

The French Ideal: Matthew Arnold, Sainte-Beuve, and Renan

Joseph Phelan

“*A*ll of us feel, at some time or other in our lives,” says Matthew Arnold toward the end of *Literature and Dogma*, “a hankering after the French ideal, a disposition to try it” (VI:391).¹ This “hankering” played a significant part in Arnold’s own intellectual life, and in their different ways Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve (1804-1869) and Ernest Renan (1823-1892) represented equally important aspects of his “French ideal.” Arnold’s indebtedness to these illustrious French contemporaries has often been noted; in a waspish overview of his career, written while Arnold was on a lecture tour to the United States, Henry James notes that “Mr. Arnold touches Renan on one side, as he touches Sainte-Beuve on the other,” with both elements combining to make him “the most Gallicised of English writers” (243). This indebtedness manifests itself above all, for James, in Arnold’s style, with its mannered charm, elegant hesitations, subtle qualifications, and incantatory repetitions, but it can also be seen in his choice of similar (and sometimes identical) subject matter for his work. Sainte-Beuve writes essays on the obscure figures of Maurice and Eugénie de Guérin, and so does Arnold; Renan writes an essay on the genius of Celtic literature, and so does Arnold. These resemblances have been thoroughly documented and inventoried—not least, as we shall see, by Arnold himself—and it is not the purpose of this essay to add items to this list.² The aim, rather, is to understand the different role that each of these incarnations of the “French ideal” played

in Arnold's development as a critic and a thinker. Sainte-Beuve seems to epitomize for Arnold the persuasive and even seductive quality of French life, with its power to charm and disarm—the antitype of the ill-tempered, one-sided, and fractious debate that disfigured intellectual life in England. Renan, in contrast, gives the imprimatur of modern scholarship and criticism to what Arnold saw as his true life's work: the attenuation of the “Hebraic” element in English cultural and political life, and in the Protestant Christianity that underpinned it.

These influences are, in some respects, successive, with Renan gradually supplanting Sainte-Beuve during the early 1860s and sanctioning Arnold's detour into biblical criticism, but they are also simultaneous, with Arnold never losing sight, even while expounding St. Paul's Epistles, of the importance “of *persuasion*, of *charm*” in preparing people to accept sometimes unpalatable truths.³ Arnold's first published reference to Sainte-Beuve comes in the context of a brief controversy sparked by a review of his 1853 *Poems* which accused him of unacknowledged borrowing from one of Sainte-Beuve's “causeries” in his “Sohrab and Rustum.” The “causerie” [chat] was Sainte-Beuve's distinctive contribution to French literary culture, an informal and conversational but artfully structured essay aimed at persuading the audience to adopt a particular point of view almost *à leur insu* [without their knowledge].⁴ Arnold's response to the accusation of plagiarism takes the form of a lengthy note, included in the 1854 edition of his poems, in which he gently mocks his accuser and turns the charge against him into an opportunity to flaunt the breadth of his knowledge and the range of his reading. Having noted the appearance of extracts from Julius von Mohl's translation of Firdousi's *Shahnameh* in the work of “that most delightful of critics,” M. Sainte-Beuve, Arnold proceeds to quote at length, and without translation, the episode on which his poem is based, before turning his attention to his English critic:

A writer in the *Christian Remembrancer* [...] has observed, apparently with blame, that I “have not thought fit to offer a single syllable of acknowledgement to an author to whom I have been manifestly very largely indebted” [...]. It

would have been more charitable, perhaps, had the reviewer, before making this goodnatured suggestion, ascertained, by reference to M. Mohl's work, how far it was confirmed by the fact. (57-58)⁵

This is, by Arnold's later standards, a rather clumsy attempt at irony; "goodnatured" is too obviously meant to imply its opposite to come across as anything other than sarcasm. It does, though, anticipate much of Arnold's later critical work in its use of French intellectual life as a way of exposing the intemperate nature of its English counterpart:

I hope that it will not in future be supposed, if I am silent as to the sources from which a poem has been derived, that I am trying to conceal obligations, or to claim an absolute originality for all parts of it. When any man endeavours to "*remanier et réinventer à sa manière*" [modify and reinvent in his own way] a great story, which, as M. Sainte Beuve says of that of *Sohrab and Rustum*, has "*couru le monde*" [made its way around the world], it may be considered quite certain that he has not drawn all the details of his work out of his own head. (58)

Arnold's accuser, it is clear, has not "*couru le monde*"; he lacks the sophistication to realize that the retelling of stories that have achieved worldwide fame usually involves some reworking of existing material. Far from concealing his indebtedness to Sainte-Beuve, Arnold transforms it into a way of exposing the provinciality and pettiness of his accuser. This note, which is not included in Super's edition of Arnold's collected prose, can be seen as Arnold's first, faltering attempt at a "causerie" in English, the prototype for the various prefaces in which he took on and gently rebuffed his intemperate or ill-informed critics.⁶ The preface is, in many respects, the consummate form of Arnold's critical art, his closest approximation to the manner of Sainte-Beuve. His famous preface to *Poems* (1853), with its grandiose pronouncements about the proper subject of art, is atypical in this respect; the essential Arnold preface is much more like the preface to *Culture and Anarchy*, a relaxed, confident, and irenic

exercise in condescension towards opponents depicted as the victims of their own misapprehensions.

