Dramatic Elegists

Arnold, Clough, and Browning at Mid-Century

1

We believe it may safely be assumed that at no previous period has the public been more buzzed around by triviality and commonplace; but we hold firm, at the same time, that at none other has there been a greater or grander body of genius, or so honorable a display of well cultivated taste and talent. . . . if the fact be so, it will make itself known, and the poets of this day will assert themselves, and take their places.—William Rossetti, in a review of Clough for The Germ

When Robert Browning published Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day (at Easter time, 1850), he was accused by some critics of invoking Momus, the spirit of satire. How, critics wondered, could he use a satiric mode for the most serious of themes? Could one even conceive of Christ speaking in a version of Hudibrastic doggerel? What sort of poem was Browning offering? He was, despite his dramatic voices, writing like Tennyson, under the inspiration of Melpomene. His work is retrospective and meditative, expressive of Browning's religious doubts and struggles to believe. Whether or nor Browning responded directly in this poem to the death of his mother in the previous year—at a time when he was unable to return to England to see her—the poem is a record of self-scrutiny and religious longing. Like In Memoriam it represents a turning point in the poet’s career, a kind of preliminary move toward Browning-as-sage.

Arthur Hugh Clough did not publish his Dipsychus in 1850, though he wrote most of the poem in that year, and hence did not risk the kind of public criticism that Browning received for Christmas-Eve. His witty, Faustian dialogue treats ironically both the self-conscious Dipsychus and the Spirit (Mephistopheles) with whom he speaks. No doubt Clough, too, would have been criticized for want of seriousness by the public press. But
like Browning and Matthew Arnold, who was always ready to find fault with his work, Clough expresses a sense of an isolated, dispossessed life, in which all questions have to be asked and few seem capable of answer.

If Clough's questions are overt and intellectualized, Matthew Arnold's tend to be covert and implied. But Arnold's poems are equally probing, introspective, elegiac. Along with Tennyson, Arnold and Browning and Clough may remind us that mid-century poetry so often records "solitary and unassimilated figures" writing of their "ways" and "journeys," their "paths" through darkness, their hope for assent, their struggles against ocean tides (the metaphors are common property, even hackneyed), in attempts to discover what Carl Jung was to speak of as "the self." Jung's notion of "the self," "our life's goal," not only echoes the language of mid-century poets, it seems almost a commentary on their works. In Memories, Dreams, Reflections, his reluctant autobiography, Jung speaks of his "buried life" in terms that English writers would have understood. "In the end the only events worth telling are those when the imperishable world irrupted into the transitory one. That is why I speak chiefly of inner experience, amongst which I include my dreams and visions." I mention Jung (and will again) simply to suggest how nearly his speculations and his language approximate the implicit aim of mid-century poetry, which is preoccupied with dreams and visions—and volcanic eruptions—and which weighs an "unsatisfactory and transitory" against an "imperishable" world. Obviously Jung's heritage, no less than Browning's, Arnold's, or Clough's, is early nineteenth-century poetry. "The light of inner happenings" (another of Jung's phrases) recalls Wordsworth and Shelley. But Jung points to an important development, for while mid-century poets inherit Romantic methods, they seem shy of Romantic egotism and unsure about the value of their work. The expression of "inner experience," of self, comes with reluctance and pain.

2 MATTHEW ARNOLD

My poems represent, on the whole, the main movement of mind of the last quarter of a century, and thus they will probably have their day as people become conscious to themselves of what that movement of mind is, and interested in the literary productions which reflect it. It might fairly be urged that I have less poetical sentiment than Tennyson, and less
intellectual vigour and abundance than Browning; yet, . . . I am likely
even enough to have my turn, as they have had theirs.—Arnold, in an 1869 let-
ter to his mother

So far as I know, only one critic published articles on Arnold, Clough,
and Browning in 1850, and he was a young man, editor of The Germ, who
"was more or less expected to do the sort of work for which the other
[Pre-Raphaelites] had little inclination—such especially as the regular
reviewing of new poems." William Michael Rossetti wrote reviews of
Arnold's The Strayed Reveller (1849), Clough's Bothie of Toper-na-
fuosich (1848), and Browning's Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day (1850).
Rossetti prided himself on being an untypical reviewer; he pleaded for
such qualities as thoroughness and sympathy, which he found wanting
in established journals like Blackwood's. Thoroughness he lacks, but he
is sympathetic. His interest in Arnold, Clough, and Browning reveals a
sharp sense of their relative merit in a period of prolific versifying. Apart
from Tennyson, these are the poets of the time who are best remem-
bered and (with one exception) they are the only poets Rossetti chose
to review.

To begin his assessment of Arnold, Rossetti picks up a phrase from
Carlyle: "If any one quality may be considered common to all living
poets, it is that which we have heard aptly described as self-conscious-
ness. . . . Every species of composition—the dramatic, the narrative, the
lyric, the didactic, the descriptive—is imbued with this spirit; and the
reader may calculate with almost equal certainty on becoming acquainted
with the belief of a poet as of a theologian or a moralist." This acute
observation applies to all three of the poets Rossetti reviews—and to
dozens he does not. Rossetti calls Arnold a lyric poet, technically bril-
liant, who has "little to learn." With surprising shrewdness, he guesses
that there will be no great developments in Arnold's verse, partly because
Arnold lacks "passion," partly—and relatedly—because, whatever the
shape of Arnold's poems, "the reflective [mode is the] essential form of
his thought." Rossetti also speculates that Arnold is "no longer young"
(he was twenty-eight), a feeling oddly enough shared by Arnold himself,
who often spoke of his wasted youth. For Rossetti, then, Arnold is
preeminently self-conscious, the representative poet of his generation.
His sense of Arnold is close to the poet's immediate impatience with his
work and close to his later estimate, when he said that, though lacking
Tennyson's brilliance and Browning's energy, he represented the main
movements of mind in his time.
Rossetti makes a further point that bears on Arnold’s self-assessment. He says that the self-consciousness of modern poets means that “mere pretenders, in their desire to emulate the great [Tennyson primarily], feel themselves under a kind of obligation to assume opinions, vague, incongruous, or exaggerated; often not only not their own, but the direct reverse of their own.” The tendency to assume opinions, which Arnold himself deplored, brings about much unreadable poetry. It has “on the other hand . . . created a new tie of interest between the author and his public.” Rossetti plays with the paradox that Gilfillan could not allow, that the more private the poetry the more popular it may become. And since self-consciousness is an aspect of modern fictional narrators as well as speakers in poems, Rossetti hints at a useful relationship between poets and novelists. I shall return to this later. For the moment I want to see how his reviews of Arnold, Clough, and Browning point to creative and moral dilemmas shared by the three poets—poets who in other ways or at other times may seem far apart.

ii

“The classical in art is what marches by intention with the cosmology of the age.”—“Pursewarden,” in Lawrence Durrell’s Balthazar

Just as Arnold the critic dominates English criticism in the 1860s and 1870s, so Arnold the poet offers a good index to the climate for poetry at mid-century. On the one hand, he embodies what Asa Briggs calls the intellectual aristocracy: an employee of Lord Lansdowne the Whig aristocrat, the son of a respected headmaster and historian, and soon to be one of Her Majesty’s Inspectors of schools. On the other hand, Arnold was a tormented young man, torn in his love affairs, dissatisfied with his friendships, obsessed by thoughts of death, “self-conscious” to the point (in Carlyle’s phrase) of “spiritual paralysis,” and generally prey to what Charles Kingsley (in a review of The Strayed Reveller) described as a morbid and egocentric “self-culture.” Arnold in 1850 had already published The Strayed Reveller, a collection of poems that surprised even members of his family with its poignant self-scrutiny and that evidently disappointed Arnold himself. He may have known that his poetry was to be almost indelibly introspective, that it would approximate the elegiac beauty of Sénancour’s Obermann more than the tragic strength of Sophocles. It was, perhaps, the elegiac quality of his poetry that most troubled Arnold.
Whether describing “The Sick King” or the Egyptian king Mycerinus, the strayed reveller or the scholar gipsy, or whether speaking in what is evidently his own voice to “Marguerite,” he sounds again the “eternal note of sadness.”

Arnold’s meeting with “Marguerite,” in 1848 and 1849, led him to write his haunting love poems. But his love for Marguerite, like Wordsworth’s love for Lucy, or Tennyson’s for Hallam, seems less a passion than a dirge for a passion that has been, with the emphasis on the “salt, estranging sea.” In *In Memoriam* Tennyson eulogizes his dead friend and interrupted love; Arnold laments his lost love and dying life. Youth, energy, nature, passion: he weeps for them all. His best-known poem, “Dover Beach” (probably written 1851, though included in the 1867 collection), is a poignant statement of his sense of loss, with the small mitigation of a presumably sympathetic listener, she, that is, whom he calls to the window.

Whereas in his essays Arnold came to be thought unflappably witty and suave, in his poems he was seen from the outset to be another voice of modern despair. And so in sense he thought of himself. His 1853 Preface to *Poems* was as much self-criticism as a general indictment of the poetry of the age. The closest Arnold was to come to his prescribed ideals for poetry represented his furthest digression from his real talents. *Meropè*, published in 1859 to “inaugurate” his tenure as Oxford Professor of Poetry, was to remain an experiment in classical tragedy. If *Emepdocles on Etna* is a more successful poem, Arnold himself saw *Emepdocles* as a “dialogue of the mind with itself,” as an example of latter-day Romanticism. Arnold’s explicit and public estimate of Romantic literature, introduced by the 1853 Preface, continues through several decades of critical writing. Already at mid-century he was thinking of the Romantics in terms of his own talents and of the literary climate in which he had to write.

Against Wordsworth and against the disposition of his contemporaries, who continued to revere Wordsworth, he responded with contempt to the notion that man can be “in harmony with nature,” and while Wordsworth’s twin ministries include fear along with beauty, his hope is always for some potential harmony, which is what he finds on the flanks of Snowdon or what he remembers as the redeeming quality in his past. The “received” Wordsworth of mid-century at any rate stressed the optimistic and descriptive poet rather than the poet of “dereliction,” or of “Michael,” who wrote a version of tragic pastoral. Implicitly, when Arnold later scoffs at the Wordsworthians and questions the power of
Wordsworth's long poems, he acknowledges more than the strength of diction in "Michael." "And never lifted up a single stone"—his literal touchstone—is a line from a poem in which hope is minimal and human loss immense.\(^\text{11}\) Arnold's public assessment of Wordsworth belongs to a later time. His private assessment begins in letters to Clough and to his family at mid-century and also—with a difference—in his poems.

