Patterns of Imagery:
Cyclical and Ascending Movements in
The Poetry of Matthew Arnold
and
The Search for a Poetic

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Introduction

The Strayed Reveller and Other Poems, Matthew Arnold's first book of poetry, was published in February 1849. The twenty-seven poems included in this volume, of a depth of thought and feeling not to be expected from its gay title, were the result of a well-developed poetic consciousness and were, at the same time, experiments in poetics: experiments in form, in metrics, in imagery and in subject matter. Arnold's first book shows that he was trying to formulate an aesthetic creed and to define, for himself, the concept of the poetic function. He was deeply concerned with the role of the poet in the nineteenth century. These poems and the letters, written during the same period, to his friend Arthur Hugh Clough and to his favorite sister, Jane, in which he defined his evolving poetic creed, are the result of conflicting demands. They are part of his search for self-understanding.

Arnold saw himself as "a reformer in poetical matters....bent against the modern English habit (too much encouraged by Wordsworth) of using poetry as a channel for thinking aloud." [1] He defended an aesthetic theory of poetry whereby its main end was to create a

thing of beauty that would give pleasure. This could be achieved, he said, by "grouping objects" so as to appeal to the senses. He criticized Clough for "the deficiency of the beautiful in your poems,...this alone being properly poetical as distinguished from rhetorical, devotional, or metaphysical;" for trying "to solve the Universe;" for "trying to get into and to the bottom of an object;" and for exciting "curiosity and reflexion" instead of giving "PLEASURE." At the same time, he criticized Tennyson for "dawdling with [the Universe's] painted shell." From these opinions, we can infer that Arnold fled from two extremes in poetry: poetry which was tediously moral and didactic and poetry which was merely decorative. His ideal was poetry that was beautiful and that gave pleasure, but which was not an empty shell. Poetry was saying "what you have to say" in a subtle, indirect way, rather than blatantly preaching. He did not say poetry must not be moral, but that it must give pleasure. In spite of his harsh criticism of Clough, however, his first volume of poetry presented the same anxieties, preoccupations and doubts as Clough's poems, although in a more sophisticated, artistic manner. Arnold's artistry almost masks these tensions, blending them organically into his poetic concepts. He strove to achieve a unity of matter, structure and form. He stressed form and expression, and not moral qualities of thought as

the prime requisites of poetry.[2]

Thus to fully appreciate Arnold's early poetry we must consider not only what he says but we must concentrate on how he says it, that is, we must analyze how he unites matter and form. Because Arnold is a sophisticated, complex and intellectual poet, this is a complicated matter. Robert G. Stange calls him "a writer of extreme subtlety of mind and formidable austerity of manner" who expected his readers "to share his own remote excitements and follow the windings of his complicated intellectual process, without offering them surface drama, delights of language, or shock to the senses."[3]

Arnold's search for a correct poetic continued after he published his first volume of poetry. Soon he began to stress the moral aspect of poetry, probably as a result of the criticism of his early poems by his family, his friends and the critics. In 1852 he wrote to Clough that poetry must become "a complete magister vitae as the poetry of the ancients did: by including, as theirs did, religion with poetry, instead of existing as religion only, and leaving religious wants to be supplied by the Christian religion."[4] Arnold's search for a poetic was influenced by the age's demand for moral guidance from its men of letters and many of his poems and letters evince a struggle between his preference for poetry which was purely aesthetic and the Victorian

ideal of moral aesthetics.

Arnold's best poems encompass much more than at first strikes the reader. The poems are built around complicated patterns of imagery, some of which provide metaphorical unity to his entire poetic oeuvre.[5] Arnold depends on imagery and on situations to express his ideas. His poetic theory is organic: the parts are subjected to the whole and their different aspects contribute to the over-all effect and enhance its meanings. We must carefully analyze Arnold's complicated intellectual processes, as well as his poetics, in order to appreciate the full scope of his poetry.

In this paper I aim to trace and analyze two connected aspects of the complicated web of imagery which runs through several of Arnold's early poems and one related late poem.

Poetic Imagery: Arnold's Use of Cyclical and Ascending Movements

A poetic image in its simplest terms is a picture or image evoked by words. It is often purely descriptive. At other times an image which appears at first to be descriptive may, when further considered and analyzed, convey to our imagination more than the reflection of an external reality. It may have the power to suggest, to evoke or to awaken in us a sense of deeper import. It is this last use of poetic imagery which makes poetry so rich and complex.

A poet often develops his own special patterns of imagery and uses them, recurringly, in his poems to create his own special system or code of symbolism. Such a system or code of symbolism enhances what the poet has to say. Through the use of such recurring patterns of imagery, a poet conveys what he may have found difficult to put into words or is unable to illustrate clearly, in any other way. His form and matter thus complement each other. This, I shall try to show, is the case of Matthew Arnold.

Among certain recurring patterns of imagery Arnold uses are <u>cyclical</u> and <u>ascending</u> movements.

These movements are at times physical movements described by and contained within a poem, or they can be metaphorical, or a whole poem may consist of one of these movements.

The ascending movement, in the physical sense, is often but not always represented by the ascent of a mountain. Metaphorically, this climbing movement denotes a challenge, a striving to reach a goal and, for Arnold, the Victorian march of progress. At other times, the climbing movement denotes a metaphorical ascent to the source of Truth. In "Rugby Chapel" the ascending movement becomes a parable of the way of life.

The cyclical movement of Arnold's poems stands in opposition to the ascending movement. It derives from repeated patterns, analogous to and often represented by nature and the eternal process of seasonal changes which are cyclical and repetitive. Contrary to the ascending movement, which generally denotes a challenge, the cyclical movement in the early poems represents a harmonious, soothing state of conformity or resignation.

The use of these two image patterns, separately or in apposition, enhances Matthew Arnold's poetic statements in the works I shall consider here. At the same time, these spatial images represent the stages in Arnold's search for an adequate poetic.

"The Strayed Reveller"

> The trying to go into and to the bottom of an object instead of grouping objects is as fatal to the sensuousness of poetry as the mere painting, (for in Poetry, that is not grouping) is to its airy and rapidly moving life....
>
> You succeed best you see, in fact, in the hymn, where man, his deepest personal feelings being in play, finds poetical expression as man only, not as artist:—but consider whether you attain the beautiful, and whether your product gives PLEASURE, not excites curiosity and reflexion.
>
> Letter to Clough, February 1849 [1]

"The Strayed Reveller," title poem of Arnold's first volume of poetry, is an early poem and one of the finest he ever wrote. A well-written, carefully polished work of art that stands by itself and says exactly what the poet meant to say, this poem is about poetry and the role of the poet. Even more importantly, it is an exercise in poetics, a tour de force in which the poet effectively puts into practice the poetic theories he had been and would continue discussing and defending in his letters to Clough at this stage in his development. In "The Strayed Reveller" Arnold effectively unites matter and form and achieves his goal of attaining the beautiful and giving pleasure in a way in which he was seldom able to do again. This

deceptively simple poem and the seemingly effortless ease with which the lines flow deafen the reader to the sound of the poet's "sinews cracking under the effort to unite matter." [2] To achieve this effect of smoothness required all of Arnold's ingenuity. In the process, he experimented with rhythm and meter, structure and form. The resulting poem, innovative in its metrics, is a masterpiece in terms of structure.

"The Strayed Reveller" is written in free verse--the verse paragraphs are of irregular length and there is neither rhyme nor conventional meter. This is a very early use of free verse in English poetry, [3] and Arnold uses it effectively to convey a number of effects: the Youth's intoxicated euphoria, Circe's allure, and even Ulysses' formality.

The obvious structure of the poem, that of a drama--in that it follows the three unities prescribed by Aristotle and is spoken entirely by the dramatis personae--is yet primarily lyric, rather than dramatic. "The Strayed Reveller" consists of the grouping of "objects" Arnold described in his letter to Clough, in this case a series of vignettes or beautiful and vivid pictures, which form the substance of the dialogue.

Although the structure of the poem seems dramatic, there is another, less obvious but more significant framework around which the poem is constructed. That framework, which gives the poem its unity, consists of

a carefully balanced series of cyclical or circular movements--a series of repetitions and of parallel images and sub-structures--which build up, accentuate and reinforce the general circular structure of the poem. The entire poem is based on these subtly repeated patterns and parallel structures. The main ones are:

First, the poem ends as it began. The first and last stanzas are the same:

> Faster, faster,
> O Circe, Goddess,
> Let the wild, thronging train,
> The bright procession
> Of eddying forms,
> Sweep through my soul!
>
> (ll. 1-6; 292-297) [4]

These delicately-wrought stanzas convey the effect of the wine upon the Youth; the repetition emphasizes the Youth's urgent desire to re-experience the exhilarating state of abandon and heightened sensibility produced by Circe's wine. The sleep he has fallen into is not a drunken stupor, but rather a trance or state of intensified sensory perception.

