not the same in "The Scholar-Gipsy" and "Dover Beach" as it

---

<sup>10</sup>*Unpublished Letters of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Arnold Whitridge (New Haven, 1923), p. 17.

is in "The Strayed Reveller." What is being rejected in the later poems is not the "labor" and "pain" of a suffering humanity, but rather the sterility and fragmentation of the times. Even the despair of the exiled Empedocles is motivated not so much by the difficulties of human life as by the pettiness of men. Detachment is not necessarily wrong, even for a Victorian.<sup>11</sup>

I think, however, the soundest inference is that Arnold intended detachment to be taken pejoratively in this case. We may conclude from the letters Arnold believed that if the poet must aim at inner coherence and artistic unity, he must nevertheless do so in relation to reality and the world as it is. It would seem, therefore, that what Silenus tells the boy—that bards must see the negative as well as the positive side of reality, that they must be involved in what they see, and that involvement in the negative side is the necessary price paid for the more god-like positive view—is what Arnold intended to affirm in the poem. And I take it that it is because the insight of the bards is *less* comprehensive, in being more involved, that they must pay this price.

The fact remains that such intentions, in spite of all our inferences, are not realized, so it behooves us to take yet another tack. It is possible that "The Strayed Reveller" is an early Modernist poem, and is therefore an excellent exhibit for showing that the Victorians were more modern and less philistine than has commonly been assumed. The double vision of the bards is presented more in terms of the ambiguity and ambivalence of images than of overt statement. Ambiguity and ambivalence are even primary virtues from this point of view, and the poem does hold both sides of the opposition in a rich and paradoxical tension.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the quasi-dramatic context reinforces this meaningful paradox, for the boy himself is in a state of detachment, and yet is at the same time explaining what the wise Silenus told him to the active hero, Ulysses. Involvement and detachment are juxtaposed, and the author remains aloof, paring his finger-

<sup>11</sup>Gottfried and Stange, in taking involvement to mean an intoxicated submersion in the flux of experience, which they identify as Romantic, can take detachment to mean control and order, which is Victorian. Cf. *Arnold and the Romantics*, pp. 125-127; *The Poet as Humanist*, pp. 19-20. But it seems to me that for the poet to immerse himself in the *pain* of life is a form of involvement favored by a Victorian point of view.

<sup>12</sup>Stange says: "Several contrasting ways of seeing, or states of mind, have been presented, but no resolution is attempted. . . . *The Strayed Reveller* embodies with great effect and unequaled freshness the sense of the double aspect of things, of the poet's necessity to be of, and yet detached from, life, to know suffering and yet not be subject to it" (pp. 28-29). So too, we recall, did Culler assume Arnold was presenting a third view which balanced the poem.

nails in the expectation that the reader will be encouraged to appreciate how complex the problem is rather than to seek for one definite solution or the other. Seen from this standpoint, Arnold has found an objective correlative for his emotion rather than merely trying to explain it directly, and in doing so has avoided the didactic heresy.

The trouble is that even the Modernist distinguishes between successful and unsuccessful ambiguity, and the simple presentation of opposites which the author cannot make up his mind about, or about which he is confused, does not create the desired effect of tension that the Modernist is looking for. If it did, then Tennyson's "Ulysses," for example, would be a fine Modernist poem, which I am afraid it is not. The basic question, then, is either (1) whether the writer is in artistic *control* of the ambiguity—whether he grasps what the opposing meanings are, and can therefore relate them so as to suggest a higher and more complex truth; or (2), if he does present or imply a choice, whether he does so dramatically and in terms of the price paid for it—in the manner, say, of Yeats in poems such as "Dialogue of Self and Soul" or "Sailing to Byzantium," where either detachment or involvement is preferred, but with a full and ironic acceptance of its opposite—in terms of the very lesson of Silenus itself. The Modernist knows that any position is limited, in the sense that the rejected alternative may contain advantages which have to be sacrificed, and he wants this position to be reached only after a sufficient involvement in struggle.

Structurally, therefore, "The Strayed Reveller," even if it did portray the Youth as making a choice, would be faulty from a Modernist point of view because he is not shown as having "earned" the right to a detached and serene vision of life.