"Memorial Verses," published in Fraser's Magazine, is a tribute to Wordsworth, an elegy or dirge, written shortly after Wordsworth's death in April. Arnold considers Wordsworth in relation to two other giants, Goethe and Byron, who had died long before. Wordsworth had carried on, at once separate from new literary movements and influential in them. It is worth remembering how Arnold, who knew Wordsworth personally, and who knew himself to be influenced by Wordsworth, contrived this farewell poem:

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Goethe in Weimar sleeps, and Greece,
Long since, saw Byron's struggle cease.
But one such death remained to come;
The last poetic voice is dumb—
What shall be said o'er Wordsworth's tomb?\(^\text{12}\)
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Arnold thought of his poem as an elegy "in the grand style," a phrase which could suggest either high-flown and laudatory or merely formal and classical in manner. Edward Quillinan, Wordsworth's son-in-law (and editor of Fraser's), spoke of its as "very classical, or it would not be Matthew Arnold's." Quillinan called the poem "a triple epicede on your [Henry Crabb Robinson's] friends Wordsworth and Goethe, and on Byron who ... is not tall enough for the other two."\(^\text{13}\) In his excellent edition of Arnold's poems, Kenneth Allott points to Goethe's distinction between classic and romantic as bearing on Arnold's understanding of the three dead poets. To Eckermann, in 1829, Goethe had said: "I call the classic healthy and the romantic sickly. . . . Most modern productions are romantic, not because they are new, but because they are weak, morbid, and sickly; the antique is classic, not because it is old, but because it is strong, fresh, joyous and healthy."\(^\text{14}\) The distinction makes sense for Arnold, but not quite for "Memorial Verses," in which Byron figures as an accountable thunderbolt, Goethe as the "Physician of the iron age" (whether diagnostic or healing), and Wordsworth as a kindly nurse:

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For never has such soothing voice
Been to your shadowy world conveyed
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\(^{\text{68} V}\)ictorian Noon
He spoke, and loosed our hearts in tears.
He laid us as we lay at birth
On the cool flowery lap of earth. . .

(Poems, 228)

Together with Goethe and Byron, Wordsworth represents an age in poetry, an age at once of profound importance and of limited usefulness. Although in “Memorial Verses” Arnold refers only to virtues in Wordsworth, his general estimate follows Goethe’s: the classic is healthy, the romantic sickly. For if the elegy praises Wordsworth as the poet who can make us feel, “In Memory of the author of ‘Obermann’” allows doubts. In this poem, “Wordsworth’s eyes avert their ken / From half of human fate” (Poems, 132)—from half of human fate because of the very preoccupations that Arnold praises in the elegy. The dilemma seems to be that, while Wordsworth is the needed healing nurse, the comforter, the poet who lays us in the lap of nature, he is so at the expense of what we need equally much, the classical, the healthy-minded. And now that the greatest of English nature poets is dead, what are the possibilities for poetry? Where can it go?

In a letter to his sister Jane (Mrs. Forster), Arnold complained that Wordsworth represented a false direction in English poetry. “More and more I feel bent against the modern English habit (too much encouraged by Wordsworth) of using poetry as a channel for thinking aloud, instead of making anything.” The distinction is exactly the distinction he was to elaborate in the 1853 Preface: between the classically healthy and the romantically unhealthy, between action and meditation. When Arnold looked at the poetry of his contemporaries, he found it, as William Aytoun and Charles Kingsley found Arnold’s own poetry, to be self-indulgent.

As evidence of self-indulgence, Arnold might have listed Charles Mackay (remembered for his share of the “labor and poor” contributions to the Morning Chronicle, and in fact a shrewd and observant journalist), who wrote an apology for his Egeria; or the Spirit of Nature (1850) in the form of an introduction: “An Inquiry into the Alleged Anti-Poetical Trends of the Present Age.” While Arnold was complaining to Clough that the age was unpoetic, Mackay defended modern poetry, including of course his own, by asserting its moral utility and by invoking the Great Man theory of Carlyle. “Those who speak great truths from the fulness of heart . . . will never want listeners.” An instance of Mackay’s own verse illustrates why Arnold might despair: “Thou sittest moping o’er ideal griefs:/A moony idiot were not worse than thou.”
Mackay’s “Spirit of Nature” suggests again how widespread the appeal to nature was at mid-century, how universal its importance. Quite obviously Arnold is far more a nature poet than Mackay (or any dozen of his contemporaries), sensitive to natural forces, to details of flowers and mountains, to the qualities of place and season. He invokes nature as conspicuously as Mackay does, and he uses nature analogously as a norm of human behavior. But just as he rejects the Wordsworthian introversion, the poetic “thinking aloud,” so too he rejects the Wordsworthians’ semireligious faith in nature’s healing powers. The poems, however, are not quite so clear as the theory. What we see in Arnold’s poems is a rationalized but urgent sense of nature’s destructiveness conflicting with an inherited acceptance of nature as both a real and a symbolic (if unattainable) unity. Two of Arnold’s poems, “To Marguerite—Continued” and Empedocles on Etna, reflect his dominant metaphors of ocean and mountain and offer a way of seeing his early theory in terms of his poetic practice.  

Empedocles on Etna  
(Poems, 175)  

“To Marguerite—Continued”  
(Poems, 124)  

In the first stanza of “To Marguerite—Continued”—a poem deserving a better title—Arnold glosses on the italicized word alone. Life, he says to the woman he loves, is a sea which separates us, diminishes us (as “mortal millions”), and leaves us not only on but also as islands in the “watery wild.” All men are islands, but death tolls for each nonetheless. The sense of death comes from traditional associations of the sea with a
“watery” wasteland, but Arnold stretches his metaphor. The “echoing straits have been “thrown” between us, so that we merely “dot” the sea of life. “The islands feel the enclasping flow,” and know “their endless bounds.” Kenneth Allott thinks that “‘enclasping’ . . . suggests an embrace rather than imprisonment” (Poems, 124), but the context, in spite of the expression of love, implies a willed control, a physical paralysis that is an emblem for the isolated mind. And “bounds” suggests something like Blake’s manacles, with the difference that, for Blake, the manacles are “mind-forged.” Arnold, like Hardy after him, seems to imply both an arbitrary fate and a fate directed by a less than generous will.

The second stanza posits, in language reminiscent of Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” nature as deceiver. Then, led back in the third stanza from nightingales to perilous seas, Arnold distinguishes the longings for unity and wholeness which the metaphoric shores at once inspire and deny.

But when the moon their hollows lights,
And they are swept by balms of spring,
And in their glens, on starry nights,
The nightingales divinely sing;
And lovely notes, from shore to shore,
Across the sounds and channels pour—

Oh! then a longing like despair
Is to their farthest caverns sent;
For surely once, they feel, we were
Parts of a single continent!
Now round us spreads the watery plain—
Oh might our marges meet again!

(Poems, 124–25)

The ebb and flow of emotion, explicit in the metaphor of the sea, allows the vision of starry nights and divinely singing birds, yet, as in “Dover Beach,” the sweet night air (Keats’s “fairy midnight”) elicits the longing that it mocks. The nightingales divinely sing: they are of another order. If Arnold, like Keats, implies the temporary leap of poetry to bind island with island, he similarly recognizes that imagination brings to fuller consciousness the sense of incompleteness in our lives. At the heart of this poem—as of “Balder Dead” and “Sorhab and Rustum”—is a recognition of profound loss, and a loss which recalls vanished Edens (the “single continent” and “balms of spring”). Much that we attribute to post-World War I despondency is here: the spring which does not renew; the parts which are scattered by history and within the individual; the sea which reminds us of our separation.
Who ordered, that their longing's fire
Should be, as soon as kindled, cooled?
Who renders vain their deep desire?—
A God, a God their severance ruled!
And bade betwixt their shores to be
The unplumbed, salt, estranging sea.

(Poems, 125)

Arnold wrote Empedocles during the same years as the Marguerite poems (and the Obermann poems, “The Forsaken Merman,” “Resignation,” “Tristram and Iseult,” and “Memorial Verses”), in the years, that is, of his greatest poetic activity and his most profound discontent. He was only thirty when he wrote to Clough (in April 1852): “How life rushes away, and youth. One has dawdled and scrupled and fiddle-faddled—and it is all over.” Empedocles appeared in 1852, although Arnold had evidently finished it some time before. It represents in its renunciation, its despair, and the final suicide of its hero, all that Arnold felt about his lost youth and lost friendships, and all, ironically, that Arnold had come to distrust in his poetry. Already by 1853, when he prepared the preface to the Poems (most of which were culled from the two previous volumes), Arnold rejected Empedocles. By attacking the failure in his most substantial work, a work conspicuously missing from the volume, Arnold held up an ideal that had less to do with the poems that he included than with the drama he held back.

Why Arnold singled out Empedocles, which at least hinted at Greek tragedy and had for its hero a classical philosopher, we can only surmise. The poem certainly dealt with the “essentials” of the protagonist’s life, and the protagonist emerged from “a long distant mythic time,” stripped of “what was accidental and passing.” In terms of Arnold’s defense of Greek literature, his insistence on the importance of “the inner man,” of the “whole” poem instead of “separate thoughts and images,” of the “calm” and “clarity” associated with Greek tragedy (Poems, 591–92), Empedocles seems the one poem that approximated his ideals. But the problem with Empedocles is that, despite his final leap into the crater, the central character finds no significant action and therefore elicits no real “enjoyment.”

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.

(Poems, 592)

Although content to publish his unrelievedly sad lyrics in the 1853 collec­tion, Arnold seems consciously to dismiss his favorite work. More than this, his renunciation of *Empedocles* points to the larger renunciation of his poetic energies, which, like his youth, he felt somehow to be “over.”

Away the dreams that but deceive
And thou, sad guide, adieu!
I go, fate drives me; but I leave
Half of my life with you.

(Poems, 135)

The lines from “Obermann” illustrate Arnold’s sense of choice that is no choice, the necessary farewell to a world of imagination. His intuition, partly suspected by William Rossetti, did of course come true. When Browning persuaded Arnold to republish *Empedocles* in the 1867 Poems, it stood out as the central work among largely mid-century poems. And Arnold’s inclusion of *Empedocles* anticipated his later acceptance of his poems on their own terms. The poet who can say, in the 1853 Preface, that the ideal poets are those who “do not talk of their mission, nor of interpreting their age,” because “all this . . . is the mere delirium of vanity” (Poems, 605), can say in after years that his poems will live because they do reflect the times.

