The Age of Eclecticism
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It might seem perverse to make Matthew Arnold, that high priest of the highest of culture, into a representative for a literary middle way; but that is precisely how Arnold saw himself. In an 1869 letter to his mother, Mary Arnold, he claims that his “poems represent the main movement of mind of the last quarter of a century” and that 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” (Selected Letters [hereafter SL] 217). I have tried to suggest that the “main movement of mind” in the nineteenth century was toward eclectic synthesis—of competing philosophies, histories, and literary and artistic styles; and that it is impossible to separate these developments from the coming to power of the middle classes or from the process of cultural globalization. The eclecticism apparent in so many aspects of nineteenth-century British culture is no less prominent in the work of the man who became its self-appointed critic and prophet. Indeed, Arnold goes on to explain to his mother that though he has “less poetical sentiment than Tennyson and less intellectual vigour and abundance than Browning,” he manages to combine the best characteristics of each, and to “[apply] that fusion to the main line of modern development” (SL 217). More profound even than the peculiar combination of sentiment and intellect that Arnold perceives as his poetic legacy is his “translation” of a variety of histories
and styles into a modern poetic idiom. Far from lacking “sympathy with the wants of the present generation” (as the Anglican cleric G. D. Boyle uncharitably suggested in an 1853 review [70]), Arnold directs his poetic and critical efforts toward overcoming the modern condition of being “between two worlds,” as he famously expressed it in “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse.” At one moment, this liminal figure is a foreigner, who, “Thinking of his own Gods, [. . . ] / In pity and mournful awe might stand / Before some fallen Runic stone—.” Ideas that once seemed as permanent as the stone on which they were etched have been abandoned: time spares no one. In another moment Arnold’s liminal narrator steps outside the time stream, refusing to cast off his mourning and join in the clamor of progress triumphant: “Fenced early in this cloistral round / Of reverie, of shade, of prayer, / How should we grow in other ground? / How can we flower in foreign air?” Few poems convey so vividly the sense of unending loss that runs all through Victorian literature, with its fatal, historical awareness. The present was necessarily derivative, a secondary creation; but did it have to be always a contraction of what came before? Was it always a falling away from the best that nature intended?

In one of his lesser-known poems, “The Second Best,” Arnold again characterizes the present as transitional, but holds out hope that he is moving toward the future’s enduring form. The eclectic principle he imbibes from Victor Cousin and other French thinkers creates a temporary order in the present moment, and opens a door into a world untroubled by doubt, diversity, or division. Although he might have seen himself as “second best,” after Tennyson and Browning, Arnold tries to blend “the best that has been thought and known in the world” into the in-between self, thereby mastering the rudderless eclecticism of modern life. Increasingly, however, the study of “excellent models” leads Arnold away from poetry. He resigns himself to the production of criticism, and to its secondary level of creation. Throughout the 1860s, in his second career as a literary critic, Arnold uses eclecticism as a tool for reforming middle-class taste. By the end of the decade, in Culture and Anarchy, Arnold’s criticism pivots on the contrast between two forms of eclecticism—the naïve, middle-class eclecticism of “doing as one likes” and the volitional eclecticism of finding the “best that has been thought and known.” On this pivot point turns the future of literature.

**Becoming Eclectic**

As a young man Arnold emulated French manners, read widely in French literature, and later counted the critic Sainte-Beuve (a disciple of Victor
Cousin) as one of the four men from whom he was “conscious of having learnt” (SL 233). Arnold commenced his career as a critic long after the star of Cousin had faded from view, but Cousin’s writings on eclecticism almost certainly influenced the evolution of Arnold’s critical principles, both directly and indirectly through his reading of other French writers. The earliest extant reading lists (1845–47) reveal the centrality of Cousin’s philosophical works in Arnold’s intellectual development.¹ In September 1845 Arnold recorded his reading of Cousin’s Introduction à l’histoire de la philosophie—the published version of the famous 1828 Sorbonne lectures that set out the theory of eclecticism. Later in the same year, he read Cousin’s Cours de l’histoire de la philosophie du xviiie siècle, which continued the 1828 lectures and illustrated the practice of eclecticism in the history of philosophy. During the next two years, Arnold seems to have relied on Cousin’s guidance in determining the direction of his further reading in philosophy. The eleventh lecture of the Introduction probably led Arnold to Vico, Herder (the Metakritik zur Kritik der reinen Vernunft appears on reading list IV), and Creuzer (the Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen of 1810–12 appears on the same 1846 list). Lecture VI of the Cours contains a long discussion of the Bhagavad Gita (that would directly influence Arnold’s 1848 poem “The World and the Quietist” with its concept of holy work) and praises Humboldt’s analysis of the sacred text (which appears on the third reading list as “Humboldt. uber die B. G.” and recurs on lists IV and V as well). Allott theorizes that Cousin’s mention of Glanvill in the twelfth lecture of the Cours probably encouraged Arnold to read The Vanity of Dogmatizing (a 1661 text that Arnold bought in 1844, “but did not read until he found [it] mentioned in Cousin” [260]).² The same lecture by Cousin inspired Arnold to include Cudworth’s The True Intellectual System of the Universe (1678) on the same reading list of December 1845. In reading the earlier dialogues of Plato during these years, Allott suspects that Arnold used Cousin’s translation, “for the sake of the ‘Arguments philosophiques’ prefixed to the dialogues” (261), a claim supported by the transcriptions we find in Arnold’s Note-books of Plato in the French of Cousin (150, 166). Finally, Cousin’s discussion of Plotinus (Lecture VIII of the Cours) might have led Arnold to read the Enneads (List IV). On the fifth reading list, Arnold includes one of Cousin’s critics, Abbé V. Gioberti; if he in fact read Gioberti, Arnold would have found a scathing attack on Cousin’s “panthéisme.” While Cousin’s name does not appear again on any of Arnold’s reading lists (not, I think, in consequence of his reading of Gioberti), many of those whom Cousin influenced do—Michelet, Sainte-Beuve, Stendhal, Guizot, Renan, and Jules Simon, among others. Also
recorded are the scores of philosophical and religious works to which Cousin had introduced him.  

Allott therefore logically characterizes Cousin as Arnold’s “mentor” during the 1840s (266), suggesting that Cousin’s eclecticism was useful in providing the young poet with “a lively guide to a comparatively mysterious field of knowledge” and with “a source of ideas which [could] be transferred to a literary or more popular context” (259–60). Like most modern critics, Allott dismisses Cousin as a “feeble” and unoriginal thinker, perhaps capable of stimulating a superior mind such as Arnold’s, but unlikely to leave any significant imprint on the age. In any event, it is impossible to disregard the eclecticism that is a leading feature of Arnold’s scholarship during the period in which he read Cousin, and that afterwards appears so prominently in his poetry and criticism. When Arnold met Cousin in 1859, however, he seems to have been more interested in the old philosopher’s role as education minister than in his forgotten fame as the promulgator of modern eclecticism, an omission that must qualify any claim of “influence.” Yet an admixture of this predisposition to a French style of thought and the pessimism Arnold felt about the progress of poetry led him to become, after Cousin, the most influential eclectic thinker of the nineteenth century. The fundamental truth that drives the eclectic ceaselessly through the wilderness of ideas, namely that no one system can lay claim to all parts of the truth, also drove Arnold 1) to resist the literary tendencies of his age and to theorize a new direction for poetry; 2) to compare critically the literatures of the world, past and present, and provide the tools with which the literature of the future might be written; and 3) to diagnose the intellectual confusion of the middle classes and to pursue eclecticism as its remedy.

Arnold concedes the necessity of eclecticism when he writes in the 1853 preface to Poems that, in the “confusion of the present times,” the young writer needs “a hand to guide him through the confusion” (48). In a striking statement of surrender to the spirit of the age, Arnold lays the foundation for the theory of eclecticism that will be most fully articulated in “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time”: “If we must be dilettanti: if it is impossible for us, under the circumstances amidst which we live, to think clearly, to feel nobly, and to delineate firmly: if we cannot attain to the mastery of the great artists;—let us, at least, have so much respect for our art as to prefer it to ourselves. Let us not bewilder our successors; let us transmit to them the practice of poetry, with its boundaries and wholesome regulative laws, under which excellent works may again, perhaps, at some future time, be produced, not yet fallen into oblivion through our neglect, not yet condemned and cancelled by the influence of their eternal
enemy, caprice” (Complete Prose Works I:15). The guiding “hand,” which Arnold has found and which he earnestly recommends to his fellow poets, is the small number of “excellent models” that exhibit the “boundaries and wholesome regulative laws” of the art. Even if the young poet cannot be original and produce what is excellent without the guiding hand, he can at least imitate the classics, and thus preserve the art of poetry so as to make possible the production of future great works. The preface exhibits a characteristically eclectic approach to artistic production by recognizing that artists of the nineteenth century “must be dilettanti”—they are, as Winckelmann would have said, Nachahmer. Living in an unpoetic age, they must “respect the art more” than themselves and, in a historical project strongly reminiscent of Cousin’s eclecticism, endeavor to “transmit the practice of poetry” to future generations.