Second, the poem is built around two conversations of the Youth in which he does most of the talking, first with Circe, and then with Ulysses. Each of the conversations is sub-divided and contains parallel images that provide contrast and balance. The Youth's two speeches consist mostly of flashbacks to the earlier events of his day. When he speaks to Circe, we

see the importance of the time scheme of the poem--he makes a pointed contrast between morning and evening, using parallel images and situations. We note the Youth's change of mood from morning to evening, and that he has come down from high in the valley to Circe's palace, which he saw through the trees. The Youth's descent suggests the passing of the day and his own "fallen" or strayed position. The Youth's second conversation, with Ulysses, consists of two parallel sets of remembered scenes in which he contrasts the vision of the Gods and the vision of the poets.

Third, the Youth awakens twice within the framework of the poem, and twice asks for wine. As the poem begins, he is just awakening from a drunken slumber--"Whence art thou, sleeper?" (1.23), Circe asks him. Then, after their conversation, she gives him more wine so that he can sleep again. When he awakens from this second slumber, he speaks to Ulysses and again asks for more wine so that he can relive the experience he has just had (of speaking with Ulysses)--to continue or repeat the cycle, as it were.

The two conversations which make up "The Strayed Reveller"--between the Youth and Circe and the Youth and Ulysses--take place in the evening on the portico of Circe's palace. The action of the poem is deceptively simple: Circe finds a sleeping Youth, overcome

by the effects of her wine, on the steps of her palace, and she asks him from where he comes. The Youth tells her, then drinks more wine and falls back into a slumber. Next he is awakened by Circe's and Ulysses' conversation and speaks at length with Ulysses before asking Circe for more of her wine. Although the action of this scene takes place very quickly, the time scheme of the whole poem consists of a full day, as the Youth relates, in two flashbacks, what has occurred to him during that day. Early in the morning, he came down from his home high in the mountains to join the day's Bacchic celebrations, but, happening upon Circe's empty palace, he drank of her wine. As a result, the Youth has spent the rest of the day unconscious of the passing of time, in a dream-like, intoxicated state of intensified sensation, induced by the wine. He says, moreover, that during this same time, he was visited by the satyr Silenus, whose conversation led him to experience a series of vivid visions.

The time scheme of a single day from morning to night and the setting in the portico of Circe's palace are important features in the poem--evidenced by Arnold's addition of stage directions specifying the setting, his only major change to the poem in later years. [5] Time and setting are emphasized in the dialogue, but, by adding this information at the beginning of the poem, Arnold meant to alert us to its importance. A vivid

series of parallelisms that stress both the setting and the passing of the day by obliquely contrasting dawn and dusk and by emphasizing the descent from the hut (high in the valley) down to Circe's palace also appear in the Youth's conversation with Circe.

The Youth's somewhat contrived opening speech, almost too pictorial to seem natural, can be explained as stemming from the state of intensified perception the wine has induced in him. He is not in a drunken stupor, usually associated with alcohol, but in a relaxed, semi-conscious state of well-being and aloofness from everyday problems. We know this because the Youth speaks, at all times, soberly and clearly. He does not speak the language of intoxication: his speech is the result of and to an extent reproduces the exuberance and exhilaration he feels. His profusion of images--visual, tactile, thermal, kinesthetic and olfactory--reflect his heightened sensibility. The opening (and final) stanza, which provides a clue to the cyclicality of the poem, is a plea for more wine. It conveys the exhilaration the wine has induced in him and betrays his urgent desire to recapture this state at its most intense (as quoted above):

> Faster, faster,
> O Circe, Goddess,
> Let the wild, thronging train,
> The bright procession
> Of eddying forms,
> Sweep through my soul!
>
> (ll. 1-6; 292-297)

The stanza sets the tone and establishes the mood of the poem.

The Youth's opening speech of six irregular stanzas or verse paragraphs is divided into two sections by Circe's question, "Whence art thou, sleeper?" Both sections are highly pictorial and carefully balanced. The Youth at first emphasizes the evening setting and the way Circe appears to him; in the second section he concentrates on a description of the morning, of nature, and of his descent to the palace:

The Youth

Thou standest, smiling
Down on me! thy right arm,
Lean'd up against the column there,
Props thy soft cheek;
Thy left holds, hanging loosely,
The deep cup, ivy-cinctured,
I held but now.

Is it, then, evening
So soon? I see, the night-dews,
Cluster'd in thick beads, dim
The agate brooch-stones
On thy white shoulder;
The cool night-wind, too,
Blows through the portico,
Stirs thy hair, Goddess,
Waves thy white robe!

Circe

Whence art thou, sleeper?

The Youth

When the white dawn first
Through the rough fir-planks
Of my hut, by the chestnuts,
Up at the valley-head,
Came breaking, Goddess!
I sprang up, I threw round me

My dappled fawn-skin;
Passing out, from the wet turf,
Where they lay, by the hut door,
I snatch'd up my vine-crown, my fir-staff,
All drench'd in dew—
Came swift down to join
The rout early gather'd
In the town, round the temple,
Iacchus' white fane
On yonder hill.

Quick I pass'd, following
The wood-cutters' cart-track
Down the dark valley;—I saw
On my left, through the beeches,
Thy palace, Goddess,
Smokeless, empty!

(ll. 7-45)

Within the two parts of the Youth's conversation are parallel images which accentuate the setting and the time scheme and, in so doing, create a balance between the two parts. In the first section, the Youth, when he realizes it is evening, evinces a sudden surprise--"Is it, then evening / So soon?"--and proceeds to describe, in sensual and pictorial terms the evening as it affects Circe. He notes the "night-dews" on Circe's brooch and then describes the "cool night-wind" (a thermal image) which "stirs" her hair and "waves" her robe (two kinesthetic images).

The Youth's description of evening is balanced by his detailed description of dawn, which follows, but the latter is less exuberant and sensual than the description of evening. His muted tone in the second section may be explained by the fact that, whereas his description of the evening or the present moment reflects the state of

intensified perception and sensibility in which he experiences it, his description of the morning is a flashback and depicts his limited perception at that time, before he was affected by the wine. Although the Youth's entire speech is given under the influence of wine, he expresses himself soberly and coherently and conveys the changes that his outlook and perception have gone through. His description of the morning centers on the beauty of nature and of dawn. He notes the morning dew: "my vine-crown, my fir-staff / All drenched in dew." This detail, of the dew, counterbalances the image of "night-dews" in the first part of his conversation and the Youth's "vine-crown" contrasts with the "ivy-cinctured" cup of wine. So also, "Iacchus' white fane" which had been the Youth's original destination, is balanced by Circe's palace which he reached by chance.

An element of contrast, yet balance, between morning and evening appears in the Youth's physical state and mood. In the morning, he was energetic, ready for action: "I sprang up" and "came swift down;" in the evening, he is lethargic and prostrate: "Thou standest smiling / Down on me." Now all he desires is more wine to prolong his state of intoxication. Circe offers him the wine. He drinks it and falls asleep.

In addition to the circular movement of this section of the poem, where the awakening Youth speaks

and again drinks so as to re-experience his wine-induced trance, there is a suggestively cyclical pattern in the passage of the day. There is also a descending movement in the poem. The Youth has left his hut high in the valley and come down to Circe's palace. In fact, the Youth's descending movement in "The Strayed Reveller" contrasts with the speaker's ascending movement in "Resignation," which I shall view as a metaphorical ascent to the source of Truth. In "The Strayed Reveller," the Youth has abandoned his privileged position at the symbolic place of Truth and has gone astray. He has descended from a place of Truth and isolation to a place of dissoluteness and temptation.

Between the two conversations the Youth has with Circe and Ulysses, the two well-known figures speak together. This central, linking, passage has a pattern of repetition and balance similar to that of the Youth's conversation with Circe. In this conversation between Circe and Ulysses, several images from the Youth's earlier conversation with Circe are repeated, although in different contexts, but still emphasizing what the Youth has said. The Youth has described in detail putting on his fawn-skin and vine-crown in the morning. He has also mentioned Circe's "ivy-cinctured cup," from which he had been drinking. Ulysses describes the Youth in these very same terms:

> ...he sits, bending downward
> His white, delicate neck
> To the ivy-wreathed marge
> Of thy cup; the bright, glancing vine-leaves
> That crown his hair,
> Falling forward, mingling
> With the dark ivy-plants—
> His fawn-skin, half untied,
> Smear'd with red wine-stains...
>
> (ll. 82-90--emphasis added)

Yet the final effect of Ulysses' description is quite different from that of the Youth's words, as he calls attention to the Youth's "fallen" state, naming his slumped over position and his soiled physical appearance. Ulysses' portrait of the Youth contrasts sharply with the freshness and innocence exuded by the Youth in his description of his departure that morning. As noted above, the Youth's conversation with Circe partly reflects the state of euphoria caused by his drinking the wine; Ulysses simply portrays the sordidness of the Youth's inebriated condition. When Ulysses describes the red wine stains, he also echoes a previous image: Circe's enticingly sensual description of the wine as she tempts the Youth to drink again:

> ...See, how it glows,
> Through the delicate, flush'd marble,
> The red, creaming liquor,
> Strown with dark seeds!
>
> (ll. 55-58)

While Circe praised the beauty of the wine, Ulysses calls attention to its unpleasant effects. In the

final lines of his speech, Ulysses emphasizes the lateness of the day and the Youth's sad state:

> ...Who is he,
> That sits, overweigh'd
> By fumes of wine and sleep,
> So late, in thy portico?
> (ll. 90-93)

The second section of the poem, the Youth's conversation with Ulysses, balances his conversation with Circe. Whereas in the first conversation, the Youth has indirectly described Circe's alluring sensuality, in the second conversation he describes the "travel-tarnish'd" (l. 106) Ulysses, the man of action, who serves as a model for an opposing way of life. The rest of the Youth's talk with Ulysses consists, as did the one with Circe, of a flashback to his experiences during the day. Just as the Youth deduces who Ulysses is, Ulysses deduces that the Youth is a poet, and welcomes him as such. The Youth proves Ulysses right by his conversation, a short treatise on poetry and the role of the poet that he has recently learned from Silenus. But the speech is paradoxical: on one hand the Youth confirms Ulysses' idea that young poets learn from and repeat what they learn from older and wiser men, the stories "Of Gods and Heroes, / Of war and arts" (ll. 124-125); yet the gist of the Youth's speech refutes Ulysses' simplistic, limited view that poetry is a matter of happy inspiration and of glorifying

the feats of heroes. Instead, the Youth expounds a complex theory of poetry based on empathy and creative agony. Since the Youth is repeating what he has been told by Silenus that afternoon, however, I see no evidence that this is the Youth's own view of poetry.

The Youth's answer to Ulysses consists of two parts in which we see Arnold's grouping of "objects." There are twelve vignettes of six different scenes from two opposing points of view. First the scenes are portrayed from the standpoint of the Gods (whose superficial view of life is analogous to Ulysses' view of poetry) and then from the standpoint of the poets. Although in both cases the vignettes are highly pictorial, the scenes described as by the Gods are idealized and unknowing portraits of peaceful and bucolic life. From the poets' point of view the vignettes are still pictorial, but far more realistic, as the poets go beneath the surface appearance of things and evoke the problems and the suffering of the people involved. Although the poets are assigned a special, elevated position by being spoken of, in one breath, with the Gods and by being allowed an overview of the world, according to the newly tutored Youth they must pay dearly for this privilege: they must feel as well as see. As Silenus has taught him, the poets must participate imaginatively in the lives they depict in their poetry, at the cost of intense labor and pain:

These things, Ulysses,
The wise bards also
Behold and sing.
But oh, what labour!
Oh prince, what pain!

(ll. 207-211)

In one of these vignettes, for example, the Gods see an Indian drifting placidly in his boat on a cool, calm lake surrounded by mountains. He gathers his crops from healthy, green plants which grow on the matted isles he has made. To the poets, however, seeing things realistically, this picture is far less attractive, but truer to life. The lake they see is turbulent, the Indian handles his fragile boat with difficulty, and he finds that his crops have been eaten by worms.

Finally, however, the Youth rebels against and rejects this empathic concept of poetry and the pain and suffering it requires, for Circe's wine offers an easier way to poetic vision:

But I, Ulysses,
Sitting on the warm steps,
Looking over the valley,
All day long, have seen,
Without pain, without labour...

(ll. 270-274)

Circe's wine, in fact, elevates him to the level of the Gods: he sees all, yet feels nothing. And he wants to prolong this state even though the wine offers him merely temporary escape--short lived dreams that are

not permanent.

"The Strayed Reveller" poses the problem of how to write poetry. In his speech to Ulysses, the Youth juxtaposes two ways of seeing reality, but doesn't offer a viable solution for poets. After he explains Silenus' painful, empathic theory of poetic creation, the Youth rejects it for Circe's easier way of painless dreaming. Yet the fact that Circe is a beautiful but dangerous temptress who turns men into beasts, combined with the fact that the Youth has succumbed to her wine and is symbolically "fallen," suggests that neither is Circe's way an acceptable alternative. No solution is offered to the opposing appeals of Circe and Silenus.

"The Strayed Reveller" attests to Arnold's own indecision as he searched for his position as a poet--the inner struggle between his aesthetic inclinations and the age's demand for didactic or moral poetry. The Youth's "dreaming" suggests his preference for poetry that is beautiful and gives pleasure--the kind of poetry he praised in his early letters to Clough. "The Strayed Reveller" is both beautiful and pleasure-giving, and this is so because Arnold has effectively united matter and form so that they complement each other. Yet, I feel, form rather than content is the essence of this poem, which is not so much a statement as an evocation. The carefully delineated time scheme, the circular structure and repetition, the groupings of

images and situations, and the subtle nuances which run through the poem evoke the notion of an ephemeral, momentary elation that establishes its perspective as part of a larger whole. At the same time that these elements create a mood or atmosphere of elation, they indicate the indecision and impermanence which is the prominent feature of the poem. I believe "The Strayed Reveller" is an organic work of art in which all the elements pull together to create a balanced and perfect whole.

"Mycerinus"

The poem "Mycerinus" is based on a story in Herodotus which Matthew Arnold had most certainly known from early childhood because his father often entertained his children with stories from his "beloved Herodotus." In a letter written to his uncle, Matthew, aged eleven, recalls the times "when I used to construe Herodotus with you." [1] "Mycerinus" is the story of an unusually virtuous Egyptian king who has learned that he has only six more years to live, and the poem presents his reaction to this "stern sentence of the Powers of Destiny" (l. 6). The first section of the poem is a bitter dramatic monologue in which Mycerinus rails at the injustices of the "Powers of Destiny," or Gods, and vehemently considers and ponders whether or not gods exist; whether they are simply indifferent to the plight of mankind; and whether they are omnipotent or themselves under the control of a larger Force. Finally, Mycerinus reaches the conclusion that his life up to now has been a great waste, and he announces his intention of making up for lost time by abandoning his duties and dedicating himself to the life of revelry and pleasure he had previously shunned. The second section of the poem

describes his life of revelry in a palm grove on the banks of the Nile River.

Mycerinus had gone out of his way to be a conscientious and just ruler. As a youth he had been a dedicated student, spurning the usual revelries of youth:

> 'Seems it so light a thing, then, austere Powers,
> To spurn man's common lure, life's pleasant things?
> Seems there no joy in dances crown'd with flowers,
> Love, free to range, and regal banquetings?
>
> (ll. 31-34)

He had studied long and hard to be a just ruler. By "contemplation of diviner things" (l. 12) he had concluded that justice was God-given and that by being a just ruler he was living a godly life:

> 'Yet surely, O my people, did I deem
> Man's justice from the all-just Gods was given;
> A light that from some upper fount did beam,
> Some better archetype, whose seat was heaven;
> A light that, shining from the blest abodes,
> Did shadow somewhat of the life of Gods.
>
> (ll. 19-24)

For his righteousness he expected to be well rewarded. Instead, he learns that he will die in six years. To him this is the epitome of injustice, for his father, in spite of having been a harsh and unfair ruler, lived a long life. Mycerinus feel <u>he</u> should have been rewarded with a long life as well as praise and honor for his accomplishments. Instead, death will be his reward for an abstemious and what he considers virtuous life:

'My father loved injustice, and lived long;
Crown'd with gray hairs he died, and full of sway.
I loved the good he scorn'd, and hated wrong—
The Gods declare my recompense to-day.
I look'd for life more lasting, rule more high;
And when six years are measured, lo, I die!

(ll. 13-18)

Mycerinus feels he has been duped, and he bitterly repudiates the life he has led, abandoning his responsibilities for a life of revelry in a palm grove. There he intends to defy Fate by turning night into day and thus "living" twice as long.

In the first section of the poem, Mycerinus' actions are example of the ascending movement. He describes his goal in terms that resemble an ascent: "I looked for life more lasting, rule more high" (l. 17). Like the passionate questers in "Resignation," he was a striver and an achiever. He describes himself as "self-govern'd," "self-master'd," a "strenuous just man" who led a "struggling life" and spurned "life's pleasant things" (ll. 10, 28, 29, 30, 32--emphasis added). These adjectives are similar to those used to describe the questers in "Resignation." They denote the difficulty involved in this way of life and, by analogy, help to determine that the movement is ascending. Mycerinus is a Victorian-type king--a reformer who struggles to improve things. Yet he does so, finally, for his own benefit, expecting to be rewarded. To lead this kind of life was difficult, as it meant

denying himself the pleasures of life: he became "self-govern'd" and "self-master'd" by denying himself an easier, more pleasant life. He is almost a metaphor for the pious Victorian Evangelicals and their moral code, which "was one of avoidances and denials rather than judicious selections among positive pleasures." His code of behaviour suggests their middle-class morality, which was concerned "much less with life for its own sake than as a preparation for eternity." [2] Mycerinus never speaks of the well-being of his people in his long lament, and his act of renouncing all responsibility confirms the impression that he did not care primarily for the good of his subjects. As we look at him closely, he appears self-centered and self-motivated--the justice he prides himself in having rendered, the life he has led is worthless to him if he will not be rewarded:

> Vain dreams, which quench our pleasures, then depart,
> When the duped soul, self-master'd, claims its meed;
> When, on the strenuous just man, Heaven bestows,
> Crown of his struggling life, an unjust close!
>
> (ll. 27-30)

> 'Oh, wherefore cheat our youth, if thus it be,
> Of one short joy, one lust, one pleasant dream?
> . . . .
> Lost labour!
>
> (ll. 49-50, 53)

> I go, and I return not. But the will
> Of the great Gods is plain; and ye must bring
> Ill deeds, ill passions, zealous to fulfil
> Their pleasure, to their feet; and reap their praise,
> The praise of Gods, rich boon! and length of days.'
>
> (ll. 74-78)

The bitter, sarcastic monologue is spoken in carefully measured six-line stanzas. It is a formal, controlled speech befitting a king, and it adequately conveys his disillusionment. The stanzaic form is as rigid as the "self-master'd" and "self-govern'd" king. It denotes the discipline to which Mycerinus had submitted himself and mastered.

