

Arnold in (and out of) Style

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There can be little doubt that Matthew Arnold's greatest relevance to contemporary culture no longer inheres in the poetry that first brought him fame but rather in his voluminous prose writings on literature, politics, and religion. But critics of Arnold's prose have been divided between those who emphasize the content of Arnold's "ideas" or doctrines and those who praise the prose for modelling a critical attitude or "temper." In 1988 Stefan Collini put the matter squarely in *Matthew Arnold: A Critical Portrait*, where he explains, "rather than providing a comprehensive summary of Arnold's 'views,' I have throughout concentrated on characterizing the tone and temper of his mind and the distinctive style in which it expressed itself" (viii). Here, Collini associates the aesthetic qualities of Arnold's prose with a hermeneutic shift away from Arnold's "beliefs" and toward "the spirit in which they were held" (5), sidestepping debates about Arnold's cultural politics and ideology and staking his reputation on less polarizing grounds.

However, Collini's distinction between ideational content and stylistic character might strike some as arbitrary, even artificial. For isn't style, as Michael D. Hurley and Marcus Waithe suggest, "a mode of thinking *through*" (1), uniting cognitive ideas, personal character, and aesthetic expressivity in a seamless whole? In this essay, I examine the critical reception of Arnold's style to show how these three dimensions of his writings are not self-evidently constellated but have historically interacted in fluctuating and evolving ways. In the nineteenth century, many critics maintained a strict separation between style and subject matter in order to establish Arnold's reputation as a "stylist," or master of nonfictional prose, in a pantheon that already included Carlyle, Macaulay,

and Newman. These efforts remind us that Arnold was deemed an artist in prose well before he was elevated as a “sage.” Yet, by establishing a series of stylistic traits that could be taken as emblems of privileged concepts, the narrow formalism of Arnold’s contemporaries facilitated his intellectual rehabilitation in the mid-twentieth century, when Arnold’s style drove a new sense of what was substantively salient in his work. At the same time, rhetorically minded critics celebrated Arnold’s style for advancing the goals of an authorial persona powerfully suited to persuasion, intensifying the nexus between style and character that was growing in other quarters. Taken together, this critical history explains how “ethical formalism” became the dominant paradigm for evaluating Arnold’s worth, so called because it recodes “views” as stylistic virtues and derives Arnold’s ethos or “character” from the verbal presentation of his “voice.” Ironically enough, the relatively positive account of Arnold’s style that has emerged from this interpretive tradition, which emphasizes freedom and flexibility over the rigidity of prejudiced belief, has proven to be one of the more durable “dogmas” of Arnold’s legacy.

The idea of the “stylist” offers a promising starting point for recovering this overlooked aspect of Arnold’s reception. According to exponents of the “new rhetoric” from Scotland, which permeated nineteenth-century Britain, the ontology of a writer’s style can be construed in a variety of ways: as a vehicle for a discourse’s content or ideas, as an expression of an author’s character or personality, or as an aesthetic merit to be judged according to independent criteria (Sussman 26-35). First appearing in 1795 (OED), the term “stylist” primarily referred to the third of these dimensions, serving as an honorific for writers whose manner of expression was judged to be particularly skillful, accomplished, or pleasing.¹ Perhaps counterintuitively, an artist’s stylism could be appreciated quite apart from the content or context of a work. For example, in an 1847 discussion of Benjamin Constant, the reviewer for *The Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review* affirms Abel-François Villemain’s belief that Constant did his best work under conditions of censorship (572). When free to write the unvarnished truth, Constant’s

writing became "slovenly," but in the face of official restrictions, "his pen swept, in its serpentine evolutions, through the most masterly and graceful curves." The curvilinear nature of the style obliquely references the doleful contexts of its generation—namely, the need to avoid the censor's eyes and circle around what could not be said—but the style's formal value is not diminished by these repressive preconditions. On the contrary, Constant "was a great stylist so long as he wrote under censorship," though, for reasons more moral than artistic, "we would rather have bad books, than good stylists" (572).