In *Empedocles* Arnold escaped the mere “externals” of the present, but he seems to have recognized immediately that his poem, despite its remoteness in setting and time, coincided with the spirit of his age. Although a number of critics (Arthur Clough among them) complained about the artificial classicism of *Empedocles*, the poem was precisely the type of poem they were calling for. The modern critic, says Arnold,

not only permits a false practice; he absolutely prescribes false aims. “A true allegory of the state of one’s own mind in a representative history,” the poet is told, “is perhaps the highest thing that one can attempt in the way of poetry.” And accordingly he attempts it. An allegory of the state of one’s own mind, the highest problem of an art which imitates actions! No assuredly, it is not, it never can be so: no great poetical work has ever been produced with such an aim. *Faust* itself . . . , judged as a whole, and judged strictly as a poetical work, is defective.

(Poems, 598-99)

In spite of his writing about an ancient philosopher in ancient times,
Arnold makes of Empedocles a Manfred or Faust. He may be able to define the nature of modern despair, but he is no more able than he regards either Byron or Goethe able to find for despair a correlative of action (except, perhaps, in suicide). He must write a dialogue of the mind with itself. In this sense, Arnold's classicism, like Yeats's masks, is a self-imposed alternative to his own and his epoch's subjective tendencies. His classicism is also an ideal he could not attain. What he could attain, he saw to represent either the poetic or the critical commonplaces of his age, and Arnold the young poet was no more generous about his age than Arnold the literary, social, and religious critic of the decades to come.

Arnold's impatience with these "damned times" and with his own almost mesmerized "consciousness of . . . difficulties" rarely led him, as a poet, to deal directly with the political or social events of his times; it did lead him to the religious and philosophical self-consciousness that Rossetti notices and to a consequent melancholy:

[Hither and thither spins
The wind-borne, mirroring soul,
A thousand glimpses wins,
And never sees a whole;

(Poems, 159)

These lines from Act I of Empedocles point to another aspect of the Zeitgeist. Whereas a poet like Wordsworth uses mountain sublimity to signify his imaginative power to unite, Arnold responds more to the gloom than the glory. Mountain wastes like the watery wastes of "To Marguerite—Continued" call attention to lonely struggles in a ruptured world. Still, Empedocles' slow ascent of Etna, from idyllic woods to blackened waste, is not just a paradigm for lives without significant action. His final vision or understanding, though it coincides with suicide, reflects the poet's own longings for emotional and aesthetic wholeness.

I have mentioned Carl Jung's insistence on the importance of inner events stripped of ephemera and looked upon with reverence. While Arnold spoke in comparable terms, he could have served as an example for Jung of a modern man unable to use his symbols and therefore distraught in his psyche. Significantly, what Jung begins to discuss in our century, Arnold's contemporaries were already addressing in theirs. A good example might be Charles Bland Radcliffe, who published Proteus, or Unity in Nature (in 1850). Radcliffe says that he expects little favor "in a materialistic age like the present. The zeitgeist is decidedly against me." There is no question that Radcliffe was in a minority in Crystal Palace England, but there is also no question that his concerns were widely shared—and by
more people than Arnold. Radcliffe uses Proteus, "an authentic symbol of nature," to suggest the breakdown of imaginative thought in his own age. We can no longer think mythically, according to Radcliffe, can no longer feel the "communion in all things." We insist on scientific accuracy and trivial detail; our fiction deals exclusively with unconnected things. What Radcliffe urges is an awakening of the heart and a lifting of "the veil under which the face of nature is hidden." Arnold seems close to Radcliffe. He points toward an "organic" unity by means of natural symbols, or what Radcliffe, in anticipation of Jung, calls "archetypal forms." Whereas Arnold turns to classical genres and to "a long-distant mythic time" to avoid "the hopeless tangle of our age," Radcliffe turns directly to classical myth. But Arnold's poetic practice, his appeal to the metaphorical sea of life, is a gesture like Radcliffe's toward a symbolic vision:

Oh, that I could glow like this mountain!
Oh, that my heart bounded with the swell of the sea!

(Poems, 188)

The sense of an elusive unity to which Empedocles here appeals provides in Arnold's poems a corollary longing for quiet, for stasis, for "calm," a word that recurs throughout the poems. Arnold's conception of tragedy, though it emphasizes action "to affect what is permanent in the human soul," probably led, as Rossetti suggested, to poems that fail in passion. Milton's "Calm of mind, all passion spent" comes close to Arnold's ideal for tragedy, but we rarely see the passion in his poems. He tells Clough that "the Indians distinguish between meditation or absorption and—knowledge," and leaves no doubt that his friend is too much the Western intellectual. If this is the choice within his own poems, however, then action can hardly belong. Empedocles' final meditation on the mountain is explicit rejection of the world below, the world of potential action, while the process of his awareness moves from useless knowledge to lonely absorption.

When Arnold says of modern literature that "the calm, the cheerfulness, the disinterested objectivity have disappeared," he acknowledges his own values—values that seem appropriate in his later public criticism. In the poems, calm suggests the state of mind that might result if "littleness united" were not invincible, if the speakers in the poems could realize the missing unity in their lives. Empedocles' tragedy at least points in the theoretical direction that Arnold advocates in the preface. Empedocles closes with this stanza:

The day in his hotness,
The strife with the palm;
The night in her silence,
The stars in their calm.

(Poems, 194)

Calm for Arnold, as for Tennyson, whether in Empedocles or the elegiac lyrics of the same years, seems to be “if any calm, a calm despair.”

Ah! calm me, restore me;
And dry up my tears
On thy high mountain-platforms,
Where morn first appears. . . .

(Poems, 120)

In “Quiet Work,” probably written in 1848, Arnold says: “One lesson, Nature, let me learn of thee. . . .”

Of toil unsevered from tranquillity!
Of labour, that in lasting fruit outgrows
Far noisier schemes, accomplished in repose,
Too great for haste, too high for rivalry!

(Poems, 106)

Arnold’s poetry is a search for calm or “absorption” or “tranquility” more than for a new classicism, if only because the dialogue of the mind with itself seems to preclude physical action. To put this another way, the self-consciousness of the speakers is analogous to their elegiac quality, and what they speak about, what they regret, seems always to be past. And though nature for Arnold, as for Charles Radcliffe, offers a potential alternative to the dull “grating roar” of contemporary life, its unity is less an ideal to be attained than a condition somehow lost.

3 ARTHUR CLOUGH

So I desisted, and have only poured forth a little to Clough, we too agreeing like two lambs in a world of wolves. I think you would have liked to see the correspondence.—Arnold to his sister Jane in 1848

Dear Matt

Why the d—l I shd write to you he only knows who implanted the spirit of disinterested attention in the heart of the spaniel—Clough to Arnold in 1849
That “unplumbed, salt, estranging sea,” as haunting to Arthur Clough as to Tennyson and Arnold, points to the breakdown of friendship between Arnold and Clough. Nearly the same age (Clough was born in 1819, Arnold in 1822), raised almost as brothers at Rugby and at the Arnolds’ home in the Lake District, the two young men benefited from the rigorous training and the intellectual pursuits of Thomas Arnold, a father in a sense to both. They had in common a love of classical literature, of historical theory, of Goethe, and of the two institutions, Rugby and Oxford. They certainly shared a dedication to poetry, thinking of themselves as poets and thinking of poetry in the highest terms. They may, indeed, have shared a love for Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*.

Arnold’s lifelong dissatisfaction with contemporary English literature extended to Tennyson but not apparently to *In Memoriam*. Kathleen Tillotson has called attention to Arthur Butler’s fictionalized autobiography, *Three Friends* (1900), which includes a conversation between Arnold and Clough in 1850 (at Rugby). The report seems at once too hyperbolic to be accurate and, still, perhaps, too plausible to be ignored. Clough says:

“A new book of poems, Mat. . . . just out. It marks an era.”

“Yours,” said Arnold inquiringly, “yours, beloved?”

“No! Something far higher! Something for the highest heaven! It is one of the immortals.” And he handed him . . . a little brown volume, from which Arnold read eagerly. “In Memoriam A. H. H. No author! Who is A. H. H.?”

“They say it is Arthur Hallam,” replied the other, “and the author shines out in every line. It must be Tennyson. Read No. 56.”

Appropriately, Clough has picked out the one section from *In Memoriam* that has seemed to many readers expressive of Tennyson’s deepest anguish—an anguish that parallels Clough’s own in “Easter Day, Naples 1849.” If we assume Butler’s account to be accurate, moreover, it was about “Nature red in tooth and claw” and “life as futile, then, as frail” so that Arnold exclaimed: “Beautiful! Luminous! A new metre! A masterpiece! It must be Alfred.” Beautiful and luminous the poem may be, but surely it represents Tennyson all too close in Arnold’s terms to the spirit of the times? In section 56, Tennyson speaks directly to issues raised by Sir Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology*: 
"So careful of the type?" but no.
From scarped cliff and quarried stone
She [nature] cries, "A thousand types are gone:
I care for nothing, all shall go."

O life as futile, then, as frail!
O for thy voice to soothe and bless!
What hope of answer, or redress?
Behind the veil, behind the veil.

If Arnold and Clough did respond favorably to Tennyson's lament for his lost friend, they might perhaps have seen its application to their own breaking friendship. They rarely could agree about literature, and, by 1850, they agreed about little else. Arnold's letters show a friendship deteriorated to the point of continual misunderstandings and renewed apologies. While we may know that friendships die, that people are separated and contrive to separate themselves, still the slow estrangement between Arnold and Clough seems particularly sad, as though Arnold willed the two apart, cutting off his friend for obscure reasons. "Thyrsis," the elegy for Clough, could in a sense have been written by the time the two friends read In Memoriam.

We have almost no correspondence from Clough to Arnold, but the letter quoted above (from June 1849) seems to express Clough's bewildered response to his friend: "Dear Matt/ Why the d--l I shd write to you he only knows who implanted the spirit of disinterested attention in the heart of the spaniel--" Arnold's own letters are a mixture of reluctant affection (with terms of endearment similar to those recorded by Butler) and something that resembles cruelty. At one time he implies that Clough's letters are themselves unkind: "I think you are sometimes—with regard to me especially—a little cross and wilful." Clough does elsewhere acknowledge his inability to "compliment," though to other friends his letters are usually full of affection.

Arnold's letters treat Clough almost as his later prose treats antagonists like Francis Newman and Frederic Harrison. After telling Clough that "many persons with far lower gifts than yours yet seem to find their natural mode of expression in poetry," he says: "I often think that even a slight gift of poetical expression which in a common person might have developed itself easily and naturally, is overlaid and crushed in a profound thinker." Arnold's frank and occasionally ruthless analyses of Clough's work seem to imply that what Arnold mistrusted in his own poems he hated in
Clough's. He is disturbed by Clough's preoccupation with the times, with the *Zeitgeist*. Clough ruins his art because of an inadequate sense of beauty, but his sense of beauty has been diminished by his cerebral activities. A poem like *The Bothie* is at once too topical and too intellectual. Moreover, Clough appears to think of his own emotions not only as important in themselves but as something to urge. "You succeed best," Arnold writes in 1849, "in the hymn, where man, his deepest personal feelings being in play, finds poetical expression as *man* only, not as artist—but consider whether you attain the *beautiful*, and whether your product gives PLEASURE, not excites curiosity or reflection." At a time, then, when both men were committing themselves to poetry—and writing at their most productive—Arnold tells Clough that he is no poet.

