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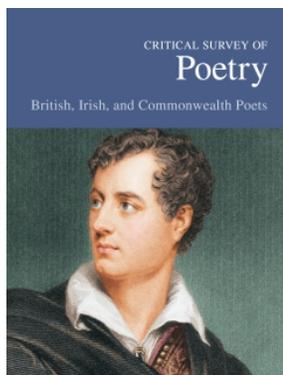


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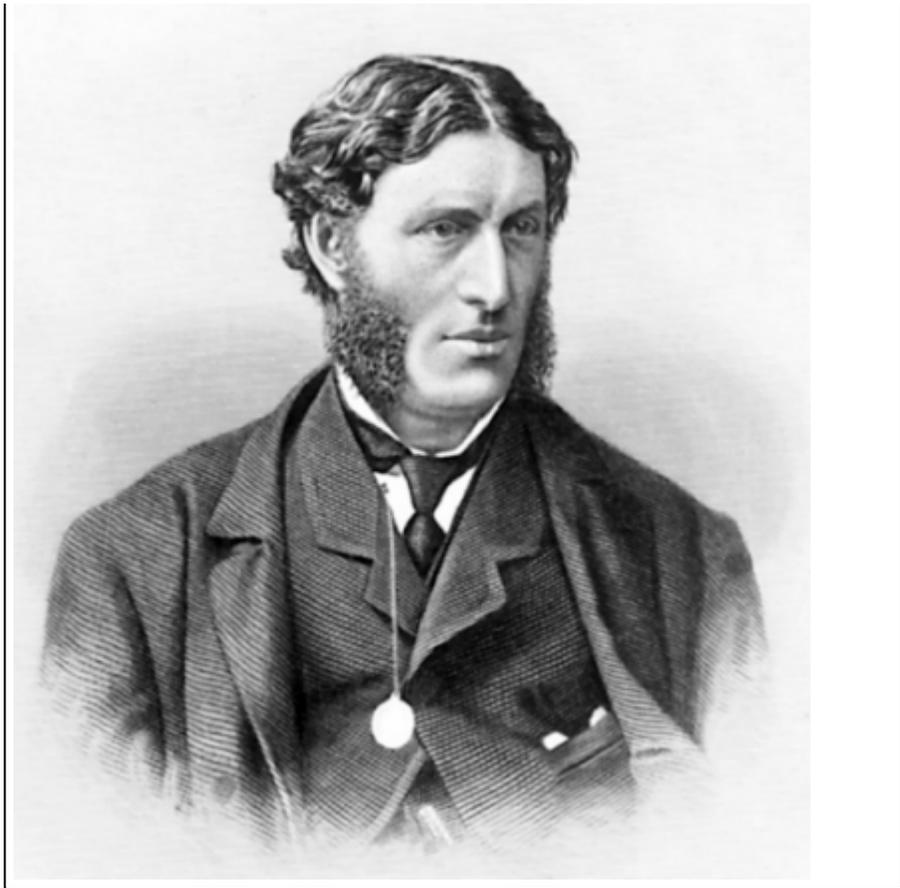
Matthew Arnold

by Ronald K. Giles

Other literary forms

Throughout his life Matthew Arnold wrote critical works on literature, culture, religion, and education that made him the foremost man of letters in Victorian England. This large body of prose is available in a standard edition: *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold* (1960-1976, Robert Henry Super, editor), with textual notes and commentary. Essays important to an understanding of Arnold's contribution to the discipline of literary criticism include *Preface to Poems* (1853), “Wordsworth,” “The Study of Poetry,” and “Literature and Science.” “Culture and Anarchy” explains the philosophical positions and biases from which Arnold criticized literature and society. Also available are editions containing his letters and notebooks.