The earliest reference to Sainte-Beuve in Arnold's stand-alone critical writings has a similar function to the note on "Sohrab and Rustum." In his 1861 essay *On Translating Homer*, Arnold takes issue with Ruskin's erroneous "application of modern sentiment to the ancients": "It reminds one, as, alas! so much of Mr. Ruskin's work reminds one, of those words of the most delicate of living critics: 'Comme tout genre de composition a son écueil particulier, celui du genre romanesque, c'est le faux'" (I:102).⁷ Arnold fails to name this "most delicate of living critics"—we are assumed to know who he means, or be forced to confess our ignorance—and refuses to translate Sainte-Beuve's pronouncement into English, a gesture that cannot pass unnoticed in an essay on translation. In his article "The Bishop and the Philosopher," about which more will be said shortly, Arnold praises Spinoza—the "philosopher" of the title—for writing in Latin, thereby preventing his speculations on religion from falling into the hands of "the scantily-instructed many" ("Bishop" 243).⁸ The French language played a similar role in English intellectual life for much of the nineteenth century, allowing the circulation and relatively free enjoyment of certain ideas and materials which would have been deemed unacceptable by those who policed and claimed to speak for public opinion in England, and reinforcing the boundary between those who felt at home in the more permissive environment of French culture and those who did not. The allusion to Sainte-Beuve in *On Translating Homer* aims, like the lecture as a whole, to unsettle Arnold's English readers, offering them a glimpse of an intellectual realm in which their habitual judgments and attitudes seem false, and from which they appear (alas!) as objects of pity and even ridicule.

By the time he wrote *Last Words*, delivered as a lecture at Oxford in 1861 and published in 1862, Arnold had been given yet another illustration of "the baneful effects of controversy" on the spirit of true criticism by F.W. Newman's blustering response to *On Translating Homer* (I:169). *Last Words* begins, as R.H. Super's notes point out, by borrowing directly

from one of Sainte-Beuve's "causeries" on the inadvisability of responding directly to criticism (I:249). This borrowing is not acknowledged in the essay, but Arnold does invoke Sainte-Beuve directly a little later on, this time naming him:

Yes, even when we have to do with writers who,—to quote the words of an exquisite critic, the master of us all in criticism, M. Sainte-Beuve,—remind us, when they handle such subjects as our present, of "Romans of the fourth or fifth century, coming to hold forth, all at random, in African style, on papers found in the desk of Augustus, Mæcenas, or Pollio,"—even then we may instruct ourselves if we regard ideas and not persons; even then we may enable ourselves to say, with the same critic describing the effect made upon him by D'Argenson's *Memoirs*: "My taste is revolted, but I learn something;—*Je suis choqué mais je suis instruit.*" (I:185-86)

Arnold this time translates Sainte-Beuve's words, but he does so in a way which puts a subtly distinctive emphasis on them. A more literal translation would be "I am shocked, but I learn something." Arnold's formulation ("my taste is revolted") softens the potential moral judgment implicit in Sainte-Beuve's "*choqué*"—the kind of response Arnold would have associated with his English readers—and emphasizes instead the aesthetic judgment lurking in it: D'Argenson has offended, not some abstract system of morality, but the writer's sensibilities, his "taste."

This translation is consistent with Arnold's tendency, throughout his work, to characterize Sainte-Beuve as a kind of aesthete *avant la lettre*.⁹ Words like "delicate" and "exquisite" are redolent of the work of Pater and Wilde, Arnold's successors at Oxford, and the meanings of both hover uncertainly between praise and censure throughout the nineteenth century. To be an "exquisite" or a "delicate" critic was to possess discrimination and fine judgment, but also perhaps to be guilty of self-indulgence or even hedonism. *OED* notes the use of "exquisite" for "[a] person (usually a man) who is over-nice in dress, etc.; a coxcomb, dandy, fop," and cites

some remarks by Dr. Thomas Arnold, Matthew's famously earnest and industrious father, criticizing "exquisites [who] imitate the outside of foreign customs without discrimination" (Stanley II:390).¹⁰ There is no doubt that a certain foppishness or dandyism was part of the "French ideal" for Arnold, an ideal that manifested itself, earlier in his life, in a penchant for the "lubricious" songs and Bohemian lifestyle of Pierre-Jean de Béranger.¹¹ Arnold's Sainte-Beuve represents a refined and respectable version of this "foppishness," retaining a certain fastidiousness and elegance of gesture but eliminating all trace of the associations with impropriety that might have shocked Arnold's readers and made them less susceptible to the charms of his style. The element of affectation in Arnold's use of the names of his French contemporaries was not entirely lost on his English contemporaries. In a scathing review of "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," Fitzjames Stephen turns the tables on Arnold, seeing him not as the sophisticated cosmopolitan of his imagination but as an insecure English tourist attempting to curry favor with the locals by criticizing his compatriots: "He is always using a moral smelling-bottle, like those beloved countrymen, who, at foreign *tables d'hôte*, delight to hold forth on the vulgarity of 'those English'" (Dawson and Pfordresher 126).¹²