The first section of the poem, although concentrating on a movement of ascent, contains some suggestively cyclical images. The most obvious is Mycerinus' realization that life is ephemeral, and his equating his life to an hour-glass: "my sand runs short" (l. 56). The hour-glass image is a metaphor for both his individual life and of the cyclical, repetitive aspect of all life: birth-death; renewal-decay; day-night. It also suggests the flux of all things--like the sand in the glass, nothing ever stands still. His six remaining years are but "six drops of time" but, during this time, nature's many cycles will proceed uninterrupted:

> 'Six years—six little years—six drops of time!
> Yet suns shall rise, and many moons shall wane,
> And old men die, and young men pass their prime,
> And languid pleasure fade and flower again,
> ...ere these are flown...
> (ll. 61-65)

Not only does this stanza detail several cycles of nature--the cycles of the sun and moon and the ageing process, but the poet recurs to a cyclical metaphor: he uses "fade and flower again"--illustrating the cycle

of decay and renewal--to describe the ebb and flow of his anticipated pleasure.

A less obvious cyclical movement, upon which the poet expands in the second section of the poem, is in the "broad volume of the insurgent Nile" (l. 40). The yearly flooding of the Nile was the life-sustaining cycle of Egyptian life. This flooding marked the culmination of the rainy season and served to indicate the proper time to begin the planting of crops, its receeding waters leaving a rich, fertile silt on which the Egyptians grew their crops. Each year the river renewed and assured the fertility of the land, and thus assured the survival of the people. The Nile is a perfect image of the cyclically repeated movement of life and nature, and it epitomizes the process of continuance which is the basis of life: decay and destruction give way to renewal; spring brings the beginning of life and summer matures it; all is swept away in winter or by the flooding of rivers, only to be born again the following spring. [3]

II

The second section of the poem is the antithesis of the first and more fully illustrates cyclical movements. There is a change of setting, tone, outlook, metrification and narrator and all these elements work

together to create a harmonious whole. This section is a lyrical description of Mycerinus' life in the grove. The poet, or omniscient author, narrates the remainder of the poem in mellifluous blank verse. The gently flowing cadence of the lines and the serene and soothing tone are in accordance with Mycerinus' new outlook and new setting, and they contrast sharply with the controlled and measured rhythm, taut form, and harsh and bitter tone of the first section.

Significantly, Mycerinus first entered the grove as an act of defiance, in anger and frustration. He scornfully abandoned all his early ideals and began willfully to defy Fate and Nature by turning night into day in order to double his allotted days. [4] Mycerinus rebels against the cyclical patterns of nature that allot man so few days of life.

The first twenty-one lines of the second section describe this period of rebellion and concentrate on describing nature, Mycerinus' revelry in the grove, and his attempt to use lamps to prolong the days. But as this is a period of rebellion, Mycerinus' outlook and his perception are biased. This is where the importance of the choice of omniscient author, or third-person point-of-view, becomes apparent. The omniscient author projects two views of nature: the general or objective view and Mycerinus' subjective view. In other words, even though the narrator extols

the beauty of nature, and the serene and smooth tone of these lines reinforces that position, this description is punctuated by references that indicate nature can also be gloomy and almost inimical. The grove is a "cool region" and it is dark--the sun reflects off the palm leaves and does not penetrate the grove, thus the trunks are "unsunn'd stems" (ll. 84, 88). This image implies both darkness--"unsunn'd"--and weakness: the use of the word "stems" instead of "trunks" belittles the strong axis of the palms. Ironically the same palm leaves which during the day blocked out the sun, at night "splinter'd the silver arrows of the moon" and allowed them to penetrate the "tranquil gloom" and "twinkling grove" (ll. 99, 94, 95). A close examination will show how the poet subtly achieves this dual impression--how he is able to convey both views of nature at the same time. He achieves this by the juxtaposition of quasi-antithetical words and images and by the use of words and images which evoke multiple and often contradictory meanings. For example, the trunks are "unsunn'd," but this is a contradiction because the sun <u>does</u> penetrate the grove: flowers bloomed there and to do so they needed sunlight; Mycerinus lighted the lamps at night "when the sun went down" (l. 93); and, if the moon beams penetrated, so too should the rays of the sun. The phrase "tranquil gloom" is another example. "Gloom" denotes

darkness and depression and melancholy. Yet "tranquil" connotes peace and calm. The word "twinkling" in the phrase "twinkling grove" implies darkness and at the same time connotes cheerfulness, gaiety and calm. The word "splinter'd" in the phrase "splinter'd the silver arrows of the moon" connotes pain and fragmentation, but creates a vivid and beautiful visual image.

The entire twenty-one line verse paragraph is unusually rich in sensuous images that contradict the gloomy view of nature. Halfway through this verse paragraph, the narrator inconspicuously reveals the restorative power of nature and hints at its influence on Mycerinus, which becomes apparent in the next verse paragraph. He says that in the grove

> ...in one dream the feverish time of youth
> Might fade in slumber, and the feet of joy
> Might wander all day long and never tire.
>
> (ll. 89-91)

The use of sensuous images is most outstanding in the luscious Keatsian lines with which the verse paragraph ends:

> Here came the king, holding high feast, at morn,
> Rose-crown'd; and ever, when the sun went down,
> A hundred lamps beam'd in the tranquil gloom,
> From tree to tree all through the twinkling grove,
> Revealing all the tumult of the feast—
> Flush'd guests, and golden goblets foam'd with wine;
> While the deep-burnish'd foliage overhead
> Splinter'd the silver arrows of the moon.
>
> (ll. 92-99)

The obvious conclusion is that the gloominess and darkness attributed to nature, on the one hand, and contradicted, on the other by the narrator's ambivalent descriptions, are really a matter of point-of-view and reflect Mycerinus' outlook--he is confused and everything looks bleak to him. In this section, we can assume that he is angry, defiant and depressed and, in spite of the revelery, not happy. Thus the importance of the omniscient author from whom we get an unbiased, balanced appraisal: he incorporates Mycerinus' feeling and outlook into the larger scheme of Nature.

The inner turmoil and confusion Mycerinus feels is apparent at the beginning of the second verse paragraph, which depicts both his confusion and his coming to terms with this inner turmoil. The choice of words and images at the beginning of this verse paragraph underlines his state of confusion, just as those at the end convey his acceptance and understanding of and his harmonious assimilation into the flux of nature.

At the beginning the narrator suggests that "It may be that sometimes his wondering soul...might shrink half startled," and he compares Mycerinus to a "guilty man / Who wrestles with his dream" (ll. 100, 102, 103--emphasis added). The narrator does not assert, does not force the point, but rather subtly insinuates, using the phrase "It may be." This phrase not only

hints at a change, but suggests a certain hesitation and awe: awe at the change which was taking place in Mycerinus and a hesitation, an inability or difficulty, to convey this process into words. His feast is described as "joyless," yet his laughter is "joyful" (ll. 107, 101). This is contradictory, but explainable: Mycerinus finally finds inner peace and joy, but in nature and not in the feast. [5] After his inner turmoil, or rather as a result of his inner turmoil, Mycerinus comes to terms with himself and with his life. Ironically, by defying the natural cycle, he finds peace:

> ...he, within,
> Took measure of his soul, and knew its strength,
> And by that silent knowledge, day by day,
> Was calm'd, ennobled, comforted, sustain'd.
>
> (ll. 108-111)

Lionel Trilling describes what he calls the "therapeutic aspect" of nature which he perceives in some of Arnold's poetry. His description of this soothing influence aptly describes the case of Mycerinus. Trilling says that in the presence of nature

> we are calmed and composed: the mind, till this moment absorbed by a thousand nagging necessities and forced to respond to a myriad diverse stimuli, is freed; the sense of self, so long drowned, is restored, the awareness of the body quickened. We feel stronger and calmer and strangely wiser; we believe, indeed, that we 'see into the heart of things,' and perhaps we do.... [6]

This second verse paragraph ends on a note of reconciliation with the cyclicality and the serenity of nature. The poet emphasizes the organicism of nature--everything contributes to the perfect and harmonious working of the whole. Mycerinus has incorporated himself into the harmonious clockwork which is nature, and, even though nature varies with the seasons, the serenity and mirth or inner joy which Mycerinus has achieved do not vary. They are stable:

> And his mirth quail'd not at the mild reproof
> Sign'd out by winter's sad tranquillity;
> Nor, pall'd with its own fulness, ebb'd and died
> In the rich languor of long summer-days;
> Nor wither'd when the palm-tree plumes, that roof'd
> With their mild dark his grassy banquet-hall,
> Bent to the cold winds of the showerless spring;
> No, nor grew dark when autumn brought the clouds.
>
> (ll. 114-121)

In the end his revelry in the grove is a rejoicing or celebration, but of a very different kind. He revels now not in defiance of Fate and Nature, but rejoices with nature, as an integrated part of nature. This integration is emphasized in the final short verse paragraph which is a sort of epilogue. Immersed in the grove, Mycerinus fades from the front of the stage, and the Nile River, that supreme example of the cyclicality of nature, takes his place. All that remains of Mycerinus is the faint sound of his revelry, which is assimilated by the Nile, or in the words of the poet, "Mix'd with the murmur of the moving Nile" (l. 127). Mycerinus has become part of the eternal flux of things.