Although we have none of Clough's immediate responses to Arnold's poems, we do have his comments on the poetry of other people as well as his 1853 review of Arnold's *Strayed Reveller* and *Empedocles*. To William Allingham, who had just published his first volume of poems (in 1850), Clough writes what might have been a rebuttal of Arnold's positions. "Somehow," he says, "I fancy that a large experience and a decisiveness of character is [sic] necessary to attract the modern world to poetry." Allingham should forget his "short things" and "follow Chaucer and facts." The letter suggests, perhaps, one of Clough's reasons for quitting Oxford: he may have sought a wider experience for his own poetry; it also points to Clough's respect for the Byronic inheritance that Arnold was already beginning to deplore.

In his discussion of Arnold's poems for the *North American Review* (written in America), Clough offered what must have seemed a crowning insult, although Arnold said that he was not offended. Clough compares his friend's work with that of Alexander Smith; while he praises Smith for his albeit "imperfect" "Life Drama," he complains about Arnold's "more than poetic dubiousness" in poems that offer a plaintive rejection of modern life in favor of a rarefied "self-culture." Tacitly, Clough follows the criticism of Kingsley, who invoked the memory of Thomas Arnold; and Clough's criticism may show the lasting influence of Thomas Arnold on his assumptions. Clough admits that Smith's poems are imperfect; but he distrusts Arnold's poems for their scholarly privacy while he seems to paraphrase Arnold himself. "There is a disposition [in "the present age"] to press too far the finer and subtler intellectual and moral susceptibilities; to insist upon following out, as they say, to their logical consequences, the notices of some single organ of the spiritual nature." Hence—and with Arnold and Smith in mind—we need poetry that lies "between the ex-
tremes of ascetic and timid self-culture, and of unquestioning, unhesitating confidence."  

Clough's conception of an ideal poetry leads him, like Tennyson, to think of the vigor and the popularity of fiction. Poetry has something to learn, not from the scholar's archives, but from Thackeray and Dickens. "There is no question," he says,

that people much prefer Vanity Fair and Bleak House [to poetry]. Why so? Is it simply because we have grown prudent and prosaic, and should not welcome, as our fathers did, the Marmions and the Rokebys, the Childe Harolds, and the Corsairs? Or is it, that to be widely popular, to gain the ear of the multitudes, to shake the hearts of men, poetry should deal more than at present it usually does, with general wants, ordinary feelings, the obvious rather than the rare facts of human nature?

Because of his self-culture, Arnold has cut himself off from the power of poetry: he too, presumably, should "follow Chaucer and facts."

Behind Clough's remarks may lie a certain animus, the result of years of odd treatment from his friend. On the other hand, Clough obviously differed with Arnold about the nature and the uses of poetry, and his allusion to Thackeray and Dickens helps to clarify both his sense of Arnold's poems and his ambitions for his own. Trained classicist and scholar though he was, Clough wanted for poetry something more than the role of cultural caretaker. He shared with Arnold a love of drama, as Dipsychus shows, and Dipsychus is a far more vigorous work than Arnold's classical Merope. But Clough also felt with Browning and William Rossetti that poetry must catch the energy of the age and "shake the hearts of men." If we recognize the academic pastoralism in both "The Scholar Gipsy" and The Bothie, and if we see some sort of parallel between Arnold's Empedocles (written 1849-52) and Amours de Voyage or "Easter Day" or Dipsychus, the two years before 1850 sent the two poets in different and irreconcilable ways. Although closer than they thought in what they were actually writing, they saw themselves as poles apart in what they wanted or what they chose to advocate.

Forgive me all this: but I am always prepared myself to give up the attempt, on conviction: and so, I know, are you: and I only urge you to reflect whether you are advancing. Reflect too, . . . how deeply unpoeitical the age and all one's surroundings are. Not unprofound, not ungrand, not unmoving:—but unpoeitical.—Arnold, in an 1849 letter to Clough.
I have mentioned in chapter II George Lewes's contemptuous response to those who complained that the age was "unpoetic": Lewes calls them inadequate poets who cannot win for themselves a wide audience and who therefore blame the times rather than their own talents. William Rossetti approaches the question in a different way. His predilection for poets who, in Arnold's terms, "excite curiosity or reflection," is evident in his review of Clough's *The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich* ("a somewhat singular title, to say the least"). "The sentence," he says, "of those who do not read is the best criticism of those who will not think." Although Rossetti later castigates "those who do not read," in his defense of Clough as well as in his defense of Browning, he feels that great poetry attains the beautiful precisely because it can stimulate the mind. As the son of a Dante scholar and a student of Dante himself, Rossetti remembers the powerful mind informing *The Divine Comedy*.

But while Rossetti criticizes the pettiness of his own age and scoffs at shoddy writers along with lazy readers, he thinks of his age in a vigorously optimistic way. "At no other time," he says, "has there been a greater or grander body of genius, or so honorable a display of well-cultivated taste and talent." For Rossetti and the other Pre-Raphaelites—apparent idolators of things medieval and of values at odds with those of their contemporaries—the mid-nineteenth century was in fact a time of promise and achievement. It was only unpoetical to the extent that tired aesthetics dominated contemporary taste.

Rossetti later dismissed his review of Clough, calling it "somewhat ponderous." But if the writer of this and the other three reviews for *The Germ* was still young, unpracticed, and given to quoting pages of text, he shows a genuine understanding of Clough's poems. Against the views of Arnold, which he could not have known, he praises the "peculiar modernness" of Clough, his "recognition of every-day fact," and his "willingness to believe it as capable of poetry as that which, but for having once been fact, would not now be tradition." As a Pre-Raphaelite, Rossetti welcomed the specificity in Clough's poems, just as he praised it in Dante and Wordsworth, and he associated fact with "truth to Nature," the Pre-Raphaelite call-to-arms.

Rossetti's admiration for Clough anticipates his response to Browning. He understands the great poets of his time as achieving a kind of "completeness," by which he means a full "elaboration" of "character and incident" and a wide range of stylistic innovation. We might expect from the Pre-Raphaelites special allegiance to Tennyson or to Patmore, who was friend to both Tennyson and the Brotherhood. But William Rossetti's own long poem of the time, *Mrs. Holmes Grey*, is a "realistic" narrative
about a woman who abandons herself to an uninterested lover and dies, with the story recounted by a double first-person (story within a story) and by newspaper accounts. Rossetti was attempting what he admired in Browning and Clough.

In Rossetti’s eyes, Clough achieves a kind of inclusive art akin to Browning’s, by which the completeness of the novel is grafted on an accommodating poetic form. Clough’s experiment, like some of Browning, reflects a new sense of poetry that is seen at once as narrative, dramatic, even epistolary, as well as lyric. Clough’s “fearless and unembarrassed” poetry presumably—though Rossetti does not make the point—contrasts with Arnold’s which is reserved in vocabulary and wholly introspective in mood. Clough’s modernity is not, as Arnold would have it, a rejection of beauty, but rather a courageous approach to beauty through “everyday fact.”

My dear Mr. Clough

I have been reading the Bothy all the morning and am charmed with it. I have never been there but I think it must be like Scotland—Scotland hexametrically laid out that is . . . and it seems to me to give one the proper Idyllic feeling which is ½ sensual and ½ spiritual I take it. . . . Your description of the sky and the landscape—and that figure of the young fellow bathing shapely with shining limbs and the blue sky for background—are delightful to me. . . . I have been going over some of the same ground (of youth) in this present number of Pendennis; which I fear will be considered rather warm by the puritans: but I think you’ll understand it—that is if you care for such trivialities, or take the trouble to look under the stream of the story.—Thackeray in November 1848

Between 1848, when he published *The Bothie*, and 1850, when he wrote most of *Dipsychus*, Clough had undergone the major crisis of his life. His hero, Philip Hewson, in *The Bothie*, finds a beautiful young woman during his long vacation in the Scottish Highlands, marries her, and sets off with a few tools for a pastoral life in Australia. Clough himself flirted with the idea of Australia, but from a self-imposed necessity, and without the mitigation of a lovely wife. Unable any longer to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the church, he resigned his Oxford tutorship and fellowship in 1848, searched for a time for new employment, and finally—with the help of young Walter Bagehot—found a post at University Hall, a nonsectarian institution associated with the University
of London. He was soon to lose even this post, and it was some years before he secured his final employment with the Education Office.

Giving up the Oxford posts would have been for most academicians next to impossible. Clough not only cut his relationship with the center of academic studies, he also lost friends, social status, and a very comfortable income. And he made his decision in the face of advice from his superiors, who urged him to think longer, to be patient. Clough’s resignation had several consequences. He was, for example, no longer able to marry, and the fact that he was thirty and unmarried troubled him. His new penury gave temporary relief to his religious conscience, though the reasons for his resignation meant that old supporters would now no longer recommend him, but the scruples that led to his resignation soon returned. The line “Christ is not risen!” from “Easter Day, Naples” recurs in Dipsychus, and from doubts about Anglican dogma, Clough seems to have moved on to doubts about the existence of God at all. The lines

The good are weak, the wicked strong;
And O my God, how long, how long?
Dong, there is no God; dong!41

may not reflect a confirmed atheism, but in their odd cacophany and in the repetition of “Dong, there is no God,” Clough expresses a profound sense of religious alienation.

The term alienation is appropriate. I have mentioned Asa Briggs’s statement that mid-century intellectuals were neither “rootless nor rebellious,” but rather “stable and assured,” because they had “enough property to buy leisure and independence.”42 A number of writers might come to mind to contradict Briggs’s estimate, but Clough seems particularly apposite. In Evelyn Greenberger’s words:

Economic alternatives for the man without capital were few. In a world without an open civil service, large corporations, nonsectarian education, modern sophisticated communications media, or almost any of the other economic apparatus by which our own largely unreligious intelligentsia now supports itself, a man with Clough’s record was nearly unemployable. . . . Almost no one could support himself and a family on literary work: a “literary man” was almost inevitably one with a private income or a rich wife. A man who left his profession to make a career of literary hack work might find himself barely able to survive even as a scribe, like David Masson’s acquaintance, John Christie.43

While Ms. Greenberger herself forgets to mention that many writers managed well as men-of-letters, making handsome incomes, or moving, like the author of Vanity Fair, in the social circles of their choice, she is right about Arthur Clough. He was not a fluent writer, and he would never
be a glib one. Writing purely for money would have been as difficult for him as holding a fellowship purely for money. And though it was possible for him to find a civil service position, Clough could not—like John Stuart Mill, Thomas Love Peacock, William Allingham, Anthony Trollope, or even Matthew Arnold—quietly divorce his work from his life. This, more than the wholesale lack of opportunity, probably accounts for his sense of alienation.