In "The Literary Influence of Academies," perhaps Arnold's most sustained attempt to promote the "French ideal," Sainte-Beuve appears again; he is, though, joined in this essay by "M. Renan," whose name is deemed familiar enough to the English audience by this point (August 1864) to require no further introduction, probably because of the fame, or rather notoriety, the French writer had achieved with the publication of his *Vie de Jésus* in 1863.¹³ Arnold had become aware of Renan's work toward the end of the 1850s, recommending the *Essais de morale et de critique* in a letter to his sister, and singling out for particular praise a work he would later borrow from extensively: Renan's essay "Sur la poésie des races celtiques" (I:515-16).¹⁴ Arnold recognized what he called a "considerable resemblance" between Renan's "line of endeavour" and his own, and the reasons for this feeling of affinity are made clear in "The Bishop and the

Philosopher," the article referred to briefly above, which first appeared in *Macmillan's Magazine* in January 1863. The article was prompted, as so many of Arnold's writings were, by yet another example of English eccentricity and provinciality in intellectual matters: the appearance of Bishop John Colenso's *Pentateuch and Book of Joshua Critically Examined*. Colenso's contribution to the science of biblical criticism attempts to show that many of the events narrated in the early books of the Bible contain contradictions and arithmetical impossibilities, and concludes, with great reluctance and some trepidation, that the doctrine of plenary inspiration held by many Protestant Christians of his time is no longer tenable. In assessing Colenso's work, Arnold attempts to gauge its impact on both "the scantily-instructed many" and "the highly-instructed few," the "freethinkers who really speak to the higher culture of their nation or of Europe—men such as Hegel was in Germany, such as M. Rénan [*sic*] now is in France" ("Bishop" 246).¹⁵ For the former group, Colenso's work provides no "edification" and no compensation for the loss of cherished (if erroneous) beliefs; for the latter, it demonstrates a lamentable ignorance of the advances made in the understanding of human culture and the history of religion during the previous century. What is needed—the "one thing needful," to borrow a phrase Arnold used a few years later in *Culture and Anarchy*—is to communicate ideas in a way that matches the capacity of the audience: "'Unto you,' said Christ to a few disciples, 'it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them (the multitude) it is not given'" ("Bishop" 243).¹⁶ Elsewhere in his religious writings Arnold talks about "the method" and "the secret" of Jesus. The former is a mode of talking to and engaging with "the multitude" in a way that they will understand, using parables, concrete images, and emotive language; the latter is the message he actually wants to convey.

Renan's increasing prominence from this point onwards heralds Arnold's growing preoccupation with what he saw as the root cause of England's cultural and intellectual backwardness: the domination, in cultural and political life, of the Dissenting middle class, many of whom believed, or at least professed to believe, in the literal truth of the Bible. Arnold's turn

toward biblical criticism in the 1860s and 1870s has often been regretted or ignored by his critics, who have tended to see it as an unfortunate distraction from his real work as a literary critic and a descent into the kind of controversy he had seemed to warn against repeatedly in his own writings, with their lofty invocations of the need for “disinterestedness” in criticism.¹⁷ It is, however, an integral part—what he saw as the most important part—of his endeavor to “Hellenise” the English people, an audacious attempt to transform Christianity itself into a religion compatible with the ideal of “sweetness and light.”¹⁸ Arnold was aware, as relatively few English writers of his generation were, of the enormity of the challenges facing Bible-based Protestant Christianity from historical inquiry and biblical criticism, and he saw in Renan someone capable of providing him with the intellectual ammunition he needed to begin his stealthy assault on these cherished beliefs. It is in his capacity as a “grave Orientalist” that Renan is invoked in “The Literary Influence of Academies,” passing judgment on such monstrosities as Charles Forster’s *Mahometanism Unveiled*, with its argument “that Mahomet was the little horn of the he-goat that figures in the eighth chapter of Daniel, and that the Pope was the great horn”; Renan’s erudition and authority help Arnold begin the slow, corrosive work of making such beliefs seem not just wrong, but ridiculous (III:243).