The charge of dilettantism that Arnold levels against the artists of his generation derives from Goethe’s delineation of the two types of dilettantes who write poetry: the one “neglects the indispensable mechanical part, and thinks he has done enough if he shows spirituality and feeling; and [the other] seeks to arrive at poetry merely by mechanism, in which he can acquire an artisan’s readiness, and is without soul and matter” (I:15). In this judgment Arnold echoes both Kingsley’s diagnosis of “The Prevailing Epidemic” in modern poetry, namely that poets have forgotten their art and produce poems merely out of vanity, and Carlyle’s argument in “Signs of the Times” that the acute self-consciousness and “machine spirit” of the age have brought about the destruction of art. As Goethe argues in his brief 1799 essay, both kinds of dilettantism are harmful to art, so much so that it is better to “adhere to accepted models and imitate the good that exists rather than strive for originality” (216). In surrendering the goal of originality, Arnold repudiates the Romantics and sides with the unpopular eclectics and academicians whose faith in traditional institutions as arbiters of taste seemed counterintuitive in an age of democracy. For Goethe, however, obedience to standards and rules was necessary for dilettantes only, who, as “plagiarists,” “undermine and destroy all natural beauty in language and thought by mimicking and aping it in order to cover up their own vacuity” (216). Arnold, by contrast, does not regard imitation as shameful plagiarism or eclecticism as dull mimicry, preferring to work for the future rather than yielding to a moment of despair. Even in this earliest piece of critical writing, aimed ostensibly at the reform of poetry, Arnold attacks the intellectual confusion and aesthetic laisser-faire of the middle classes—the real sources of poetry’s decline. When he urges that we collect and preserve the rules of poetry, to protect them from “neglect” and “caprice,” Arnold sounds a lot like Macaulay (a writer for whom he had
little respect) in “Dryden” when Macaulay argues “that the creative faculty, and the critical faculty, cannot exist together in their highest perfection,” or in the review of poetaster Robert Montgomery when Macaulay sets out to give readers a lesson in what makes good poetry. Arnold shares with Macaulay and Carlyle a powerful sense of historical determinism informing his judgment that poetry cannot be great in an unpoetic age; unlike many of his contemporaries, however, Arnold believes that history itself will provide the subject matter that allows poetry to go forward.

As do so many of Arnold’s essays, the 1853 preface responds directly to various critics of his work, including his friend and fellow poet Arthur Hugh Clough. A review of new poetry—Arnold’s own and that of a Glasgow mechanic named Alexander Smith—had given Clough the opportunity to consider more broadly the proper subject of poetry in the nineteenth century. To explain Alexander Smith’s greater achievement, Clough employed a powerful architectural metaphor: “The novelist does try to build us a real house to be lived in; and this common builder, with no notion of the orders, is more to our purpose than the student of ancient art who proposes to lodge us under an Ionic portico. We are, unhappily, not gods, nor even marble statues. While the poets, like the architects, are—a good thing enough in its way—studying ancient art, comparing, thinking, theorizing, the common novelist tells a plain tale, often trivial enough, about this, that, and the other, and obtains one reading at any rate; is thrown away indeed tomorrow, but is devoured to-day” (145). Clough suggests that the more ancient arts of poetry and architecture are too pre-occupied with cataloguing their own histories to “tell a plain tale,” meaningful to an ordinary reader. According to Clough, Alexander Smith’s volume of poetry shares with contemporary novels this ability to “build us a real house to be lived in.” Though they are as disposable as modern architecture, modern novels provide immediate shelter, immediate relief, immediate lessons. It is no longer practical to lodge beneath an Ionic portico, and while it might form a fascinating entry in the history of architecture or an attractive setting for a cold hard statue, the ancient styles and ancient stories will not warm the heart of a living being. When he says that the common builder has “no notion of the orders,” or history, of his art, he intends to question whether Arnold’s “More refined, [. . .] and more highly educated sensibilities, [are] too delicate [. . .] for common service” (153). Like the eclectic architects, poets too concerned with the glories of past styles miss the opportunity to communicate and connect with modern subjects, and to create for their art a style appropriate to the age.  

In the preface Arnold answers charges of aesthetic refinement by pointing out the difference in poetic terms between simplicity and excessive
ornamentation. If poets follow the example of Shakespeare, Keats, or even Tennyson, then they run the risk of attending too much to “ingenuity of expression” and too little to the selection of an action. Following Goethe, Arnold asserts that what distinguishes a genuine artist from an amateur is the sense of *Architectonice*, “that power of execution, which creates, forms, and constitutes: not the profoundness of single thoughts, not the richness of imagery, not the abundance of illustration” (I:9). The problem is that these superficial features are “more easily seized than the spirit of the whole,” and young poets frequently write poems “for the sake of single lines and passages; not for the sake of producing any total impression” (I:9, I:7). Arnold recognizes the danger of the age’s haphazard eclecticism in these immature and untalented poets. The problem is not, as Clough would have it, an incorrect choice of subject, but the crude appropriation of the superficial points of style.

Although the distinction between design and ornamentation was architecturally and poetically significant, Clough had good reason to link his friend’s poetic efforts with those of contemporary architects. Nineteenth-century architecture was beset by a crisis of invention. The only good architecture of the period, William Morris would conclude in 1888, had been laboriously eclectic. Architects depended on past styles to give meaning to buildings raised for modern purposes, but the meanings thus conveyed were often wildly inappropriate. For critics such as Pugin and Ruskin, the incongruity between historical styles and their contemporary applications drew attention to the nineteenth century’s loss of faith in the principles that underlay the great architecture of the past. Similarly, Clough viewed Arnold’s eclectic subject matter as a melancholy ramble through the ruins of history, as the enervated effort of a scholar: “There is something certainly of an over-educated weakness of purpose in Western Europe [. . . ]. There is a disposition to press too far the finer and subtler intellectual and moral susceptibilities [. . . ]” (163). This tendency to criticize high Victorian culture for its “weakness of purpose” must be connected to the perception that it was eclectically “over-educated” and therefore incapable of satisfying the expressive needs of modern sensibilities. To respond to this modern dilemma, as Arnold does, with a poetics based on scholarship and imitation—in other words, with a more rigorous form of eclecticism—appeared to his critics to be a kind of artistic suicide. As long as art expressed little more than the greatness of the past, then it would be relegated, ever more quickly, to the margins of contemporary life.

At an emotional crossroads in the review of “Recent English Poetry,” Clough asks himself whether he can reconcile these “totally different,
repugnant, and hostile theories of life” (162)—or whether he needs to make a choice. He feels the dilemma of being equally “at home” in Smith’s “real house” and beneath Arnold’s Ionic portico. Clough recognizes the technical superiority of “A.’s” poems, but sees his mission in the review as “going forth to battle in the armor of a righteous purpose, [ . . . ] with Alexander Smith” (161). As an artist-imitator, Arnold represents “ascetic and timid self-culture,” the opposite of Alexander Smith’s “unquestioning, unhesitating confidence” (163). In a revealing moment, Clough admits that he has “been inclined to yield to a preference for the picture of simple, strong, and certain, rather than of subtle, shifting, and dubious feelings” (165)—exactly what so many of Arnold’s poems will not do. The moral restlessness of the poet gives no rest to the reader. A poetics of subtlety and doubt rarely produces the certainty that confident action requires. In his sympathetic reading of both poets, Clough understands the impulses that produced each, but he wants to choose the poems that help him to live in the present. Implicitly, Clough fears Arnold’s moral eclecticism. As if in danger of following Arnold into the abyss, Clough backs away from the better poet to grasp the hand of the stronger man.