Matthew Arnold
(Library of Congress)



Achievements

In 1840, while he was a student at Rugby, Matthew Arnold won the Poetry Prize for “Alaric at Rome,” and three years later, then at Oxford University, he won the Newdigate Poetry Prize for “Cromwell.” From this official recognition of his poetic gift, Arnold began a career that produced what T. S. Eliot calls in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), “academic poetry in the best sense; the best fruit which can issue from the promise shown by the prize-poem.” However, Arnold wrote many poems that rise far above the merely academic, though popular interest in his poetry never approached the following of his more technically and expressively gifted contemporaries, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and Robert Browning. Admittedly, Arnold’s poems lack the polished texture that characterizes the great Victorian poetry; critics often complain about Arnold’s lack of “ear.” The novelist George Eliot, however, early recognized, in the *Westminster Review* (July, 1855), what has been increasingly the accepted opinion: “But when . . . we linger over a poem which contains some deep and fresh thought, we begin to perceive poetic beauties—felicities of expression and description, which are too quiet and subdued to be seized at the first glance.” Whatever his prosodic deficiencies, Arnold still composed several lyric and narrative poems which take their place with the best that the age produced.

In a century notable for elegies, “Thyrsis,” for Arnold’s friend Arthur Hugh Clough, ranks with Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Adonais* (1821), Walt Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” (1865), and Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* (1850) as distinguished additions to the genre. “The Scholar-Gipsy” and “Dover Beach” contain the lyric energy and power that justify both their numerous anthology appearances and a body of criticism that places them among the most frequently explicated poems in the language.

In 1857, Arnold won election as Professor of Poetry at Oxford and, in 1862, was reelected to another five-year term. Receiving permission to abandon the customary Latin, Arnold delivered his lectures in English and invigorated the professorship with lectures ranging from the individual (Homer, Dante) to the topical (“The Literary Influence of Academies”) to the broadly critical (*On the Study of Celtic Literature*, 1867). Though his critical writings on English culture, literature, and religion made him a controversial figure, Arnold gained respect in his post as inspector of schools, serving twice as assistant commissioner on official committees dispatched to study European schools, and eventually becoming a senior inspector in 1870, the same year in which Oxford conferred on him an honorary D.C.L. degree. In 1883, he visited the United States on a lecture tour that, though not triumphal, was at least a measure of his commanding stature as a critic and poet.

Biography

Matthew Arnold, born on Christmas Eve, 1822, at Laleham, England, was the second child and eldest son of five boys and four girls in the family of Thomas Arnold and Mary Penrose Arnold. At the time of the poet’s birth, his father, a graduate of Oxford, was performing his duties as master at the school in Laleham, preparing himself intellectually and professionally for his appointment in 1828 as headmaster of Rugby, where he set about reforming the narrowly classical curriculum to include emphasis on language, history, and mathematics and to reflect his “broad church” liberalism, while insisting that his students maintain his own high standards of discipline and moral conduct. Though his reformist views on both church and school invited attack from traditional quarters, the elder Arnold exerted over his students, family, and English education a lingering influence after his premature death at the age of forty-seven.

Although there was an undoubtedly tense relationship between headmaster father and poetically inclined son (who, at times, neglected his studies and sported the dress and talk of a dandy), Arnold’s elegiac tribute to his father in “Rugby Chapel” confirms his mature appreciation for his father’s magisterial qualities of mind and conduct. Likewise, Arnold took a distinct pride in the Cornish ancestry of his mother, whose father was a clergyman named John Penrose and whose mother’s maiden name was Trevenen. Arnold’s interest in

Celtic literature derived from this ancestral connection, received further stimulation from a trip to Brittany in 1859 to visit the schools, and finally resulted in the lectures *On the Study of Celtic Literature*. Whatever the exact influence of his parents, Arnold certainly felt the familial strains which, on the one side, tended toward the moral and intellectual honesty and practicality of the headmaster and, on the other, toward the imaginative and expressive charm of the Celtic mother.

Arnold married Frances Lucy Wightman in 1851 after his celebrated infatuation, rendered in the “Switzerland” poems, for the beautiful “Marguerite,” a woman now identified by Park Honan in *Matthew Arnold: A Life* (1981) as Mary Claude, “a descendant of French Protestant exiles” who came to live near the Arnold family home at Fox How. Matthew and Frances Lucy had six children, two daughters and four sons, in a happy marriage three times saddened by the early deaths of Basil at two, Thomas at sixteen, and William at eighteen.

Two years after his retirement from the wearying post of school inspector, Arnold entered in his diary, under the date of April 15, 1888, “Weep bitterly over the dead.” That day, at Liverpool awaiting the arrival of his daughter and granddaughter from the United States, he collapsed from a heart attack and died.