The possible gap between style and content also governs R.H. Hutton's extended comparison of Arnold with John Henry Newman in an article occasioned by the publication of *Essays in Criticism* in 1865. Hutton begins by acknowledging Arnold's stylistic greatness, with Newman being one of his "few equals" (127). But he remains puzzled as to "why there is so much of resemblance between their styles with such a world of thought between their principles" (128). There are, of course, many substantive differences between Arnold and Newman: "Mr. Arnold's dogmatic intellectualism is self-evolved, while Dr. Newman's dogmatic theology is taken up in the humility of self-abnegation," and Hutton prefers Newman's "wider [...] more *liberal* nature" to Arnold's "much thinner genius" (128). Yet among their stylistic similarities, Hutton notes "the easy play of the preparing intelligence," "the light and flexible precision of thought," and "the luminous line which every sentence seems to present without any use of high colour" (127). Hutton concludes that these similarities stem not from the authors' divergent "dogmatisms," but rather from a shared "manner of presenting thought to the public" (128). In *Appreciations*, Pater would later speak of "the necessity of *mind* in style" (21)—rooted, say, in the "intelligence" that "prepares" the prose—which assumes a perfect identification between style and personality. But here that mind is divided between the "culture" (127) or intellectual background that shapes the matter and a psychologically inflected rhetorical intention that determines (and, in this case, standardizes) the formal means of presentation.

Hutton's distinction between matter and manner reflects the belletristic emphasis on style in expository prose as something that could be appreciated as an independent aesthetic merit. For a further example of this approach, consider T.W. Hunt's essay of 1888, "Matthew Arnold as an English Writer," in which he resolves to examine Arnold "exclusively as a prose writer," and to "confine attention to the question of style, as distinct from any related question of personal character or opinion" (355). In the first part of the essay, Hunt largely takes up Arnold's own vocabulary of stylistic description in noting the style's "classical" qualities: its "clearness," "finish," and "urbanity." As John Campbell Major argues, these virtues constitute the "Attic" prose style that Arnold consistently praised, commending ideals of clarity, simplicity, and brevity that supposedly mark the prose of the metropole (1092). However, like Hutton, Hunt maintains a rigid separation of style and substance even when the "manner of presenting thought" seems to reflect something of the author's moral or intellectual character. For example, when celebrating "the excellence of his prose as a vigorous protest against all that is superficial," Hunt insists that "we are speaking exclusively of our author's style, and not of his individual beliefs" (363), as if a hatred of the superficial were only an aesthetic feeling. He similarly faults the style for its "dogmatic spirit" (359) without consideration of the various dogmas conveyed. This is because, for Hutton, "the very essence of Mr. Arnold's personality" inheres in his "supreme devotion to literary form as an art, to the artistic or aesthetic side of authorship" (358). The man of "views" and the "man of letters" (355) who writes about those views are not one.

Such distinctions proved especially useful to those who admired the artistry of Arnold's style without necessarily agreeing with him. It is a curious fact that the first book-length treatment of Arnold, George Saintsbury's *Matthew Arnold* (1899), is also the least appreciative of his "content," with Saintsbury arguing from the premise that most of Arnold's writing, being occasional or doctrinal, would prove of little interest to posterity. Valuing Arnold primarily as a poet, and remaining skeptical of his intellectual abilities, he instead praises the prose for introducing a new

"mode of argumentative writing" into English, with *Essays in Criticism* being "epoch-making" for providing "the manual" for a "critical movement in England" (88). Like Hutton, Saintsbury was less interested in Arnold's conclusions than in his method of practicing criticism. He adopts a formalistic approach to Arnold's literary essays in particular, tracing how Arnold renders the project of criticism accessible and engaging. For example, "A French Eton; or Middle-Class Education and the State" (1864), originally published as a series of articles in 1863-1864, "is perhaps most interesting for its style," which "shows a pretty obvious endeavour to soften and popularise, without unduly vulgarising, the academic tone of the earlier work" (81). Similarly, in *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867), "What we go to Mr Matthew Arnold for is not fact, it is not argument, it is not even learning. It is phrase, attitude, style [...]. It is the new critical attitude" (106). That is not to say that Arnold has no arguments worth making—on the contrary, at least some of the "matter" is "invaluable" (222)—but Saintsbury expects Arnold's legacy to rely almost entirely upon his mastery of "the 'middle' style, neither very plain nor very ornate, but 'elegant'" (224), a style that is both perfect and rare: "not so much English prose has that character of grace, or elegance, which has been vindicated for this, that we can afford to lay aside or to forget such consummate examples of it" (226).