"Resignation"

"Resignation," the last poem in Arnold's first volume of poetry, clearly juxtaposes cyclical and ascending movements. In this poem Arnold compares and contrasts two attitudes towards life and the passing of time. "Resignation" opens with a scene far removed from Victorian England, but which can be seen as a metaphor for the general condition of the country at mid-century. The opening stanza portrays ancient and medieval pilgrims and warriors striving against hardships to reach their goals. Pilgrims bound for Mecca, Crusaders on their way to reclaim the Holy Land, Goths and Huns on their way to battle and conquests, all march to the same battle cry:

> To die be given us, or attain!
> Fierce work it were, to do again.
> (ll. 1-2)

Their difficult and strenuous road, their march forward and their refusal to look backward or fall back even one stride, is a strong ascending movement, and "to stand again / Where they stood once, to them were pain" (ll. 18-19). This forward movement, this metaphorical ascent is portrayed partly in terms of a

battle. The warriors have established their aims and will reach them in spite of hardships they may encounter. The speaker of the poem [1] describes the hardships the pilgrims and warriors have had to withstand and overcome: "miles / Of dust which wreathed their struggling files," "snows," "burning noon," and "flooded plains / Through which the groaning Danube strains / To the drear Euxine" (ll. 5-6, 7, 4, 11-13--emphasis added). In this first section, nature hinders this upward progress. The poet not only describes the hardships the warriors have endured but evokes their pain by harsh and martial words as well as by the tone and the rhythm of the lines. The words--all monosyllabic and disyllabic, with more of the former--and the abundance of harsh consonant sounds prevent the lines from flowing smoothly and instead create an abrupt, staccato rhythm and harsh tone which has an almost marching cadence:

> Tŏ díe bĕ gívĕn ús, ŏr ăttáin!
> Fíerce wórk ĭt wére, tŏ dó ăgáin.
> Só pílgrĭms, boúnd fŏr Méccă, práy'd
> Ăt búrnĭng noón; só wárrĭors saíd,
> Scárf'd wĭth thĕ cróss, whŏ wátch'd thĕ míles
> Ŏf dúst whĭch wreáthed thĕir strúgglĭng fíles
> Dŏwn Lýdĭan moúntaĭns; só, whĕn snóws
> Roŭnd Álpĭne súmmĭts, éddyĭng róse,
> Thĕ Góth, boŭnd Róme-wărds; só thĕ Hún,
> Croúch'd ĭn hĭs sáddlĕ, whĭle thĕ sún
> Wĕnt lúrĭd dówn ŏ'er floóded plaíns...
>
> (ll. 1-11)

This onomatopoeic effect of marching further suggests the hardships and sufferings of all who choose this way of life. The poet is quite specific that this way of life, this attitude toward life, is not limited to pilgrims and warriors, but is the attitude of all "Whom labours, self-ordain'd, enthrall" (l. 14), all, the poet says, who are prisoners of their passions. It was also the attitude of a nation caught in the march of progress, an expanding and changing nation which had reached a period of development, never before reached by any nation, and whose "official thought was announcing the Englishman's ascent to the heights of human possibility." [2] The attitude announced in the poem was the attitude of a people who felt great pride in the achievements of their nation and who believed the only way for them was up, perhaps not yet themselves fully aware of the growing pains and mental strife that were bound to accompany such a rise, later to be described by Arnold in "The Scholar-Gipsy" as

> ...this strange disease of modern life,
> With its sick hurry, its divided aims,
> Its heads o'ertax'd, its palsied hearts...
>
> ...the infection of our mental strife,
> Which, though it gives no bliss, yet spoils for rest...
> (ll. 203-205, 222-223)

People and nations who opt for this upward way of life are caught in the Time Stream--a favorite Arnoldian term for the imperfection and flux of the contemporary

world--and become prisoners of their desires and of the goals they have set for themselves.

II

The remainder of "Resignation" is devoted to presenting and defending an alternative approach to life, one of resignation and acceptance, which, the poet asserts, results in outward serenity, inner peace, and a measure of freedom. This alternative approach or attitude he believes can be learned from nature. Man must put himself into harmony with nature. He must try to live according to the pattern nature sets. The eternal, flowing process of nature is based on a network of cycles: the world turns on its axis producing the day-night cycle; the world rotates around the sun, producing the cycle of the four seasons. These cycles in turn give life to the cycle of life: birth-life-death; and the cycle of decay and renewal; the unchanging flux of nature, whereby all changes, yet all remains finally the same. A tree, for instance, may stand for hundreds of years, but its leaves die and new ones are born every year. Nature is a harmonious whole, and man is part of nature and must learn from nature a lesson on how to live.

The second part of the poem is constructed around movements which emphasize the cyclicality of nature,

which the poem itself immitates or tries to immitate in order to be in harmony with nature. The most obvious of the cyclical movements is the observed repetitive life of the gypsies.

The gypsies are a special breed of people, not tied down to convention and thus symbolic of freedom and innocence and closeness to nature. They are the antithesis of the strivers in the first section of the poem. The gypsies are nomadic and lead a wandering, cyclical existence, in that they often return to the same encampments as they wander from place to place. Chance, however, guides their wanderings:

> And often to some kindly place
> Chance guides the migratory race,
> Where, though long wanderings intervene,
> They recognize a former scene.
>
> (ll. 112-115)

Their way of life is the same as it has been for years--it is hereditary, simple, unchanging. It echoes the unchanging changes of nature. Their ancestors have lived and died, and the succeeding generations have continued to follow the same traditions. Not for the gypsies is the march of progress, the "strange disease of modern life." They do feel the effects of Time, which bring ageing and decay to their bodies:

> For them, for all, time's busy touch,
> While it mends little, troubles much.
> Their joints grow stiffer—but the year
> Runs his old round of dubious cheer...
>
> (ll. 126-129)

They also feel the effects of progress, which include stronger and severer laws that restrict their marginal lifestyles:

> They must live still—and yet, God knows,
> Crowded and keen the country grows;
> It seems as if, in their decay,
> The law grew stronger every day.
>
> (ll. 132-135)

Yet, although they have reason to, the gypsies do not complain. They accept both their own ageing and the fact of social progress--and the changes these entail--as inevitable, and they make the best of their situation:

> So might they reason, so compare,
> Fausta, times past with times that are.
> But no!—they rubb'd through yesterday
> In their hereditary way,
> And they will rub through, if they can,
> To-morrow on the self-same plan,
> Till death arrive to supersede,
> For them, vicissitude and need.
>
> (ll. 136-143)

The gypsies let life run its course, their aim being a balanced existence. As long as they have food to eat and a place to set up camp, they are content. They follow their tribe's traditions, which are opposed to the new notions comprised in progress. As simple beings, close to nature, they are endowed with the power to intuit deep truths, and, although confined by their lifestyle, they are free because they recognize and accept their limitations. They live in harmony with nature and the life cycle.

In tracing poetic imagery in Matthew Arnold's poems, we sometimes note that complex patterns of imagery can be created by the multiple suggestiveness of words in their poetic context. In this section of the poem, the word "chance" is an example. "Chance" can mean accident. But by another interpretation, it can be synonymous with Fortune. As such, it suggests a cyclical movement. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Chance or Fortune was visualized as a constantly turning wheel, to which man was attached. Thus, at times, man would be at the top of the wheel and all would be well, but as the wheel turned, man would fall to the bottom and so would his luck. Life was seen as a series of ups and downs, and bad times would alternate with good times just as summer alternates with winter. The gypsies in "Resignation" wander aimlessly, but it is suggested that they are led by a great, invisible Force--Chance or Fortune. Their seemingly aimless wanderings are part of the revolutions of the Wheel of Fortune.

The other cyclical movement in this section of the poem precedes the account of the gypsies and is less obvious. Supposedly spoken as the speaker and Fausta climb a mountain, the movement of the poem duplicates an earlier holiday excursion. [3] The poet describes in detail that first ascent and descent, comparing the first walk with the present one and setting up a cyclical repetition of the first ascent

of the mountain.