With his habitual tact, Arnold is careful not to align himself completely with Renan.¹⁹ He presents himself very often as an intermediary between the advanced ideas of the French and the British public, especially where matters as delicate as the fundamentals of religious belief are concerned. In “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” Arnold again points to the unfortunate Colenso as the epitome of “the low ebb at which, in England, the critical spirit is,” contrasting him explicitly with Renan: “while the critical hit in the religious literature of Germany is Dr. Strauss’s book, in that of France M. Renan’s book, the book of Bishop Colenso is the critical hit in the religious literature of England” (III:278).²⁰ This does not, however, mean that he completely endorses Renan’s project in the *Vie de Jésus*, which is nothing less than “a new synthesis of the elements furnished to us by the Four Gospels”

(III:278). Arnold's view is that such an attempt is "perhaps premature, perhaps impossible," a view he supports, with typically Arnoldian wit, by citing Renan's own words against him: "If a new presentation of the character of Jesus were offered to me, I would not have it; its very clearness would be, in my opinion, the best proof of its insufficiency" (III:278). More work needs to be done, especially in England, before a new "character" of Jesus can be accepted; but Renan has, for Arnold, identified "the very essence of the religious problem," the need to develop and make acceptable "a fresh synthesis of the New Testament *data*,—not a making war on them, in Voltaire's fashion, not a leaving them out of mind, in the world's fashion, but the putting a new construction upon them, the taking them from under the old, adoptive, traditional, unspiritual point of view and placing them under a new one" (III:279).

This tact in dealing with Renan's ideas, and especially with his ideas concerning the reconstruction of Christianity, is particularly necessary when dealing with the question of race, which lies, for both Renan and Arnold, at the root of Europe's problems with Christianity. It has become customary, at least since the pioneering work of Lionel Trilling and Frederic E. Faverty, to treat Arnold's use of racial distinctions and categories in his work as a regrettable concession to ideas that were "unfortunately endemic to European thought of the period" (Nash 33). Faverty, whose work on this topic deserves to be better known, provides a thorough survey of Arnold's indebtedness to various pioneers of the emerging science of racial classification, but prefaces his detailed study with the observation that "Arnold was no systematic racialist" (1). This is not surprising: Arnold was no systematic anything. One of the constants in his critical writing is his determination to remain free of systems and theories; a critic whose work is governed by "something which he wants to prove" is, as he puts it in "A French Critic on Goethe," "no genuine critic, but a man with a system, an advocate" (VIII:255). His use of the language of race is fluid and passing, rather than fixed and rigid; sometimes he lumps the Teutons and Celts together as part of the Indo-European family, and sometimes he makes sharp distinctions between

them. His famous distinction between “Hellenism” and “Hebraism” is another example of his flexibility in dealing with racial thinking; these terms are occasionally used in a sense which maps onto ethnic identity, but for the most part are a kind of shorthand for different tendencies or elements of human life associated with these two perpetually warring elements in the human spirit. Arnold is careful to distance himself from what he sees as the less intelligent and less flexible applications of racial classification and analysis, but there is no doubt that it represented for him a crucial part of the “French ideal,” another example of France’s ability to move forward intellectually in line with new scientific developments that it would be beneficial for his fellow countrymen to know.

Arnold’s clearest statement of his beliefs about racial difference comes in his lecture *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, published in 1867. In this essay, which is probably the most directly indebted to Renan of all Arnold’s writings, he explains the differences between the literature, culture, and historical trajectory of the Teutonic English and the Celtic Welsh and Irish on the basis of their inherent racial characteristics; the dreamy, impractical Celts furnish English poetry with its “natural magic,” but are doomed to subjugation and relative historical insignificance by the altogether more prosaic and practical Anglo-Saxons. Arnold uses *Celtic Literature* as something of a primer on racial thinking for his audience, normalizing the topic before embarking on the larger and altogether more ambitious challenge of freeing Christianity from its “Semitic” origins. This was a task that Arnold associated with the work of his father, as he noted in a letter to his mother, written on Christmas Day 1867:

Bunsen used to say that our great business was to get rid of all that was purely Semitic in Christianity, and to make it Indo-Germanic, and Schleiermacher that in the Christianity of us Western nations there was really much more of Plato and Socrates than of Joshua and David; and, on the whole, papa worked in the direction of these ideas of Bunsen and Schleiermacher, and was perhaps the only powerful Englishman of his day who did so. (III:207)

Arnold restates this belief, in very similar terms, in *Celtic Literature*: "The modern spirit tends more and more to establish a sense of native diversity between our European bent and the Semitic bent, and to eliminate, even in our religion, certain elements as purely and excessively Semitic, and therefore, in right, not combinable with our European nature, not assimilable by it" (III:301). This kind of thinking is hinted at in Renan's *Vie de Jésus*, with its insistence on Jesus' affiliations with Nazareth and Galilee rather than Jerusalem and Judea; but it was Emile Burnouf, another contemporary, who went all the way to the hypothesis of an "Aryan Jesus" whose intellectual and racial origins were not rooted in Judaism.²¹

