

Sohrab and Rustum and Balder Dead: Communicating about Communication

Juha-Pekka Alarauhio, Oulu University

Matthew Arnold's career as a writer can seem rather inconsistent. On the one hand, he can appear to be a poet of melancholy, disillusionment and doubt, as in the closing lines of "Dover Beach". The darkness and confusion depicted there are a recurrent motif, and in many of his early poems he himself displays something of the "icy despair" he ascribes to Senancour, Byron and Shelley.¹ In his later prose writings, on the other hand, he comes across as the self-confident exponent of his own views. This is an unfazed, commanding Arnold, who sets his sights on nothing less than the "disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world, and thus to establish a current of fresh and true ideas".²

But continuities between the bleak poet and the poised debater have already been found by Timothy Peltason, for instance, who says that Arnold's switching from poetry to prose is not a movement "from the inner world to the outer, from subjective to objective". Rather, the prose is "a [...]mode of refusing these easy divisions and of coming to life in language".³ Seen this way, the critical writings reflect the underlying tension between subjective and objective in the relationship between a more rhetorical and a more logical mode of argumentation. How the same tension is reflected in the poetry Peltason does not say. But in my own view, some such conflict certainly informs much of Arnold's writing, and not least some of the verse he published from 1853 onwards.

In that year his thinking about poetry underwent a major shift, triggered by a dissatisfaction he had come to feel with *Empedocles on Etna*, the long poem which had given the title for the anonymously published collection of just a year earlier. There Empedocles was

¹ Leon Gottfried, *Matthew Arnold and the Romantics* (Lincoln, 1963), p. 35.

² Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time", in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold Part III, Lectures and Essays in Criticism*, ed. R.H. Super (Ann Arbor, 1962), pp. 258-286, esp. 35.

³ Timothy Peltason, "The Function of Matthew Arnold at the Present Time", *College English* 56 (1994) 749-765, esp. 753.

portrayed as a philosopher who, in Kenneth Allott's words, has grasped the truth about the world "as it is".⁴ In his severe disillusionment Empedocles experiences, like Byron's Manfred, a barrenness of spirit which incapacitates him for all of life's joys. Everything seems to be against him, and with no remaining friends, and with no benign intervention to be expected from other-worldly powers, he feels that his only available course of action is the suicide by which he reunites himself with the universe. As Arnold frankly explained in his Preface to *Poems* (1853), he now found this kind of subject-matter unacceptable.

What then are the situations, from the representation of which, though accurate, no poetical enjoyment can be derived? They are those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done. In such situations there is inevitably something morbid, in the description of them something monotonous. When they occur in actual life, they are painful, not tragic; the representation of them in poetry is painful also.

To this class of situations, poetically faulty as it appears to me, that of Empedocles, as I have endeavoured to represent him, belongs; and I have therefore excluded the poem from the present collection.⁵

The Preface connects Empedocles' loss of hope with the problems of modernity—with the "discouragement" of Hamlet and Faust.⁶ Arnold believed that discouragement was very much the temper of his own time, largely owing to the loss of religious belief in the face of modern science. He felt, too, that Empedocles could be discussed in the same breath as Byron and Shelley, poets whom he much admired for their passion and courageous vigour, but whom he blamed for not providing adequate intellectual foundations for action.⁷ In the Preface to his 1881 edition of Byron, he mentions several different reasons for the Romantic poets' deficiencies, but basically he saw their writing as too self-absorbed. Like Empedocles, they had become locked into a self-culture of subjectivity, for which effective interaction with the world was not a possibility.

⁴ Kenneth Allott (ed.), *Annotated English Poets: The Poems of Matthew Arnold* (London, 1965), p. 148.

⁵ Matthew Arnold, "Preface to First Edition of *Poems*" [1853], in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold Part I, On the Classical Tradition*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor, 1960), pp. 1-15, esp. 2-3.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 1.

⁷ Gottfried, *Matthew Arnold*, pp. 78, 86.