Analysis

A commonplace beginning for criticism of Matthew Arnold’s poetry is one or another of his many well-known critical statements that provide a basis for showing how well or how poorly the critic’s precept corresponds with the poet’s practice. One must remember, however, that most of Arnold’s best work as a poet preceded his finest work as a critic and that his letters reveal dissatisfaction with his poetic “fragments,” as he called them. He did believe that his poems would have their “turn,” just as Tennyson’s and Browning’s had, because they followed closely the trend of modern thinking. Indeed, Arnold’s modernity—his sense of alienation, moral complexity, and humanistic values—makes his work, both critical and creative, a continuing presence in the literary world.

The sense of alienation that carries so much thematic weight in Arnold’s poetry reaches back into his childhood. As a child, he wore a brace for a slightly bent leg. This had an isolating, restricting effect on a boy who enjoyed running and climbing. Also, he early realized the irony of numbers, because, as the second born, he found that his parents’ time and attention did not easily spread over nine children, and, at fourteen, he spent what surely seemed like a year in exile at Winchester School. The need for attention

influenced his pose as a dandy, and he probably enjoyed his reputation as an idler, especially in his circle of family and friends who upheld and practiced the Victorian principles of work and duty.

Of course, the religious and social atmosphere in which Arnold approached adulthood conditioned his perception of the alienating forces at work in England: He entered Oxford during the Tractarian controversy that divided conservative and liberal elements in the Church of England, and he knew about the general economic and social discontent that separated the working class from the wealthy. With such factious elements at work—including the dispute between religion and science on the origin of earth and humankind—Arnold, facing his own lover's estrangement in "To Marguerite—Continued," could write with justifiable irony that "We mortal millions live alone." With good reason, then, Arnold formed his ideas on the wholesome effect of order and authority, of education and culture recommended in his prose—evident alike in that quest for unity, wholeness, and joy which, in the poems, his lyric and narrative speakers find so elusive.

In addition to the poems discussed below, the following poems are considered among Arnold's best work: "The Forsaken Merman," "The Strayed Reveller," "Palladium," "The Future," "A Dream," and "A Summer Night." Although Arnold's work has been very influential, even at its best it contains elements which can bother the modern reader, such as the over-reliance on interrogative and exclamatory sentences, giving to his ideas in the former case a weighty, rhetorical cast and, in the latter, an artificial rather than a natural emphasis. There is, however, a consistency in the melancholy, elegiac tone and in the modern concern with humankind's moral condition in a world where living a meaningful life has become increasingly difficult that makes Arnold's poetry rewarding reading.

"To a Friend"

In the early sonnet "To a Friend," Arnold praises Sophocles, in one of his memorable lines, because he "saw life steadily, and saw it whole."

"Wholeness" was the controlling thought behind the poet's vision: "an idea of the world in order not be prevailed over by the world's multitudinousness," he tells Clough in a letter critical of the "episodes and ornamental work" that distract both poet and reader from a sense of unity. This unity of idea, in perception and execution, is necessary for poetry "to utter the truth," as Arnold says in his essay on William Wordsworth, because "poetry is at bottom a criticism of life . . . the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life,—to the question: How to live." For Arnold, this question is itself "a moral idea."

If Sophocles saw life "whole," he also, according to Arnold, saw it "steadily." For Arnold, Sophoclean steadiness implies two distinct but complementary processes. First, as physical steadiness, *seeing* is the broad sensory

reaction to the range of stimuli associated with the poet's "Idea of the world." One may note, for example, the last six lines of "Mycerinus" with their heavy emphasis on auditory imagery—"mirth waxed loudest," "echoes came," "dull sound"—which perfectly conclude the preceding philosophical implications of six long years of reveling by King Mycerinus. These implications appear in a series of "it may be" possibilities, and the imagery underscores the essential uncertainty of the auditors ("wondering people") because the sounds are really once-removed "echoes," partly "Mix'd with the murmur of the moving Nile." There is an attempt to match appropriately the sensations with the subject.