The Eclectic Compromise in Arnold’s Poetry

The first volume of poetry, *The Strayed Reveller, and Other Poems* (1849), represents, as many critics have noted, Arnold’s effort “to reconcile two modes of poetry”: “Romantic introspection and a classical ideal of detached lucidity” (Machann 19–20). Canvassing Arnold’s sources, however, it is apparent that he was trying to attach meanings to his work much more varied than those belonging to Classic and Romantic. There is no doubt that the early poetry grew out of his eclectic reading. In addition to those sources gleaned from his reading of Cousin, Arnold found inspiration for “Mycerinus” in Herodotus, for “The New Sirens” in George Sand’s *Lélia* (1833), for “Written in Butler’s Sermons” in Joseph Butler’s *Fifteen Sermons* (1726), for “In Utrumque Paratus” in the *Enneads* of Plotinus and in Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, for “The Forsaken Merman” in the Danish folk ballad “Agnes and the Merman,” for “The Strayed Reveller” in Book X of the *Odyssey*, for “The Sick King in Bokhara” in Alexander Burnes’s *Travels in Bokhara* (1834), and for several others in Spinoza, Emerson, Cruikshank, Goethe, and Sophocles. Such a diverse array of textual sources is not unusual in Victorian poetic practice; what is distinctive about Arnold’s eclecticism is his effort toward synthesis, to detect in the multitudinous voices of history the consistent articulation of eternal verities.
Arnold desires an eclectic unity of expression within the “Time Stream” that necessitates stepping outside of it.

Many of the 1849 poems imagine circumstances under which an individual might transcend the limits of time. For example, “Mycerinus,” “Fragment of an ‘Antigone,’” and “The Sick King in Bokhara” represent actions that free the actor from transient concerns—“A goal which, gain’d, may give repose” (“Resignation: To Fausta”), while “Shakespeare,” “The Strayed Reveller,” “To My Friends,” and “The World and the Quietist” depict ways of seeing that get beyond the “narrow margin” put up by the “Mountains of Necessity” (“To a Republican Friend, Continued”). An oracle reveals to King Mycerinus that “when six years are measured,” he dies, but the young king turns night into day and lives instead for twelve, no more the “Slave [ . . . ] of a tyrannous necessity” (11. 18, 42). When she “dares / To self-selected good / Prefer obedience to the primal law, / Which consecrates the ties of blood” (11. 28–31), Antigone chooses the timeless bond of family over the briefer links we forge with strangers. When the young king tells his old vizier that he will bury a commoner in his own royal tomb, he does so in the full knowledge that fame and glory are fleeting, but that tending another man’s honor after death is within reach.

Even the great honour which I have,
When I am dead, will soon grow still.
So have I neither joy, nor fame.
But what I can do, that I will. (11. 217–20)

Against the vizier’s seeming wisdom—no man can take on the world’s sorrows—the king comes closer to Allah in his care for the least of these. While proper acting can bring repose, and peace, that “secret of life” (“Resignation”), peculiar seeing makes the poet:

_In the day’s life, whose iron round
Hems us all in, he is not bound.
He leaves his kind, o’erleaps their pen,
And flees the common life of men._

_Not deep the Poet sees, but wide._ (italics in original; “Resignation” 11. 209–14)

Shakespeare’s breadth of vision depends on his freedom from the Zeitgeist: he is “Self-schooled, self-scanned, self-honoured, self-secure” (1. 10) and “Didst walk on earth unguessed at” (1. 11). Though ordinary mortals
“ask and ask,” Shakespeare smiles and is “still / Out-topping knowledge” (11. 2–3). “All pains,” “All weakness,” and “all griefs” find their voice in Shakespeare. Possessing this comprehensive soul and relieved of the necessity of painful doubting, Shakespeare achieves immortality. In “The Strayed Reveller” Arnold presents a conflict between two poetic visions, that of the bards who are capable of seeing life in its totality, but must suffer with humanity; and that of the youth who watches life from Circe’s palace, outside the time stream, intoxicated by “the wild, thronging train, / The bright procession / Of eddying forms, / [that] Sweep through [his] soul!” (11. 294–97). The narrator of “To My Friends” battles his “master,” Time, with poetic remembrance:

Time’s current strong
Leaves us true to nothing long.
Yet, if little stays with man,
Ah! retain we all we can
If the clear impression dies,
Ah! the dim remembrance prize
Ere the parting hour go by,
Quick, thy tablets, Memory! (11. 57–64)

The poet of “mournful rhymes” in “The World and the Quietest” sees that “the world hath set its heart to live” (1. 11); but in its turning of “life’s mighty wheel” (1. 13), the world forgets time and death. In a surprising turn, Arnold makes remembrance of death the key to immortality. The laborer at the wheel hears “adverse voices” (1. 19), and comprehends his omnipotence, and knows that he is more than matter. Like the adverse voice of the servant to Darius the king, reminding him every evening of the power of Greece to defeat him, the poet speaks liberation.8

Many of Arnold’s readers did not want to hear the message of liberation that he tried to bring them, and too often the moral tendency of his poems was unclear. Indeed, Clough’s 1853 review is typical of the reception of the early poetry: the poet has squandered his talent in building up an effete intellectualism. Arnold himself occasionally expressed dissatisfaction with being the poet of ideas. In May 1853 he confessed to Clough, “I feel immensely—more and more clearly—what I want—what I have (I believe) lost and choked by my treatment of myself and the studies to which I have addicted myself” (SL 86). Kenneth Allott interprets “studies” here as the philosophical and related studies of the six early reading lists, pursuits inspired by his “mentor” Cousin (264). While these studies might or might not have harmed Arnold as a poet, Allott stresses that “the
motive for them is easily grasped” (264). The intellectual confusion of the age required Arnold to master disparate fields of knowledge—science, religion, philosophy, and literature—to attempt to synthesize them, and thus to find their direction and meaning, if he were to contribute anything. When Charles Kingsley asked, “To what purpose all the self-culture through which the author must have passed ere this volume [The Strayed Reveller] could be written” (Review 42), Arnold would have liked the answer to be more apparent: he wanted to make sense of tradition and the Zeitgeist.

Kingsley’s objection to Arnold’s early poetry formed part of the chorus of reviewers who maintained that poetry should speak to the needs of the age—or remain silent: “What does the age want with fragments of an Antigone? or with certain ‘New Sirens?’—little certainly with these last seeing that the purport of them is undiscoverable (as is, alas! a great deal more of the volume)” (43). Kingsley blames the incomprehensibility of modern poetry on the poets’ inward turn. They are fiddling, he says, while Rome is burning, and should instead be “taking [. . .] active part in God’s work” (45). In one of his more Carlylean moments, he warns Arnold that “If he chooses to trifle with the public by versifying dreamy, transcendental excuses for laziness, for the want of an earnest purpose and a fixed creed, let him know that the day is at hand when he that will not work neither shall he eat” (45). Implicit in Kingsley’s argument is the notion that poetry has “work” to do on behalf of the age. A peculiar kind of laborer, the poet observes from the margins of active life (and here one must think of Ford Madox Brown’s quintessential portrait of the mid-nineteenth century, Work), yet he participates in that life by representing it. If his poems “transcend” this essential reality, then they are not doing their proper work of making meaning. Opposing Arnold’s presumed “laziness” to the implied demand for real work, Kingsley hints that the poet refuses to touch real life for fear of contagion or out of intellectual snobbery. Furthermore, when Kingsley equates “earnest purpose” and “fixed creed,” he clearly believes that one cannot have the former without the latter. He perceives that Arnold is searching for meaning over the broadest possible field of knowledge, because his creed is not yet fixed; but to put into print the evidence of an eclectic process will only confuse his readers. Kingsley sees Arnold’s eclecticism as working against the age, rather than in harmony with it. In his very earnest novel Alton Locke (1850), Kingsley has Sandy Mackaye lecture the young tailor-poet, who is trying to write verses about a roving missionary who encounters naked island girls in the South Pacific: “What do ye ken anent the Pacific? Which is maist to your business?—the bare-backed hizzies that play the harlot o’ the other side o’ the world, or
these—these thousands o’ bare-backed hizzies that play the harlot o’ your ain side—made out o’ your ain flesh and blude? You a poet! True poetry, like true charity, my laddie, begins at hame” (88). Sandy’s object lesson continues with a visit to a group of impoverished seamstresses, who embody the notion of “classic tragedy [. . .], man conquered by circumstance” (89). After encountering these pathetic and noble souls, Alton is converted to the view that “Fact is grander” than fiction and chooses to write of that “dark, noisy, thunderous element, that London life” (94). More troubling for Kingsley than Arnold’s use of historical material in *The Strayed Reveller and Other Poems* is the poet’s apparent neglect of the most pressing social issues of the time. After all, Kingsley would go on to write historical novels, and he approved of Tennyson’s handling of contemporary issues within the historical framework of *The Princess* (1847); it would therefore be unreasonable to make him the spokesman for poetic presentism. But like many other writers, he felt that the orientation of modern literature toward the long ago and far away was often a symptom of its intellectual confusion and false principles. A poet who wanted to step outside the time stream might be trying to get a clearer picture of his historical moment; or, he might simply be trying to escape it.

