

A Gift Imprisoned: The Poetic Life of Matthew Arnold

By Ian Hamilton

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CHAPTER ONE – DR. ARNOLD OF RUGBY

Tom Arnold wanted to mark his Rugby students for life. With MA there was no doubt it would happen.

2 – TA never seemed to like small boys, he could easily see the devil in them.

3 – Day after day Rigby students were told they were on the brink of a big life decision.

4 – TA was a scholar of Thucydides.

5 – England in the 1830s was like a student about to leave school – in that stage of life. To guide it Christian boys were needed and TA sought to make them.

7 – TA said his students would one day look back with regret on days filled with folly or worse!

9 – In 1834 MA was 11. TA was very outspoken. TA delayed ordination because he could not stomach the idea of the blessed trinity, enshrined in the 39 articles. He moved to Laleham and had 6 of his 9 children in seclusion.

10 – There he stored up scholarly acorns. And, he argued that the Anglican church should assimilate all sects.

11 – The Oxford movement wanted just the opposite. They put out tracts and so were Tractarians – TA attacked them. Newman asked him, “Is (T) Arnold Christian?”

12 – TA’s belligerence nearly cost him his Rugby job.

CHAPTER TWO – ‘CRABBY IN CHILDHOOD’

13 – In 1820 TA married Mary Penrose. She is Celtic in history.

14 – Alive in limb and spirit, if not mind, MA had a happy childhood there.

15 – Jane Martha – “K” – was born prior to MA, then Tom.

16 – When 2, it was noticed that MA’s legs were ‘greatly bent’.

18 – Has their 5 year old curriculum, including, “Latin Grammar, French verbs and exercises, arithmetical tables and sums, history, geography and scripture. They also had to memorize a hymn and a short passage from the Bible every day.

21 – By 1833, the family had moved to Fox How and Wordsworth had become his friend.

22 – The kids published a magazine, Fox How Magazine.

23 – TA’s brothers died before he had.

CHAPTER THREE – SCHOOLDAYS

27 - MA was sent off to school to make him more serious and to help him ‘dare to do right.’

31 - But, it did not work. In less than a year, in 1837, his father transferred him to Rugby.

32 – Prior to, on vacation in France, the Jewelry and monocles were what impressed MA.

33 – He was also meant to keep up with Clough – 4 years his senior.

34 – But MA was not serious. Rather Foppery and “the elegance of his detachment” were what he was known for.

40 – He came under the influence of Byron and started to win poetry prizes. He won for “Alaric at Rome’

It is said to be Byronic. But, Hamilton points out, it has no action. When it opens the battle is won. But, it seems the winner, Alaric, is going to die of illness soon and time will be the real victor, in killing all.

CHAPTER FOUR – OXFORD

44 - Newman ruled at Oxford. But TA was the anti-Newman.

45 - Clough doubted TA, followed Newman and never regained his academic powers, falling in grades and status.

Newman, he saw as divine.

But, of course he stayed out of theological squabbles.

46 - And, MA liked his father’s speeches, but spoke of their moral content and emphasis on ‘conduct’.

47 – MA’s exploits got him a reputation as a dandy.

50 – Clough and others started an intellectual group called ‘The Decade’s’.

52 – Under TA, Rugby was thought of as one of the best schools in Britain.

53 – In 1842 Jane’s engagement got cancelled and this caused great darkness and despair in her.

54 - And, in 1841 TA died. This was a bleak period.

CHAPTER FIVE – FIRST POEMS

55 – Before he died, Carlyle visited the Arnold’s. He wanted to see where an important historical event had happened.

57 – MA missed him, but would have been quite aware of his ‘poet as hero’ model.

58 – Carlyle’s poems were not meant to take any creed. He said, Be Godlike and you do believe in God.”

59 – It likely influenced his Cromwell poem. And, TA’s death likely influenced Mycerinus.

60 – Matthew’s father died young and so did his father, it must have weighed on MA.

62 – Stanley’s bio of TA was done with a Carlyle sense of hero-worship. Stanley worked on it with MA’s mother. And, so he gave little opinion on it.

65 – People worried about MA’s absurdities. “I laugh too much, and the more one’s laughter means too much.”

66 – MA got a second class degree.