The second point, related to physical steadiness, implies a type of mental fixity on the part of the observer, a disciplined exercise of consciousness operating throughout the temporal context of creative urge and eventual artistic fulfillment. Explaining the difficulty of this exercise for his own poetic practice, Arnold writes to Clough that "I can go thro: the imaginary process of mastering myself and the whole affair as it would then stand, but at the critical point I am too apt to hoist up the mainsail to the wind and let her drive." In short, Arnold recognizes a lack of mental fixity to accompany the poetic inspiration; he can, imaginatively, see the "whole," but, at the critical point of artistic execution, he lets go, becoming, at the expense of the whole, too insistent or expansive in one thematic or descriptive part. The lyric "Despondency" addresses this problem in the typically elegiac tone of Arnold's poetic voice. The lyric speaker says that "The thoughts that rain their steady glow/ Like stars on life's cold sea" have "never shone" for him. He has seen the thoughts which "light, like gleams, my spirit's sky," but they appear "once . . . hurry by/ And never come again." He laments the absence of that conscious persistence that preserves the "steady glow" of thought bearing directly on the moral vastness of "life's cold sea."

In a more general way, seeing life steadily allies itself to the "spontaneity of consciousness" for which Arnold praises Hellenism in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). This spontaneity suggests a physical and mental alertness which instantly responds to "life as it is," a consciousness prone to thinking but unencumbered by the predisposition to action that describes the force of "conduct and obedience" behind Hebraism, the other major tradition in Western civilization. Sophocles, the model Hellenist, possesses the "even-balanced soul" that holds in steady counterpoise the old dichotomy of thought and feeling, a pre-Christian possibility coming before the "triumph of Hebraism and humankind's moral impulses." Thus, as a letter to Clough shows, Arnold appreciates the burden of seeing steadily and whole for the modern poet whose subject matter is perforce a criticism of life, a burden compounded because "the poet's matter being the hitherto experience of the world, and his own, increases with every century." This "hitherto experience," both Hellenic and Hebraic, overlaying Arnold's own, accounts for his interest in remote, historical subjects such as "Mycerinus," "Empedocles on Etna," "Tristram and

Iseult," "Sohrab and Rostum," and "Balder Dead"—which nevertheless contain critical implications for living morally, even joyfully, in the incipiently modern world of Victorian England.

Poetic dualities

This "then and now" conception of the human experience has its analogues in the dualities that, as critics often note, Arnold's poems constantly explore: the moral and the amoral, the mind and the body, thought and feeling, the contemplative life and the active life, or, as scholar Douglas Bush labels them in *Matthew Arnold* (1971), the "Apollonian-Dionysian antinomy" of Arnold's ideas. Here again the dynamics for seeing steadily emerge because the poet must look simultaneously in polar directions, resisting all the while the temptation to "hoist up the mainsail to the wind and let her drive."

In his best poems, Arnold seeks the vantage point—call it a poetic situation—from which he can see steadily the dualities that, in the poem's thematic reconciliation, coalesce in the wholeness of the "Idea." Arnold warns, however, in the "Preface to Poems," against the poetic situations "from the representation of which, though accurate, no poetical enjoyment can be derived . . . those in which the suffering finds no vent in action . . . in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done." For Arnold, the problem of poetic situation means finding "a vent in action" which does not overwhelm the speculative nature of the idea, and the solution often comes in the form of the "quest," the symbolically active.

"The Scholar-Gipsy" and "Thyrsis"

"The Scholar-Gipsy" is on a quest, "waiting for the spark from heaven to fall." When the spark falls, he can share with the world the secret art, learned from the "gipsy-crew," of ruling "the workings of men's brains." Until then, he wanders mysteriously from Berkshire Moors to Cumner Hills, pensively cast in an ageless "solitude," exempt from the "repeated shocks" and "strange disease of modern life." The shepherd who lyrically tells the scholar-gipsy's story speaks for the Victorians who also "await" the spark from heaven, but, with "heads o'ertax'd" and "palsied hearts," cannot acquire the immortalizing agency of a quest with "one aim, one business, one desire." The antithesis is clear: "Arnold's Gipsy," as Honan says, "represents stability in a world of flux and change, creative inwardness in a world of lassitude, stagnation, frustration, and dividedness." The shepherd, a part of the modern world but temporarily secluded in the imaginative distance of "this high field's dark corner," discovers the physical and mental steadiness to tell the story, to see concurrently the past and present, and to indict his society through the quest of the mythic wanderer.