His double gesture of not only removing *Empedocles on Etna* from the new collection but of justifying the cut in a theoretical manifesto points to an intense personal conflict, which also had wider symbolic significance within the culture as a whole. As Barbara Gates puts it, Arnold was in a sense

too good a historian. His *Empedocles* became such a close contemporary that Arnold rejected his poem as being too modern. Through *Empedocles* Arnold solved the problem of Victorian Angst; he offered willed death as a final confirmation of personhood in times when society threatens to dissolve personal identity. But he was repelled by his poem's fitting resolution; it did not meet his extra-literary needs. He had once told Clough that the spectacle of the 1848 revolution in France would be a "fine one" to an "historical swift-kindling man, who is not over-haunted by the pale thought, that after all man's shiftings of posture, 'restat vivere'" [...]. For Arnold himself it remained to will life, not to plunge into revolutionary self-destruction. *Empedocles on Etna* functioned as a kind of eloquent suicide note that negated the need for suicide itself. It was a substitution of sign for experience. Through displacement to *Empedocles*, Arnold found that "the dialogue of the mind with itself" led to the brink of suicide. He then withdrew himself and his work from the crater's edge and turned toward the more personally acceptable role of Victorian sage.⁸

From what sources, then, was hope to be drawn? Arnold's unwillingness to rely on the intellectual culture of Victorian England is clear enough. The Romantic celebration of the individual in poetry; the atomizing procedures of triumphant science; the encouragement of individual competitiveness though *laissez-faire* economics: these major trends could only destabilize human beings' relationships with God, with the world of nature, with art, and with each other. Arnold refused to be spiritually paralysed, however, and would not allow his own serious uncertainties to blight his social effectiveness as a writer. As Amrollah Abjadian notes, he actually came to believe that a "person who has no sympathy for the age cannot be a critic of the society".⁹ A generous understanding of the contemporary world, and of its distinctive intellectual challenges, became one of his most characteristic notes.

⁸ Barbara T. Gates, *Victorian Suicide: Mad Crimes and Sad Histories* (Princeton, 1988), p. 88.

⁹ Amrollah Abjadian, "Arnold and Sohrab in Wasteland", *Victorians Institute Journal* 8 (1979) 61–79, esp. 64.

As far as poetry was concerned, his idea was now that, by representing human actions “in an interesting manner by the art of the poet”, it could add to the sum of human happiness.¹⁰ The topics of the “modern poet” were to be found in actions as undertaken by the “inward man”. More particularly, poetry would explore “feelings and behaviour in certain tragic situations” that Arnold took to reflect an unchanging core of humanity.¹¹ For this salutary and universalist purpose, the ideal genre seemed to be that of the epic, since, as M.I. Finley has pointed out, epic poems did not seek their subject matter in “ideas, creeds, or symbolic representations”, but in “happenings, occurrences—wars, floods, adventures by land, sea, and air, family quarrels, births, marriages, and deaths”.¹² Faced with such circumstances, the inward man could hardly retreat into a life of inaction.

Yet although Arnold now saw his recent representation of Empedocles as a dangerous spiritual surrender, the change in his new poems was in some ways far from abrupt, and his own withdrawal from the crater’s edge not as effortless as Gates implies. Not only was he interested in “tragic situations”. The pieces brought together in *Poems* (1853) are themselves full of tensions and doubts, which clearly recall his sense of Empedocles’ problems as subjectively all too real.

Sohrab and Rustum, the book’s longest item and his first venture into epic, not only sustains an interest in the inward man’s psyche during action, and during violent action at that, but places action itself under scrutiny. Drawing on a legend from mediaeval Persia,¹³ it tells of a father and son who are the champions of opposing armies, and who engage each other in battle without being aware of each other’s identity.

¹⁰ Arnold, “Preface”, pp. 2–3. Of course, this idea of the important social duties of the poet is not an uncommon view among Arnold’s contemporaries. As Carl Dawson says, one of the critical commonplaces of Arnold’s time was that “the great poet is the healer of the age” (Carl Dawson (ed.), *Matthew Arnold, the Poetry: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1973), p. 3).

¹¹ Arnold, “Preface”, p. 5.

¹² M. I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (Harmondsworth, 1972), pp. 25–26.

¹³ As re-told in Sir John Malcolm’s *History of Persia* (1815). There has been some disagreement about Arnold’s source for the story. For a still convincing rejection of J.A. Atkinson’s abridgement of *Sháh Námeḥ* of Firdousi (1832) in favour of Malcolm’s *History*, see Louise Pound, “Arnold’s Sources for *Sohrab and Rustum*”, *Modern Language Notes* 21 (1906)15–17.

“[I]gnorant armies clash by night” indeed!—to recall the sombre close of “Dover Beach”. The final outcome does offer a gleam of hope, but is tragic all the same, since in the world of action hope may come at a very high price. Genuine communication between father and son does take place; in a sense they do end up being “true / To one another”, in the words of that other poem.¹⁴ But only when one of them is already dying.