69 – **“This Matthew Arnold of 1845 is a perplexing figure, poised between dandyism and melancholia . . . a son in mourning who made everybody laugh.”**

70 – MA contrasts himself with Clough, saying Clough had a great force of character, whereas, MA did not.

71 – Carlyle railed against the impact of the industrial revolution on the poor and yet would do nothing to help TA make a numerical survey of them.

72 – Should he rise above it all as Goethe had suggested and Carlyle suggested, as a poet?

CHAPTER SIX – “DAYS OF LELIA AND VALENTINE”

73 – 74 – Dr. TA quit a position over doubts about the 39 articles. MA would have first read about his father ever having doubts, with this incident, in Stanley’s bio.

In 1846

75 – People had deep friendships, but there is no evidence of any homosexuality at Rugby. Boys slept together. TA had to deal with only 2 cases of sexual indiscipline and told the boys they needed to look for help outside of themselves.

76 – Sands contrasts passion and duty. In truth, Sand's novels condemned abusive marriage, but not marriage itself.

77 – But her books often turned on the conflict between passion and duty, with duty of some sort always carrying the day. Romantic passion is seen as deluding and destructive. Personal feeling must be surrendered to the higher good.

78 – But this is done by philosophy, not by adherence to the church.

And, at this time, 1846, MA went to Switzerland.

79 – He met Sands and it was disappointing. She described him as “a young poet of somewhat Puritan aspect.” She directed him towards the novelist Senacour, who wrote Obermann.

81 – On this trip he also saw the Jewish Rachel perform.

82 – Arnold worshipped the Jewish actress as western

83 – Relationships of MA and brother Tom. Tom, the second Arnold, was dutiful as an Arnold should be and a foil to MA's aloofness.

85 – Brother Tom is a radical renunciant. He left England for land in New Zealand.

86 – He left in 1847.

87 – William set off for the East Asia company.

Resignation is Arnold's first significant first person work. The poet in it sits on high, aloof from men's world. Obermann is also a high-souled escapee. He leaves potential priesthood for the Alps.

91 – In Obermann, the turbulent self is contrasted with the serene continuities of nature.

CHAPTER SEVEN – LANDSOWNE, CLOUGH and MARGUERITE

92 – With Lansdown, MA got to be detached and of the big city.

94 – MA was 25. Lansdowne was 67. He took a 'charity will ruin folks' attitude about the Irish famine. He raised funds to resettle the Irish, but not relief.

95 - MA was troubled, but did not protest.

96 – Clough was not detached from politics. MA called him “Citizen Clough.”

97 – Clough left Oxford over not being able to sign onto the 39 articles.

99 – At the time, young poets looked to Tennyson or the ‘Spasmodics’. MA told Clough, that poetry was not an instrument for registering transient bewilderment. MA thought Clough’s poetry too flippant and not natural.

100 – But MA’s ‘Strayed Reveller’ at the time, was hardly natural.

His pre-1948 poetry ‘has in its traces of the undergraduate poseur. By that, Hamilton means he doesn’t seem to know who he is.

103 – Was his brooding and then silence a pose? He got an unspecified health warning in 1846. His life, seemed to be half way over and he was not in a relationship at all.

104 – His poem writes as love as a poor investment.

105 – We don’t know who Marguerite was.

His first Marguerite poem seems to be about the impossibility of fixing experience.

107 – In response to his sister’s not responding to his first book of poetry, he asks her to like fragments as he himself is fragments. And, that he is too changing and so they are vague and indeterminate.

CHAPTER EIGHT – THE STRAYED REVELLER, OBERMANN and MARGUERITE, ONCE MORE

110 - K said, Matt’s poems were philosophy, not redemption – making up for the decline in Christianity.

111 – People are down on MA for his disbelief and lack of uplift in his work. He should keep his doubts to himself, as that is not what the time needs.

112 – He tells J. C. Shairp he intends to keep Greek form, not modern form. JC says he likes to speak for himself. MA says he values the modern form less and less.

113 – His poetry offered no solutions as Wordsworth had found in nature. God’s loss may be permanent – So intro to Marguerite. But, he had to hide his doubt as it may have been scandalous.

And there are tensions between private doubt and mission as a vocation.