Saintsbury's criticism self-consciously imagines what it would be like to remember Arnold from "the merely formal point of view" (224), and for this reason Anthony Kearney rightly calls Saintsbury the first "extreme formalist" (337) among Arnold's critics. A less diachronically motivated example of stylistic formalism may be found in W.C. Brownell's chapter on the author in *Victorian Prose Masters*, published in 1901. In the section on Arnold's criticism, Brownell notes that "the disinterested free play of consciousness that he celebrates in criticism is usually displayed in analysis" (160), observing the likeness between matter and manner that will occupy later ethical critics. But Brownell does not regard disinterestedness, and related attitudes such as objectivity and detachment, as stylistic properties. Instead, they are aspects of argument,

or *logos*, to be contrasted with Attic virtues of “limpidity,” “lucidity,” and “precision” that serve a different artistic function. While no doubt advancing the goal of reasoned argument, Arnold’s style is made to “count aesthetically” (187) by animating the “spirit of playfulness to which we owe very much that is acutely charming in Arnold’s writings” (188). The aesthetic purpose of lucidity, then, is not to be informational, but to be “interesting”: “In any theme of Arnold’s one is interested in how he takes it, how it is conceived, exhibited, enforced, in the way in which its own intrinsic interest is unfolded, in the adaptation itself of the means to ends” (191). This is “never style for its own sake” (189), nor style that satisfies a communicative norm, but something more purposefully aesthetic: “Interesting as his substance is, it would be distinctly less so but for the art of its presentation” (190-91).

T.S. Eliot’s essay “Arnold and Pater” (1930) marks the end of what may be termed the narrowly formalist period in Arnold’s reception, a fitting transition as Eliot combines formalism with ethicism in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. Like Saintsbury, Eliot is critical of Arnold as a thinker, claiming that he lacks that “power of connected reasoning” and possesses “little gift for consistency or for definition” (10). “Nothing in his prose work,” Eliot concludes, “will stand very close analysis” (10). But Eliot also claims that “we go to him for refreshment and for the companionship of a kindred point of view to our own” (10), much as we enjoy the company of a like-minded friend. For Eliot, the very vagueness of Arnold’s gospel of “culture” is one reason why it remains sympathetic: as “a champion of ‘ideas’ most of whose ideas we no longer take seriously” (12), Arnold provides the space for readers to embrace his concept of culture as an abstract ideal without being forced to quibble with its content. In a similarly ironic fashion, Eliot praises Arnold for providing an “illusion” of “precision and clarity [...] as ideals of style” (11), despite not executing them in practice, for Arnold’s best work consists in “his defence and enunciation of a needed attitude” (12), not in what he says. In a way not dissimilar to Eliot’s own oracular pronouncements, Arnold’s style matters more for what it stands for than for the claims it happens to make.

As a major effort to defend Arnold as a thinker of significance, Lionel Trilling's *Matthew Arnold* (1939) was seminal in twentieth-century revaluations of Arnold's reputation. And yet, by reading the "thought of Matthew Arnold" as a "complex unity" (9), Trilling sought to collapse Arnold's "ideas" and "attitudes" in a fashion that earlier formalist critics had resisted. First, Trilling quotes Arnold's letter to Clough in which he defines style as "the expression of the nobility of the poet's character, as matter is the expression of the richness of his mind" and notes Arnold's extension of this thought: "But on men character produces as great an effect as mind" (qtd Trilling 30-31). According to Trilling, as Arnold's career progressed, character became the more comprehensive term, assimilating "mind" and elevating style to a "theory of morality" (185) that encompassed both. As Trilling puts it, Arnold's fundamental idea—that "literature is a criticism of life"—required "a new manner of speech which should be the outward and visible sign of this new manner of thinking" (185). Hence, when Trilling emphasizes the "urbanity" of Arnold's style—that commitment to ease and accessibility formerly regarded as distinctly "Attic" or aesthetic—he contrasts it with the intellectual failures of other important stylists, such as Carlyle, whose "voice" was "mighty but often irresponsible," and Macaulay, whose "objectivity" was really "priggishness," and Ruskin, whose "incomparable orchestra of [...] prose" was well-intentioned but prone to "confusion" (184). Trilling thus credits Arnold with a massive extension of stylistic significance that legitimates the idea that "style is character": "it is the quality of a man's emotion made apparent; then, by an inevitable extension, style is ethics, style is government" (31). Indeed, "Style nevertheless can be matter" (163).

For Trilling, Arnold the stylist and Arnold the dogmatist are one, a tactic that works in Arnold's favor so long as the reader approves of both. However, the risks of stylistic monism (which denotes the conflation of content and form) are clearly present in Geoffrey Tillotson's chapters on Arnold in *Criticism and the Nineteenth Century* (1951), which turns Arnold against himself by arguing that recognizable features of his style actually exemplify less savory aspects of his underlying character.