Thematically, it might seem at first glance that Arnold would win the favor of the Modernist critic for courageously having the Youth choose the inner life. But real Modernism is just as different from standard "Modernism" as is real Victorianism from standard "Victorianism," and the hypothetical choice could be interpreted either way from this standpoint. Frost, for example, although he accepts the abyss in "Desert Places," nevertheless rejects it in "Stopping by Woods," even while maintaining his respect for it. Indeed, in "Come In" the speaker deliberately rejects the temptation of despair in favor of control and discipline.

As with Victorianism, then, the choice here between involvement and detachment does not rest on any foregone conclusions, but depends

on what the terms signify in each particular situation as well as upon the way the poet feels he must view them at any given time. The Yeats poems mentioned above present what appear to be contrary positions with equal skill and conviction. The "Dialogue" chooses an involvement in the natural processes of birth and death as opposed to a quasi-religious immortality, while "Sailing to Byzantium" chooses an artificial immortality as opposed to those very same natural processes. Although there is admittedly a certain amount of conscious paradox here, the fact is that "mortality" in "Sailing" means growing old, while in "Dialogue" it means making human mistakes; and "immortality," accordingly, in the one means the imperishable realm of art (whose subject, it should be noted, is mortal life), while in the other it means the spiritual realm of the soul (which is indeed divorced from the natural world). Or again, the isolation of Eliot's Prufrock is certainly not presented for our admiration, nor is the despair of *The Waste Land* to be seen apart from its own implicit affirmation, or from the more explicit counter-movement represented by "Ash Wednesday" and *The Four Quartets*, respectively.

The Modernist, consequently, could take the Youth's hypothetical choice either positively or negatively. Interpreted as an expansion of consciousness in terms of the inward journey, or as an affirmation of man's sensual nature and the primacy of the subconscious, the effect would be favorable. Interpreted, however, as an evasion of responsibility, and hence as a sign of immaturity, the effect would be unfavorable. Indeed, as I hope this exercise is making clear, if Arnold cannot be called a Modernist merely because he is ambiguous, he is very close to Modernism in the way the problem presents itself to him. Even though he is a Victorian, he is just as aware of the significance and importance of the buried life as the Modernist; and the Modernist, even though he belongs to a more relativistic and sophisticated tradition, sometimes comes close to the Victorian's notions of Duty and Responsibility when he speaks of Complexity and Maturity. The difference is primarily due to the Modernist's somewhat more subtle emphases and keener sense of the intricacies involved, while the Victorian is often simply more confused. The Victorian knows the inner and outer lives of the individual must be reconciled, but he is not clear about how to do it; certainly the Modernist doesn't always know how to do it either, but he does have a clearer idea of the possibilities (in the thematic idea of an unstated complex position emerging from the clash of opposites), and especially of how art can embody them (in the structural notion of "earning" a position through

“struggle”). This is a large difference, for poetics, indeed. But since the Victorians are what we know, to paraphrase Eliot, if we have any superiority at all, it is in the wisdom of hindsight.

“The Strayed Reveller,” in sum, fails equally as a Romantic, Victorian, or Modernist poem mainly because it fails as an artistic whole. If Silenus shows the Youth what the issues are, and suggests to him a solution, the fact remains that the Youth enacts the opposite. And if the poem objectifies in dramatic form the subjective tensions of the author, the fact remains that the distance between the poet and the poem is too great, and that the parts of the poem itself are related more arbitrarily than organically. It is an uncommitted poem about commitment, and its form is as detached as its protagonist. The statuesque and pageant-like quality results in a curious effect of suspended animation, and the insight into the relation between art and human suffering is inadvertently neutralized by the very means employed to embody it.