Despite any possible implication of the 1851 Preface that action is an indisputable good, in the new poems themselves it is genuine communication that emerges as the truest antithesis to solipsism. Action, by offering scope for the kind of stamina and worldly engagement promoted by Arnold *père* at Rugby, does stand a better chance than self-withdrawal and suicide of actually improving human life, and an epic poem may well be more generally beneficial than a lyrical one such as *Empedocles on Etna*.¹⁵ But ignorant action, action based on failures of understanding and empathy, can wreak the most terrible havoc. What the new verse seems to be suggesting is that the greatest tragedies are afflictions within human relationships, between both individuals and entire groupings. And as we can now note with the wisdom of hindsight, there was no reason why such communicational disasters should not be precipitated in full view of a reading audience by the actions described in an epic poem. Indeed, such a poem may itself serve to create a community within which communication and all its difficulties are the very topic about which poet and readers are comparing notes.

Even the style of an epic poem, a style for which Arnold drew directly on Homer as the “best model of the grand style simple”,¹⁶ can be communicatively constructive. As Isobel Armstrong explains, “[t]he effort to create a composing action and to seek a pure diction consonant with the unifying grand style is increasingly apparent in Arnold’s poems after 1853. The grand style in its simplicity was intended to be universal

¹⁴ I am using the expression “genuine communication” in the sense explored by Roger D. Sell in a number of recent publications. See, for instance, his “Literary Scholarship as Mediation: An Approach to Cultures Past and Present”, in *Cultures in Conflict*, eds Balz Engler and Lucia Michalcak, Gunter Narr: Tübingen, 2007, pp. 35-58.

¹⁵ Warren D. Anderson, *Matthew Arnold and the Classical Tradition* (Ann Arbor, 1965), p. 41.

¹⁶ Matthew Arnold, *On Translating Homer*, in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold Part One*, pp. 97-216, esp. 189.

and thus generally accessible, enabling the moral effect of poetry to be widely experienced.”¹⁷ In the attempt to make modern life meaningful, a poet’s stylistic efforts should be directed, Arnold believed, towards an inconspicuous stylistic coherence, lest the poem’s essential interpretation of the world be lost in a mass of beautiful details.¹⁸ Not only that, but the grand style could itself contribute to understanding and spiritual refreshment. Partly thanks to its intertextualities with a long literary tradition, its communicational ethos was one by which the threat of solipsistic isolation might be counteracted. Even for readers unable to appreciate the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* in the original Greek, Homer’s distinctive qualities of address could be emulated by an English translator or imitator, whose texts could in this way become similarly bracing. More specifically, the characteristics singled out in Arnold’s lectures *On Translating Homer* (1860) were that Homer “is eminently rapid; that he is eminently plain and direct, both in the evolution of his thought and in the expression of it, that is, both in his syntax and in his words; that he is eminently plain in and direct in the substance of his thought, that is, in his matter and ideas; and, finally that he is eminently noble”.¹⁹

Arnold’s grand style was not slavishly derivative, however, but communicationally sensitive. For English readers the iambic pentameter, already the medium of high styles in Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth, was bound to be more accessible than any attempt he might have made at hexameters. Nor did it prevent him from capturing something of Homer’s rapidly flowing movement. In marked contrast to *Empedocles on Etna*, not only is *Sohrab and Rustum* composed in just the single verse form. Apart from a few Miltonic complications of syntax, it runs along altogether more swiftly, thanks to paratactic structures directly modelled on Homer.²⁰ Take, for instance:

[...] and there Rustum sate

¹⁷ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London, 1993), p. 217.

¹⁸ Gottfried, *Matthew Arnold*, p. 135.

¹⁹ Arnold, *On Translating*, p. 102.

²⁰ John Bryan Hainsworth, *The Idea of Epic* (Los Angeles 1991), p. 19; Alan J.B. Wace and Frank H. Stubbings (eds) *A Companion to Homer* (London, 1962), pp. 155–156.

Listless, and held a falcon on his wrist,
 And play'd with it; but Gudurz came and stood
 Before him; and he look'd, and saw him stand,
 And with a cry sprang up and dropp'd the bird,
 And greeted Gudurz with both hands, and said [...]
 (*Sohrab and Rustum*, ll.199-204)²¹

No less typical is the diction of this passage, its rather prosaic quality being the direct consequence of Arnold's desire to make his grand style genuinely accessible. In fact the most striking parallel between the Arnoldian and Homeric manner is their avoidance of rich metaphor, which in the case of Arnold is partly attributable to the cautionary force of Empedoclean solipsism. As Isobel Armstrong points out, Arnold's ideas about language involved a dualism between experience and expression which made metaphor seem suspicious.