"Thyrsis," a monody for Clough, follows the same stanza form and rhyme scheme of "The Scholar-Gipsy," continuing too the unifying strategy of the quest, this time for the "signal elm-tree," which has itself become a symbol for

the perpetual existence of “our friend, the Gipsy-Scholar.” In this way, Arnold aligns Clough with the legendary rover; Clough, however, unlike the Gipsy, “could not wait” the passing of the “storms that rage” in their fragmented society. With night descending, Corydon (Arnold’s persona) sees, but does not achieve, the object of his quest; but he cries “Hear it, O Thyrsis, still our tree is there!” So lives the Gipsy-Scholar, so remains, in the symbolic activity of the quest, the idea of hope: Corydon will “not despair.” As in “The Scholar-Gipsy,” Arnold turns the old genre of pastoratelegy to topical account, and the poem achieves a balanced steadiness, as much about Corydon as about Thyrsis, as much about hope as about despair, as much about life as about death.

The idea of the quest—or the hunt, or the journey—recurs again and again in Arnold’s poetry, providing the “vent in action” required by the expanding idea. The journey may be inward, as in “The Buried Life,” in which Arnold says that humankind’s impulse to know the “mystery” of its heart sends it delving into its “own breast.” Here the poet tries to reconcile the dualities of outward “strife” (in “the world’s most crowded streets”) and inner “striving” (toward “the unregarded river of our life”). This self-questing journey, however, ironically needs the impetus of “a beloved hand laid in ours,” “another’s eyes read clear,” and then, in the respite of love, one “becomes aware of his life’s flow.” There is, though faint, an optimistic strain rising through the modern sense of isolation, even permitting the poet, in “Resignation,” to make a virtue of necessity by accepting “his sad lucidity of soul.”

For Arnold, though, isolation and solitude are not similar; they represent yet another set of opposites: isolation, a state of rejection and loneliness, is to be shunned, while solitude, a state of reflection and inspiration, is to be sought. Away from the “sick hurry” of modern life, the poet in solitude achieves the steadiness of feeling and perception required for the aesthetic fulfillment of his or her idea. Arnold’s lyric speakers enjoy solitude: The shepherd in “The Scholar-Gipsy” and “Thyrsis,” or the loungeur in Kensington Gardens who finds “peace for ever new” in the “lone, open glade,” is analogous, in the “Austerity of Poetry,” to the “hidden ground/ Of thought” within the Muse herself.

However, there is always the ironic danger: Empedocles, on the verge of suicide, drops his laurel bough because he is “weary of the solitude/ Where he who bears thee must abide.” Arnold needs the creative succor of a solitude that carries over, as he says in “Quiet Work,” into a life “Of toil unsever’d from tranquillity,” a life that, even as Empedocles admits, still “leaves human effort scope.” This “human effort” becomes the dynamics behind Arnold’s own quest to focus and balance the idea with the action, to elevate and juxtapose the moral propositions of antagonistic extremes: life and death, love and hate, alliance and alienation.

“Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse”

“Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse” follows the typically Arnoldian pattern. The first sixty-five lines witness the sensory perception and steadiness of the speaker, his spontaneity of consciousness comprising a mixture of imagery—visual (“spectral vapours white”), auditory (“strangled sound”), tactile (“forms brush by”). There is the anticipatory journey or quest: “The bridge is cross’d, and slow we ride/ Through forest up the mountainside.” Then, at line sixty-six, there is the idea, framed in the rhetorical question: “And what am I, that I am here?” The speaker admits that the object of his ultimate quest is really elsewhere, for the “rigorous teachers” of his youth “Show’d me the high, white star of Truth,/ There bade me gaze, and there aspire.” That abstract quest, though, must temporarily defer to this cold physical journey to the Grande Chartreuse, a monastery in the French Alps, where the troubled speaker can shed his melancholy tears in the presence of a profound religious faith. No longer young and feeling caught in the forlorn void between the faiths of a past and future time, he is “wandering between two worlds, one dead,/ The other powerless to be born.” The past age of faith, still ascetically practiced in the Carthusian monastery, and a desirable future age “which without hardness will be sage,/ And gay without frivolity” bracket a divisively inert time in which the sciolists talk, but, with their fathers’ history of pain and grief as justification, “The Kings of modern thought are dumb.”