Kingsley’s sense that the author of *The Strayed Reveller* wrote against the age, rather than with it or for it, is surely confirmed by many of Arnold’s statements about contemporary poetry. In a revealing letter to Clough written in November 1848, Arnold expresses his irritation with the favorable reception of his friend’s poem *The Bothie of Toper-na-Fousich*, which seems too ready to cater to popular taste: “I have been at Oxford the last two days and hearing Sellar and the rest of that clique who know neither life nor themselves rave about your poem gave me a strong almost bitter feeling with respect to them, the age, the poem, even you. Yes I said to myself something tells me I can, if need be, at last dispose with them all, even with him: better that, than be sucked for an hour even into the Time Stream in which they and he plunge and bellow. I became calm in spirit, but uncompromising, almost stern. More English than European, I said finally, more American than English: and took up Obermann, and refuged myself with him in his forest against your Zeit Geist” (SL 49). In a swiftly developed line of association from the *Bothie*, to the Oxford clique, to an English, and finally American, Zeitgeist, Arnold articulates two ideas that will be repeated often in his later criticism. First, the sentiments of popular taste are transient, so that poetry catering exclusively to the fashion of the moment is poetry that will be forgotten; and, second, Anglo-American culture suffers from the crippling narrowness of excessive attention to the present and to the individual. Like Arnold, Clough is
a classical scholar; but unlike Arnold, Clough allows himself to “be sucked [. . .] into the Time Stream” when he produces a poem of momentary, and not of eternal, interest. As we have seen, in the preface Arnold places himself in the curious position of defending an eclectic solution (hewing to superior models in writing poetry) in an eclectic age, but this position is carefully vetted in his letters to Clough of the late 1840s. Since modern writers such as “Keats Tennyson et id genus omne” only confuse writers of the “foot soldier” variety, he believes that those who cannot read the best examples (the Greeks) “sh[ou]ld read nothing but Milton & parts of Wordsworth” (SL 50). These writers have less in their works of a transient character, and more of “those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time” (I:4). He believes that he and Clough are living in “damned times” when “everything is against one—the height to which knowledge is come, the spread of luxury, our physical enervation, the absence of great natures, the unavoidable contact with millions of small ones, newspapers, cities, light profligate friends, moral desperadoes like Carlyle, our own selves, and the sickening consciousness of our difficulties” (SL 59). While he never argues that modern middle-class life is devoid of poetic interest, Arnold does imply here that the rise of democratic institutions has hindered the development of great natures and that the din of the popular press has diminished the power of great voices. How will the best emerge from the crowd? How will the work of genius be heard in the cacophony?

Throughout his poetry of the late 1840s and early 1850s, Arnold imagines characters who stand outside the mainstream, and yet still overlook society, finding there the quiet space in which an adverse voice might be heard. In Empedocles on Etna, Arnold makes the calmness of spirit that he invoked against Clough and the Zeitgeist into an enduring critical position—disinterestedness. Like Arnold’s hero, Obermann, Empedocles turns against the Zeitgeist, but in choosing exile he does not occlude the needs of society; on the contrary, he recognizes that the spirit of the age is for heedless progress, but he cannot ignore the suffering that progress brings with it. As most readers of Arnold are aware, the dramatic poem Empedocles on Etna holds an uneasy position in his poetic oeuvre. Expelled from his collection of Poems in 1853, it represented a crisis, famously characterized as the “dialogue of the mind with itself,” which, while true, even in its proper historical moment, could in no way “infuse delight” and thereby justify its literary existence. Setting aside Arnold’s mea culpa and the overwrought poetics that followed upon it, we have in Empedocles a particularly lucid expression of the difficulty of preserving the core self apart from the spirit.
Chapter 0: Matthew Arnold

of the age, neither following the crowd nor standing in futile opposition to it.

The frequent exhortation to “know thyself” found here and everywhere in Arnold’s poetry gains a deeper relevance when considered as an aspect of his eclecticism. When critics of the eclectic method point to the core problem of determining the principles of selection, they are really asking what makes any particular individual capable of rigorous eclecticism. As Arnold’s critical outlook becomes more overtly eclectic, he justifies his own capacity for selection in three ways: he gains a panoramic or comprehensive vision of human knowledge and affairs by imagining a viewpoint outside or above the time stream, he avoids partisan entanglements by canvassing the widest possible range of opinions, and he knows his own mind, as much as anyone can. But how does one get to know one’s mind without some standards external to oneself? Empedocles’ awareness of this dilemma is signaled early in the poem when he describes the human soul as a wind-tossed mirror, glancing fragments of some larger truth in its surface:

Hither and thither spins
The wind-borne, mirroring soul,
A thousand glimpses wins,
And never sees a whole;
Looks once, and drives elsewhere, and leaves its last
employ. (I,2:82–85)

Possessing never more than partial knowledge of the conditions of existence, most people rely on each other or on tradition, rather than seeking for the truth within—but “Man gets no other light, / Search he a thousand years” (I,2:144–45). Most people never find their best internal resources, Empedocles warns, because they too often mistake will for intelligence. He advises his medical friend Pausanias that this is the root cause of man’s mental unease: “’Tis that he makes this will / The measure of his rights, / And believes Nature outraged if his will’s gainsaid” (I,2:154–56). This tendency to make will the measurement for all good in life must be resisted, if we are to become capable of intelligent self-reflection. Once this error is uprooted, we come closer to accepting the limits of our existence—“Limits we did not set / Condition all we do; / Born into life we are, and life must be our mould” (I,2:184–86). Nature is the soil, and our ancestors the roots and stem from which we grow. As Empedocles says, we must keep time to tunes we did not make.
In the Stoic tradition that Arnold draws upon here, conformity to nature and the moderation of desire are the first steps to happiness and to knowing one’s own mind; but accepting limits does not make a human being an amoeba. We can have both immoderate “bliss” and vast knowledge. To back off from either goal makes us less than we could be. In particular, Empedocles despises the limits we place on our knowledge of nature—calling it a sin to investigate the workings of the universe, giving up in despair because certain answers seem out of reach, and concluding that they must be the province of the gods alone: “Fools! That in man’s brief term / He cannot all things view, / Affords no ground to affirm that there are gods who do; / Nor does being weary prove that he has where to rest” (I,2:347–51). This admonition against rest when there is work to do might seem to contradict the drift of Empedocles’ Stoicism, but it constitutes an important defense of eclecticism. Opponents might contend that an eclectic viewpoint is an artificial construct only, depending on an impossibly vast erudition; but Arnold repeatedly offers models of the “internal eye” (as Cousin termed it) that make eclecticism seem not only possible, but a moral responsibility. Eclecticism is the only method available to human beings for dealing with the burden of the past and the vastness of the universe. Knowledge is gained piecemeal and we must spend our lives piecing it together, not “looking once” and turning away.

Throughout the philosophical chant, Empedocles seems continually to iterate negative truths about human existence—we will never see things in their wholeness, we will never achieve the fulfillment of all our desires, and we will never find answers to all the questions we ask; in short, we have to remember that we are not gods, but instead something second best, human beings who can imagine a godlike perspective. Kenneth Allott notes the resemblance between these lines—

But still, as we proceed
The mass swells more and more
Of volumes yet to read,
Of secrets to explore.
Our hair grows grey, our eyes are dimmed, our heat is tamed; . . . (I,2:332–36)

—and lines found in Arnold’s early poem, “The Second Best.” While Act II of Empedocles lays out the philosophical principles that shape the harmonious and productive life, including those of eclecticism, the few lines quoted above hint at the pitfalls awaiting the ardent eclectic—the more books one reads, the further the horizon of contentment recedes from
view. “The Second Best” thus echoes many of the themes found in early-nineteenth-century writing about the “sea of knowledge” and the loss of intellectual authority that followed the rapid expansion of literacy in the period. The speaker is a scholar who, like Arnold, feels obligated to pursue an array of studies, even though he recognizes that he is strain ing and “overfeeding . . . his wit with reading” (11. 14–15). In the word “yet” that introduces these lines, however, the poet qualifies the experience: “yet, . . . No small profit that man earns” (11. 13, 16). He shapes his reading, rather than allowing himself to be consumed by it:

No small profit that man earns,

Who through all he meets can steer him,
Can reject what cannot clear him,
Cling to what can truly cheer him;
Who each day more surely learns

That an impulse, from the distance
Of his deepest, best existence,
To the words, ‘Hope, Light, Persistence,’
Strongly sets and truly burns. (11. 16–24)

Having no alternative but to confront the swelling “mass” of books, the scholar sets himself toward the best. Though he might not gain “his deepest, best existence,” reading eclectically gives him at least the “second best” life. Contact with the best minds gives him the principles that “steer him.” He reaps the profits of greater clarity, sharpening his capacity for judging and ordering knowledge. He learns to “cling to what can truly cheer him” and to discard what only diminishes life.