Tillotson's argument is guided by his belief that Arnold did not practice the virtue of "disinterestedness" that he preached. On the contrary, his partisanship and egotism are everywhere apparent in a prose style whose sole aim is "to produce a certain effect on the British middle class" (46) in aid of "those particular goods in which he held stock," namely "culture" in the form of criticism and poetry (52). For this reason, Tillotson interprets Arnold's use of catch phrases and keywords as shameless sloganeering, glossing repetition as "advocacy" (54). And he recharacterizes Arnoldian "vivacity" (typically associated with wit and anecdotal playfulness) as a satirical "wish to inflict pain" (54), "delightful" but "offensive" (55). Tillotson's account of Arnold stems not only from a polemical interpretation of Arnold's class position and profession, but also from his personalistic view of the author's character as that of a "clever salesman" (52) whose pose of "omniscience" is a cover for propaganda. In this way, Tillotson reveals how Trilling's holistic criticism provided new grounds for recoding stylistic virtues as vices.

Interestingly, Tillotson retreats from the monist position in his more tempered contribution to George Levine and William Madden's 1968 collection, *The Art of Victorian Prose*. The title of his essay, "Matthew Arnold's Prose: Theory and Practice," announces Arnold's increasing importance not just as a stylist but as an emblematic figure in theorizing prose style writ large. Indeed, Arnold provides a convenient occasion for examining the "relation of mind and written words" according to two interpretive postures with which we have become familiar: an "intellectual" one that "applies itself to the content—to the matter, the way it is being thought about, the conclusions being drawn from it"; and an "aesthetic" one that responds partly to the "words as words" (that is, to the elements of style traditionally addressed by belletrism) and partly in response to the "personality shown in writing," which Pater calls "atmosphere" and which Tillotson describes as "colouring" (73). In practice, these two aspects of aesthetic response to style are difficult to disentangle, not least because the "colouring" personality provides the motive for how the words are used. For example, Tillotson takes up

Arnold's belief that the best prose combines "regularity, uniformity, precision, balance" (78). Dismissing the third of these terms as related to the content rather than the manner of expression, Tillotson attributes the others to Arnold's desire to write in a more "conversational" style that opposed the ponderous "explosiveness" of "oratorical" writers like Carlyle (85). If oratorical prose reflects an author who "thinks of himself as dominating his audience from a platform" (85), then Arnold's conversational style assumes a more perfect equality between reader and writer through its even-flowing "smoothness" (85), "looser ordering of the matter expressed" (86), and "more intimate personal colouring" (86) that conjures the presence of an individual "voice" (90). The downside to this intimacy, however, is the "intellectual superiority" and egotistical love of controversy that the Arnoldian voice entrains (92).

Whether Tillotson regarded Arnold as a salesman misleading his audience or a conversationalist gently educating them, his attention to Arnold's "voice" had lasting impact and underscored another important strand in the reception of Arnold's style: the recognition that much of his prose may be understood as rhetorical in design and purpose, seeking to engage, inspire, and ultimately influence his readers. Given the occasional, pedagogical, and often polemical nature of Arnold's writing, it is unsurprising that many earlier critics also noted the persuasive power of his prose. For example, in a review of *Literature and Dogma* (1873), one critic calls Arnold "a master of literary style" whose "sentences follow with the utmost freedom the mould of his thought" (286), the clarity and precision (which Tillotson had dismissed as mere "content") allowing for the effective transmission of ideas. Similarly, although Arnold "repeats himself continually," he does so "with variations like those of a skillful musician on a familiar air" (286), charming rather than boring the reader. In a review of *Mixed Essays* in 1879, Mark Pattison describes how the "new perception" that Arnold "endeavoured to inspire" (425) in readers depended upon the stylistic presentation of an attractive personality. As Everett Lee Hunt describes in one of the earliest essays that takes a self-consciously neoclassical approach to Arnold's rhetoric, "It is the fact that

Arnold did appeal to the public that gives us the opportunity to study him as a rhetorician” (485).