What do we have left, then? At most a poem about a poet who is simply too young to appreciate what Silenus has taught him. We are to deplore his ignorance, but yet are to tolerate it as a forgivable error of youth. Something like this interpretation is suggested by Houghton and Stange in their introductory note: “The Youth is a very young man, pointedly contrasted in this respect with both Circe and Ulysses, ambitious of being a poet, but as yet without the experience which his Romantic theory of poetry requires” (p. 401, n. 1). But it bears repeating that this theory of poetry is Silenus’ rather than the boy’s. One may ask why it is “Romantic”—all things considered, one would have thought it was more Victorian. Perhaps the notion of the poet becoming what he sings is a reflection, as I have suggested, of Keats’s theory of empathic projection, but I think the element of suffering for the pain of others represents in Arnold’s poem an addition. For a description of the Romantic poet, Houghton and Stange refer us to Arnold’s essay (1863) on Maurice de Guérin (pp. 401, 505-506),<sup>18</sup> where we encounter such ideas as this: “He hovers over the tumult of life, but does not really put his hand to it.” Surely this is rather the

---

<sup>18</sup>Allott makes much of de Guérin also (p. 65, headnote; p. 66, note to ll. 3-6). I have read many times that the notion of immersion in the flux of experience, and of the poet’s sufferings, are Romantic commonplaces, but I think that often critics are confusing the effects of Circe’s wine on the Youth with Silenus’ teachings: intoxication may plunge one into the flux of experience, and being so highly sensitized may be painful, but what Silenus says, on the other hand, is that the poet must feel the *pain of others*. Thus it is possible for the Romantic poet to immerse himself in experience—that is, his own reactions to life—while at the same time remaining aloof from the experience of others.



opposite of Silenus' teaching! Houghton and Stange also refer to Arnold's "Resignation": "though that emphasizes," they say, "a stoic detachment in the contemplation of life which is not suggested here."

If the poem is confusing, I think in this case it is because the poet was confused. Arnold, like his protagonist, was too young—he was but twenty-seven—to be able to absorb his own knowledge, and so was unable to unify the poem, either in structure or theme. I think Mark Schorer's influential Modernist idea that technique is discovery is only partially true: a writer cannot come to understand his material simply by finding the appropriate way of presenting it. Arnold's techniques, it seems to me, are potentially quite effective in this poem. Indeed, it can be said with equal plausibility that the writer cannot exploit the proper technique until he has come to understand his material. In the most profound sense, he cannot resolve a problem in writing that he cannot resolve within himself. I do not necessarily mean that his "life" has to be as wise as his "poems"; clearly, he can act out things on paper more completely than he can in life. This is one of the functions of art, as Santayana showed in the final chapter of *Poetry and Religion* (1900),<sup>14</sup> and it is in this sense that Schorer is right: successfully writing something out helps one to understand it better.

But even here, it seems to me, we have to be in a prior state of readiness before such a process can work at all, and this state is a requirement both for writers and readers. A clever poet is not necessarily an insightful or loving person, and a professor is not always humanized and ennobled by his devotion to poetry (see Yeats's "The Scholars"). One cannot write what he cannot conceive of, nor can one appreciate something in his reading that he is not ready to grasp. In some urgent way, he must already be traveling in the direction of the poem within himself, whether as its author or its reader, before he can either write it or be affected by it. No amount of technique by itself could ever do it for him.

Isn't this readiness exactly what Silenus is talking about? Poets must become what they sing, not simply in the sense of empathic projection, but in the sense of going through, at least in their inner selves, the experience they want to write about. Not in any simple-minded way: as Henry James points out in "The Art of Fiction" (1884), the writer can develop a general sense of life from knowing one particular corner of it deeply and well.<sup>15</sup> One doesn't have to ex-

<sup>14</sup>*Literary Criticism in America*, ed. A. D. Van Nostrand (New York, 1957), p. 206.

<sup>15</sup>*Literary Criticism in America*, pp. 148-149.

perience jealousy in one's personal life before one can write *Othello*—one must merely have the power of imagining it intensely. If a writer is open to the turmoil of his *own* spirit and the risks of reality, he'll have a better notion of what *others* are going through who, although they may be different, are nevertheless similarly open to turmoil and risk.

Perhaps this openness is Romantic if it is similar to what Keats meant when he said that truth is not truth until it is tested on our pulses. But it is also Classical, if it is similar to what Horace meant when he said if you would move me, you must first be moved yourself. Perhaps it is also Victorian if it means involvement, and Modern if it means maturity. Either way, no one can know much about life who has not taken the risk of facing its menace and joy within and for himself.