The muted hopefulness of “The Second Best” is found everywhere in Arnold’s writings, but it is a difficult mood to sustain, particularly when he or his characters feel that they are in conflict with the spirit of the age. From the heroism of a scholarly Prometheus, one easily descends into the excessive introspection and despair of Empedocles. In the dramatic form of Empedocles on Etna, Arnold creates not only a dialogue between Pausanias and Empedocles, with a counterpoint in Callicles’ songs, but also a dialogue within the mind of the philosopher-hero. While in the first act Empedocles counseled self-reliance, in the second act we see that inner strength “impaired” by “some secret and unfollowed vein of woe.” Unable to live with others or with himself any longer, Empedocles chooses self-destruction, and termination of the “dialogue of the mind with itself.” Most
In the art and literature of the nineteenth century, such nostalgia was pervasive, and a few writers felt that the feelings it engendered and the eclecticism it encouraged ought to be resisted. Elizabeth Barrett Browning acknowledges the force of Arnold's arguments in the poems and Preface of the 1850s by devoting much of the pivotal central section of *Aurora Leigh* (1856) to answering them.

\[\text{Ay, but every age} \]
\[\text{Appears to souls who live in't (ask Carlyle)} \]
\[\text{Most unheroic. Ours, for instance, ours:} \]
\[\text{The thinkers scout it, and the poets abound} \]
\[\text{Who scorn to touch it with a finger-tip:} \]
\[\text{A pewter age—mixed metal, silver-washed;} \]
\[\text{An age of scum, spooned off the richer past,} \]
\[\text{An age of patches for old gaberdines,} \]
\[\text{An age of mere transition, meaning nought} \]
Except that what succeeds must shame it quite
If God please. That’s wrong thinking, to my mind,
And wrong thoughts make poor poems. (Book V:154–65)

Like many of Arnold’s early reviewers, Browning is annoyed by Arnold’s apparent reluctance to “touch [the age] with a finger-tip”—for her it is a question of whether the poet should remain on the margins or dive into the mainstream of life. In order to overcome the confusion of the present times, Arnold believes that he must stand apart—only then can he separate what has meaning and endures from what is meaningless and transient. Browning, however, spends much of the novel-in-verse arguing that artists are not always, romantically, social outsiders, but are sometimes those who define the character of an age and shape the nation’s future. In the guise of her eponymous heroine, Browning also speculates on one of the most commonly vetted problems of the period, the perception (real or imagined) of the decline of art. She lends modern resonance to images of decline familiar since ancient times that have been continually invoked to describe the Victorians’ sense of their own historical position (“A pewter age—mixed metal, silver-washed”); she also utilizes more homely and ironically eclectic images to emphasize the poet’s plight: “An age of scum, spooned off the richer past, / An age of patches for old gaberdines.” It seemed to many, including Arnold, that the age was an unpropitious one for the production of great works of art. Eclecticism, which seemed to skim off the riches of the past, or to be passing off old clothes as new, would naturally come under fire as a symptom of enervation and decadence. Echoing Carlyle in *On Heroes and Hero-Worship*, Browning denies that the present age is without its heroes. In her view, “All actual heroes are essential men, / And all men possible heroes: every age, / Heroic in proportions, [ . . . ]” (V:151–53). Letting go of the notion that the nineteenth century is without heroes allows the poet to represent the “great actions” (as Arnold would say) and the “essential men” of her own time (precisely what Browning attempts in *Aurora Leigh*). In what reads like a direct response to Arnold’s 1853 Preface, she contends that regarding the age as one “of mere transition, meaning nought / Except that what succeeds might shame it quite” is “wrong thinking” that will not necessarily produce great poetry in the future. In claiming that a poet’s “sole work is to represent the age” (V:208), Browning nevertheless looks unflinchingly ahead. The poet’s concern about the future should be limited to this question: will the generations to come feel the beating heart of the nineteenth century if she does not produce a “living art, / Which thus presents and thus records true life” (V:221–22)? Browning shares with Arnold what E. D. H. Johnson calls a “double awareness”
Part II: Eclectic Victorians

typical of Victorian writing: they agree that poetry needs to speak to the needs of the present, even as it “transcend[s] topicality” (ix). While Arnold believes that representing the present in its specificity will make a poem unreadable in the future, Browning relies on readers of the future to feel sympathy, as the Victorians certainly did, with their past, a sympathy that will be possible only if they record “true life.”

As he would later write in a letter to his mother, Arnold believed that his poetry would evoke such sympathy, representing as it did “the main movement of mind in the nineteenth century.” Eclecticism did not produce an artificial culture with which it was impossible to have sympathy; on the contrary, it could represent a breadth of experience unmatched by an exclusive focus on the present moment. Arnold’s poetry ranged over an exceptionally diverse historical and geographical landscape, without seeking to exclude Britain or the nineteenth century, which turned up everywhere in his lyrical poems. What he resisted most emphatically, however, was the model of evolution that was always opposed to the model of synthesis. Antagonistic to the outlook of eclecticism, the theory of “incarnate history” (about which George Eliot wrote in her review “The Natural History of German Life”) had a fatalistic appeal un congenial to Arnold’s primary mode of thought. If a people’s historical development was written in their genes, so to speak, then they were freed from the responsibility of commanding it. A true eclectic such as Arnold could never surrender his influence over development, and resisted its often pseudoscientific rationalization.

Not surprisingly, Arnold’s ideas about history played a central role in the formation of his critical eclecticism. His belief in the possibility of freedom from the Zeitgeist runs directly counter to the positivists’ faith in the evolution of humankind through necessary stages (indeed, Auguste Comte may be one Frenchman from whom Arnold did not wish to learn). Arnold does not believe, however, with Clough, Kingsley, Barrett Browning, or The Spectator, that “‘the poet who would really fix the public attention must leave the exhausted past, and draw his subjects from matters of present import, and therefore both of interest and novelty’” (I:3). Under-scoring his opinion that relevant poetry need not have a “modern” subject, Arnold based many of the new 1853 poems on history, myth, and legend: “Sohrab and Rustum” derives from the Persian Shah Nameh of Firdousi (via Sainte-Beuve’s “Le Livre des Rois, par Firdousi” [1850] and Sir John Malcolm’s History of Persia [1815]); the source for “The Church of Brou” is Edgar Quinet’s essay “Des Arts de la Renaissance et de l’Église de Brou” (1839); “The Neckan” derives, as does its earlier companion piece, “The Forsaken Merman,” from Scandinavian folklore; “Philomela,” the story
of a woman who was raped and mutilated by her sister’s husband, the King of Thrace, has its origin in Greek mythology; and “Balder Dead” drew upon a contemporary translation of the Prose Edda of Snorri Snurlson and, like “Sohrab and Rustum,” was an imitation of classical epic having a mythological source. Even an apparently modern poem, “The Scholar-Gypsy,” derives from Glanvill’s seventeenth-century philosophical treatise and stays close to it in spirit. As in the Glanvill version, Arnold writes of a man who searches for a solution to living among society’s outcasts, and recasts the dominant theme of so many of his earlier poems:

O born in days when wits were fresh and clear,  
And life ran gaily as the sparkling Thames; 
Before this strange disease of modern life, 
With its sick hurry, its divided aims, 
Its heads o’ertaxed, its palsey hearts, was rife—(201–5)

For Arnold, of course, “modern life” refers to the nineteenth century, and its “strange disease,” an intellectual confusion for which the cure is exile. But already in The Vanity of Dogmatizing, Glanvill had recognized that “The Disease of our Intellectuals is too great, not to be its own Diagnostic: [. . . ]. The weakness of humane understanding, all will confess: yet the confidence of most in their own reasonings, practically disowns it: And ’tis easier to persuade them it [is] from other lapses then [sic] their own; so that while all complain of our Ignorance and Error, every one exempts himself” (62–63).10 By Arnold’s time this disease affected a much greater portion of society—virtually anyone who could read. Ruth apRoberts has argued that “Glanville’s [sic] whole book was important in shaping Arnold’s thought, and the Scholar-Gipsy himself becomes a symbol for the [. . . ] anti-dogmatic philosophy of the seeker” (145). As Arnold surely learned from Cousin, in every incarnation of eclectic philosophy the eclectic begins as a seeker, with a method; and Arnold manages to practice a form of eclecticism that never verges into system, by keeping himself detached from the time stream, like the scholar-gypsy.