Hunt quotes Arnold’s letters to show how seriously he dedicated himself to a service-ideal of prose, hoping to “do some good” (qtd Hunt 493) through his public writings while appreciating that “everything turns upon one’s exercising the power of *persuasion, of charm*” (qtd Hunt 493). To make this point Hunt draws out an implicit contrast between Arnold and Macaulay. In “A French Critic on Milton” (1877), Arnold praises Macaulay’s “rhetoric,” noticing the “brilliant writing” that cultivates a love of truth by stimulating pleasure in language and style (qtd Hunt 489). But as Arnold also notes, Macaulay’s popularity largely depended upon his “commendation of a view of life which is on the whole theirs, and of men and causes with which they are naturally in sympathy” (qtd Hunt 489). According to Hunt, this mirroring of what the audience already knows invites the Platonic objection to rhetoric as a form of sycophancy or flattery. He believes Arnold differs by holding a view of persuasion that combines “moral discipline” (which suppresses the desire for self-display or fame) with an “intuitive” style of reasoning that seeks emotional resonance rather than systematic truth. The fundamental “mildness” (496) of Arnold’s writerly attitude, which Arnold himself described in 1863 as “sweetness and good humour” (qtd Hunt 493), is therefore the appropriate tone for reading an audience of intelligent, general readers to confront new and potentially uncomfortable beliefs. Given this characterization of Arnold’s methods, Hunt reframes the “scholarly” essays (such as *On Translating Homer*) as attempts to elevate the critic (“well-read, sensitive and cultivated”) over the scholar-pedant as an arbiter of culture, and re-frames the “literary” essays as “hortatory” defenses of “tolerance and detachment” (505-6) rather than critical exegeses. In both cases, the cultivation and display of a particular “tone and temper” (506) becomes the ultimate point of argument.

In the only article of importance to pick up Hunt’s analysis, James A. Berlin nuances his view by further contextualizing two aspects of Arnold’s rhetoric: style and ethos on the one hand, and epistemology and

psychology on the other. According to Berlin, the "deep structure" (30) of Arnold's discourse is Platonic insofar as it rejects a vision of rhetoric that merely confirms what people already know and elevates the "dialectician" whose purpose is to discover truth through the removal of error. The dialectical structure of Arnold's writings is most obvious in his use of "opposing variables" (32) like culture and anarchy, in dialogic structures as in *Friendship's Garland* (1871), and in the conversational style described by Tillotson. However, Berlin notes that Platonic dialectic has little concern with beauty, whereas Arnold's letters everywhere aver the Aristotelian importance of persuasive charm. Berlin naturally asks, "How does one charm while censuring?" (35).² In his account, the aesthetic features of Arnold's style described by others—the elegance, accessibility, and spirit of "free play"—model the task of dialectic while softening it. Central to this effort is Arnold's use of *ethos*, or authorial credibility, by projecting a personality appealing enough "to establish confidence with his audience even as he is criticizing it" (37-38). As we have seen, not everyone found Arnold's "personality" ingratiating, and hostile critics were inclined to impugn his persona as disingenuous, haughty, or grotesquely mannered. For Berlin, however, Arnold's tone is fundamental to his central project, not of "offering truth absolute and eternal" (37), but of exposing error in a spirit of modest meliorism. The style thus "describes a way of knowing as well as a way of communicating" (30), fusing Aristotle's emphasis on persuasion with Plato's interest in truth.

While Hunt and Berlin represent a sideroad in Arnoldian criticism, John Holloway's *The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument*, first published in 1953, placed rhetoric center-stage by reconfiguring Victorian stylists as "sages" who should "be judged not for whether they were right but for what they did" (2). Responding to accusations that nineteenth-century critics such as Arnold or Carlyle lack a systemic philosophy or even sympathetic doctrines, Holloway describes the "activity of the sage" as a "whole mode of utterance" whose goal lay in "modifying the reader's perceptiveness" and "stimulating him to notice something to which he was previously blind" (9). As such, Holloway dramatically shifted the

emphasis from the conveyance of “content” to styles of illocution and their response, envisioning the sage as an artist-in-prose whose subject is wisdom and whose purpose is revelation. If Martha Nussbaum reveals how novelists are really philosophers, then Holloway showed how sages borrowed many of their techniques from novelists, using character mouthpieces, fictional interlocutors, figurative language, thematic keywords, and above all, a pervasive force of personality or “temper,” to advance their distinctive “imaginative strategy” (18).