Expressive accounts of language and experience presuppose that inner experience occurs prior to language and subsequently seeks its equivalent in words. Metaphor is an extension this process. Metaphor *coins* words and turns language into a currency by turning one expression into an equivalent term and exchanging one term for another. But since expressive language is a psychological language, and words are merely the proxy form of for a psychic condition, a representative "allegory of the state of one's own mind" simply returns one to the inner subjectivity of the self, because the outer shell of language is merely the equivalent of subjectivity. [...] Finally, expressive metaphor is logically a private language, for if words are merely a subjective correlative, so to speak, of an internal condition, then the sign has no communal value.²²

It was precisely Arnold's fear of slipping into isolated subjectivity through private language which made him so keen on descriptive objectivity. A grand style, he believed, could help poets efface themselves "by confronting objective actions where language as a medium almost disappears".²³

At first Armstrong's discussion may seem to recall some remarks on the grand style of Milton made by Christopher Ricks:

[I]t should [not] surprise us that Milton's Grand Style is seldom metaphorical. Apparently, the same is true of Virgil and Homer. The very nature of the epic will

²¹ All quotations of Arnold's verse from Allott, *The Poems*.

²² Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, pp. 179-180.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 180.

discourage metaphor—or at any rate those metaphors whose boldness we find attractive elsewhere but which would seem pert or distracting in *Paradise Lost*.

The dignity of the epic is not consistent with such metaphors as are boldly and explosively new. But there is more than one kind of verbal life, and both his temperament and his respect for literary decorum impelled Milton to choose to bring ancient metaphors back to life rather than to forge new ones.²⁴

But for Arnold, the metaphorical conventionality of the grand style was not only a matter of decorum. In ways that David Quint has suggested, the entire tradition of classical epic could be seen as a guarantee of communal stability, a transmitter of received values. Many of the conventions of epic poetry tended to reinforce a particular view of history: history as seen by imperialist victors. “If epic usually begins *in medias res*, it moves toward a fixed end point, the accomplishment of a single goal or mission—the Trojans’ settlement in Italy, Portugal’s opening of the Indian trade route, the delivery of Jerusalem, the Fall of Adam and Eve. The formal completion of the epic plot speaks for the completeness of its vision of history: telling a full story, epic claims to possess *the* full story.”²⁵ But as Quint also suggests, in some epics a more questioning or even critical voice can be heard, when the features of epic proper begin to be interwoven with features we associate with romance. “[I]n opposition to a linear teleology that disguises power as reason and universalizes imperial conquest as the imposition of unity upon the flow of history, the dissenting narrative becomes deliberately disconnected and aimless.”²⁶ This dialectic within the epic tradition itself is something with which Arnold engaged so strongly that the grand style became as much as anything else a moral issue.²⁷ Threatened by the spiritual discouragement so common among his contemporaries, he did not try to fill the metaphysical void with an individualist religion, or to express his anxiety in private language. Nor, in his view, could he improve the situation by pontificating authoritarian certainties. The only hope lay in communicational gestures more inclusive of the viewpoints of other people, some of them potentially different from his own. *Vis à vis* both his *dramatis personae* and his readers, his own communicational ethics

²⁴ Christopher Ricks, *Milton's Grand Style* (London, 1963), pp. 57, 33–34.

²⁵ David Quint, *Epic and Empire* (Princeton, 1993), pp. 33–34.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

²⁷ Gottfried, *Matthew Arnold*, p. 138.

needed to be based, not on an impossibly total sympathy, of course, but certainly on an empathy that recognized the autonomy of non-Arnoldian subjectivities.

Take, for instance, his use of Homeric similes. According to Daniel Kline, their frequency in *Sohrab and Rustum* reflects ideas about similes expressed in Locke's *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, which Arnold had been reading in 1850.