Confused by Arnold’s declaration in favor of the Greek and Roman models, many contemporary reviewers of the 1853 volume ignored its stylistic range and varied subject matter, and the degree to which Arnold vividly bodied forth the complex, hybrid nineteenth century. However, the difficulty with becoming the eclectic scholar-gypsy was that Arnold could not really overcome, in this way, “the dialogue of the mind with itself.” Although Arnold was concerned with the suffering that “finds no vent in action,” his famous characterization of modern suffering finds
its counterpart in Cousin’s “internal eye,” the position from which he would judge what was true and what was false in the history of philosophical, educational, and political systems. While G. H. Lewes and others judged Cousin’s imagined detachment and objectivity as absurd, Cousin needed this objectivity to practice the history of philosophy as an eclectic, and to find truth wherever it existed. But in relying solely on the powers of his mind to juxtapose systems and discern the truth within each, Cousin ran the risk of being merely provincial. The erudition needed to put into practice either Cousin’s eclecticism or Arnold’s objective poetics was practically impossible for any one person. Cousin’s nonpsychological formulation for historical study sounds rather more plausible and probably influenced Arnold in the 1840s: “eclecticism must be the basis of the new history of philosophy because an infallible law requires that every philosophy, which in its turn becomes predominant, after having finished its theoretical development [sic], must look back towards former ages, must interrogate them in its own spirit, and terminate in an history of philosophy conformable to itself” (Introduction to the History of Philosophy 428). The best historicist writing of the nineteenth century always built a bridge from past subject to present need. Arnold’s efforts at translation in the 1849, 1852, and 1853 volumes (including Empedocles on Etna—the poem that Arnold later considered too modern, in the worst sense) were always directed toward interrogating the past in the spirit of the present, if not from the present of Kingsley, Clough, or Browning, then from his own unified self. Eventually, however, even this would not be enough for the poet who was increasingly becoming a critic, a role that afforded a much more secure position from which to observe the world and raise his “adverse voice.” In a letter to his sister Jane dated 6 September 1858, he confesses that to “submit voluntarily to the exhaustion of the best poetical productions” would entail giving up too much. It is unnatural, he writes, in the present unpoetical age, to attempt poetry at all; he cannot do it “without an overwhelming and in some degree morbid effort” (SL 111). Arnold finds the solution to living in the present age—and writing for it—somewhere between being a fanatic and being “chalf blown by the wind” (SL 59); he will be neither dogmatic nor excessively latitudinarian, but will instead be eclectic in relation to the Zeitgeist. The middle class will find itself capable of living only when it recognizes that it has the freedom to shape its destiny, and is willing to listen to the “adverse voice” of Arnold.
The critical exclusiveness of Arnold’s poetry—its scholarly quality, its expression of faith in the past, its detachment from the time stream—was meant to preserve his contemporaries from making bad choices by being aware of the choices they had to make. In that context eclecticism gave Arnold a way of coping with history and the problem of producing original art that would, at least obliquely, reflect the age. As a volitional eclectic, Arnold favored synthesis over development, seeking to live in synchronic rather than diachronic time—outside the time stream. In translating cultural material, Arnold created the potential for change. In promoting the ideal of Goethe, he eschewed nationalism and organic historicism: “Let us conceive of the whole group of civilised nations as being, for intellectual and spiritual purposes, one great confederation, bound to a joint action and working towards a common result; a confederation whose members have a due knowledge both of the past, out of which they all proceed, and of one another” (IX:38). When writing poetry in the styles of the past became too strenuous, Arnold decided to write for the future. In abandoning the writing of poetry for the writing of highly polemical criticism, he confirmed his membership in what we might term “the prophetic school” of literary criticism, where his controversial style would have a more profound and lasting effect. With the publication in 1865 of the Essays in Criticism, Arnold puts the eclectic principles worked out in his poetry into practice in his prose.

In his preface to the collection, Arnold begins by declaring his allegiance with his audience, “The English middle class, of which I am myself a feeble unit” (III:288), so that he might argue more effectively against their present way of doing things. He is especially worried that the English middle class seem content with the philosophy of Benthamism and do not perceive the slightest reason to question its ascendancy. Arnold implies that his work will do just the opposite; namely, he will cause his readers to question every received opinion and to rest in none of them: “To try and approach truth on one side after another, not to strive or cry, nor to persist in pressing forward, on any one side, with violence and self-will—it is only thus, it seems to me, that mortals may hope to gain any vision of the mysterious Goddess, whom we shall never see except in outline, but only thus even in outline. He who will do nothing but fight impetuously towards her on his own, one, favourite, particular line, is inevitably destined to run his head into the folds of the black robe in which she is wrapped” (III:286). Arnold brings eclecticism to do battle with middle-class complacency. As an eclectic, he has learned to approach the truth from many sides, and in his ideal of detachment, not to argue violently for any particular side. In his
style of argument Arnold will often seem to be ducking and weaving like a boxer—he wants to pummel the reader, but he throws his punches only to the place where his reader most resists. In ventriloquizing the philosophy of Empedocles, Arnold asserts that we must accept the fragmentary vision of eternal things, as if our souls were mirrors blown by the wind. To fight for one favorite view of the truth inevitably misses a hundred others equally persuasive at different moments. For Arnold the “epoch of transformation” is not finished, and never will be finished, because we mortals never grasp more than a limited or momentary glimpse of what is true. Arnold thus sets out the need for eclecticism as a critical method, and will put this method into practice in his own work. In three of these essays, “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” “The Literary Influence of Academies,” and “Heinrich Heine,” Arnold argues that criticism must have a key role in the present if literature is to have any future at all.

Arnold as Comparatist

If Arnold had only used the term “eclecticism,” his brilliant essay on “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” might have come down to us as the manifesto of eclectic criticism. In it he uses for the first time the phrase that would forever be associated with Arnold—“the best that is known and thought in the world” (III:283)—a clear expression of his eclecticism. The starting point of Arnold’s argument (a reminder of certain points from his controversial Homer lectures) probably did not endear him to his English readers: “almost the last thing for which one would come to English literature is just that very thing which now Europe most desires,—criticism” (III:258). The “power and value” of English literature thus “impaired,” Arnold makes a case for the development of critical principles in the most untheoretical of nations. Unlike the Germans and the French, whose critical efforts have all been directed toward seeing the “object as in itself it really is,” the English let their fondness for custom and a proud literary tradition obscure their judgment. Certainly, Arnold concedes, the critical faculty “is of lower rank than the creative”; but if we look unflinchingly at history it will be plain to see that “the production of great works of literature or art [ . . . ] is not at all epochs and under all conditions possible” (III:260). Arnold stays close to the tradition of eclectic thought when he argues that criticism constitutes a transitive effort, namely getting from one creative period to the next. However, he goes a step further toward acknowledging the permanent need for eclecticism when he suggests, “The grand work of literary genius is a work of synthesis
and exposition, not of analysis and discovery; its gift lies in the faculty of being happily inspired by a certain intellectual and spiritual atmosphere, by a certain order of ideas, when it finds itself in them; of dealing divinely with these ideas, presenting them in the most effective and attractive combinations,—making beautiful works with them, in short” (III:261). The artist, apparently, is always doing something “eclectic” with the materials of the age; he or she does not discover new ideas—Arnold believes that is the work of the philosopher—but only achieves new combinations. Since the English fail to see the object as in itself it really is, their artists do not have the materials necessary to produce effective combinations of ideas—in other words, great art. Criticism, however, has more control over the materials it synthesizes; it makes them usable by seeing “in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science” the object as in itself it really is. This tends at last, Arnold believes, “to make an intellectual situation of which the creative power can avail itself. It tends to establish an order of ideas, if not absolutely true, yet true by comparison with that which it displaces; to make the best ideas prevail” (III:261).