Not surprisingly, by attending to the combined interests of rhetoric and ethics, Holloway’s chapter on Arnold provides one of the richest analyses of Arnold’s character as a stylist, not least because Holloway insists, far more than Berlin, that Arnold “had no rigid doctrines to argue for, only attitudes. His work inculcates not a set of ultimate beliefs—a ‘Life-Philosophy’—but simply certain habits and a certain temper of mind” (203). Critics like Terry Eagleton might dissent from Holloway’s view that Arnold’s “conclusions” are a “secondary matter” (203), but Holloway’s determination to assimilate all aspects of “dialectic” to the stylistic expression of ethos generated considerable insight into the Arnoldian “voice.” For example, Holloway traces two kinds of arguments to Arnold’s “frame of mind” or persona: “*distinguo* arguments” that reveal his “unrelaxing circumspection” (212) with respect to contexts and terms; and “concessive arguments which emphasize his modesty,” marked by expressions of diffidence, self-deprecation, and cautious generalization (212). As Holloway notes, “concession in argument necessarily does little to advance the proof for one’s own case” (212); hence its primary purpose is to create a “favourable impression” (207) of the author’s personality as “intelligent, modest, urbane” (209). Arnold’s combat with real and fictional interlocutors (whom opponents might call “straw men”) is part of this strategy: *ad hominem* arguments make “cocksure people look silly” (211), impugning their own “habits of mind” to recommend his own. In addition, Arnold’s use of over-general keywords is interpreted as a common-sense refusal of pedantic niceties, while slogans and catch-phrases (which Tillotson dismissed as advertising) help readers navigate

arguments by providing conceptual shorthands and traceable "nodal points" (225). Irony also becomes a primary tool for recommending one temper of mind over another, especially through devices such as insincere praise and disingenuous disclaimers.

Holloway's work was pivotal in providing a rhetorical justification for treating Arnold's ethos as argument, and thus for interpreting style as a matter of character. It provided the template for a variety of other ethically motivated studies that explored, at least in part, the aesthetic appeal of Arnoldian temper against the growing ranks who subjected it to ideological critique.³ For example, William Madden's *Matthew Arnold: A Study of the Aesthetic Temperament* (1967), while offering little in the way of stylistic analysis, interprets Arnold's prose works as "the exhibition and defense" of a "poetic temper and attitude" (129) for which creative expression reigns supreme. Recalling Trilling's emphasis on the unity of Arnold's thought, Madden summarizes Arnold's prose works as a rhetorical effort to model and transmit this fundamental "idea." Similarly, in *The Time-Spirit of Matthew Arnold* (1970), R.H. Super calls Arnold "the best representative, among the Victorians, of the modern spirit" (91), taking at face value Arnold's claim that his "poems represent the main movement of mind of the last quarter of a century" (qtd Super 29). Admiring Arnold's "wit" and "quickness of mind," while treating his "ideas" as representative rather than dogmatic, he proclaims the value of Arnold's "temperamental transcendentalism adapted to a naturalistic frame of reference" (90). Finally, in *The Arnoldian Principle of Flexibility* (1979), William Robbins rebuts accusations that Arnold's "manner of thinking" is incoherent or vacillating by foregrounding the principle of *eutrapelia* or "flexibility," which Arnold describes in "A Speech at Eton" (1882). Defining Arnold's "dominant attitude" as "open-mindedness" (72), or the "cultivation of moderation and tolerance" (28), he suggests that the "response to his style as urbane, witty, civilised" (28) demonstrates his success at realizing this doctrine in practice.

Two studies of the 1980s also interpret Arnold's style as advancing ethico-rhetorical goals. In *Matthew Arnold's Prose: Three Essays in*

Literary Enlargement (1983), William Buckler follows Holloway in tracing “the rhetorical tradition in which the Arnold-*persona* works” (93), which combines the “plain-speaking” (93) simplicity of Socrates or Jesus with the “experiential and revelatory” (44) image-making of the romantic poet. However, he goes further in aestheticizing this impression of character, suggesting that the value of the Arnold-*persona* lies less in the critical virtues it transmits (such as tolerance or moderation) than in the affective interest generated by its stylistic individuality. For example, Arnold’s “best prose [...] had a personative or dramatic character that erased the philosophical rigidities of mind speaking to mind” and that performed “the complex intricacies of a multidimensional *persona* who felt, dreamed, gestured, strategized, played with language, who enticed as well as thought” (88). Significantly, this prose “is not expository or argumentative,” and the reader is not drawn to Arnold because he learns something. Rather, the benefit lies in becoming “a fully immersed participant in the drama of consciousness” (63), not unlike an encounter with a novel or poem. Buckler’s formalism thus harks back to Brownell’s notion of the stylist as an author whose discourse generates aesthetic interest quite apart from some paraphrasable “content,” its value lying in “the imaginative way in which the subject is apprehended and treated” (54)—the main subject being the author himself. In *Matthew Arnold and the Betrayal of Language* (1988), David Riede similarly rebuts accusations of mannerism by turning stylistic eccentricities into strengths. Responding to the old indictments of Arnold’s sloganeering and “phrase-making,” Riede defends “the empty language” that occurs “throughout all of Arnold’s writings” as fundamentally self-reflexive: “language has nothing to refer to but itself” (4). While acknowledging that Arnold is “properly regarded as nineteenth-century England’s greatest spokesman for culture” (1), he argues that the “polished, unruffled urbanity of tone” (212), enhanced rather than undone by what J. Hillis Miller calls Arnold’s “empty linguistic shells” (266), constitutes a “pure form” of “univocal” (212) prose that Arnold was unable to achieve in poetry.