Locke suggests in the *Conduct* that similes become the most effective vehicles for the transmission of new and unfamiliar thoughts, and as Arnold seeks to write a poetry that will acculturate his readers to the nobility and enduring value to be found in the classics, the similes of *Sohrab and Rustum* become a way of investing the language of the poem with accuracy and precision at key moments in that momentous and, for Arnold, vitally important task.²⁸

In Locke's account, any such metaphors and similes as could be used to stabilize the relationship between a meaning and a sign are viewed very favourably, and Arnold's fear of metaphorical solipsism could well have left him seeing extended similes as a kind of figurativeness more widely accessible.²⁹ Yet semantic accessibility was hardly the only consideration. Decorum—the issue raised by Ricks on Milton—was certainly a factor as well, and one no less a matter of social assessment than that of meaning. In a traditional epic poem Homeric similes are, for a start, so decorous that an epic poem without them is actually difficult to imagine. They are one of the features by which the community of readers classes such a poem together with other poems belonging to the same category. Still more to the point, here, *within* any such poem readers expect a due decorum to be observed between, on the one hand, the ideas and images summoned up by any given simile and, on the other hand, the context and wider frame of reference within which it is used.

How decorous, for instance, were readers likely to find the two similes which describe Rustum's first impressions of his unrecognized son?

As some rich woman, on a winter's morn,

²⁸ Daniel Kline, "Unhackneyed thoughts and winged words': Arnold, Locke, and the Similes of *Sohrab and Rustum*", *Victorian Poetry* 41 (2003) 173-196, esp. 182.

²⁹ Cf. Kline, "Unhackneyed thoughts'", p. 176.

Eyes through her silken curtains the poor drudge
 Who with numb blacken'd fingers makes her fire—
 At cock-crow, on a starlit winter's morn,
 When the frost flowers the whiten'd window-panes—
 And wonders how she lives, and what the thoughts
 Of that poor drudge may be; so Rustum eyed
 The unknown adventurous youth, who from afar
 Came seeking Rustum, and defying forth
 All the most valiant chiefs; long he perused
 His spirited air, and wonder'd who he was.
 For very young he seem'd, tenderly rear'd;
 Like some young cypress, tall, and dark, and straight,
 Which in a queen's secluded garden throws
 Its slight dark shadow on the moonlit turf,
 By midnight, to a bubbling fountain's sound—
 So slender Sohrab seem'd, so softly rear'd.

(*Sohrab and Rustum*, ll. 302-318)

No small part of these similes' decorousness is in themselves hinting the mistakenness of Rustum's perceptions, a factor which comes to have a crucial bearing on the entire plot. When Rustum is figured as an upper-class woman and Sohrab as a pauper woman, this catches not only Rustum's sense of the younger man's baffling otherness but his own scope for error: he simply cannot know anything for sure here. Then, as his mind continues to flounder around for the truth about the mysterious young man, he associates him with an image whose social connotations accordingly veer to the very opposite end of the scale from the poor drudge. Also, the highly civilized garden in which he imagines the now apparently cypress-like youth as having been raised connotes a beautiful femininity that is very much at odds with the dry roughness of the warriors in the desert. Such fantasies directly contribute to his tragically blind hostility towards the man who is his son.

Granted, at first sight Arnold's similes may merely seem to reflect his idea that Homer composed with his "eye on the object".³⁰ Even though the objects described are only used to convey a sense of something actually other than themselves—a simile's vehicle is *not*, after all, its tenor—, the visual rendering is detailed down to the very frost-flowers on "the whiten'd window-panes". In the view of Alan Roper, such composing with the eye on the object leads to descriptions which

³⁰ Arnold, *On Translating*, p. 111.

have full significance “only outside the poem, in the poet’s originating experience”.³¹ Roper thinks that Arnold’s overall goal would have been better served by less detailed similes, and by a greater reliance on the often rich epithets of a stock poetic diction, whose pre-established meanings might more readily convey the particular poem’s significance.

Yet Roper, while keenly sensitive to Arnold’s concern for semantic stability and social accessibility, surely overestimates the extent to which the similes go off at a tangent. Or to put it the other way round, he underestimates their decorous relevance to what is really going on in the story as a whole. In particular, similes can carefully render an *inward* man’s impression of something, and this inward impression is that of a character in the story. Although, in passages like the one just quoted, their detailed descriptiveness is superficially just as objective as any of the grand style’s other features, the impressions forming in the mind of the protagonist are in effect oppositional to the surrounding context of more impersonal narration. It is in no small part thanks to the similes that commentary on the poem’s events becomes suggestively polyvocal. They are Arnold’s way of still granting very considerable scope to the subjective, and to all its risks and possible variety. In fact there is a tragically mounting tension, as the characters’ narrated actions begin to be grounded on the very misconceptions and communicative failures which the similes so suggestively illuminate.