114 – More and more, he said he felt against the modern English habit (encouraged by Wordsworth) of making poetry a channel for thinking out loud, instead of making anything.

Could one save the age and nurture your own distinct inner line of thought? Today we most like the parts in Strayed Reveler wherein MA is thinking out loud.

115 – In 1849 he starts writing Empedocles. He wanted to use the old Greek form as drapery for his own thoughts, said Shairp. A refined remoteness. Empedocles is about pitch black darkness.

116 – He was also starting Obermann about renouncing your human side.

117 – MA was not the renouncing type and he had little to renounce, no family, a slight job.

“Ah, two desires toss about
The poet’s feverish blood.
One drives him to the world without,
And one to solitude.

He wrote to Clough that he had been reunited with Marguerite. He writes that he had “never yet conceded in any one great occasion in consciously mastering myself.”

118 – He finds it a time in where greatness is hard to come by and newspapers and tiny things crowd one out.

119 – MA returns to England and writes his Marguerite poems. And, they seem to be personal venting.

120 – Does he leave her due to her background? Being unfaithful?

121 – Women want strong men, but he isn’t one. Is this why he left?

124 – While wondering why he left Marguerite, searching for personal reasons, Hamilton seems to miss all the poem’s philosophical import. But, sure he goes from break up to ‘we are all alone’ in a heartbeat.

MA returns to England, neither an Obermann left in the mountains or in love – a ditherer.

125 – During the last months of 1849 he writes some of his best poems – 20 of them, in fact.

In these he repeatedly berates himself for having lost his nerve and last chance to break free of the ‘petty dust.’

126 – We was weary of asking what he was. He looks up and begs the stars to inspire him.

127 – He and his sister were not impressed by his spiritual progress – or lack thereof. But, Jane tried to keep the brothers aware of each other’s lives.

CHAPTER NINE – MARRIAGE TO MISS WIGHTMAN

128 - Tristram parts from his lover and marries the more appropriate Iselt.

129 – About half way in, from the love fevers of dying Tristram to the low-key suffering of his marriage. By 1850, MA believed he was free of the fool passion, and Switzerland was overcome.

129 – Beautiful passion for FLW.

130 – She was entirely free from the taint of letters. And, at 25, ready to be caught.

131 – As Jane's marriage offended him, MA knew his marriage to her would offend Jane. She didn't know only a little Greek!

132 – After Jane's marriage, she was no longer MA's confidant.

132 – “Everything merely fanciful and the romantic should be sacrificed to truth.” He told her.

132 – He sees resignation as written for Jane after her first break up. And, a month before her engagement, Wordsworth died.

133 – No money or prospects with which to get Flu, he went to Switzerland and wrote more poems.

134 – We see being a madman or slave as the only two choices in the poem, A Summer Night. The same dynamic holds in the poem, The Buried Life, wherein he yelps about 'breathing free,' which shows there is no rest.

137 – Modern passion is shallow compared to his. All the siblings were getting married in 1850. He had to too. And, he told her about the school inspector job.

139 – We don't know much about K's reaction to the wedding. He wrote, “as if we could only acquire any solidity of shape and power of acting by narrowing and narrowing our sphere, and diminishing the number of affections and interests which continually distract us while young, and hold us unfixed and without energy to mark our place in the world.” “The aimless and unsettled but also open and liberal state of our youth we *must* perhaps all leave and take refuge in our morality and character.” It is a “melancholy passage.”

143 – He went to the Grande Chartreuse on his honeymoon. His appreciation of its ‘ambiance of rigor and abstention – as much from habit as rigor,’ is in the poem.

144 – But in God's absence, what religious value can be placed on the aesthetic?

145 – Hamilton thinks Dover beach is about the end of Arnold's life. No.

146 – Tom Arnold partially took off due to not being able to face London’s poverty. MA withdrew in another way.

147 – He conceded that his young poet dreams might be the casualty of marriage, writing, **“The gifted have astonished and delighted the world, but not trained or inspired or in any real way changed it – and the world might do worse than to dismiss the high pretensions,** and settle down on what it can see and handle and appreciate.”

CHAPTER TEN – EMPEDOCLES RENOUNCED

148 – Epicurus is echoed in Empedocles, ‘seek not things as you wish them to but as they are and you will have a tranquil flow of life.’