In dealing with Burnouf's hypothesis in *Literature and Dogma*, Arnold's tone is, as Faverty notes (180), one of "levity": "Such speculations almost take away the breath of a mere man of letters. What one is inclined to say of them is this. Undoubtedly these exploits of the Aryan genius are gratifying to us members of the Aryan race" (VI:239). This has sometimes been seen as a redeeming trait in Arnold's otherwise unfortunate adoption of racialized thinking, a sign that he was able to see round the new dogma of racial difference even as he was attempting to free his fellow countrymen from the outdated dogma of belief in the literal truth of the Bible. It is, though, always important to bear in mind the audience for whom Arnold was writing. The English Nonconformist tradition that Arnold saw a chance of "getting at"—those who raised their standard in defense of "the dissidence of Dissent and the Protestantism of the Protestant religion"—was characterized by a deeply held belief in the unity and brotherhood of the human race.²² It was this conviction that powered the anti-slavery movement under the slogan "Am I not a man and a brother?" and led organizations like the British and Foreign Bible Society to spend so much money and expend so many lives in missionary efforts across the globe. The new scientific thinking about race, especially those versions of it that embraced polygenic theories of human origins, was seen by many as profoundly irreligious in spirit, a direct contradiction of the Bible's insistence on the human race's common parentage. J.L. Whitley's survey of "Ethnology—Its Methods and Results" in *The Baptist Magazine* for 1865, for instance, looks at recent work in the field

but ends up reaffirming the “Adamic theory” of the unity of the human race: “‘all nations’ have come from ‘one blood,’ and ‘every man’ is redeemed by ‘one’ Saviour” (565). Like his jibes at the Bishops of Winchester and Gloucester—members of the Church of England establishment, against which so much of the fire and fury of Dissent was directed—Arnold’s ironic disdain for Burnouf can be seen as part of his attempt to charm his audience into adopting his way of seeing things almost in spite of themselves. It is certainly the case that arguments derived from assumptions about race form an integral part of Arnold’s writings on Scripture, from the philological excursion in the second chapter of *God and the Bible*, designed to show that the structures of belief that grew up around Christianity had their origins in the deepest recesses of Indo-European thought and language, to the attempt, in *St. Paul and Protestantism*, to present St Paul as “a man [...] separated from us by time, race, training and circumstances,” a “Judaizing” and “Orientalizing” reader whose misinterpretations of Jesus’ words have had profoundly damaging consequences for the development of Christianity, and of Protestantism in particular (VI:20).

Arnold’s excursion into biblical studies and contemporary racial theory can, then, be seen as part of his promotion of the “French ideal.” Renan’s work, taking the results of abstruse German scholarship and creating from it a new synthesis adequate for the needs of the nineteenth century, could, in suitably mediated form, assist in the work of freeing England’s intellectual life from its unfortunate and unnatural alliance with Hebraism. These studies also, however, contain indications that Arnold’s enchantment with French culture was coming to an end, or rather fracturing into a combination of censoriousness about the present condition of France and nostalgia for a lost and still idealized past. His remarks on the “French ideal” in *Literature and Dogma* come in the context of a chapter on “The Greatness of the Old Testament,” and this greatness consists, above all, in Israel’s having realized that the pursuit of righteousness rather than sensual gratification was the ultimate guarantee of human happiness. France has cultivated what Arnold calls “l’homme sensuel moyen”—the average sensual man—and in doing so has neglected its higher and better self

(VI:390).²³ It is this which gives France "her attractiveness for everybody" and "her successes," but also "her repeated disasters" (VI:390). This reference to France's "disasters" is meant to evoke for Arnold's readers its repeated history of political turbulence and revolution throughout the previous century, but has a more specific reference to the catastrophic military defeat of 1870 that led to the collapse of the Second Empire and the horrors of the Paris Commune. These events exposed the fundamental weakness of the French civilization that Arnold had spent the previous twenty years holding up to Britain as a model for emulation.²⁴

The link between this event, which led many in Britain to reassess the extent of their investment in French culture, and Arnold's estimate of the work of his great contemporaries can be clearly seen in his review of Renan's *La Réforme intellectuelle et morale de la France*, a work written in the immediate aftermath of France's humiliation in the war of 1870.²⁵ Looking to the foremost French intellectual of the mid-century for guidance at this critical moment in the country's history, Arnold finds, instead, a woeful misunderstanding of France's predicament, which is portrayed as the result of "*la manque de foi à la science*" [the lack of faith in science] (VII:44). For Arnold, the correct diagnosis is the complete opposite; the "manque de foi" is not in relation to science, but in relation to "conduct":

One of the gifts and graces which M. Renan finds in France is her enmity to pedantry and over-strictness in these matters: and in his letter to Dr. Strauss he says that, although he himself has been sufficiently near holy orders to think himself bound to a regular life, he should be sorry not to see around him a brilliant and dissipated society. No one feels more than we do the harm which the exaggeration of Hebraism has done in England; but this is Hellenism with a vengeance! Considering what the natural propensions of men are, such language appears to us out of place anywhere, and in France simply fatal. (VII:45)

As Super points out in his note to this passage, Arnold has subtly misrepresented Renan's original statement in his letter to Strauss here.