It is now easy to see how the ethical formalism that became the dominant approach to Arnold's style in the last quarter of the twentieth century represented a new compromise between the rehabilitation of Arnold as an author whose best "ideas" were really "attitudes" with the belletristic formalism that resisted the reduction of style to doctrine. Collini's *Matthew Arnold* does not, therefore, mark a new departure in Arnoldian criticism but rather the fruition of trends that had been present since its inception. Collini certainly acknowledges Arnold's ideological importance, noting, with some bemusement, that Arnold "is more central to the cultural debates of the late twentieth century than he has been at any time in the hundred years since his death" (110). However, in his chapter on "The Arnoldian Legacy," he notes that "the reasons for Arnold's current importance bear only a tenuous relation to any considered understanding of the complexities of his tone and temper" (117). When properly recognized, Arnold's temper provides a "still-effective antidote to just that cast of mind that insists on denigrating him for its own partisan purposes" (117), effectively insulating him from ideological capture. Instead, "one of the reasons why Arnold can still speak to us more directly than most of his contemporaries is that he did not make the prime object of attention the content of a writer's beliefs so much as the spirit in which they were held" (5). Collini's book contains many felicitous characterizations of this "spirit," few of them new, and many decidedly aesthetic. He describes Arnold's "qualities of balance, perceptiveness, and wit, which he sometimes embodied as well as recommended," as well as a "lightness of touch" and "Mozartian gaiety" that belie a "deeply pondered" approach to life and art (117). For Collini, the Arnoldian "voice" is humble, intimate, witty, facetious, and playful, and, like the most sympathetic Victorian critics, he proffers *Friendship's Garland* as "required reading for all those who think of Arnold only as an uninvitingly heavy moralist" (75). Even so, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) retains its pride of place as showcasing the best of Arnold's manner-as-matter—an opinion that was anticipated by Eliot.

In a review of Collini's career, Cessare Cuttica has considered the extent to which Collini's own brand of cultural criticism is "Arnoldian."

Collini's rejection of esoteric specialism and eclectic intellectual interests; his attention to the aural qualities of an author's "cadence" and "voice"; his belief that disinterested criticism is an essential condition for political meliorism; and his use of interpretive practices drawn from literary criticism all imply an emulation of Arnold's method. So too does his own cultivation of a compelling stylistic personality, frequently ironic, that "eschews the overly theoretical parlance of much contemporary criticism, opting instead for the warmer language of historical and biographical narrative combined" (266). As Cuttica shows, Collini's critics resemble Arnold's when they impugn his refusal to place an emancipatory conception of criticism in the service of a concrete political agenda; for Collini, as for Collini's Arnold, cultural criticism influences politics by modelling deliberative and civic virtues rather than advocating for one position over another. From the point of view of style, then, we can see how Collini's sense of Arnold is hardly his own invention, but rather brings to completeness a long-standing backformation that interprets Arnold's style as his *locum ethicae*.

Following the precedents of Trilling and Collini, in recent years the formalist ethics of Arnold's style have been increasingly imagined as an expression of procedural liberalism. For example, in *The Powers of Distance* (2001), Amanda Anderson defends Arnold's criticism for raising "temperament, stance, and character as the site where fact and value might be reconciled" (97). Her work anticipates Elaine Hadley's claim in *Living Liberalism* (2010) that "what the Victorians might call 'frames of mind,' such as disinterestedness, objectivity, reticence, conviction, and sincerity" possess "a moral valence" (9) that emphasizes "*how* one ought to think but not precisely *what* to think" (10), a classic liberal formulation. It is no coincidence that Hadley uses the term "formalism" to describe this attitude or posture: the history of Arnold's reception amply demonstrates how stylistic formalism gives rise to a picture of ethics that is, not surprisingly, formalist in character, emphasizing processes over outcomes and turning stances into substance. In the most robust consideration of Arnold in this tradition, David Russell argues that the vague doctrine of culture once

decried, and yet ironically appreciated, by Eliot, deliberately depends "less on the specific content of an idea than on a style that would make room for it" (204). For Russell, Arnold's empty slogans "perform a making space for ideas" and "seek to form rather than inform their reader, by making space for speculation" (207), with Arnold's anti-authoritarian view of the state perfectly mirroring this stylistic performance: "Arnold prescribes for this state no particular characteristics of institution or structure. It is an idea, a way of thinking of the collective by having a kind of reverence for it, which is not pre-emptively conscripted into practical conflicts" (206). Russell thus underscores Arnold's connection to the second-order goals of the liberal education to "create the conditions for freer thought" (212), allowing individuals to chart their own "orientation to a social idea" (213) in the space that only style makes possible.