Clough was a complex man, for whom private struggles would remain private, except to a few friends and, when he did finally marry, to his wife Blanche. The man who mocked the public commandments of his age also subscribed to a sense of duty—witness his service to his wife's friend Florence Nightingale in years to come—and lived by an almost stoical code. But it is not unfair to Clough to think of "Easter Day I" as an expression of deep and unanswered religious misgivings and of Dipsychus as an ironical and witty but nonetheless disillusioned utterance about modern life as well as about Clough's own shattered career. For Clough, as for Francis Newman, whose The Soul he reviewed in 1850 (see the following chapter), religious doubts serve as means to self-awareness, becoming tenor and vehicle in what Clough calls "communing" "with my secret self."

From the good humor and happy conclusion of The Bothie through the unfulfilled loves of Amours de Voyage and the skepticism of "Easter Day" and "Epi-Strauss-ion" to the personal confrontations of Dipsychus lies a long and difficult emotional journey. The Bothie was written in England while Clough still held his Oxford post; Amours de Voyage, "Easter Day," and Dipsychus were all written in Italy (like Browning's Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day) and set there too. Amours describes in loose epistolary verse the tentative and un consummated relationship of Claude (Clough?) and Mary Trevellyn, English travelers, who not only do not sail happily for Australia and a new life, they never even come together to confess their reluctant love. Mary writes to her friend Miss Roper at the poem's conclusion:

You have heard nothing; of course, I know you can have heard nothing. Ah, well, more than once I have broken my purpose, and sometimes, Only too often, have looked for the little lake-steamer to bring him. But it is only fancy,—I do not really expect it. Oh, and you see I know so exactly how he would take it: Finding the chances prevail against the meeting again, he would banish Forthwith every thought of the poor little possible hope, which I myself could not help, perhaps, thinking only too much of;
He would resign himself, and go. I see it exactly.
So I also submit, although in a different manner.
Can you not really come? We go very shortly to England.

(Poems, 133)

In its account of Claude’s Weltschmerz and in its arbitrary division into cantos, Amours recalls Childe Harold, which Clough invokes for self-parody in Dipsychus; in its emphasis on diminished hope and on the possibility of nothing, in its acquiescent and partly self-understanding characters, who calmly dissect their own lives, Amours anticipates the muted and brittle conversational worlds of T. S. Eliot’s later plays. The word submit, though Clough may understand it in various ways, carries with it a double sense of accepting the world as we find it and accepting a religious burden—a burden all the heavier for being so incompatible with the everyday world. This, as I take it, is at the heart of Dipsychus, a work in which Clough barely allows a story and altogether dispenses with epistolary forms. A story may imply an ordered life; letters, even to distant friends, imply a compassionate listener. In Dipsychus “I with my secret self held communing of my own.” The result is one of the most powerful mid-century poems and—in spite of its lack of narrative context—one of the most available to modern readers. Clough’s “communing” is an experiment with various interior voices, each of which toys with fragments of truth. The poem is at once a witty dialogue with the self and what might be called a dramatic elegy.

iv

What is it to be a poet? It is to have one’s personal life, one’s actuality, in categories entirely different from the poetical productions, that is, to relate one’s self to the ideal only in imagination, so that one’s own personal way of living is more or less satire upon the poetical or upon one’s self.—Søren Kierkegaard, in January 1849

Arnold complained to Clough that his poems succeeded best as hymns, because Clough, overwhelmingly sincere and unable to leave religious problems unresolved, used his art for ulterior purposes. Arnold’s own concern with the Zeitgeist, which later manifested itself in his exploratory assessments of nineteenth-century culture, may have been masked by classical settings or by self-imposed poetic limits, yet the man who bemoaned the unpoetic condition of his age is the man preoccupied with his age. As Rossetti noticed, moreover, the poetry of both Arnold and Clough
deals with fundamentally religious questions. In recent years, critics have deplored Clough’s reputation as “the poet of doubt,” and in the sense that such a tag reduces a poet or falsely limits him, its rejection is understandable. Rossetti is nevertheless right in seeing Clough and his contemporaries as chronically unable to leave religious topics alone.

The quotation from Kierkegaard’s journals about the nature of a poet helps, I think, to put Dipsychus in perspective. We are not inclined, perhaps, to think of Kierkegaard, precursor of existentialism, profound religious thinker, and Danish priest, in relation to an English poet like Clough. Yet Kierkegaard’s life (1813-1855) parallels Clough’s (1819-1861) in some interesting ways. Apart from the fact that both died at about the same age, that they wrote autobiographically, that they were private men who often chose not to publish what they had written, that they were hostile to their established churches and punished themselves by their actions toward those churches—apart from all this, they were preoccupied with their sense of themselves as poets, and as poets necessarily divided by the times. The problem of living in “a world of worldliness” with the possibility that “Christ has not risen” or that “God is dead” meant for both men “all the sufferings of inwardness” (the phrase is Kierkegaard’s). A poet for Clough as for Kierkegaard seems to be “an unhappy man who conceals deep torments in his heart, but whose lips are so formed that when a groan or shriek streams out over them it sounds like beautiful music.” Arnold thought this untrue of Clough, but, as Rossetti knew, Clough’s sense of music was simply different from Arnold’s; hence again his criticism of Arnold in the 1853 review, his feeling that Arnold’s quest for the beautiful involved self-indulgence.

And yet there recurs in Clough’s poems, just as in Arnold’s, a conflict between selves: between the self of imagination and the self of ordinary existence, “so that,” again in Kierkegaard’s words, “one’s personal way of living is more or less satire upon the poetical . . . self.” I can think of no better comment on Clough’s life at mid-century and Clough’s sense of his life as expressed in Dipsychus than the following passage from Kierkegaard:

Contemplating my personal life, am I a Christian . . . ? or is not this personal existence of mine a mere poet-existence, though with a trait of daimonia? The logical thing to do would be to venture on so prodigious a scale and bring upon myself such misfortune that I should then be in a situation to become really a Christian. But have I a right to do it dramatically, so that the Christianity of the whole land is involved in the game? Is there not something of desperation in all this . . . ? Perhaps, for perhaps it might turn out that I do not become a Christian.
Dipsychus records an extremity of intellectual and emotional strain, after the fact as it were of Clough's own prodigious "venture," and with a kind of desperation. The speaker picks up from "Easter Day" the line "Christ is not risen," and contemplates it after a year's delay. "Easter Day" and Amours may have reflected imaginary circumstances, but both are set in Italian cities and at a time of revolutionary activity—Amours parallels Clough's letters from abroad about Mazzini and the Italian patriots and the French attack on Rome (1849). Clough sets Dipsychus in Venice, the city that had long been a symbol for decadence. Like Thomas Mann's later Aschenbach in Death in Venice, Dipsychus is a northerner, reduced emotionally, and at some sort of crisis in his life. He is intoxicated by the city; he fights against a long suppressed sexuality; he is haunted by vague longings; he encounters his own "daimonia." And if the general time of the poem is vague, Clough's allusions are not. The "Spirit" says for example:

The Doge's palace though, from hence,
In spite of Ruskin's d--d pretence,
The tide now level with the quay,
Is certainly a thing to see.

(Poems, 244)

While Clough wrote Dipsychus, Ruskin, of course, was at work on Stones of Venice.

Clough's dialogue is with the Spirit, and the Spirit is an articulate and witty "Spirit of the Times," a voice who is himself the Zeitgeist. He is also the voices of sensuality, of skepticism, of self-satire. In terms of Dipsychus's aspirations, he is "der Geist der stets verneint," Goethe's negating spirit from Faust. Clough's Spirit anticipates those seedy middle-class Mephistos in Dostoyevski, Gide, and Mann, the disreputable tempters, close to the unacknowledged side of the somewhat dubious modern Faust. Dipsychus, according to Walter Houghton, should not be confused with the Spirit; the Spirit is a separate character with whom the divided spirit of Dipsychus speaks. While recognizing a parallel between Clough's character and Arnold's Empedocles, Houghton suggests that Dipsychus is simply an intellectual in disarray, another Claude, who confronts a separate being. For "apart from the verbal difficulty . . . requiring 'the two-natured' man to talk with his other nature, the text leaves no doubt, I think, that Clough meant Dipsychus himself to be two-psyched."51 Houghton cites the lines

To thine own self be true, the wise man says.
to argue that Dipsychus could hardly be untrue to the Spirit and must therefore refer to a polarity within himself.

It may be that Clough intended his divided hero to be speaking with a wholly separate character, and it may be, too, that in a poem he never entirely finished or polished, he left certain inconsistencies. But Dipsychus could, as a matter of fact, be untrue to what the Spirit represents in the sense that he would lack the courage to act, that he could not perform in the world of “actuality,” however sordid he might find it. Like Empedocles, he is a poet made aware finally of his own capacities. An indication that Dipsychus does speak with a dramatized version of himself can be seen in the way that the Spirit enters the poem. In Scene I, Dipsychus muses about the year past and quotes his own (Clough’s) “Christ is not risen.” The Spirit (as Kierkegaard’s “satire upon the poetical self”) quotes in turn, then says: “Oh indeed! /Wasn’t aware that was your creed.” Dipsychus takes no apparent notice, and the two voices speak across each other through the entire scene, with Dipsychus finally saying, “Ah, heaven, too true, at Venice/Christ is not risen either” (Poems, 220). In the next scene, Dipsychus says:

Poems, 222

The Spirit is an external agency to the extent that he is dramatized; and in conversation with him, Dipsychus will push and be pushed to extremities of opinion. Clough, however, insists on our seeing the intimate connection between the troubled poet and the mocking spirit:

Poems, 265

"Not interrupts" because somehow expected or anticipated. In the same passage he says:

I have scarce spoken yet to this strange follower
Whom I picked up—ye great gods, tell me where!
And yet he seems new come. I commune with myself.

(Poems, 275)
In fact, Clough seems purposely to hedge on the nature of his two psyches, since he wants the extraordinary state of Dipsychus's mind to remain enigmatic. In the humorous epilogue to the poem, in which Dipsychus (now Clough himself) tries to clarify the poem for his friendly but obtuse uncle, he says:

“You see, dear sir, the thing which it is attempted to represent is the conflict between the tender conscience and the world. Now, the over-tender conscience will, of course, exaggerate the wickedness of the world; and the Spirit in my poem may be merely the hypothesis or subjective imagination, formed—”

“Oh... for goodness' sake, my dear boy,” interrupted my uncle, “don’t go into the theory of it. If you’re wrong in it, it makes bad worse; if you’re right, you may be a critic, but you can’t be a poet. And then you know very well I don’t understand all those new words.”