Arnold’s faith in the power of criticism to be creative, to create epochs in which the creative spirit is in ascendance, derives from his historical outlook. Some critics argue that Arnold accepts a cyclical model of history derived from Giambattista Vico’s The New Science (1744), while others claim that Carlyle and the German Romantic philosophers were stronger influences on the formation of Arnold’s historicism. As an eclectic who wanted to approach the truth from as many sides as possible, Arnold allowed himself to be influenced by a variety of sources; but as in so many arenas of his intellectual life, the profound and lasting influence came from France. Arnold and the French historian Ernest Renan (1823–92) were near contemporaries, but Renan’s influence on Arnold is easily traced to 112 entries in the Note-Books, references to Renan in twelve different essays or books, and the essay on Renan in Essays in Criticism, Third Series (Bachem 229). Like Arnold, Renan loses his faith as a young man and searches for “une philosophie vitale et compréhensive” that will let him “harmonize within himself the divergent skills and insights of scholar, critic, philosopher, and poet” and will let him “‘grasp the whole from every point of view’” (qtd. in Chadbourne 40). Richard Chadbourne concedes that to Victor Cousin, “Renan probably owes most of his terminology and ideas concerning synthesis” (41). From Cousin he borrows the notion of the three ages of humanity (which Cousin had distilled from various Enlightenment and Romantic sources): in the first stage of history, the “syncretic,” we exist in an instinctive and poetic union with the world outside ourselves; in the second age, the “analytical,” we separate
ourselves from nature; and in the third age, the “synthetic,” we achieve “true wisdom” when we integrate reason with religion (Chadbourne 42). If we were following Vico’s schema, then this third stage would actually represent the beginning of a decadence and collapse, wherein society returns to its origins to be reborn. For Renan the third age is not decadent, but eclectic; that is, it incorporates what was best in each of the other ages. Renan, influenced by Cousin, sees eclecticism as a historical inevitability, although it defies the model of organic development that he found so appealing in other respects. Cousin had written in the Introduction à l’histoire de la philosophie of the need to accept changes that had come since the Revolution: “the irresistible march of time will by degrees unite the minds and hearts of all in the intelligence and in the love of the constitution, which contains at once the throne and the country, monarchy and democracy, order and liberty, aristocracy and equality, all the elements of history, of thought, and of things” (439). With everything around it being so “mixed, complex, and mingled, is it possible that philosophy can avoid being eclectic” (440)? In his Studies of Religious History, Renan calls eclecticism the “obligatory method of our age,” suited to the present intellectual temperament of France and its desire for compromise. Although he is wary of traveling the road from eclecticism to relativism and nihilism, he believes that “it is impossible for an enlightened man to shut himself up in one [school] exclusively” (35). The points of contact between Arnold’s thought and Renan’s are clear, as is the significance of the early influence of Cousin. Both men were disposed to be eclectic and both believed that their eclectic criticism would shape the age to come.

Flavia Alaya has written that Arnold and Renan “both had been led, by way of their explorations of the roots of modern institutions, to the axiomatic truth that societies are not so much altered by the ideas of single men as by the impress of such ideas upon mass opinion” (555). Both would have to become “popularizers” if they were to prepare for the “direction of social transformation [ . . . ] in advance” (555). In “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” we see Arnold breathing the fire of ideas into the “epoch of expansion [that] seems to be opening” (Complete Prose Works III:269). This fire is fueled by criticism. In no other way can the epoch of concentration be exploded. The worship of tradition, the blind observance of customary forms, and the resistance to new ideas hold society in this concentrated phase. In opposing these alternating epochs Arnold accepts, as Renan did, an eclectic philosophy of history. By way of example, Arnold refers frequently to the Renaissance as “a great hybrid movement,” which was a fusion of the Hebraic and the Hellenic, of the Middle Ages and antiquity (Culler 143). Synthesis usually occurs after a period in
which there has been intense competition between ideas, and finds a way to bring the opposing sides into harmony. The expansion that Arnold has in mind for the nineteenth century is similar to that of the Renaissance, in that criticism will carry forward the best ideas and create the foundations on which the new age will be built. Criticism depends on the “free play of the mind,” obeying an instinct to know the best that has been thought and known in the world. Its only rule, Arnold proclaims, is its disinterestedness. Any prejudice, any “absorption” into politics would, like the casting of a vast net, restrict the free play of ideas. Arnold admits that England has its critics, but they are too involved in practice, are “too polemical and controversial,” to lead the masses toward perfection. Although Arnold might have difficulty avoiding controversy himself, he has no trouble following the last of his dictates: since “much of the best that has been thought and known in the world cannot be of English growth,” the English critic “must dwell much on foreign thought” (III:282–83)—and this is just what most English critics will not do. Criticism, he concludes, must regard Europe as being “one great confederation, bound to a joint action and working to a common result” (III:284). If the intellectual boundaries of England are expanded, creative activity will again become possible. However, expansion is not the only way to serve the future of literature; Arnold also imagines that centralization, in the form of an academy, can produce the criticism that the age so desperately needs.

Throughout this history of the idea of eclecticism, I have exhibited the resistance to academies and academicians as one symptom of the general resistance to eclecticism. Taking up this important question of the value of institutions in regulating taste and establishing standards for the arts, Arnold remains true to his eclectic principles. While “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” argues for the vital role of the critic in preparing the way for future literature, “The Literary Influence of Academies” asserts the need for an institution that will guide their activities. In this essay Arnold again looks to the example of France: he praises the work of the French Academy and decries the lack of any comparable institution in England. Taking his cue from Renan, Arnold contends that without a literary academy in England, “inferior” literature will eventually gain the upper hand. In chapter 3 we saw how anxiously writers such as Coleridge, Southey, and Mill watched the rise of the popular press and worried that the number of voices competing to be heard would overwhelm those of real value. For them this development represented the advent of a variety of eclecticism, random and indiscriminate in nature. Thomas Love Peacock realized that there were two types of eclecticism, the first the accident of a late and democratic period in history, and the second the result
of a disciplined process of selection and synthesis. For Arnold academies belong in this second category; at the same time, they are useful in overcoming the naïve eclecticism of the first category. This is because the academy has the capacity for “creating a form of intellectual culture which shall impose itself on all around” (Renan qtd. in Arnold III:235). However, it is this very imposition to which Englishmen most object. Arnold devotes much of the essay to denouncing the English complacency that hinders the establishment of an academy, which would regulates English taste and prevent Englishmen from always “going their own way.” It might at first seem paradoxical that Arnold opposes “going one’s own way” to “openness of mind,” a quality of which the English are in too short a supply. Going one’s own way or “doing as one likes” usually means following after the crowd or traveling in the rutts of custom and convenience. The English do not go their own way as individuals, approaching the truth from all sides at once; rather, they go their own way collectively, as a nation, not bothering to ask whether what their grandparents or neighbors believed to be true continues to be so. The French, by contrast, have the “Openness of mind and flexibility of intelligence [that] were the signal characteristics of the Athenian people in ancient times” (III:237). The good qualities of the English people—energy and honesty—seem to resist the fixed standards and centralized authorities of academies: “By this [the English nation] certainly escapes certain real inconveniences and dangers, and it can, at the same time, as we have seen, reach undeniably splendid heights in poetry and science. On the other hand, some of these requisites of intellectual work are specially the affair of quickness of mind and flexibility of intelligence. The form, the method of evolution, the precision, the proportions, the relation of the parts to the whole, in an intellectual work, depend mainly upon them” (III:238). Arnold is getting at the same prickly problem of the age that he confronted in “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time”: the English might be superior in every way that matters in creative endeavors such as poetry and science, but they are inferior when it comes to prose, and critical prose is what is most needed at the moment. To write good prose one must have a flexible intelligence that sees how the parts relate to the whole, and sees the object as in itself it really is. Fortunately, Arnold believes, “quickness of mind and flexibility of intelligence” can be learned, unlike the “free activity of genius” (III:238). The academy “consecrates and maintains” these qualities, engendering genius in the long term, and thus advancing the cause of the “human spirit.”