Another measure of Arnold’s continuing concern with subjective individuality is that, by the time the poem’s ostensible action reaches its climax, the official, public opposition between the two sides has lost significance. Neither the reason for the battle nor the nature of the troops’ loyalties was ever spelled out in the first place. Indeed, the poem’s entire setting is almost a-historical. Cultural and political forces have presumably played their part, but are scarcely specified at all, and Arnold’s main concern is certainly not to give an accurate account of the Tartar invasion of Persia. In marked contrast to Firdousi’s version of the same legend,³² there are no foreign conquerors, no symbols of a national claim to a territory, and no natives to be conquered. As part of a battleground whose location appears to be totally random, the flowing river, and the shifting sands along its banks, merely suggest the

³¹ Alan Roper, *Arnold’s Poetic Landscapes* (Baltimore, 1969), p. 36.

³² See fn. 13 above.

dimension of passing time, so hinting that the conflict is one of sheer vanity. And sure enough, the actual armies steadily disappear from the main focus. First, they are described in a detailed catalogue (ll. 104-140), then there is a symmetrical image of the generals on both sides straightening their front ranks, and then a challenge issued between the hosts (ll. 150-153). Next come the reactions of the armies to the challenge, suggested in two similes (ll. 154-159, 160-169), followed by a scene in Rostum's tent, where the Persians try to persuade him to accept the challenge. Finally, the troops make a brief re-appearance, but only in a simile which describes the field of battle as a field of grain (ll. 293-298); the opposing armies are compared to two squares of standing corn which are separated only by a swathe cut in the grain, an image tending to obliterate any real difference between them. All this is not primarily a matter of Arnold's sustaining Homeric impartiality as a narrator. Nor is it as if the strength and importance of the armies were superseded by the kind of supernatural forces so often at work in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, where the fates of men can always be affected by the will of the gods. On the contrary, the poem bodies forth what Karen Alkalay-Gut describes as "the darkness of nature" and a total "lack of divine responsibility".³³ The two main protagonists are acting in a world where only they themselves are accountable. They are entirely on their own, and what happens is up to them. If natural forces do seem to intervene, this does not so much lend the poem a metaphysical dimension as stage the duel within a confrontation that is entirely one-to-one. By a mere quirk of nature, by a curious little sandstorm, Sohrab and Rostum are wrapped in a "gloom" that is all their own, while their men on either side "[s]tood in broad daylight" under a clear sky. The "unnatural conflict" between father and son is ultimately between themselves alone. Above all, it is the encounter of two subjectivities which are by this time thoroughly and tragically benighted (ll. 481-490). In short, the poem's most essential action is based on inward motives, while the external appearances of the events are represented as false. They merely hasten the tragic outcome.

³³ Karen Alkalay-Gut, "Aesthetic and Decadent Poetry", in Joseph Bristow (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 228–254, esp. 249.

By the climax of the duel, on Rustum's side the impediments to genuine communication have become a combination of the psychological and physiological, as Arnold most carefully registers:

He [Sohrab] ceased, but while he spake, Rustum had risen,
 And stood erect, trembling with rage; his club
 He left to lie, but had regain'd his spear,
 Whose fiery point now in his mail'd right-hand
 Blazed bright and baleful, like that autumn-star,
 The baleful sign of fevers; dust had soil'd
 His stately crest, and dimm'd his glittering arms.
 His breast heaved, his lips foam'd, and twice his voice
 Was choked with rage; at last these words broke way [...].
 (*Sohrab and Rustum*, ll. 449-457)

The staccato rhythms and fragmented, seemingly wayward syntax register the collapse of the man's martial composure. He has dropped his club; his crest and arms are soiled; he topples to the ground. With its frequent caesuras and onomatopoeic consonants, the verse also catches the choking inarticulacy of his sheer rage. The Homericly objective style of description in no way prevents the intensities of his inner life from emerging in full force: his all-consuming pride as a warrior, his devotion to the code of behaviour which had originally prompted him to accept Sohrab's challenge (in ll. 250-259). In battle, he has renewed his identity as the fiercest combatant in all his host, a role which the writing now shows as all too sadly narrowing his humanity. His fury is almost bestial.