(Poems, 292)

Dipsychus’s uncle may be intended for the baffled reader whom Clough anticipates for his poem, or he may be yet a further self, another voice of self-parody in a work that continually undercuts its speaker.

The Devil! we’ve had enough of you,
Quote us a little Wordsworth, do!

(Poems, 246)

The uncle’s lethargy and the Spirit’s impatience raise another (and here a final) point about Clough’s poem. Dipsychus does occasionally quote Wordsworth, or at least echo him. His apostrophe to the great Alps,
That wrapping round your head in solemn clouds
Seem sternly to sweep past our vanities...

(Poems, 223)

recalls, however, that Dipsychus wanders through Venice rather than the Alps and that he refers to physical nature in a largely symbolic way. In this poem as in The Bothie he is conscious of the archetypal Garden of Adam and Eve, an intellectualized garden, which, as the Spirit in another context says, “has a strong Strauss-smell about it.” Dipsychus is an intellectual with the knowledge of things but with a rationalizing mind that robs the life of things. For Dipsychus-Clough as for Empedocles-Arnold, nature itself will not suffice.

If nature serves as an intellectualized alternative instead of a “healer” in Dipsychus, then Clough shares with the Arnold of “Obermann” the
sense of Wordsworth as a somewhat ineffectual nurse. My question is whether, in that case, Goethe is Clough’s diagnostic physician? In the first drafts of Dipsyclus Clough referred to his speakers as Faustulus and Mephisto. His “Prologue,” a brief conversation between Dipsyclus and his uncle, who hopes the poem will be “in good plain verse,” is not set, quite obviously, in heaven. But it serves, like Goethe’s “Prologue” to poke fun at what follows. Goethe’s Mephistopheles consciously practices his conversational art with God, and he makes light of his interview: “Es ist gar hübsch von einem grossen Herrn/So menschlich mit dem Teufel selbst zu sprechen.” Clough altered the names Faustulus and Mephisto to Dipsyclus and the Spirit, no doubt to make his indebtedness to Goethe’s Faust less obvious. But whether or not Clough models his protagonist or his protagonist’s struggles on Faust, he certainly meant his reader to see affinities and to bear Faust in mind.

Just as Tennyson could assume his reader’s awareness of Dante, Clough could assume his reader’s awareness of Goethe. Mid-century reviews remind us of an 1850 translation of Eckermann’s Conversations, of a Henry Bohn edition of Goethe’s plays, and of several reissues of letters and other works. The page of George Lewes’s Leader (and Lewes was soon to publish his Life of Goethe) are full of references to Goethe. Lewes even calls Thackeray “a mocking Mephistopheles,” with a Goethe sitting at his elbow. Lewes was a student of Goethe, but his respect for Goethe, his sense of Goethe as the great spirit of the age, was not uncommon. Many of Lewes’s contemporaries had followed Teufelsdrock’s admonition to put away their Byron and to read their Goethe.

So Goethe was very much in the air. And he was in Clough’s mind as he wrote the third major poem of his own Italian journey. How far should we push the parallels? Evelyn Greenberger argues against comparison with Faust: “Those who see in Dipsyclus only another Faust have not looked deep enough. Indeed, the implicit criticism here of Faust’s willingness to learn at the expense of another human spirit is both clear and profoundly important.” While it may be true that Clough inverts the moral positions of Faust, so that his Mephisto becomes more sympathetic than the character he tempts, in fact neither the Spirit nor Dipsyclus is entirely wrong or right throughout the poem. Clough admires action, yet action, like self-denial, can never absolutely be linked with moral good. By presenting a psychological and moral vision of more complexity than Goethe’s, Clough approximates—as I have suggested—the rhetorical and moral antitheses of Kierkegaard, who is similarly concerned with the attractions and the effects of renunciation. To say this is not, however, to dismiss
parallels with *Faust*. It would make more sense to argue that Clough parodies Goethe, just as he parodies Byron and himself, to call attention to similarities as well as differences. Clough’s obscure woman is no Gretchen, but she is an object of lust, and lust in *Dipsychus* as in *Faust* is both a physical and an intellectual passion. Dipsychus lacks Faust’s energy; his “yearning sensibilities of soul” lend themselves to a terrible inertia; hence, perhaps, the contrast between Goethe’s dramatic structure and Clough’s sequence of scenes, each of which echoes and sometimes repeats the others. “Alas, how quietly / Out of our better into our worse selves . . .” *(Poems, 233)*—like the lines “Christ is not risen,” or “Dong, there is no God”—recurs. The sense is not of a rejuvenating memory as in Wordsworth, but of a haunting memory, and the Spirit reminds Dipsychus of his own troubling thoughts as well as of the world of action and success. Dipsychus does not so much have a soul to sell as a soul that he must partly lose.

The affinities with Faust nevertheless remain. Clough’s overly intellectual hero has come to a crisis. If he reminds us, with his passivity and his repetitions, of Eliot’s Prufrock—

> Ah, pretty thing—well, well—. Yet should I go?
> Alas, I cannot say. What should I do?

*(Poems, 224)*

he has the self-understanding, the physical appetite, and the need for some emotional or spiritual breakthrough of Faust.

Apart from Dipsychus himself, Clough leaves no doubt that the shapes of his dialogue look back to Goethe. The well-meaning uncle’s plea for “good plain verse” may be answered in a poem that is more complete and more colloquial than Rossetti found *The Bothie* to be. But in *Dipsychus* Clough experiments with a variety of forms from rolling blank verse to fragments from songs to epigrammatic couplets to rhyming monologues. Even more than Browning, Clough is testing the limits of poetic rhythms and experimenting with poetic vocabulary. From one point of view he is using dramatic monologue in a way that anticipates Pound and Eliot in the early years of the twentieth century; from another point of view he is developing the dramatic voices of the Romantics, just as Melville, in *Moby Dick*, was soon to do in prose. In either case, the process is an “escape from personality,” or—as Harriet Martineau described her own mid-century crisis—an escape from “the prison of the self” in an experimental poetic drama.55
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The correct theory is precisely an aspect of the conception of art as intuition or lyrical intuition. Inasmuch as every work of art expresses a state of mind, and inasmuch as a state of mind is individual and always new, intuition implies infinite intuitions, which it is impossible to fit into a set of pigeon holes for genres, unless the set itself is composed, too, of infinite pigeon holes, and, thus, no longer pigeon holes for genres, but for intuitions.—Benedetto Croce, Guide to Aesthetics

William Rossetti’s final review for The Germ addressed itself to the poet who seemed to the Pre-Raphaelites “the modern giant,” but who caused great difficulties for mid-Victorian readers. Most critics of Browning acknowledged his “genius” while deploiring his “grotesque” and “obscure” style. A typical critic was the Scottish author and physician David Moir, who presented a series of lectures to characterize the poetry of the first half century. Moir argues that Browning, however gifted, “has utterly mistaken singularity for originality.” Similarly Elizabeth Barrett Browning, despite “a high, peculiar, and speculative genius,” has become “more and more inverted and involved.” Whether Moir thinks that Robert influenced Elizabeth, or whether—as seems likely from his comments on Tennyson and others—he merely thinks both poets reflective of dangerous tendencies, he approves of neither.

Moir understands criticism to be a matter of historical assessment. Can Elizabeth Browning return to her strengths, leaving the “dark November day” for the sunshine of poetry to come? Will Tennyson ever fulfill his promise? How does Wordsworth stand now? His attempts to rank and to judge indicate that Moir shares with social and historical writers a desire to estimate his own age and a readiness to understand the age in terms of historical movement. He does not, as Taine was soon to do, explain the poetry by the character of the nation and by the times; but he sees a parallel. As a Scot, he is interested in the development of national literatures. And while, unlike some of the cruder Utilitarians, he assumes no necessary connection between social and literary “progress,” he does assume that the morbidity of his own era will be supplanted by health and light. I cite Moir because his desire to make historical distinctions is analogous to Browning’s own, in the essay on Shelley, and because, in his assumptions and his readiness to judge, he represents critical tendencies that the young Rossetti categorically rejects.
Rossetti's approach to literature is similarly historical, and he may relapse into clichés about earnestness and sincerity. He is, however, far more sophisticated. He assumes that, in the face of "genius," the critic's first responsibility is a sympathetic diffidence. "Of all poets, there is none more than Robert Browning, in approaching whom diffidence is necessary." The principle of diffidence defines "the critic's function," which is "to interpret rather than judge, to state facts, and to suggest considerations; not to lay down dogmas." 58 What is remarkable in the brief review of Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day—apart from the fact that Rossetti never speaks directly about the work at hand—is his accounting for Browning's "extravagance" and "grotesqueness" of style. Rossetti scoffs at the insularity of his countrymen, who "can't read Sordello." They fail to understand that "style is not stationary, or, in the concrete, matter of principle: style is, firstly, national; next chronological; and lastly individual." 59 Since poetic styles must change, the sort of criticisms made by Moir are senseless, for it is at once futile to advocate the mannerisms of earlier writers and irresponsible to attack poets whose stylistic manner is new. We might appreciate that, as a Pre-Raphaelite, Rossetti would be concerned with style, but it is testimony to his and to his colleagues' generosity that they could appreciate a poet as different from their own apparent ideals as Browning.

Rossetti acknowledges that singularity is no virtue in itself. He simply says it may be required. Browning is evidently unconventional; the question is whether his manner is appropriate for his conceptions, and Rossetti feels there can be little doubt.

To those who yet insist: "Why cannot I read Sordello?" we can only answer: —Admitted a leading idea, not only metaphysical but subtle and complicated to the highest degree; how work out this idea, unless through the finest intricacy of shades of mental development? . . . Admitted an intense aching consideration of thought; how be self-consistent, unless uttering words condensed to the limits of language?—And let us last say: Read Sordello again. Surely, if you do not understand him, the fact tells two ways. 60

Rossetti's defense of the poet, his desire "to explain and justify the state of feeling in which we enter on the consideration of a new poem by Robert Browning," is a strong apology for Browning's "difficulties." It comes close, moreover, to Browning's own feelings about his poetry. If the "leading ideas" in Browning are "the emanation(s) of the poet's most secret soul," then Rossetti has understood precisely what Browning himself came to see as the heart of his poetry. For a later (1863) edition of Sordello, Browning was to write to Milsand, the French writer, by way of preface.
Dear Friend,—Let the next poem be introduced by your name... I wrote it twenty-five years ago for only a few... My own faults of expression were many; but with care for a man or a book such would be surmounted, and without it what avails the faultlessness of either? I blame nobody, least of all myself, who did my best then and since... The historical decoration was purposely of no more importance than a background requires; and my stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul: little else is worth study. I, at least, always thought so—you, with many known and unknown to me, think so—others may one day think so; and whether my attempt remain for them or not, I trust, though away and past it, to continue ever yours, R. B.