Fraser Neiman, in *Matthew Arnold* (1968), summarizes the common emotional ground of the anchorite and Arnold: They both “turn to a quest for inward peace,” but Arnold must find his in solitude, in the buried life, in quiet work, in, as Neiman says, “a profound inwardness . . . not incompatible with the world of activity.” The poem concludes with images of “action and pleasure”—the “troops,” the “hunters,” the “gay dames” passing below the monastery—representing a life again rejected by the Carthusians but, as the reader infers, accepted by the speaker, who has had, at least, the catharsis of his tears. The emphasis, though, is on the idea, an idea that Arnold tries to see steadily and whole through the confrontation of opposites: the ascetic, contemplative life of the anchorite, “Obermann,” and the past at the top of the Etna-like mountain (where, one gathers, the “suffering finds no vent in action”), versus the secular, restless life of “Laughter and cries” at the bottom of the mountain where “Years hence, perhaps, may dawn an age,/ More fortunate.” “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse” renders in setting, mood, and idea the predicament of the poet, expressed in Arnold’s earlier poem, “Stanza in Memory of the Author of ‘Obermann’”:

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

“Dover Beach”

"Dover Beach" fits into the same structural pattern of imagery, idea, and resolution. The opening of the poem establishes the physical and mental awareness of the speaker, a person attuned to the sensory stimuli of the scene before him. The counterpointed imagery of sight and sound in the first verse paragraph divides as naturally as a Petrarchan sonnet: The visual imagery of the first eight lines suggests peace and serenity ("the moon lies fair," "the tranquil bay"), but the auditory imagery of the next six lines, signaled by the turn of the imperative "Listen!," introduces the "grating roar/ Of pebbles" which, in the climax of the paragraph, "Begin, and cease, and then again begin,/ With tremulous cadence slow, and bring/ The eternal note of sadness in." The imagistic division, the modulated caesura, and the irregular pattern of end and internal rhymes provide the lyric energy leading up to the emotional dimension of sadness which the second verse paragraph quickly converts to the mental dimension of thought. In a transitional effect, the auditory imagery surrounding the "note of sadness" connects with the image of Sophocles who "long ago/ Heard it on the Aegaeon," bringing "Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow/ Of human misery." Critics sometimes object to the shift in imagery from full to ebb tide, but the crucial thematic point lies not so much in the maintenance of parallel imagery as in the formulation of idea: "we/ Find also in the sound a thought/ Hearing it by this distant northern sea." Thus, the perception of dualities—full and ebb tide, present and past time, physical and metaphorical seas—prepares for the "then and now" structure of the third verse paragraph: the "Sea of Faith" was once full, like the tide at Dover, but the lyric speaker can "only hear/ Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar."

The sociological interpretation, to select just one critical approach, maintains that the disillusioned speaker refers to the debate between religion and science then dominating the intellectual effort of so many Victorians. If the "Sea of Faith" came to full tide with the "triumph of Hebraism and humankind's moral impulses," the preceding image of Sophocles adds poignance to the speaker's resignation in the face of the constant factor of "human misery." Whereas Sophocles could, in an ancient world, see life steadily and see it whole in its tragic but nevertheless human consequences, the speaker enjoys no such certainty. The retreating Sea of Faith takes with it the moral and spiritual basis for "joy" and "love" and "peace." The speaker's own attempt to see modern life steadily and to see it whole, successful or not, leads to the resolution of the lyric cry: "Ah, love, let us be true/ To one another!" The world may no longer offer the comfort of "joy" and "certitude" and "help for pain," but the lovers may create their own interpersonal world where such pleasures presumably exist.

Some critics fault the ending of "Dover Beach," which imaginatively transports the couple to "a darkling plain," leaving behind the sea imagery that guides the speaker's emotional and mental state throughout the poem. The ending, however, maintains the consistency of auditory imagery ("confused alarms,"

“armies clash”) that concludes each of the preceding verse paragraphs, and the “struggle and flight” of the “ignorant armies” echo, in appropriately harsher terms, the “retreating” roar of the Sea of Faith. Furthermore, the principle of duality, carefully set up in the poem, works at the end: Physically, the lovers are still by the quiet, beautiful cliffs of Dover, but figuratively, at an opposite extreme, they find themselves “as on a darkling plain.”

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