Renan's actual words are: "je serais désolé qu'il n'y eût pas des gens du monde pour représenter une vie plus libre" ("La réforme" 117).²⁶ The words "brilliant and dissipated" are projected by Arnold into Renan's statement, summing up the two contradictory sides of the "Hellenism" of France. This determination to see France's decline and defeat as the consequence of moral failings is also apparent in Arnold's characterization of the French people as "the children of Gomer and [...] Vercingetorix" (VII:45). Vercingetorix was the leader of a failed Gaulish revolt against Roman rule, while Gomer was one of the sons of Japheth, associated by tradition with the people of Gaul and with the Celts. But Arnold would have been aware of another Gomer in the Bible, and would have expected his biblically literate English readers to be aware of her too: the wife of the prophet Hosea, a "whore" and an adulteress.²⁷

One of the reasons Arnold adduces for France's moral failings in this article is its racial composition; in spite of superimposed Latin and Germanic influences, France is an illustration of Renan's "great law" that "the primitive race of an invaded country always ends by getting the upper hand" (VII:45). The future for France is Celtic, and this means that its "incapacity for seriousness in the highest sense" will become increasingly apparent without correction: "France has been since 1789 getting rid of all the plan, cramps, and stays of her original builders, and their edifice is in ruins; but is the Celt, by himself, constructive enough to rebuild?" (VII:48). In distancing himself from Renan, Arnold does not distance himself from the results of Renan's inquiries, and in particular the French writer's determination to make racial differences and conflicts the motive force of human history. He often, indeed, as in this case, uses the very racial calculus developed by Renan to emphasize his contemporary's errors and shortcomings. The theme of his lecture "Numbers," published as one of the *Discourses in America* (1885), is the old Arnoldian one of the need for an élite, a "saving remnant," to prevent democracy from sliding into anarchy and destructiveness, and his example of such a descent is, as ever, drawn from the experience of France. He depicts France as a worshipper of the goddess Lubricity, and Renan as a lukewarm but

nonetheless observant member of the congregation: "M. Renan himself seems half inclined to apologise for not having paid her more attention. 'Nature cares nothing for chastity,' says he; *Les frivoles ont peut-être raison*; 'The gay people are perhaps in the right'" (X:155). Again, Arnold is embellishing his source material somewhat; the French expression here, which is a loose paraphrase of Renan's own words, links the French writer's skepticism about the compatibility between human systems of morality and the natural world with a relaxed and frivolous attitude to life.²⁸ This growing worship of Lubricity is, for Arnold, a direct consequence of the attenuation of the "Germanic" element in the composition and the cultural life of the French people, leaving their Latin "rationality" as the only potential check on their innate "quickness, and sentiment, and sociability, and sensuality" (X:158).

In "Numbers," Arnold pauses briefly to pay a compliment to Sainte-Beuve: "M. Sainte-Beuve wrote to me in the last years of his life: 'You have passed through our life and literature by a deep inner line, which confers initiation, and which you will never lose.' *Vous avez traversé notre vie et notre littérature par une ligne intérieure, profonde, qui fait les initiés, et que vous ne perdrez jamais*. I wish I could think that this friendly testimony of that accomplished and charming man, one of my chief benefactors, were fully deserved" (X:154). Sainte-Beuve is still awarded the magical epithet "charming," and his name is invoked as a way of explaining why Arnold felt himself so "powerfully drawn" to France in his early life. The French critic had died in 1869, and so remained, in Arnold's imagination, insulated from the consequences of France's defeat and degradation in 1870; but he is also insulated from any connection with the causes of this defeat. He is always "brilliant," never "dissipated"; and, unlike Renan, he demonstrates a willingness to run counter to the prevailing mood of the nation, even if this involves some apparent contradiction in his own position. These traits are clearly visible in the notice of Sainte-Beuve's life that Arnold wrote for *The Academy* in November 1869. This is a notice clearly written for a small but educated audience (part of the "remnant"); Arnold makes no effort to translate the

lengthy extracts from Sainte-Beuve's work that he includes, assuming that his readers will be able to read them in the original French. The affinities between Sainte-Beuve and the aesthetes are reinforced by the addition of "good breeding" to the French critic's list of qualities, along with the more familiar "charm" and "delicacy." Arnold also draws attention, as he does in the chapter on "Sweetness and Light" in *Culture and Anarchy*, written around the same time, to the quality of intellectual "curiosity" that distinguishes Sainte-Beuve's work. For English readers, "curiosity" sometimes connotes negative qualities, something which is "futile, and merely a disease"; but Arnold wants to insist that there is a higher and better version of "curiosity" that is deeply bound up with the desire to know the best that has been thought and said in the world. It is, as he puts it in *Culture and Anarchy*, "the true ground to assign for the genuine scientific passion, the sign of a '*naturalist*'" (V:91):