Sohrab, on the other hand, tries to initiate communication, even after the combat has already started:

Come, plant we here in earth our angry spears,
 And make a truce, and sit upon this sand,
 And pledge each other in red wine, like friends,
 And thou shalt talk to me of Rustum's deeds.
 (*Sohrab and Rustum*, ll. 440-443)

Ironically, perhaps, it is the younger Sohrab who is the more certain of his own identity, since he is willing to lay down his weapons even though his army has gathered to see him fight. This contrast between the two duellists is of a piece with the paradoxical nature of battle as a motif,

not only in Arnold as it happens, but in Clough as well. As Isobel Armstrong notes, for both these Victorian poets action is figured

as combat or battle. But it is here, for both of them, that the trope of battle discloses a contradiction in the individualism it both expresses and seeks to assuage in meaningful communal action. For the battle precisely undoes meaning and certainty in action. Its ground shifts, actions signify ambiguously. It is ethically compromising. It is the site of further isolation and solipsism, and, commensurately, deep sexual doubt and unease about one's male sexuality. Individual action and communality dissolve simultaneously. Moreover the independent striving for self-fulfilment becomes the counterpart of a more ignoble condition.³⁴

Only in the closing of *Sohrab and Rustum* does Rustum begin to understand the blind destructiveness by which he has been impelled. His brief experience of genuine communication just before Sohrab's death, his membership in a renewed community of family, is predicated on his self-detachment from his army.

The continuities with *Balder Dead*, published in *Poems, Second Series* in 1855, are clear enough. *Balder Dead* is another epic poem in Homeric grand style, and with the same underlying concerns. This time taking his subject from Norse mythology, Arnold depicts events which follow on the murder of the sun god Balder, the most beloved and virtuous of all the gods in Valhalla. After his death, Balder's spirit has entered the shadowy realm of Hela, and has there come to understand the futility of the violent rule of the gods. Arnold's version of the story narrates Balder's funeral, the gods' attempt to retrieve Balder from the icy underworld, their failure to do so and, finally, the message Balder sends back to them from hell, as his thoughts move far beyond the coming overthrow of their destructive order to a new era that will be very different.

The verse is still more rapid, direct and plain than that of *Sohrab and Rustum*, so further extending Arnold's project of an accessible style. Even more to the point here, his representation of different subjectivities is arguably more diversified than in any other poem. The dialogue actually differs from that of both *Empedocles on Etna* and *Sohrab and Rustum*, in being more fully a matter of interaction between the various characters. If the communicative effort of Empedocles' world-weary monologues was surpassed by Sohrab's and Rustum's brief attempt at

³⁴ Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, pp. 174-175.

exchange, then the action in *Balder Dead* is entirely dependent on dialogue within and between two opposed groupings: the followers of Odin, and the malignant family of Lok, to which Hela, queen of the underworld, also belongs. But even so, communication still has a very long way to go. Arnold's fairly neutral narration presents the oppressive rule of Odin's Valhalla as almost cause enough for Lok and Hela's enmity, so that, as in *Sohrab and Rustum*, the two parties' ostensible grievances are less central to a reader's impression than the entire conflict's deleterious consequences for any subjectivity that happens to get caught up in it.

The darker side of Odin's rule stems from the stagnation of a world-view that is dogmatically absolutist. Yet the enemies of his rule have nothing with which to replace this. Their nihilistic hatred will merely bring about the chaos of the world-consuming Ragnarok. True, the eradication of the old must in any case precede the creation of something new. But in *Balder Dead* the forces of destruction are incapable of anything other than destruction, an impasse similar to the one noted (albeit more explicitly in terms of nineteenth-century intellectual history) in Arnold's "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse", published in the same year: "Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born, / With nowhere yet to rest my head, / [...] on earth I wait forlorn" (ll. 85-88).

The gods mourning Balder are nothing if not active, yet their energy can be fitful, their motives unreflecting and reactionary. The failure of their heaven is rooted in the aridity of its spiritual and intellectual life, in its lack of visionary imagination. Dogma hinders the emergence of moral rationalism, which in turn prevents any serious self-reflection. Although Balder himself has always shown great sensitivity and skill as a mediator, a gift which continued to be therapeutic even among the "ineffectual feuds and feeble hates" of the dispossessed in hell (III, ll. 466, 82-88), Balder is exceptional. What Odin strongly encourages is an emotionally icy machismo. He and his followers would not dream of facing their own deaths with "women's tears and weak complaining cries", and their grief at the death of Balder must also be held in check. They are to weep for the space of an hour; they will spend a whole day giving him a spectacular funeral; and then, with "cold dry eyes", they will carry on their lives as if he were still among them (I, ll. 28-36).