Before he dies Empedocles tells us the wise man knows limitations.

150 – Receive me, save me, Empedocles calls as he jumps in.

151 – His social life bot tied with his job, previously; all this was now gone. Time was gone. But, he had a clear line of direction.

His poems often questioned their own right to be written. Conflict between energy, lanuor, lunacy and slavery, art and social duty; mountains and darklings plain. They also drifted towards stasis.

152 – What good was poetry if it was all diagnosis and no cure?

He knew nearly nothing about schools. There was no system of state education in 1851. Most schools were run for profit or were Anglican foundations, administered by the clergy. Only the nonconformist schools were open to inspection. They charged fees, but required state subsidies, and so were open to inspection. MA inspected them and ‘pupil teachers’.

He was one of 20 inspectors who looked after 4,000 schools.

153 – MA started to interpret his work soon after starting.

154 – MA now printed another book of poems, as “A” in 1852.

154 - He wrote Clough about the difference between a ‘mature age of the world,’ and more ‘youthful epochs, like those of Shelly, Keats, Shakespeare. A youthful age could afford to dabble in luxuriant poetic diction. In a post-Christian epoch, such creativity was not enough.

155 – 156 “Poetry nowadays had an immense task to perform’. In the absence of religion, the poet’s duty was to respond to humanity’s continuing ‘religious wants.’ This was no time for fiddle-faddling or ornamentation.”

He withdrew Empedocles from circulation after 500 copies had been sold.

156 – The decision to withdraw it ‘advertised a healthy new self-confidence, and a grownupness.’

He replaced Emp with Sorhab – which was much more positive, a buried life and oberman were also removed.

157 – And here too was the preface with a new, purposeful self-image. He announced Empedocles was removed because in it, “everything is to be endured, and nothing to be done.” Great poetry should speak of great events. Great poets should be cheerful, calm, invisible, like the ancient Greeks.

Work should “be a guide . . . relative to their power of helping him forward.”

158 – He advocated poets reminds of Greek works, the classics. We needed vital ‘commerce with the ancients.’ It brings “a steadying and composing effect upon men’s judgement, not of literary works only, but of men and events in general.” It also brings modesty. Folks raised on the classics do not inflate themselves with ‘a belief in the pre-eminent importance and greatness of their own times.’

159 – While trying to get subjectivity out, it remained in Sohrab. This and scholar gypsy were new in the 1853 edition.

160 – Also, the Scholar – Gipsy’ A farewell to the poetic life.

161 – The Scholar Gipsy earned his immortality by quitting the social world, the world of family, work and duty. The narrator didn’t go all the way and so lost immortality.

CHAPTER ELEVEN – ‘THIS IS FOR OUR WISEST!’

164 – Halfway through Scholar Gypsy he speaks to how unpoetical the current age is.

165 – Arnold and Tennyson had a bit of a rivalry as Tennyson was said to be a natural and MA a poet due to work.

166 – MA said T was decorative, rather than penetrative.

167 – Critics asked why Christian Brits should copy Greeks. MA, in his second edition said, just be aware of them and choose from great actions – don’t be overly attached to the present.

168 – Classical meant sane; romantic meant unstable.

168 – In Feb of 1853 he wrote, “I am past thirty and three parts iced over.” And, my pen, it seems to me, is even stiffer and more cramped than my feeling.”

But, when he saw his work as too boring he resolved to, "Do my duty, whatever that may be."

He looked at his father as a model for saving himself and others via duty. By the mid 1850s, 4 Arnold sons were working in education.

171 – He slowly came to appreciate his teacher work's potential.

172 – He longed for vacations.

174 – He also warmed to K's husband, William Forster, as he was big in education.

175 – 6 Discussion with Flu's family was kind of depressing. But, he started his 30 year membership in the Athenaeum at that time. His portrait is in the entry.

CHAPTER TWELVE – A PROFESSOR OF POETRY

180 – Balder Dead is a poem that comes next, defraying a critique that he should not prize other race's history above that of his own. It is Nordic. It tells of the Nordic God's refusal to accept death.

181 – He will live if everyone cries. But, Loki, disguised as a hag, does not cry and so kills his arch enemy.

Like TS Eliot, Hamilton thinks it too academic and reeking of Rugby.