His curiosity was unbounded, and he was born a *naturalist*, carrying into letters, so often the mere domain of rhetoric and futile amusement, the ideas and methods of scientific natural inquiry. And this he did while keeping in perfection the ease of movement and charm of touch which belongs to letters properly so called, and which give them their unique power of universal penetration and of propagandism. Man, as he is, and as his history and the productions of his spirit show him, was the object of his study and interest; he strove to find the real data with which, in dealing with man and his affairs, we have to do. (V:306)

The word "*naturalist*" is, on both occasions, italicized for emphasis by Arnold, drawing attention to the fact that it is something of a neologism in the context of "letters." Arnold's choice of this word is, in fact, a remarkable and prescient crystallization of the emerging intellectual formation that would eventually produce the literary Naturalism of Émile Zola and his school. The idea of using scientific methodology to investigate literature, and indeed to write literary texts, gave rise to a number of studies during the 1860s, most notably Hippolyte Taine's

Histoire de la littérature anglaise. Taine put forward a theory that the literature of a people was the result of the interaction of the forces of "race, milieu, moment" (race, environment, moment), and that the literature of England therefore inevitably reflected the inherent tendencies and qualities of the English people. Taine's polemical reduction of culture and morality to products of large-scale forces—"vice and virtue are products like vitriol and sugar" (Habib 401)—ensured a certain amount of controversy for his ideas, which in turn helped make them widely known. Taine was claimed as an ancestor of the literary Naturalists by Zola, though he always repudiated the identification.²⁹ Arnold was an early reader of Taine's work; he wrote to Sainte-Beuve in January 1864 to request a copy of the edition of the *Constitutionnel* in which Sainte-Beuve had reviewed Taine, and asked if a meeting might be possible (Super, "Documents" 209). Arnold's admiration for Taine's work was, though, shot through with typically Arnoldian reservations; in a letter to Taine written during the early 1880s he praises the "energy, power, judgment, and knowledge" of the *Histoire*, but adds that he thinks the work "too systematic" (Roe VI:176).³⁰ In calling Sainte-Beuve a "naturalist," then, Arnold is giving this new literary tendency a name, but also reminding those engaged in this enterprise of the need for "ease of movement and charm of touch" in communicating their findings. Edmond Scherer, a critic Arnold admired, and one who recognized the importance of "the old story of 'the man and the milieu'" in his study of Milton, nevertheless falls short of Sainte-Beuve because of his lack of these winning qualities:

Well-informed, intelligent, disinterested, open-minded, sympathetic, M. Scherer has much in common with the admirable critic whom France has lost—Sainte-Beuve. What he has not, as a critic, is Sainte-Beuve's elasticity and cheerfulness. He has not that gaiety, that radiancy, as of a man discharging with delight the very office for which he was born, which, in the *Causeries*, make Sainte-Beuve's touch so felicitous, his sentences so crisp, his effect so charming. (VIII:174)

It is this naturalism that gives Sainte-Beuve the courage to espouse unorthodox opinions, refusing to ignore the “real data” and preferring instead to trust his instinct “of opposing, in whatever medium he was, the current of that medium when it seemed excessive and tyrannous” (308) Arnold constructs him, in fact, as a kind of Arnoldian figure, confronting his fellow countrymen with uncomfortable truths if he feels they need to hear them.

In expressing his admiration for French culture through the figures of Sainte-Beuve and Renan, Arnold was doing something characteristically Arnoldian: replacing the abstract with the concrete, the expression of general ideas with touchstones and examples. Just as the version of Christianity that emerges from his religious writings depends on separating the figure of Jesus, in all his amiable simplicity, from the accretions of his interpreters, so the attempt to imbue English life with some of the virtues of its French counterpart depends on making English readers admire and even love figures like Sainte-Beuve. The terms of approbation that Arnold uses about Sainte-Beuve’s writings—“cheerfulness,” “gaiety,” “charm”—could be applied just as easily to the man himself, transforming his writings into a kind of emanation of his “radiancy.” This preference for the personal is, moreover, not just a matter of temperament, no matter how often Arnold protests that he is a simple soul incapable of abstruse thought. It is also an acknowledgement of the strengths and capacities of the audience he is dealing with, which has an inbuilt tendency to personalize and humanize abstract concepts, and can only be brought to act on moral precepts when they are presented to it in this way.

De Montfort University

Notes

¹ All references to Arnold’s prose works are taken from Super unless otherwise stated.

² See, for example, F.J.W. Harding, *Matthew Arnold the Critic and France* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1964); R. H. Super, “Documents in the Matthew Arnold–Sainte-Beuve Relationship,” *Modern Philology*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (1963), 206-10; Flavia Alaya, “Arnold and Renan on the Popular

Uses of History," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (1967), 551-74; Geoffrey Nash, "Aryan and Semite in Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold's Quest for the Religion of Modernity," *Religion and Literature*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (2014), 25-50.