The speaker's description of their first ascent recalls several of the martial images of the ascent of the warriors in the very first section of the poem. The mountain climbers have a "leader," who "reviews and ranks his motley bands" and who "makes clear our goal to every eye" (ll. 44-46). Although they "march" through "noontide heats" and "many a mile of dusty way," the images of their efforts and of nature are softer than those in the first section of the poem (ll. 48, 69, 80). Instead of being harsh and threatening, nature is refreshing, comforting and beautiful, with: "mild hollows," "cheerful silence," "cool shade," "clear heathy swells" and "balmy darkness" (ll. 66, 67, 75, 83). For the Victorian walkers, there is a brook, instead of a river, which rather than hindering their progress as the Danube did for the warriors, guides them back down to where they started so that they come full cycle (l. 76).

In this section of the poem there are more polysyllabic words than in the first section; however, the monosyllabic and disyllabic words remain in the same proportion--with a preponderance of monosyllabic words. Yet, the words flow together smoothly and seem to linger, creating a lulling, soothing cadence and a serene tone, which are in tune with the concept of nature they express. This smoothness and ease is achieved

because the poet uses fewer harsh consonant sounds, concentrating especially on s and other sibilant consonant sounds:

> Mild hollows, and clear heathy swells,
> The cheerful silence of the fells.
> Some two hours' march with serious air,
> Through the deep noontide heats we fare;
> The red-grouse, springing at our sound,
> Skims, now and then, the shining ground;
> No life, save his and ours, intrudes
> Upon these breathless solitudes.
> (ll. 66-73)

As soon as the poet has finished describing the first walk, he begins to describe the present one, which follows the same path, and thus the two walks constitute a third cyclical movement. In the same way, the poem itself--since the structure of the second part is based on cyclical movements--becomes an imitation of nature. The speaker establishes a comparison between Fausta and himself and the warriors of the first section. But the situation of the warriors or prisoners of their passions, for whom "to stand again / Where they stood once were pain" (ll. 18-19), is far removed from the speaker's and Fausta's situation: "Once more we tread this self-same road, / ...and again unroll, / ...the familiar whole" (ll. 86, 94, 95). The poet and Fausta are happy to be retracing their walk, and when they reach the top of the hill they look around and are

pleased to notice that, after ten years, the natural scene remains unchanged. This last thought leads the poet to a consideration of the paradoxically unchanging alterations of nature and of the ways of the gypsies, which we have already noticed.

Fausta's and the poet's ascent repeats a previous climb but, significantly, the poem is uttered at the top of the mountain--in mid-cycle as it were, rather than at either the starting or finishing place. By uttering the poem at the top of the mountain another facet of the ascending movement becomes apparent: it is not symbolic exclusively of action and striving, but, in another context, denotes a metaphorical ascent to the source of Truth. This poem is the result of the poet's ascent to the source of Truth. Similar to and yet distinct from Wordsworth's vaunted "emotion recollected in tranquility," the poet has a kind of epiphany or moment of truth at the top of the mountain. Finally, this poem is the poet's attempt to communicate to Fausta those Truths about the poet and how to live that he has perceived, namely, that a true poet rejects a life of action and passion and human cares and so should mankind:

> Though he move mountains, though his day
> Be pass'd on the proud heights of sway,
> Though he hath loosed a thousand chains,
> Though he hath borne immortal pains,
> Action and suffering though he know—
> He hath not lived, if he lives so.
>
> (ll. 148-153)

The poet intuits these truths, though mankind learns them through experience. The poet is he

> Whose natural insight can discern
> What through experience others learn;
> Who needs not love and power, to know
> Love transient, power an unreal show.
>
> (ll. 233-236)

That the speaker of this poem is certainly a poet can be deduced from his clear insight and perceptive analysis of the poetic office. Yet, for all his knowledge, he claims to lack "the poet's rapt security" (l. 246). These words indicate his insecurity and indecision, and they help to explain a subtle ambiguity in the final section of the poem.

The way of life of resignation and acceptance which is expounded as preferable to a life of action and the seeking of goals is, as was Circe's way of painless dreaming for which the Youth opted, defended on the one hand, but subtly undermined on the other. In the final stanza of "Resignation," the life of conformity and acquiescence, which is supposed to give serenity and inner peace, is not portrayed as a happy existence--it is merely bearable.

> Enough, we live!—and if a life,
> With large results so little rife,
> Though bearable, seem hardly worth
> This pomp of worlds, this pain of birth;
> Yet, Fausta, the mute turf we tread,
> The solemn hills around us spread,
> This stream which falls incessantly,
> The strange-scrawl'd rocks, the lonely sky,

> If I might lend their life a voice,
> Seem to bear rather than rejoice.
> (ll. 261-270)

Nature, which contributes to meaning throughout the poem by seeming to reinforce the positions presented--being harsh and threatening when the ancient questers are described and being comforting and refreshing on the poet's two walks, now becomes aloof and withdrawn, silently exhibiting the ravages of time: the "mute turf," "solemn hills," "stange-scrawl'd rocks" and "lonely sky [which] seem to bear rather than rejoice" (ll. 265, 266, 268, 270--emphasis added).

The ambiguous portrayal of nature in "Resignation" reflects the speaker's indecision concerning the correct approach to life. If a life of resignation is merely bearable and "hardly worth / This pomp of worlds, this pain of birth" (ll. 263-264), a life of action is not much better:

> 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 whirl'd,
> The something that infects the world.
> (ll. 271-278)

Just as in "The Strayed Reveller" Arnold is trying to determine his position as a poet, in "Resignation" he is trying to establish a way or manner of life suitable for himself.

"Rugby Chapel"

"Rugby Chapel" is one of the last important poems Arnold wrote. He included it in his last volume, published in 1867--a slim volume containing his work of the past ten years. "Rugby Chapel" is a belated elegy for his father, Dr. Thomas Arnold, who had died twenty-five years earlier, and I view it as, also, an elegy for Arnold's own poetic career. [1] After 1867 Arnold virtually ceased to write poetry.

Dr. Thomas Arnold, schoolmaster, clergyman, historian and scholar, was a forceful, energetic man of strong mind and character. He was deeply concerned about the social and moral issues of the age, and he became a spokesman and leader in contemporary social and religious conflicts. He was untiring in his crusade for a better England in the face of changing social and religious codes and values. A deeply moral man of strong religious convictions, Dr. Arnold reared his children and educated his students in the tradition of duty, morality and earnestness. But the young Matthew Arnold rebelled against the tradition in which he was raised: he was arrogant, careless, debonair, and lazy. At Oxford he assumed the role of a carefree dandy and

failed to achieve scholastic distinction. He went to extremes to distance himself from his earnest, serious father. His writing of poetry was almost a challenge to the sense of duty and the ethical principles his father had instilled in him. Arnold's early poems were emblematic of his rebellion, as they were aesthetic and emphasized form rather than content, as I tried to show in my discussions of "The Strayed Reveller" and "Mycerinus."

In "Rugby Chapel" Arnold presents a complete reversal of his earlier position and makes a final break with his earliest poetic theory. Originally, as we have seen, Arnold had demanded that poetry be beautiful and give pleasure. But already in 1852-1853, in letters to Clough, Arnold was postulating a new theory of poetry which conformed to the age's demand for moral guidance and spiritual comfort and which conflicted with his earlier insistence on the qualities of beauty and pleasure: "modern poetry can only subsist by its contents: by becoming a complete magister vitae as the poetry of the ancients did: by including, as theirs did, religion with poetry, instead of existing as poetry only." In 1853 he wrote, quoting from his poem "The Youth of Nature," ll. 51-52:

> The complaining millions of men
> Darken in labour and pain—
>
> what they want is something to animate and ennoble them--not merely to add zest to their melancholy or grace to their dreams.[2]

The struggle between his original aesthetic stance and his later moral stance is evinced in many of Arnold's poems. In "Rugby Chapel," the moral instinct prevails. Arnold praises his moralist father and identifies with him; in so doing, he ends the inner struggle between lyricist and moralist, between primacy of aestheticsm or ethics. Arnold's identification with his father is like Empedocles' removal of his laurel bough--both acts are symbolic of the giving up the poetic life. [3] Yet, though the voice of the moralist dominates "Rugby Chapel" and though content overshadows form, it is still possible to perceive the voice of the lyricist in the controlled and unified imagery of the poem.

"Rugby Chapel" probably represents the epitome of Arnold's use of the ascending movement. It lauds the man of action "whom a thirst / Ardent, unquenchable, fires," which impels him to reach "a clear-purposed goal," and which requires "A long, steep journey, through sunk / Gorges, o'er mountains in snow" (ll. 73-74, 85, 87-88). The dominating image of "Rugby Chapel" is that of a Dr. Arnold-like figure--a strong, energetic and compassionate leader--climbing a mountain in a severe snow storm and leading a throng of followers to safety.

The autumnal setting, established in the first verse paragraph, is fitting for the content of the poem.