This risk is what Arnold knew he had not yet taken when he wrote his sister Jane in 1849 that his poems were fragments because he was fragments (Whitridge, p. 18), and this failure is what he acknowledges nine years later when he tells her he has not been able to face up to it (“an actual tearing of oneself to pieces, which one does not readily consent to”).<sup>16</sup> “The Strayed Reveller” could not be more coherent than he was, and the lesson of Silenus ultimately proved even more difficult for Arnold to absorb than for his protagonist.

## II

Although “The Forsaken Merman” deals equally ambivalently with a similar theme, it is structurally more of a piece. No longer merely statuesque or an occasion for set speeches, the action is relatively striking, dramatic, and unified. The poem may be seen as falling into three sections. The Merman, who speaks throughout, begins by admonishing his children to come away and return with him to the sea (ll. 1-29). Their mother is a human, and she has evidently returned to the human community from whence she came. They have come to seek her, and to get her to come back. But it has been in vain, and they must return without her. This return is the present moment of the action. In the second section (ll. 30-84), the Merman, still speaking to his children, recalls the previous day, when their mother heard the Easter bells ringing from the church, and decided she had to return for the good of her soul. This speech explains her motivation. He had told her to go up and pray, and then to come

---

<sup>16</sup>Aug. 6, 1858. *Letters of Matthew Arnold 1848-1888*, ed. G. W. E. Russell (New York and London, 1895), I, 72.

back. When she did not reappear, however, he became impatient, and went with his children up to find her. They saw her in the church, but she did not respond, "For her eyes were seal'd to the holy book" (l. 81). At the end of the second section and the beginning of the third (ll. 85-143), the Merman's speech has returned to the present moment—"Come away, children, call no more"—and then turns toward the future. Here he foresees the consequences of his wife's desertion, first for her, and then for himself and the children. Apparently, although she'll be happy having returned to Christian society, she'll nevertheless have a heavy heart remembering the family she left behind. As for them, having returned to their subaqueous world, they will miss her terribly, but they will resent what she has done.

Technically and structurally, most of the elements of the poem cohere and are related in an effective way. The situation exerts real pressure on the protagonist dramatically, and what he says is an out-growth of it. Although a sequence of past, present, and future moments is presented by means of a single speech in the present moment, it is done smoothly, on the whole, and with a corresponding gain in immediacy and intensity. Narration and exposition are thereby contained within the context of the Merman's address to his children, urging them to come away, and so are absorbed into the action itself. The only awkwardness, I think, is that the middle section—"Children dear, was it yesterday"—does seem to protrude a little, for clearly these words are directed at the reader rather than the children, but this is a minor flaw in a poem that does not purport to be realistic in the first place.

Furthermore, the conception and its embodiment are quite interesting. What we have here, in effect, is "The Return of the Strayed Reveller," and the issues are much more clearly drawn. The wife, after having sampled the life of primitive nature, decides to return to the world of the Christian community. But the problem is no longer simply whether a poet should involve himself in mankind's suffering or remain blissfully detached; it is rather a matter of two distinct worlds and of their impingement upon one another. I find the inversions and complexities here effective indeed; we have come up out of the Youth's world, and into Silenus'; the representative of Silenus' world is here a woman—a wife and mother; and yet the whole is nevertheless told sympathetically from the point of view of the deserted husband and children, the representatives of the Youth's world.

Free of Arnold's own personal confusions about poetry and being a poet, this poem concerns paganism and Christianity, and about these

issues the young Arnold could, at least on the surface, be relatively more clear. And yet, as before, the poem fails to resolve, illuminate, or embody its problem successfully. It is true that the opposition is presented in suitably Christian, even Puritan, terms, but at the same time it is also true that the life of primitive nature is presented in terms which are excessively civilized. It is strange, after all, that the predominant emotion of the forsaken one is regret for his motherless children. The dramatic structure is not exactly consistent, as I see it, with the erotic implications of the theme and symbol. Even Tennyson's "Locksley Hall," which is more explicit still about the conflict between Victorian society and individual sexuality—"I will take some savage woman, she shall rear my dusky race"—and which finds something of a parallel here in Arnold's human woman rearing children beneath the waters with a merman—even Tennyson's poem raises the issue only to evade it. Neither poet is sufficiently in control of the implications of the theme: Tennyson would have us regard this passage as merely the desperate ravings of a callow youth, while Arnold would have us see his Merman primarily as an abandoned husband who is left with the children to take care of. What, then, are we to think of his wife's return to her proper home?