³ These words are highlighted by Arnold in a letter to his mother of 29 October 1863: "It is very animating to think that one at last has a chance of *getting at* the English public [...] partly nature, partly time and study have also by this time taught me thoroughly the precious truth that everything turns upon one's exercising the power of *persuasion*, of *charm*; that without this all fury, energy, reasoning power, acquirement,—are thrown away and only render their owner more miserable" (II:238). All references to Arnold's letters taken from Lang unless otherwise stated.

⁴ Translations from French are my own unless otherwise stated.

⁵ The review in question was by J.D. Coleridge (Allott 321). All references to Arnold's poems taken from Allott unless otherwise stated.

⁶ Arnold omitted the note in the 1857 edition of his poems, and reinstated a greatly reduced version of it, shorn of the references to the *Christian Remembrancer*, in 1869. It is reprinted in its original form in Allott, Appendix C (676-79).

⁷ The quotation from Sainte-Beuve can be translated: "As every kind of composition has its own particular pitfall, that of the Romantic genre is falsehood."

⁸ Cited from the original journal publication rather than from Super's edition, which follows Arnold in reallocating sections of this article to the later "Spinoza and the Bible."

⁹ The earliest use of "aesthete" in *OED* dates from 1866.

¹⁰ The remark can be found in one of Thomas Arnold's travel journals describing a tour on the continent in 1829-30.

¹¹ On the role of Béranger in Arnold's intellectual development, see J.P. Phelan, "Clough, Arnold, Béranger, and the Legacy of 1848," *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (2005), 833-48.

¹² Fitzjames Stephen, "Matthew Arnold and His Countrymen," *Saturday Review*, 3 December 1864.

¹³ This was the first volume of Renan's colossal *Histoire des origines du christianisme*; the *Vie de Jésus* went through ten editions in one year.

¹⁴ Arnold had in fact been introduced to Renan in April 1859 during a visit to France in his official capacity as a commissioner for education (*Letters* I:426).

¹⁵ Arnold also mistakenly uses an accent in Renan's name in the journal entry and letter to his sister mentioned above (I:426, 515).

¹⁶ The fifth section of *Culture and Anarchy* (1868) is entitled "Porro Unum Est Necessarium"—"But one thing is needful"—a title taken from the Vulgate version of Luke 10:41.

¹⁷ Lionel Trilling, for example, offers a sympathetic and detailed analysis of Arnold's religious writings, but characterizes them as something "forced upon him" (317) and resists the conclusion that they represented the culmination of his life's work. Stefan Collini sees the religious writings as a reflection of the Victorian preoccupation with this topic and argues that "it was where he turned to address eternal questions that [Arnold] has dated most." The studies themselves are characterized by "a culpable lack of rigour [...] and traces of an increasingly exigent moralism that constrained the 'flexibility' that he had urged in his earlier work" (95).

¹⁸ These terms are, of course, central to Arnold's argument in *Culture and Anarchy* (1868).

¹⁹ Flavia Alaya sees Arnold's failure to acknowledge specific instances of indebtedness to Renan as part of his instinctive recognition of the potential for mutual misunderstanding between England and France during the period due to national sentiment and rivalry.

²⁰ "Dr. Strauss's book" is his *Life of Jesus*, which had been translated into English by Mary Ann Evans [George Eliot] in 1846.

²¹ Subsequent developments of this idea are traced in Susannah Herschel, *The Aryan Jesus* (Princeton UP, 2008).

²² This was the slogan of *The Nonconformist* newspaper, cited and ridiculed by Arnold on a number of occasions. On Arnold's strategy for "getting at" the English public, see above, n. 3

Joseph Phelan, "The French Ideal: Matthew Arnold, Sainte-Beuve, and Renan"

²³ The translation is Arnold's.

²⁴ Alaya also notes the significance of 1870 as a turning point in the Arnold-Renan relationship.

²⁵ Arnold's review appears in *The Academy*, 15 February 1872, 61-64.

²⁶ "I would be sorry if there were no worldly people to bear witness to [the pleasures of] a freer life."

²⁷ Hosea 1:2; Faverty implies an awareness of this *double entendre* in his comments on this article: "By his use of the phrase 'the children of Gomer,' in the essay on Renan, Arnold seems to be denying morality to the Celts" (101).

²⁸ Renan actually wrote, in his *Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse* (125): "je me demande sans cesse si ce ne sont pas les gens frivoles qui ont raison" (I ask myself incessantly if the frivolous people are not perhaps in the right).

²⁹ As noted by Hilary Nias in her chapter on Taine in *Habib* (401-2).

³⁰ The precise dating of this letter has been a matter of some debate: Roe dates it to 9 March 1880, but Lang plausibly corrects this to 1882.

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