The mood of autumn, a season associated with death and decay, augments the sadness and sense of loss the speaker feels as he faces his father's tomb inside Rugby Chapel and discusses the magnitude of this loss to the Victorian quest for a better world. Lifelessness and cold in the present scene contrast sharply with the vibrant vitality and energy which Dr. Arnold possessed and which the poet describes in subsequent verse paragraphs. So, also, the withered autumnal leaves contrast with the mighty oak to which Dr. Arnold is compared:

> We who till then in thy shade
> Rested as under the boughs
> Of a mighty oak...
>
> (ll. 31-33)

Dr. Arnold's strength and energy, vigor and compassion are extolled. His qualities of leadership are evoked in terms of his religious tenets. The son finds it hard to accept that such a great source of energy has been permanently stilled and has ended in nothingness. To counterbalance this image of nihility, the speaker resorts to affirmations of immortality, envisioning his father in an afterlife that continues the work he started on earth. By some new "shore," Dr. Arnold is still an untiring striver, achiever, and leader, his mission a moral crusade:

Yés, ĭn sŏme fár-shĭnĭng sphére,
Cónscĭous ŏr nót ŏf thĕ pást,
Stíll thŏu pĕrfórmĕst thĕ wórd
Ŏf thĕ Spírĭt ĭn whóm thŏu dŏst líve—
Prómpt, ŭnwéarĭed, ăs hére!
Stíll thŏu ŭpráisĕst wĭth zéal
Thĕ húmblĕ goód frŏm thĕ gróund,
Stérnlў rĕpréssĕst thĕ bád!
Stíll, lĭke ă trúmpĕt, dŏst róuse
Thóse whŏ wĭth hálf-ŏpĕn éyes
Tréad thĕ bórdĕr-lănd dím
'Twĭxt více ănd vírtŭe; rĕvív'st,
Súccŏurĕst!—

(ll. 44-56)

The rhythm of these three-stressed, unrhymed lines, predominantly dactylic, creates a pulsating, marching cadence which evokes Dr. Arnold's vitality and militancy.

The sixth verse paragraph, by way of contrast, presents concisely and condescendingly, an opposing way of life: a life of indirection and insignificance which, according to the speaker, is that of the mass of men. The essence of this verse paragraph is a recantation and a condemnation of the attitude toward life, previously lauded by the poet, of resignation and acceptance, which he asserted led to serenity and inner peace. This discription of the life of the mass of men echoes the description of the life of the gypsies the speaker commended and held up as a positive example for Fausta in "Resignation." Using similar terms and images, though more succinctly, the speaker now disparages those who

settle with resignation to "the course of life." Resorting to slighting and almost pejorative cyclical images, the poet criticizes the apathy and the futility of the lives of those who opt for a life of resignation:

> Most men eddy about
> Here and there—eat and drink,
> Chatter and love and hate,
> Gather and squander, are raised
> Aloft, are hurl'd in the dust,
> Striving blindly, achieving
> Nothing; and then they die—
> Perish;—and no one asks
> Who or what they have been,
> More than he asks what waves,
> In the moonlit solitudes mild
> Of the midmost Ocean, have swell'd,
> Foam'd for a moment, and gone.
>
> (ll. 60-72)

The word "eddy," in this case a verb which denotes a circular or whirling motion, sums up and evokes a visual image of the cyclical or circular aspect of mankind's life process. At the same time, it suggests helplessness and conveys the apathy of those who drift aimlessly in life's current. The lives of the mass of men are portrayed in terms of almost animal existence: they are satisfied with the basic biological essentials of life. In the next verse paragraph the word "eddy," this time a noun, is part of an image which declares the futility of life without purpose or goals:

> ...without aim to go round
> In an eddy of purposeless dust.
>
> (ll. 76-77)

The image evoked by the phrase "are raised / Aloft and hurl'd in the dust" is that of the revolutions of the Wheel of Fortune and emphasizes its negative phase. The action of the waves, the eternal ebb and flow, is both part of the process of nature and an apt symbol of the continual, never-ending flux of things. At the same time, this image suggests the insignificance and transiency of life. The poet rejects the position he so carefully expounded and favored in "Resignation" and adopts a diametrically opposed stance.

The remaining verse paragraphs of "Rugby Chapel" portray and urge a life of action as the only worthy one. Yet the life of action in this instance refers to the pursuit of spiritual fulfillment rather than of material gain. This section, the predominant part of the poem in imagery and content, is built around an ascending movement which is a parable of life and salvation in terms of Christian mythology. The ascent is a variation of the traditional topos of life as a pilgrimage or one-way journey through the world. The speaker uses Biblical motifs and terminology to establish and underline the moral tone of the poem and his father's role as a redeemer of souls. The speaker recognizes that only a select few have the determination to persevere in their quest and for this reason leaders--superior men of stronger determination and endurance--are necessary to guide and safeguard most

of mankind. Dr. Arnold was one of the chosen men--he was a leader of a pilgrimage "to the city of God" (l. 208).

The seventh verse paragraph, by far the longest and most pictorial, epitomizes the ascending movement. The speaker identifies himself with his father and establishes their chosen roles as men of action. He uses an extended metaphor of a mountain climb to depict the difficulty of this way of life. Along the way a storm, a flood, an avalanche, and the ensuing chaos curtail and hinder the progress of the strivers and evoke the vicissitudes encountered. The lines of this section are short and uneven, analogous to the effort of climbing a mountain:

> Ah yes! some of us strive
> Not without action to die
> Fruitless, but something to snatch
> From dull oblivion, nor all
> Glut the devouring grave!
> We, we have chosen our path—
> Path to a clear-purposed goal,
> Path of advance!—but it leads
> A long, steep journey, through sunk
> Gorges, o'er mountains in snow.
> Cheerful, with friends, we set forth—
> Then, on the height, comes the storm.
> Thunder crashes from rock
> To rock, the cataracts reply,
> Lightnings dazzle our eyes.
> Roaring torrents have breach'd
> The track, the stream-bed descends
> In the place where the wayfarer once
> Planted his footstep—the spray
> Boils o'er its borders! aloft
> The unseen snow-beds dislodge
> Their hanging ruin; alas,
> Havoc is made of our train!
> Friends, who set forth at our side,
> Falter, are lost in the storm.

We, we only are left!
With frowning foreheads, with lips
Sternly compress'd, we strain on,
On—and at nightfall at last
Come to the end of our way,
To the lonely inn 'mid the rocks;
Where the gaunt and taciturn host
...asks:
Whom in our party we bring?
Whom we have left in the snow?

(ll. 79-110; 114-116)

The description of this march and the dangers faced are reminiscent of the description of the questers in the opening lines of "Resignation," who also faced hardships and dangers from natural phenomena, but who did not slacken their pace and who strove against all odds to reach their goal. Yet it becomes apparent, as we read further, that the obstacles to the speaker's progress--storm, flood and avalanche--function symbolically and assume a meaning of deeper import by representing, in terms of the Christian myth, the trials, tribulations, and temptations mankind faces on earth. Thus the poem becomes a parable of the "way" of life and salvation--"way" being the name given in the Middle Ages to the unidirectional pilgrimage which was life.[4] The host at the end of the journey stands for God demanding an account of each pilgrim's accomplishments:

...the gaunt and taciturn host
Stands on the threshold, the wind
Shaking his thin white hairs—
Holds his lantern to scan
Our storm-beat figures, and asks:
Whom in our party we bring?
Whom we have left in the snow?

(ll. 110-116)

For although it is commendable to reach the top of the mountain, or City of God, it is even more praiseworthy to help others get there.

Therein lies the greatness of Dr. Arnold--he was not content to attain his own salvation, as promised by his Christian belief, but he, like the Good Shepherd, was intent on leading others weaker than he. The speaker, while avowing that he shares his father's convictions, admits his own weakness by comparison. The speaker, with difficulty, reaches his goal; the father helped others along the way. The speaker uses Biblical situations and images to describe and praise his father. By developing an analogy between his father's life and the parable of the Good Shepherd and the lost sheep (Matt. xviii:14), he portrays his father's clerical mission on earth:

> Therefore to thee it was given
> Many to save with thyself;
> And, at the end of thy day,
> O faithful shepherd! to come,
> Bringing thy sheep in thy hand.
>
> (ll. 140-144)

Arnold also alludes to a less obvious Biblical situation, also illustrative of Dr. Arnold's role as a leader and guide of mankind, in the lines which allude to the Israelites' forty-year trek through the desert, led by Moses, in search of the Promised Land. The "host of mankind" wandering in the "rocks of the world" in

mid-nineteenth century are analogous to the Israelites, and thus Dr. Arnold is compared to Moses:

> See! In the rocks of the world
> Marches the host of mankind,
> A feeble, wavering line.
> Where are they tending?—A God
> Marshall'd them, gave them their goal.
> Ah, but the way is so long!
> Years they have been in the wild!
> Sore thirst plagues them, the rocks,
> Rising all round, overawe;
> Factions divide them, their host
> Threatens to break, to dissolve.
> —Ah, keep, keep them combined.
>
> (ll. 171-182)

The final verse paragraph of "Rugby Chapel" emphasizes Dr. Arnold's position as one of a select group of leaders and forcefully acclaims the merits and extols the virtues of these leaders of mankind or Servants of God. Not only do these chosen men guide the way, but they inspire and motivate the "fainting, dispirited race" (l. 189). Their energy and strength contrast with and dissipate the weariness and weakness of "the host of mankind." The sounds and rhythm of these lines accentuate the idea expressed. There has been a crescendo movement through the poem leading up to the final verse paragraph. The pulsating, marching tempo reaches its climax and these lines blast forth, exuding vitality and energy and leaving no room for doubt and despair. The final lines become a battle cry or call to action:

> Ón, tŏ thĕ boúnd ŏf thĕ wáste.
> Ón, tŏ thĕ Cítў ŏf Gód.
>
> (ll. 207-208)

"Rugby Chapel," which portrays Dr. Arnold as an almost larger than life hero, gives the impression of being told from a boy's point of view.[5] This is a perceptive and fitting portrayal, as Dr. Arnold had been an example and source of guidance for his many young students. Reverting to Biblical images, it can be said that Matthew Arnold was "born again"--through the eyes of a child he was able to see his father in a new light.