184 – Balder was completed in 1854.

Hamilton goes to pains to tell us that MA's passion is gone. But, here is one poem I like, Merope.

185 – Hamilton says that MA was frustrated by planned poems he could not get to completion after the next reissue. He extends this time to 1857. And, his family was growing at this time.

187 – He was hoping for an Oxford position and still had a 'grand manner' and a dandiacal dress-sense. "Kid gloves, glittering boots, and a costume cut in most perfect fashion." In 1857 he got the Oxford position.

187 – Hamilton insists MA was so unhappy and unfulfilled.

188 – MA is proud of his oxford position due to his father, and the ability the position gives him to guide. And he was the first person to not lecture in Latin.

189 – In his poem Lucretius, he was afraid to consider being second-rate.

190 – It is at this point he switches to Sophocles and words like 'light' 'grace' and 'noble'.

We need the Greeks because they help us take possession of the multitude of facts around us, that baffles our comprehension.

191 – Merope is the story of a son called home by his mother to honour the memory of his dead father.

Sorhab was a tribute to Homer and Balder, Nordics, Merope, Sophocles.

191 – His inaugural lecture was called the Modern Element in Literature.” Given in 1857. It was a flop. But he got better. On Translating Homer was three lectures that he gave to a packed house.

193 – Though he hoped it would be a play, Merope was not well received.

194 – Hamilton hates it and calls the chorus ill-used.

196 – He says that MA knew he could never be a full-time poet, as Goethe had been.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN – LAST POEMS

197 – MA thought Merope was nothing without a stage, and so the poor reception.

198 – MA says the reception of Merope tells you a lot about the present time. And he wonders what can be done to change that taste. And from now on he will analyze society.

At this time “Tom Brown’s Schooldays” got popular.

198 – 199 – Of Dr. Arnold, “The country was now ruled by his former pupils, or imitations of them.”

199 – MA liked T Brown’s School Days. James Fitzjames Stevens attacked it and Dr. Arnold! Though the dates are off, the bad review may have inspired Rugby Chapel.

200 – The poem shows his and Dr. Arnold’s moral power.

In 1859 he was summoned to a European fact finding tour. Fitzjames Steven actually helped him get this gig.

201 - He returned in 1859 the nation’s expert on European public education.

He began to write on politics and joined a military group.

202 – in April 1859 he learned his brother William died.

202 – William had been like a father to MA and became the director of Public Instruction at the Punjab.

203 - He had agonized for months over the rights and wrongs of compulsory Bible study for the natives. He ended up being against imposition.

204 – He wrote a poem sort of about William’s death. Once upon a time he would have thought his life not romantic enough to receive praise. Now, he conceded that “the truth was ‘high-souled.’”

In later poems, “Heine’s Grave” for example, The poetic way of life is targeted as irresponsible.

205 – Rather than poetry replacing religion, he wanted Christianity that had poetry.

206 – He hoped religion would set an aesthetic mood.

‘Oberman once more’ tells of turn away from self-absorption.

207 – MA returns to Switzerland and sees difference with his old self.

209 – Clough dies. He writes Thyrsis, which is a eulogy for a dead friend but also for his life as a poet. (That’s ironic as it is a poem).

211 – But Thyrsis is hopeful of what he can do with illuminating the poetic sense.

211 – Hamilton is too dismissive of MA’s prose. He calls it ‘irksomely mechanical with whole arguments pivoting on undefined concepts.’ What a nasty review.

212 – “The more Arnold neglected his own gifts as a poet, the more extravagantly nebulous became his protestations on behalf of poetry’s transformatively civilizing powers.” What a nasty quote. Perhaps we take MA at his word and he has outgrown poetry? Eh?

213 – MA writes Growing Old as a response to Browning’s optimistic, “Grow old along with me / the best is yet to be” This is the only poem, post the close of the 1850s, Hamilton will give him any credit for.

214 – He says money was a major consideration for MA’s prose writing!

215 – He admits MA still had some leisure time and came out with a book of poetry in 1867 (which had no new work of any substance) (Though it had Thyrsis and Dover Beach).

216 – Browning urged him to reprint Empedocles.

217 – Though he died in 1888, his poetic life ended in 1869; the year of his two-volume poems and in which he became older than his father ever had.