We can reasonably hypothesize that, had the poem been written from a Romantic point of view, the emphasis would have been on sympathy for the Merman; had it been written from a Victorian point of view, it would have been for the wife; and had it been written from a proto-Modernist point of view, it would have been suspended between the two. Which possibility seems to throw the most light on the poem's intention?

Sympathy is indeed aroused for the Merman, and the town to which his wife returns is strangely sterile—almost nightmarish, "to the white-wall'd town; / Through the narrow paved streets, where all was still, / To the little grey church on the windy hill"<sup>17</sup> (ll. 69-71). Yet how can the poem be seen as Romantic when the natural-pagan side of the conflict is presented in familial rather than sensual terms? It may be that the civilized-Christian side is presented effectively in a negative way—although even here the wife's song of joy and children ("O joy, O joy, / For the humming street, and the child with its toy!" [ll. 89-90]) sounds a contradictory note—but the dichotomy is left dangling, as it were, with one of its poles foreshortened. The opposi-

---

<sup>17</sup>For Culler, the wife "was clearly wrong," and her world is that of the bleak middle class (see *Imaginative Reason*, pp. 20-21). But this seems to me a rather flat way of going about it.

tion which the natural-pagan force should create is undercut by the very terms in which it is expressed.

This is entirely curious, for if the poem be regarded from a "Victorian" standpoint, there is by the same token an even more serious confusion to be confronted. From this angle, our sympathies would shift from paganism to Christianity, from the Merman to Margaret, and yet the fact that what she is leaving behind is presented in such domestic terms, places what she is choosing instead in a rather ambiguous light. W. Stacy Johnson's interpretation of this poem highlights the difficulty.<sup>18</sup> The water world, he says, here represents "the natural world of flux and freedom; the conflict between it and the human land is associated now with the conflict between the isolated natural self and the social or moral self." But that is only what it *would* have been, had Arnold not confused "the isolated natural self" by adding to it marriage and a family. Furthermore, the only portrayal of "the social or moral self" in the poem, aside from the church scene, is that of Margaret spinning at her wheel, apparently alone. She does sing, as we have seen, and that "most joyfully." But this of course only serves to remind us—and her—of her own abandoned children, and she weeps for her lost family.

Johnson goes on, rightly, I think, to interpret the divorce between the natural and human worlds as not being a black and white opposition: "Neither of the alternatives is complete in itself; for the social, the civilized man must feel himself incomplete and so must the natural man." This part is clear enough. But what of the fact that Arnold muddles the distinction between the alternatives? "On the land," explains Professor Johnson, "companionship results from communion, from common worship; men are brothers when they have one Father, marriages are made in the image of the divine spirit's marriage with the flesh. In the ocean, kinship derives from immanent bonds, the bonds of the family which are those of living flesh alone."

This reading is ingenious and persuasive, and it has the further merit of trying to account for what Arnold has actually done. Except for the fact, as I have already noted, that, apart from the children mentioned only in her song, Arnold does not *portray* any marriage at all, or even much companionship, in the human community. Johnson has accordingly had to shift his argument from social and moral terms to religious ones, thereby glossing over Arnold's real confusion between them. Johnson has tried to find a thematic coherence which the

---

<sup>18</sup>*The Voices of Matthew Arnold* (New Haven, 1961), pp. 84-90.

dramatic structure will not support. How can choosing “the social or moral self” be reconciled with abandoning one’s family on religious grounds? Aren’t husband and children among the central religious responsibilities of the very community to which Margaret is returning? Granted that marriage and children outside the church are unsanctified, I doubt that Arnold’s Christianity would be so colonialistic as really to sanction the breaking of such bonds simply because they were “those of living flesh alone” (although perhaps Tennyson’s Christianity could, at least in the passage from “Locksley Hall” cited above). Christianity, and certainly society and morality, would *include* such bonds rather than dismiss them: in a “social or moral world,” higher responsibilities cannot cancel out the lower ones; in a Christian community, religious values must include social and moral ones.<sup>19</sup>