Russell laments that "we have perhaps never been so far from Arnold's ideas" (214) about education or the state, but, as this reception history suggests, we remain remarkably close to conceiving Arnold's style as the direct conduit to his most cherished values. Yet one of the more distinguishing features of Arnold's style remains its ironic playfulness and "evasive" (Levine 143) variability, its refusal to settle into predictable modes or tones. Brian Nellist argues that one of Arnold's works that attracts the least sustained attention—*Friendship's Garland*—is actually the most stylistically characteristic because it animates, through its cavalcade of masked personae and ceaselessly modulating registers, a "variety of voice" (33) that is markedly (if paradoxically) Arnoldian. Originally published as a series of separate articles in the late 1860s, *Friendship's Garland* purports to represent the correspondence, edited by Arnold, between himself and Arminius Von Thunder-ten-Tronckh, a Prussian interlocutor; but its design and execution frustrate the possibility of drawing reliable connections between style, characters, and doctrines. In some places, Arnold refers to real-life figures and ongoing debates in newspapers and periodicals (such as his exchange with Frederic Harrison), while in others (as with Arminius) he interacts with fictional characters, obscuring the line between nonfiction and satire. The version of Arnold

presented in the text, whether by Arminius or Arnold's own editorial emendations, is also highly dubious, as when Arnold recounts his having previously said to Arminius, "Fiddlesticks about our better self!" (49), a phrase that belies the perfectionism of his public writings in this period. In the same way, Arnold's habit of self-deprecation is alienated and repurposed, only to be projected back upon him by Arminius as his second self: "Now, I have a regard for this Mr. Matthew Arnold," Arminius attests, "but I have taken his measure, and know him to be, as a disputant, rather a poor creature. Again and again I have seen him anxiously ruminating over what his adversary has happened to say against his ideas" (43). According to Nellist, these carnivalesque techniques are standard Arnoldian fare insofar as they exhibit a complex "process of thinking" that is interesting for its own sake, with the "style that negotiates between mockery and feeling, slighness and substance" becoming "the idea beyond all other ideas in the work" (41). Noting the persistence of dandiacal tendencies throughout Arnold's career, James Najarian goes so far as to make *Friendship's Garland's* "self-consciously aesthetic" (203) playfulness central to his claim that Arnold is the "grandfather of camp" (203).

This final suggestion draws attention to an additional figure whose ideas about style were directly, if somewhat surprisingly, shaped by Arnold's precedent. In "The Decay of Lying" (1891), Oscar Wilde refutes the received idea that art imitates life and argues instead that life is far more likely to imitate art. "The self-conscious aim of Life is to find expression" and "Art offers it certain beautiful forms through which it may realise that energy" (54). The belief that we develop doctrines in isolation and then represent them through style, even in expository contexts, is for Wilde a verbal illusion. On the contrary, art makes possible the forms of expression that subsequently furnish us with ideas. Wilde's take is a sly extension of the situation that Arnold himself presumed to obtain in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1861), in which he argues that creation can flourish only under conditions made propitious by criticism. Wilde takes this one step further by suggesting that the "critical tempera-

ment" is itself a phenomenon of form. Still, given the account of Arnold we have seen thus far, Wilde may not have been too far off. "It is style that makes us believe in a thing—nothing but style" (48), he says, including, we might add, the "idea" of Arnold himself.

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Notes

¹ Not everyone liked the new term. For example, Henry James criticizes Guy de Maupassant for using "the detestable expression, 'stylist,' which I have not reproduced" (534).

² This question returns in modified form when David Russell asks, "how to persuade people of their need for something they do not value?" (207).

³ In 1983, Eugene Goodheart noted that for many critics, such as Gerhard Joseph and Harold Bloom, Arnold's approach to the "social question of the humanities" (468) had come to represent "an abandoned path or a path to be abandoned" (451). More recently, James Walter Caufield identifies another three decades' worth of "caricatural reductions" (12) of Arnold, including those by Terry Eagleton in *The Idea of Culture* (Blackwell, 2000) and Edward Said in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (Columbia University Press, 2004).

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