Browning may well have forgotten, as Robert Langbaum suggests, “that the Romantic poets had thought so, that even Arnold, who disagreed, could hardly help but write poetry as though he too thought so, and that the enormous popularity of the ‘spasmodic’ poets gave evidence that by mid-century almost everyone thought so.” It is more likely that Browning was entirely aware of poetic tendencies in his age and of complementary poetic theories—as his own distinction between “objective” and “subjective” would indicate. But to say that expressive theories of art were pervasive at mid-century is not to say that they were accepted without reluctance (the antithesis of creative and reflective makes this clear) or that Browning himself was understood to be an expressive poet. The letter to Milsand—a public declaration—suggests that Browning wanted his contemporaries to see the representative qualities of his poetry (much as Arnold asserted the representative qualities of his poetry in later years), his use of dramatic forms toward lyric ends.

The rival energies of objective and subjective, dramatic and personal, bear on Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s relation to Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day and on the ways this odd but pivotal work continues to be read. When the poem was announced, a Leader reviewer (probably Lewes) said: “Browning’s new poem... excites peculiar expectations partly because it is his first publication since his marriage; and we may anticipate tracing the influence upon his impressionable mind of a remarkable woman; and partly because it is understood to be an elaborate defense of Christianity.” By and large, the poem has always been thought of in the terms suggested here: a reflection of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s influence and a defense (however awkward) of Christianity. What the reviewer evidently would not have known is that Elizabeth Browning had long tried to persuade Browning to write about religion (his “soul”) and also to write in his own voice.

Elizabeth urged Browning “to speak for himself, ‘out of that personality
which God made, & with the voice He turned into such power & sweetness of speech."  

Power seems accurate; sweetness implies a quality distinctly unlike Browning’s but close to her own talents. And a problem with Elizabeth Browning’s poems at this time (in Sonnets from the Portuguese) was that they spoke perhaps too much of personality and of private emotion. Robert Browning later referred to “the strange, heavy crown, that wreath of Sonnets.” “‘Heavy,’ perhaps,” as William Irvine and Park Honan write, “because they seemed too personal to be made public and yet were too good to be kept private. Of course the argument of merit prevailed. The sequence was included in the 1850 edition of Elizabeth’s poems.”

The intimacy of the poems, which yoked together love for Robert Browning with love of God, no doubt prompted David Moir to call Elizabeth Barrett the “reflex” of Alfred Tennyson, who also memorialized his love with a sequence of sonnet-like lyrics.

If Elizabeth urged Robert to write out of himself, she was at the time concerned about his not writing at all. Since their marriage (in 1846) he had written little. “What am I to say about Robert’s idleness and mine? I scold him about it in the most anti-conjugal manner.”

A few months after this report of scolding, Browning was hard at work on Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day. Whether that “remarkable woman” determined its subject or urged its manner, the poem reflects interests of both poets, and it comes as close as almost any of Browning’s works to unmediated poetic statement.

But did Browning, indeed could Browning, write directly “out of that personality which God made”? J. Hillis Miller argues that Browning “is a multivocal personality, and there is no way in which he can accede to Elizabeth Barrett’s repeated request that, having written so much dramatically, he should now speak in his own person.” In point of fact, “he cannot throw off the mask, for there is nothing behind it, or nothing but a face that is all faces at once.”

Professor Miller’s sense of Browning struggling with “the formlessness prior to all form,” with the “chaos” of life, each poem a temporary “crystallization leading to discovery of its inadequacy,” accounts well for the constant projections of “internal dialogue” in Browning and for the “breathless haste of his language.” Yet Miller himself seems to argue that Browning must write out of himself, and in ways, moreover, that Elizabeth Browning had specifically in mind. He speaks about Browning’s sympathetic relativism, his acceptance of “the great crowd of grotesques and idealists,” who manage to express “the consciousness of Browning himself.”

Elizabeth’s own terms are not too different:
But you . . . you have the superabundant mental life and individuality which admits of shifting a personality and speaking the truth still. That is the highest faculty, the strongest and rarest, which exercises itself in Art,—we are all agreed there is none so great faculty as the dramatic. Several times you have hinted to me that I made you careless for the drama, and it has puzzled me to fancy how it could be, when I understand myself so clearly both the difficulty and the glory of dramatic art. Yet I am conscious of wishing you to take the other crown besides—

The terribly high expectations for Browning’s art point to ambitions that Browning shared with contemporaries like Arnold and that he probably drew from Shelley. At a time when he had trouble writing, however, his own ambitions and the reminder and articulation of them by his wife must have been daunting. What Elizabeth wanted of Browning and what he expected of himself is an art beyond poetry as such, which nonetheless subsumes great poetic force. Browning’s long interest in the Swiss alchemist Paracelsus, about whom he had written an early work, characterizes his ambitions, for Paracelsus seeks more than the mere changing of base metals into gold. He represents for Browning “the transmutation of his own mortal clay into angelic brilliance.” The Promethean longing in Paracelsus could explain why Browning was to admire Arnold’s more or less contemporary Empædocles, since Empædocles for Arnold has as much of the alchemist about him as the Promethean figure.

Paracelsus may also remind us again of Carl Jung’s later infatuation with alchemy, which Jung equates with profound psychic processes. The transformation of mortal clay begins for Jung in self-understanding. He draws parallels between his own ideals and the alchemists’ codes of behavior, between the rigor of their intellectual and moral discipline, and the shape of his own professional life. His work, Jung said, is inseparable from his life, which necessitates a constant assessment of himself as “patient,” a constant investigation of psyche or soul. Such, I think, was the way Browning thought of his own poetic life, and how Elizabeth wanted him to feel. For Browning as for Jung, “Soul [is] the unsounded sea”; it is Arnold’s “unplumbed” sea, emblem of the buried life, and of Carlyle’s great “unconscious.” His preoccupation with the demands of the soul shows Browning, like his own Paracelsus, leaning toward alchemy, looking, in the twistings and windings of his language, to express the inexpressible, attempting some sort of self-transformation through and in spite of words.

What is left for us, save, in growth
Of soul, to rise up, far past both,
From the gift looking to the giver,
And from the cistern to the river,
And from the finite to infinity,
And from man’s dust to God’s divinity?

(Poems, 406)

To read *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* in a biographical context may have the sanction of Browning’s later letter to Milsand. Ironically, at the time when he seemed to be following his wife’s suggestion and attempting “the other crown,” he deplored the kind of biographical gossip associated with Shelley and implied that for his own type of poetry biography was superfluous. It may generally be for Browning; certainly he shared Jung’s impatience with biography, and asked people to read his work, perhaps thinking of himself as his work: “R. B. a poem.” Yet it does help to remember that *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* is Browning’s only published book between the last of *Bells and Pomegranates* (1846) and *Men and Women* (1855), that, like Arnold’s *Empedocles* and Clough’s *Dipsychus*, it coincides with a time of crisis in Browning’s life, and that it seems to bear some relation, not only to Elizabeth’s urging, but also to Arthur Clough’s example. The Brownings may have met Clough in Italy in 1849. They were definitely reading Clough’s “Easter Day” and “Epi-Straussian,” along with Arnold’s *Strayed Reveler*. Elizabeth praised Arnold and Clough, but she found neither “poetic.” And when *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* was finished, she evidently found it too intellectual. Thus, while she persuaded Browning to a poem like *Christmas-Eve*, she seemed to have reservations akin to Arnold’s about the result.

Arnold accused Clough of excelling at hymns. In a sense, his own “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse” or “Dover Beach” might be hymns, hymns without hope on the order of Clough’s “Easter Day.” So, too, Browning’s mid-century poem. Like Arnold and Clough, he is preoccupied with the spiritual climate of the age. By 1850 he probably knew David Friedrich Strauss’s *Life of Jesus* (as translated by George Eliot in the year the Brownings married), and he was concerned about the Catholic revival, which soon culminated in the restoration in England of the Catholic sees. As the later “Bishop Blougram’s Apology” illustrates, Browning kept an eye on the careers of Catholic leaders such as Wiseman (appointed cardinal in 1850), John Newman, and Henry Manning. *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* weighs the appeal of Rome and the speculations of a Strauss-like professor against the inherited principles of English dissent, Browning’s unlikely via media. But behind the external forms of religion and religious doubt lie Browning’s personal exploration, his “particular expression,” in Croce’s terms, “of a particular personality.”
As a page out of the history of a life, the poetic confession of a troubled soul, *Christmas-Eve* has a significance and a value peculiarly its own. . . . Since Butler, no English poet has exhibited the same daring propensity and facility in rhyming. If the verse is sometimes rugged it is but the better exponent of the thought Realism in Art has Truth as an aim, Ugliness as a pitfall.—George Lewes (?) in a *Leader* review

The *Leader* review of *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* raises further questions about Browning’s mid-century work and about its relation to the poems of Arnold and Clough. Lewes—if Lewes was the reviewer—uses the word *realism*, with a meaning he himself is credited with introducing into English, but uses it at this early time in a way he assumes will be understood, and applies it to poetry rather than to fiction. Like Rossetti, he recognizes the risk of *ugliness* in a work that seeks accuracy and completeness. Style, instead of a pretty ornament of the thought, is integral with the thought. “In the bold and artful mingling of the ludicrous with the intensely serious [Browning] reminds us of Carlyle. His style is swayed by the subject.” His choice of subject, his honest treatment of the subject, and his disregard for his reader’s expectations allow Browning a radically new version of modern literary directions: “the poetic confession of a troubled soul.”

The reviews by Lewes and Rossetti both make virtues out of perceived faults. Both are apologies for a work that has, from the outset, seemed to need apology. “It does not strike us,” wrote the *Spectator* reviewer, “that Mr. Browning has at all advanced himself by this new poem.” And for the *Athenaeum*: “Our complaint against Mr. Browning is—that while dealing with the highest themes of imagination . . . , he has recklessly impaired the dignity of his purpose.” Such an opinion of *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* has lingered ever since. If critics mention the work at all, it is to dismiss it as an aberration, or an interlude between better things, or as a work of “conscience” rather than imagination, interesting only in what it tells us about Browning’s ideas. Even a sympathetic reader like William Clyde De Vane can say that “in spite of many splendid passages . . . ,” Browning’s mid-century work “was not significant for its day, and is even less so for ours.”

*Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* has certainly avoided popularity. It sold only about two hundred copies when first published, and it is not now anthologized. But whether or not it is significant for our age, it proved significant for its own. Browning’s poem crept into people’s consciousness
because—apart from its artistic innovation—it seemed to express so much. A contemporary reviewer for the *English Review* recognized in the poem not only a difficult theme that required a difficult treatment but an achievement that paralleled Tennyson’s. Like *In Memoriam*, it was destined to live. We can see how it did live by thinking of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, in which Hardy, while echoing Arnold on “the ache of modernism,” quotes a few lines from *Easter-Day*:

> you indeed opine  
> That the Eternal and Divine  
> Did, eighteen centuries ago,  
> In very truth...  

(*Poems, 411)*

For Hardy as for many nineteenth-century readers, Browning’s poem characterized the dilemmas of men and women for whom Christian faith had become most questionable when it seemed most needed. It summed up a generation of writers whose poems—as William Rossetti pointed out—unavoidably expressed their religious beliefs. Yet Browning was both representative and defiant. Unlike poets such as Philip Bailey, who published *The Angel World* in 1850—a vague and formless lyric version of Milton’s account of heaven—Browning offered no glib assurances. Contemporary reviewers saw an appropriate parallel between Browning’s poem and Butler’s *Sir Hudibras* (a poem frequently mentioned at the time, though apparently at odds with the practice of most poets), and Browning’s language certainly suggests Donne’s, with its crabbed syntax and exclamatory rhetoric.

Despite the qualities that offended Browning’s contemporaries, what we see in, say, Tennyson’s poem of tentative and hard-fought affirmation, or in Clough’s arguments with the Spirit, or in Arnold’s laments about “the sea of faith” is manifest in Browning’s twin poems about the difficulties facing a believer:

> How hard it is to really be  
> A Christian, and in vacancy  
> I pour this story!  

(*Poems, 412)*

Is the vacancy a world no longer invested by spirit, or is it a world in which the speaker cannot be heard? At any rate, *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* is a kind of diary, or confession, an assessment of the poet as well as of his faith.

Browning’s religious background in English dissent, which Elizabeth
Barrett Browning delighted to find paralleling her own background, becomes the point of departure and involves the tentative resolution in *Christmas-Day*, which begins in a dissenting chapel and returns, after a series of dream visions, back to the chapel. Readers of the poem have often objected to two of the visions, one of Saint Peter’s in Rome, the other of a lecture by a “higher critic” in Göttingen, as illustrating Browning at his least sympathetic, and indeed at his most thoughtless in depicting other men’s beliefs. His vision of “papist” Rome may reflect a common English prejudice of the time, but the speaker says:

I see the error; but above
The scope of error, see the love—

(*Poems*, 402)

He seems more impatient with the “exhausted air-bell of the Critic,” who seeks to find a Christ among historic fragments, myth and meaning having vanished in his sad, “over freighted” academic mind. But here, too, the speaker feels a “sympathetic spasm,” and he makes his judgment by leaving the lecture hall, just as (in a dream) he has left the dissenting chapel. The point is that the fetid, hostile chapel, with its ranting preacher, seems hardly better than the “raree-show of Peter’s successor, /Or the laboratory of the Professor!” (*Poems*, 408). The choice is evidently made with reluctance and with uncertainty, none of the options really sufficing, and all coming in for satire. *Christmas-Eve* anticipates in its unsatisfactory resolution the opening lines of *Easter-Day*—

How very hard it is to be
A Christian! Hard for you and me,—

(*Poems*, 409)

which recur like Clough’s “Christ is not risen” as a refrain.

The scrutiny of the different ceremonies and the contrast they make with the vision of Christ—

All at once I looked up with terror.
He was there—

(*Poems*, 401)

point to the obvious conclusion that Browning is “tracking his way through doubts and fears” rather than establishing the rights of a particular sect or of the higher criticism. The poem is confessional and should remind us of the essentially inward, individual, and self-conscious nature of Christianity itself, and of the self-probings of Christian apologists, such as Augustine, Dante, or Bunyan. The evangelical move-
ments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with their Puritan source and puritanical fervor, dwelled on the inner light, which we associate with the Gospels ("Let your light so shine. . .") and with the metaphoric patterns in poets as diverse as Wordsworth and Shelley. At a time when many men and women found it "hard to be a Christian," the self-exploration implicit in Romantic literature was likely to coincide with specific assessments of faith and doubt.

Then is the imperative call for the appearance of another sort of poet, who shall at once replace this rumination of food swallowed long ago, by a supply of the fresh and living swathe; getting at new substance by breaking up the assumed wholes into parts of independent and unclassed value, careless of the unknown laws for recombing them. . . .—Browning, "An Essay on Percy Bysshe Shelley" 81

In his essay on Shelley (published in 1852), Browning attempted to refine the contemporary distinctions between creative and reflective, classical and romantic, or what he himself accepted as subjective and objective poets. Browning's oppositions, like Tennyson's and Arnold's, involve the recognition of differences between the generations of Wordsworth and Shelley and the writers of mid-century, and Browning implicitly agrees with Arnold about the subjective quality of early nineteenth-century poetry while sharing some of Arnold's ambivalence. If by this time he thought of Wordsworth as the lost leader, he could praise Shelley as the poet of "the self-sufficing central light." "The objective poet . . . chooses to deal with the doings of men, . . . while the subjective poet, whose study has been himself, appealing through himself to the absolute Divine mind, prefers to dwell upon those external scenic appearances which strike out most abundantly and uninterruptedly his inner light and power, selects the silence of the earth and sea in which he can best hear the beating of his individual heart." 82 Browning appears to categorize Shelley as a subjective poet and to elevate the subjective over the objective; but he attributes to Shelley the self-sufficient qualities of the objective poet and assumes the complementary values of both poetic categories.

Where, then, would Browning place Browning? Apparently he thinks of himself as an objective poet, a necessary voice for the new times, who stands apart from the romantic-subjective hangers-on from a previous generation. 83 But the essay may, with regards Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day,
allow another reading. Browning wrote it as introduction to Edward Moxon’s publication of spurious Shelley letters, the year after Christmas-Eve. If we imagine, along with the praise for Shelley, a specific defense of his recent poem as well as a general defense of “objective” monologues, we can see Browning pointing to his own peculiar mixture of personal and impersonal, objective and subjective, in an experimental poem that had not found wide acceptance. Praise of Shelley’s diversity reflects on his own. And a poem full of solitary visions and religious questioning is also a poem about Browning as subjective poet “appealing through himself to the Divine mind.”

The first part of the poem, Christmas-Eve, is a narrative, in certain ways a Shelleyan narrative, in which an Alastor figure pursues his own interior visions while finding correspondences for them in fully realized physical settings. True, the description of the chapel sounds more like the satirical Shelley than the Shelley of Epipsychidion, but the multicolored rainbow suggests Shelley of the inner light:

suddenly
The rain and wind ceased, and the sky
Received at once the full fruition
Of the moon’s consummate apparition.
The black cloud-barricade was riven,
Ruined beneath her feet, and driven
Deep in the West...  
(Poems, 400)

The account of a lonely and lost wanderer meeting with representative manifestations of his thinking recalls Alastor, but it suggests also Arnold and Clough and their sense of man alone. “Alone! I am left alone once more.”

The second part, Easter-Day, also comes close to Arnold and Clough; it is a dialogue of the mind with itself. But as a break with the personal narrative of Christmas-Eve, Easter-Day reads like the dramatic lyrics that Browning was already making famous. At least two speakers converse in the crabbed, at times “obscure,” way that Lewes and Rossetti argued to be necessary. Browning seems, on the other hand, to force the realization that his voices in Easter-Day are close to the voice in Christmas-Eve, since one of the speakers in the second part refers to “our friend,” the narrator of the first part. The voices themselves in Easter-Day are not distinguishable in the way of the voices of Dramatic Lyrics or Men and Women. The distinctive feature of Browning’s usual monologues is a lonely speaker, pushed by some interior monomania to an ironic confession of unacknowl-
edged guilt. *Easter-Day* anticipates the fuller characters of *The Ring and the Book*, without setting the speakers apart or separating them from one another. Though at first the speeches are contrasted, one with, one without quotation marks, the confusion of voices seems as intended as it is real.

Did you say this, or I?—Oh, you!  
Then, what, my friend?—(thus I pursue our parley). . .

*(Poems, 411)*

The implication is that one mind might have made any of the comments, since the debate—as in Clough’s *Dipsychus*—is not between eccentrics, but between similar people, even between the two sides, or among the several sides, of another divided but sympathetic consciousness.

When George Lewes described Browning’s achievements in *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*, he called the poem “a page out of the history of a life.” He meant, perhaps, something akin to what Browning meant in the dedicatory letter to Mil Sand and what Benedetto Croce, in a general statement about the nature of poetry, had in mind when he was to speak of art as the particular expression of a particular personality, of dramatized “intuition.” One assumption behind such remarks is the essentially expressive (Croce speaks of the lyric) nature of poetry, which for Browning as for Tennyson and Wordsworth is at the same time epistemological. *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* is about knowing rather than about knowledge, and about knowing in terms of renewed perceptions. “The world,” as Browning says, “is not to be learned and thrown aside, but reverted to and relearned.”

To think of Browning’s entire career, from *Pauline* through the dramas, the “dramatic lyrics” and monologues, to *The Ring and the Book*, may tempt us to put aside *Christmas-Eve* as an exceptional “page out of the history of a life.” And rarely is Browning so openly confessional or so directly concerned with “how it strikes a contemporary.” Yet, even when he sets his poems in a remote past, Browning’s historic interest lies precisely in the shifting moods and feelings of his subjects. “England’s most distinguished historicist” speculates about past and present worlds with the sympathetic imagination of a man who has abandoned absolute judgments and who risks the apparent chaos of matter-of-fact.

Browning’s historicism is, then, related to both Rossetti’s hope for “completeness” and his recognition of “self-consciousness.” Completeness in a poet meant using a poetic vehicle with the potential effect of fiction,
risking a breach of ordinary decorum in poem that fuses public and private, that filters diverse experience through personal consciousness. *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* is in these terms both a useful clue to Browning's art and a representative work that reaches beyond its apparent genre. To recall Richard Church's description of Dante, Browning's "epos of the soul" is "reckless of all ordinary proprieties and canons of feeling" because Browning aims at a comprehensive art. I shall return to questions of historicism and self-consciousness in the following chapters. Here I want only to emphasize that Browning's interests, like Clough's, imply some of the same experiments in mid-century poetry that we can see in the fiction of the time.