"Rugby Chapel" is a poem of conciliation. It begins as a reflective poem which expresses the speaker's grief and sense of loss, and it acknowledges and pays tribute to Dr. Arnold's greatness, in his son's eyes. It is a poem of affirmation which could only have been written after the speaker had come to terms with his father's position. To do so meant conforming to the age's demand for leadership, even from its men of letters. Arnold abandoned the poetry which expressed his inner-most feelings of insecurity, rebellion and confusion, and opted to become part of the Time Stream. Thus the ascending movement of "Rugby Chapel," symbolic of the life of action and striving he was now embarking on, could be said to supersede the circular movement, symbolic of a life of detachment and resignation. Arnold choose to follow in his father's footsteps, and that was the greatest tribute he could pay Dr. Arnold.

Conclusion

> Ah! two desires toss about
> The poet's feverish blood.
> One drives him to the word without,
> And one to solitude.
>
> "Stanzas in the Memory of the Author of 'Obermann'" (ll. 93-96)

Many of Matthew Arnold's poems directly or symbolically set up an opposition between ambition or action, and detachment or contemplation--between the strain and passion that accompany a life of action and the serenity and objectivity which supposedly are the result of a life of detachment.[1] A life of action meant striving single-mindedly towards a goal. A life of detachment also included perception and open-mindedness--a seeing beyond immediate surroundings and achieving a balanced, long term view. The life of detachment is associated with and described in terms of nature and is portrayed by the cyclical movement in the poems I have discussed. The life of action is portrayed by a contrary movement os ascent. Many of Arnold's poems show ambivalence between involvement in the life of the times and aloofness from it. The patterns of imagery in the poems, based on cyclical and ascending movements, reflect this indecision.

Most of Arnold's early poems favor a way of life of detachment, and there cyclical images prevail. "The Strayed Reveller" is built around cyclical images and is itself an object of beauty which appeals primarily to the senses. "Mycerinus" includes both cyclical and ascending movements, and the former are more abundant and lyrically expressed. Both poems are objective works of art in which the voice of the poet is not heard. However, Arnold's poems underwent a change, probably as a result of the expectations of his family, friends, and public. Although Arnold had originally criticized Clough and all other poets whom he considered too analytic, too didactic, and too much inclined to aspire to "the high, white star of Truth," [2] he began to follow in their footsteps. The lyricism and objectivity in his early poems were slowly replaced by the discordant tone of "the dialogue of the mind with itself." [3] His poems became subjective, and the speaker in those poems is clearly Arnold himself. This is true of "Resignation" and "Rugby Chapel."

"Resignation" reflects Arnold's insecurity and indecision. The speaker concentrates on portraying the superiority of a life of detachment over a life of action, as the only way of attaining serenity and peace, and he uses cyclical and ascending images to illustrate his points. However, the final stanza belies the gist of the poem by asserting that such a life is not conductive to happiness; rather, it is merely bearable.

"Rugby Chapel," a late poem, is based on a movement of ascent, and denigrates what cyclical movements stand for. The poem appeals to the intellect rather than the senses. Lyricism has given way to moralizing.

The cyclical and ascending images of the poems I have considered reflect Arnold's struggle between speaking as a lyricist or as a moralist. In the early lyric poems there is a profusion of circular images. The later poems, reflexive and moralizing, are conceived in terms of movements of ascent. Although Arnold tries, as we know from his letters, to make his poems conform to the requirements of mid-nineteenth century moral aesthetics, his poetry eventually suffers--it loses the objectivity and lyricism characteristic of his early poems. In fact, the poems become almost as stilted and arduous as the ascending movements themselves. We may conclude, then, that in spite of his high hopes for a poetry that would "animate" and "ennoble," Matthew Arnold failed to adequately integrate lyrical utterance and moral exhortation.

Notes

Introduction

[1] "To Jane Arnold," probably 1849, Unpublished Letters of Matthew Arnold, ed. Arnold Whitridge (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1923), pp. 15, 17.

[2] "To Arthur Hugh Clough," February 1849; February 1848; 6 December 1847; February 1849; 6 December 1847; December 1847 or early part of 1848, The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough, ed. Howard Foster Lowry (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1932), pp. 99, 66, 63, 99, 63, 65.

[3] Robert G. Stange, Matthew Arnold: The Poet as Humanist (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 4.

[4] "To Arthur Hugh Clough," 28 October 1852, Lowry, p. 124.

[5] See Dwight Culler, Imaginative Reason: The Poetry of Matthew Arnold (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 3.

"The Strayed Reveller"

[1] Lowry, p. 99.

[2] "For me you may often hear my sinews cracking under the effort to unite matter," describes Arnold's struggle to achieve a balance of form and content in his poetry. In his early letters to Clough, Arnold stresses the importance of form and beauty in poetry, but also notes the importance of content or matter. For Arnold, the best poetry was that which consists of a balance of form and matter. He describes this situation in terms of style: "Style is the saying in the best way what you have to say. The what you have to say depends on your age." The "what you have to say," or poetic matter, being "the hitherto experience of the

world, and [the poet's] own..." Poetry, then, should be above all beautiful and give pleasure, but it must be more than an empty shell. It should have something to say, but the content must never overshadow the form. This was not easy to achieve. See Lowry, pp. 65, 98-99.

[3] See Stange, p. 17n.

[4] These lines and all of Matthew Arnold's poetry quoted herein are taken from The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold, edited by C. B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry, (1950; rpt. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1957).

[5] See C. B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry, The Poetry of Matthew Arnold: A Commentary (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 159; and Kenneth Allott, ed., The Poems of Matthew Arnold (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1965), p. 66n.

"Mycerinus"

[1] Park Honan, Matthew Arnold: A Life (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1981), pp. 17, 52, 70, 21.

[2] Richard D. Altick, Victorian People and Ideas (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1973), pp. 177, 165.

[3] Dwight Culler believes that the Nile is the central symbol of the poem. He says: "It is at once the symbol of the deepest current in the king's own soul and of the cyclical process in nature by which all things die and are renewed," p. 60.

[4] Paull Baum says: "His act was a mad rash protest against divine injustice, no doubt, and a foolish attempt to double his years." He adds: "Mycerinus was justly angered and scornful of the ways of Destiny and justified in trying to thwart them." Paull F. Baum, Ten Studies in the Poetry of Matthew Arnold (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1958), p. 18.

[5] Paull Baum says: "What seemed to be false solution turned out to be salvation." p. 18.

[6] Lionel Trilling, Matthew Arnold (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1939), p. 91.

"Resignation"

[1] In the rest of my discussion, I use "poet" to stand for the speaker.

[2] Trilling, p. 79.

[3] In 1833 the Arnold family spent the summer in Grasmere Valley. In July Dr. Thomas Arnold (the "leader" in "Resignation") took his children Matthew, Jane (Fausta), Thomas, Jr., and a friend, Captain Hamilton, for a walk from Wythburn to Keswick. A decade later and soon after the death of their father, Jane and Matthew retraced that walk. See Honan, pp. 22-23, 176.

"Rugby Chapel"

[1] "Rugby Chapel" is dated 1857, but critics are not sure exactly when it was written. Some critics believe it was written closer to 1867. Most agree, however, that the publication of Tom Brown's School-days by Tom Hughes in 1857 and a review of the book by James Fitzjames Stephen, which suggested that Dr. Arnold was a "narrow bustling fanatic," goaded Arnold to write the elegy and portray the positive side of Dr. Arnold's personality. However, whether it was written in 1857 or later, "Rugby Chapel" was not published until 1867. See Honan, p. 296; and Tinker and Lowry, Commentary, pp. 239-241.

[2] "To Arthur Hugh Clough," 28 October 1852; 30 November 1853, Lowry, pp. 124, 146.

[3] Empedocles on Etna, Act II, ll. 191-193.

[4] See Donald R. Howard, The Idea of the Canterbury Tales (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1976), p. 68.

[5] See Honan, p. 296.

Conclusion

[1] See E. K. Brown, Matthew Arnold: A Study in Conflict (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 25-26.

[2] "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse," l. 69.

[3] See Matthew Arnold, "Preface to Poems, 1853."

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