But even if *Balder Dead* strongly echoes the gloom of “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse”, at some distant date a brighter day may dawn. And this is not just a motif which comes with the territory of Norse myths, but one which represents an aspiration much cherished by Arnold personally.

There re-assembling we shall see emerge
 From the bright Ocean at our feet an earth
 More fresh, more verdant than the last, with fruits
 Self springing, and seed of man preserved,
 Who then shall live in peace, as now in war.
 But we in Heaven shall find again with joy
 The ruin'd palaces of Odin, seats
 Familiar, halls where we have supp'd of old;
 Re-enter them with wonder, never fill
 Our eyes with gazing, and rebuild with tears.
 And we shall tread once more the well-known plain
 Of Ida, and among the grass shall find
 The golden dice wherewith we play'd of yore;
 And that will bring to mind the former life
 And pastime of the Gods, the wise discourse
 Of Odin, the delights of other days.

(*Balder Dead*, III, ll. 527-542)

Here Arnold is unashamedly tapping the tradition of paradise in epic, presenting the landscape of the golden age, a world of fresh vegetation, harvest without toil, and “prelapsarian sociable mildness”.³⁵ And this, the prophecy which Balder sends back from the shades of hell to his old companions, has the moral and intellectual honesty to see through the automated violence of their Asgardian dogma, and to admit the necessity of loss in change. One day, their present martial ethos will merely be remembered as something in the past. Although the new golden age will be nostalgic for the old, the values which Balder views as transcendent are beauty, peace, companionship and wisdom.

Perhaps because of the image of Arnold as a poet of melancholy, the remarkable conclusion of *Balder Dead*, in a way so close to his ambition as a prose writer of propagating “the best that is known and thought in the world”, has been somewhat overlooked. But here he has not written a

³⁵ Thomas M. Greene, *The Descent from Heaven: a Study in Epic Continuity* (London, 1963), p. 392.

poem of action of the kind apparently desiderated by the 1853 Preface. Neither is *Balder Dead* an attempt to write such a poem which has failed. As in *Sohrab and Rustum*, Arnold clearly senses that action, although potentially far more beneficial than inaction, will be positively dangerous unless based on a clear spiritual and moral intelligence. The surest way to arrive at a happy future is neither by self-withdrawal, nor by the kind of febrile activity engaged in by the gods when Hela promises to restore Balder if they can only prove that his loss is universally mourned. The surest hope must lie in stoical endurance, enlightened by genuine communication. Balder's heroic role is in trying to mediate in conflicts, and in his vision of a new order in which the rigid boundary-lines of old enmities will be dissolved through communal self-reassessment.

This, then, is how as an epic poet Arnold comes to hover between those two opposing tendencies discussed by David Quint. "To the victors belongs epic, with its linear teleology; to the losers belongs romance, with its random or circular wandering. Put another way, the victors experience history as a coherent, end-directed story told by their own power; the losers experience a contingency that they are powerless to shape to their own ends."³⁶ Arnold's epic poems question teleological structures by giving voices to different, conflicting subjectivities, and by being suspicious of any single aim or explanation. Paradoxically, they also hint at a new teleology, seeing life as ultimately directed towards sincere relationships and a peaceful cohabitation of the planet, a teleology which actually throws in question any uncompromising intensity of individual will.

As long ago as 1973, Carl Dawson was already saying that the habit of seeing two different, even separate Arnolds had become too much a critical commonplace. "Many of Arnold's later critics thought that his prose had ensured an audience, or a substantial audience, for the poems, as though, like Wordsworth, he had created the taste by which he could be enjoyed. But they thought in terms of two Arnolds, the poet and the writer of prose, the private and the public man."³⁷ Initially, such a division between two Arnolds may lighten some of the critic's burdens. But distortions arise as soon as one of them is taken for granted and the continuities ignored. Arnold did not find it easy to project himself as the

³⁶ Quint, *Epic and Empire*, p. 9.

³⁷ Dawson, *Matthew Arnold*, p.xiii.

self-confident persona of the prose, and despite some appearances to the contrary he took little real delight in verbal pugilism. Rather, the prose moves, not beyond the poetry but, *like* some of the poetry, beyond a state “in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done”. In prose and poetry alike, what is to be done is primarily a matter of heightened mental and social engagement, in a mode of genuine communication to which, from 1853 onwards, his most distinctive writing also seeks to raise his readers.