Now of course it could be argued that Arnold was simply following his sources in these matters, and that if his poem portrays subaqueous domesticity, it must be because the Danish legend portrayed it first, which it naturally does. But an inspection of these materials in Tinker and Lowry will reveal that Arnold has introduced significant alterations, and that they tend in general to blur the distinction between paganism and Christianity rather than sharpen it.<sup>20</sup> Professor Johnson points out that Arnold added three things to these materials: he placed the story within the context of the Merman’s rather than the landsman’s point of view; he intensified the contrast between land and sea; and he specified the season as Easter. Clearly the first works against Johnson’s own interpretation, while the second and third could be possibly seen as supporting it—although one of the sources does say that Margaret’s return took place “one festival morning.”

More important, however, are five other changes unmentioned by Johnson: first, Arnold has omitted the original seduction of the woman by the Merman (one source says he “decoyed her by his speeches,” and another has him saying, “Come with me, Grethe, and I will give you as much gold and silver as your heart can wish”); second, he has omitted the Merman’s demonic aspect (“His eyes they shone like a yellow flame; / His face was white, and his beard was

---

<sup>19</sup>It is true, of course, that Christ advised his followers to give up everything and come with him, and also that his behavior toward his own mother wasn’t always clear, but it is also true that the family was at the center of Victorian Christianity, and that the wife in Arnold’s poem is not giving up everything to follow Christ—she merely exchanges one family for another, one community for another.

<sup>20</sup>C. B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry, *The Poetry of Matthew Arnold: A Commentary* (New York, 1940), pp. 129-132.

green— / A fairer demon was never seen”); third, he has added the fact that the children accompany the Merman in his unsuccessful visit to the church; fourth, he has made the wife’s renewed life in the town more lonely (she “ever after stayed with her parents,” says one of the sources); and finally, he has omitted the fact that one of the sources refers to her abandoned offspring as “ugly little children.”

The net effect of these changes is, of course, to make the Merman in Arnold’s version more domestic and more sympathetic. On the other hand, had Arnold written the poem Johnson assumes he wrote, he could have done so by following his sources more closely. Therefore Arnold’s confusions cannot be attributed to the Danish legend. Emphasizing the Merman’s demonism, and correspondingly de-emphasizing his domesticity, which the legend encourages, could have resulted in a poem consistent either with Romantic or Victorian predilections. As it is, there is not sufficient motivation for generating a meaningful conflict either way. Does it not matter what Margaret had been *doing* down there in the “Sand-strewn caverns”? So far as we know, she has been—not even drinking Circe’s wine—raising a family (“Once she sate with you and me,” the Merman tells his children, “On a red gold throne in the heart of the sea, / And the youngest sate on her knee. / She comb’d its bright hair, and she tended it well, / When down swung the sound of a far-off bell” [ll. 50-54]). Why does this child-care imperil her poor soul?

Again, perhaps paradox and ambiguity are the effects intended, and this poem is best seen in Modernist terms. In recreating a Danish legend for the purpose, Arnold has found his objective correlative. And life under the sea is a very good symbol for the repressed life of the unconscious, with its barely suggested erotic overtones. It reminds us clearly of the closing lines of Eliot’s “Prufrock”:

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves  
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back  
When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea  
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown  
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

And finally, Arnold does not represent the choice either of the Merman or his wife as an easy one: he will miss her, but still resent her; she will remain firm in her human duty, but still will feel a yearning love for him and the children. In other words, the final position has been “earned” on both sides, and the price is being paid. Her cruelty is softened by her nostalgia (“And anon there breaks a sigh, . . . For

the cold strange eyes of a little Mermaid / And the gleam of her golden hair" [ll. 101-107]), and the fate of her abandoned family is made even more pathetic by *their* nostalgia. So they are frozen forever in this painful attitude, and even though their worlds are once again divided, there still exists a two-way emotional connection between them.

But this is still not a successful Modernist poem, for even though Arnold deals thus paradoxically with the suppressed life of the subconscious, he does not do so with any sharp awareness of what he is doing. I do not wish to be mistaken on this point. Arnold has, as Johnson agrees, left the poem balancing between its alternatives, neither of which is satisfactory in itself, and I would not want Arnold to have made a definite choice between them. Either a Modern or a Victorian treatment could have left this balance structurally as it is, and the difference would have been merely a difference in thematic emphasis. Each would place a different value on the terms of the conflict—the Victorian viewing the human community more positively, and the Modern seeing the natural self more positively—and yet each could nevertheless realize that its preference was incomplete without the other.

The trouble with the poem, then, is not that Arnold should have made a different choice, or even that he should have made a choice at all. Nor is the trouble that he has given positive values to both sides of the conflict. It is rather that he has given *similar* positive values to each: family loyalty and the Christian community belong to the same cluster of values. A fruitful ambiguity, on the other hand, could have been created by attributing *different* positive values to each side, so that one set of advantages would be seen as being sacrificed to achieve the other. Thus a Victorian treatment would have shown that, as Johnson argues, although one must return to the human community, a divorce from the natural self is the price paid for doing so; while a Modernist treatment would have shown that, although one must affirm the natural self, a divorce from society is the price paid. As it is, my analysis of the poem and its sources shows that Arnold did neither.

The real terms of the conflict are thus not clear. Paganism vs. Christianity? Eros vs. Civilization? Family Responsibility vs. Salvation of the Soul? Whether regarded either from a Romantic, Victorian, or Modern point of view, the picture remains unfocused. The family situation prevents us from taking the Eros theme seriously, while at the same time it prevents us from feeling comfortable with the Religion theme. If Arnold wanted us to sympathize with the Religion theme, he should not have had Margaret merely abandon her family;



if he wanted us to sympathize with the Eros theme, he should not have made the Merman such a domestic paragon. In either case, whether positively or negatively, there should have been more development of lawless sexuality and isolation on the one side, and of community and morality on the other.

What, then, *did* he write? My guess is that Arnold originally intended to place, in line with his sources, Margaret's return to the town in a sympathetic light—she is, after all, concerned over the fate of her immortal soul—but that, sensing the sympathetic pull of the abandoned husband's situation, he decided to place the Merman in a somewhat favorable light as well. In this way, he could deepen the painful pathos latent in the situation, and broaden its thematic significance at the same time. In doing so, however, he backed off from the obvious erotic implications, and gave his hero a more “acceptable” set of attractions. Once on this line, he found he could allow all of his hitherto repressed feelings for the Merman to flow safely forth, and so he shifted the emphasis the other way round, not realizing that he was crossing his wires at the center of the poem. The result is that the Merman's domesticity, as a displaced substitute for natural sexuality, is a symbol, in the Freudian sense, for its opposite:<sup>20</sup> the imagery continues to carry the theme—“Where the sea-snakes coil and twine” (l. 41)—which the dramatic situation attempts to disguise.

That is why, it seems to me, “The Forsaken Merman” is not coherent thematically, even though it is unified structurally. This presents us with a rather different sort of failure from that of “The Strayed Reveller,” where the thematic conflict was more clearly drawn, but whose structure failed to cohere. If the young Arnold had difficulty in reconciling the detachment and involvement of the poet, he had even more difficulty in reconciling sex and Christianity—although, because he hit upon an apparent way out of his impasse, he could write a better poem in the latter case. Yet, if its surface is more successful, its underlying confusion is more profound. I suspect that a confusion over sexuality underlies a confusion over the poet's role, and that to clarify the former would help clarify the latter. An anxiety about involvement in experience is at bottom an anxiety about sex. As Arnold himself says in his letters, a poet cannot successfully unify form and content until he has shaped the variety of life into an informing vision, and he cannot thus shape life until he has organized his inner self. What Arnold was less clear about is that one cannot organize one's inner self until he has confronted not the age, which he was in the habit of too easily blaming, but the fear of his own repressions.