Without intelligence, English literature is susceptible to “hap-hazard, crudeness, provincialism, eccentricity, violence, blundering” and will therefore have less influence over the public and be a less effective agent for
change (III:241). For Arnold, the chief fault here is English provincialism. Lacking the “center and rallying point” that an academy would provide, English letters suffers from provincial fragmentation, so that its divided efforts lead to “ignorance and charlatanism” rather than to progress (III:242). Arnold means that English intellectuals, without the checks of their contemporaries upon them, are subject to “vagaries” and “intellectual eccentricity of all kinds” (III:243). We might take George Eliot’s Casaubon as the very type of the English intellectual who, isolated from his peers, does not realize that his “Key to all Mythologies” duplicates the decades-old work of German philologists. His life’s work is meaningless, except as a private exercise, because he has taken no account of developments in the field, particularly abroad; and he has had no body of peers to referee his scholarship. Casaubon’s case is an extreme one, as Eliot intended, but his faults are exactly those that Arnold ascribes to English criticism: his work is too provincial and too eccentric, relying too much on individual genius and ignoring the larger context within which one must always work. What will cure the English of their provinciality?—only its opposite, “urbanity,” which can be achieved via the “intellectual metropolis” of an academy; “for it brings us on to the platform where alone the best and highest intellectual work can be said fairly to begin. Work done after men have reached this platform is classical; and that is the only work which, in the long run, can stand. All the scoriae in the work of men of great genius who have not lived on this platform are due to their not having lived on it. Genius raises them to it by moments, and the portions of their work that are immortal are done at these moments; but more of it would have been immortal if they had not reached this platform at moments only, if they had had the culture which makes men live there” (III:245). To “get rid of provinciality” the English need a broader vision of culture. Arnold imagines that they will attain this wider view by ascending a kind of historical plateau, a “certain stage of culture” (III:245). When they are upon the platform, they are “classical,” “immortal,” and urbane. When they fall back into history, into the time stream, they are again prejudiced, transitory, and provincial. Arnold makes a very similar argument in “On the Modern Element in Literature,” his inaugural lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford, when he claims that ancient Greek literature is, in fact, modern because it “adequately comprehended, [and] adequately represented” its own age (I:21). Having before them the spectacle of a “copious and complex present” and behind them the spectacle of a “copious and complex past,” the English must eclectically “compare the works of other ages with those of our own age and country” and preserve those literatures that “solved for their ages the problem which occupies ours” (I:21). Having again reached
a “highly developed, culminating epoch,” Arnold believes that it is again necessary to ascend the platform and to try to comprehend the whole.

Arnold’s opponents often found his reverence for foreign writers and institutions excessive and even disloyal. In calling on “foreign witnesses” to judge English culture, Arnold follows the lead of Heinrich Heine, who exemplifies the urbane spirit, the “tone of the city,” that will ultimately deliver the English from their provinciality, and their Philistinism. To this end, the cosmopolitan Heine was, in his own words, “a brave soldier in the Liberation War of humanity” (III:107). He is a “Liberator” because he is uniquely capable of feeling the force of modern ideas: “Modern times find themselves with an immense system of institutions, established facts, accredited dogmas, customs, rules, which have come to them from times not modern. In this system their life has to be carried forward; yet they have a sense that this system is not of their own creation, that it by no means corresponds exactly with the wants of their actual life, that, for them, it is customary, not rational. The awakening of this sense is the awakening of the modern spirit” (III:109). If Goethe began the work of dissolving “the old European system of dominant ideas and facts,” then Heine continues it. Unlike his German Romantic contemporaries, “[Heine] is not conquered by the Middle Age”; instead, he wages his war against the Philistines from the “intellectual metropolis” of modernity, Paris. Heine believes that “the French, as a people, have shown more accessibility to ideas than any other people,” and he despises their opposite, “the genuine British narrowness” (III:112). While the French perceive a lack of correspondence between old institutions and present needs, the English want nothing more than to patch up the old systems, and to hang on to the old ideas as long as possible. Instead of referring to “general principles,” the English proceed “by the rule of thumb” and have become “of all people the most inaccessible to ideas and the most impatient of them” (III:113). In escaping from the narrowness of his own country, Heine did not, however, become merely a Francophile; rather, in locating himself between two cultures, the German and the French, “he found something new” (III:120). No doubt Arnold admired Heine for his embracing of modern ideas, but he emphasizes that Heine was not “an acrid dissolvent” of the old. Heine belongs to “the main current of the literature of modern epochs” because he applied “modern ideas to life” (III:122), not because he abandoned the past. His great contribution was in using French ideas to air out German attics. His country already had a wealth of ideas but needed a rational intelligence to order them and make them serve the present. Heine accepted the in-betweenness of modern life and exploited it to produce original art. Like Heine, Arnold wants his people to have a wider view of the present, in all its
complex relations, and the *Essays in Criticism* as a whole attempt to build the “intellectual metropolis” out of the best ideas that have been thought and known in all the world. He also wants to give the English a new language to speak. In modern times there is no longer the division between the language of scholarship and the language of the people; there is only the vernacular. Like Heine, Arnold wants to make the vernacular cosmopolitan. Arnold’s “intellectual metropolis” requires a language as diverse as history itself.

While the *Essays on Criticism* provided his English readers with examples of the greatness of European literature and culture, his next critical work, *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, brought home the implications of his critical method. Following the lead of Renan, who had published a study of the poetry of the Celtic races about ten years earlier, Arnold recommends the study of Celtic literature as a way to correct some of the faults of the English character. Probably nothing would have been more galling to his readers than this particular piece of advice: the English ought to look to the Irish and the Welsh for culture. (Critics today not directly interested in Celtic language and literature have tended to shy away from Arnold’s 1867 work as altogether embarrassing, because underlying his discussion of the literature are disconcerting assumptions about race, language, and national identity.) In 1865 he explained to his mother how Celtic studies would fit into his overall critical enterprise (Machann 66):

“I hate all over-preponderance of single elements, and all my efforts are directed to enlarge and complete us by bringing in as much as possible of Greek, Latin, Celtic cultures; more and more I see hopes of fruit by steadily working in this direction” (*SL* 168). The “fruit” would seem to be those fresh combinations of the materials of the age that produce great art. Imitating Renan, Arnold begins his study of Celtic literature with a visit to Celtic territory, to Wales. He even attends a festival of Welsh literature and language, which he judges a dull affair; but he is nonetheless inspired to witness the enthusiasm of common people there for poetry and history, something entirely lacking in the dull Anglo-Saxon.

At first glance Arnold’s efforts seem entirely noble. He only wants his contemporaries to acknowledge and to make use of the richness of a native tradition that has been ignored for centuries. Emphasizing that English culture contains a mixture of Celtic, Norman, and Teutonic elements, Arnold wants to refute the popular notion that “it is vain to seek after Norman or Celtic elements in any modern Englishman” (*Complete Prose Works* III:336) because these populations were entirely absorbed. Why does Arnold want to revive these old tribal and national differences? One recent biographer has noted that he seems to be describing aspects of
himself. Certainly, he is not unpatriotic in the assertion of mixture over purity, because he believes (with Renan) that mixed nationalities are stronger and, in much of his work, he seems to advocate a kind of literary husbandry. If he cultivates the strengths of each racial element, then he will “complete” the English character, bringing it to its highest perfection. In order for this eclectic project to go forward, he also has to defeat those philologists who want to dismiss the imaginative literature of the Celts as “evidence of the existence of a common stock of ideas, variously developed according to the formative pressure of external circumstances. The materials of these tales are not peculiar to the Welsh” (III:325). Arnold, by contrast, wants to argue for a unique tradition linked to racial and national identity. This is a key moment in the history of the idea of multiculturalism: do we say that people should read something because it is universally and timelessly important, or do we say that people should read something “foreign” because it will reveal something of the uniqueness of another race or group of people? Arnold comes down at first on the side of difference and variety. He contends that the discovery of commonality is “one of the most interesting discoveries of modern science; but modern science is equally interested in knowing how the genius of each people has differentiated, so to speak, this common property of theirs; in tracking out, in each case, that special ‘variety of development,’ which [ . . . ] ‘the formative pressure of external circumstances’ has occasioned; and not the formative pressure from without only, but also the formative pressure from within. It is this which he who deals with the Welsh remains in a philosophic spirit wants to know” (III:325). Arnold does not seem to want true multiculturalism, the coexistence of many cultures within one, because he is too insistent on the need for the Welsh to give up their language, that which most constitutes their separateness: “The fusion of all the inhabitants of these islands into one homogeneous, English-speaking whole, the breaking down of barriers between us, the swallowing up of separate provincial nationalities, is a consummation to which the natural course of things irresistibly tends; it is a necessity of what is called modern civilisation, and modern civilisation is a real, legitimate force; the change must come, and its accomplishment is a mere affair of time” (III:296–97). For Arnold, history tends to bring about homogeneity, but also strength and completeness, if managed properly. Instead of multiculturalism, this is eclecticism moving toward synthesis, federation, and the spirit of a nation in Renan’s terms (and a nation always demands sacrifice, forgetting): “In the first place, Europe tends constantly to become more and more one community, and we tend to become Europeans instead of merely Englishmen, Frenchmen, Germans, Italians; so whatever aptitude or felicity one people imparts into
spiritual work, gets imitated by the others, and thus tends to become the common property of all. Therefore anything so beautiful and attractive as the natural magic I am speaking of, is sure, now-a-days, if it appears in the productions of the Celts, or of the English, or of the French, to appear in the productions of the Italians; but there will be a stamp of perfectness and inimitableness about it in the literatures where it is native, which it will not have in the literatures where it is not native" (Arnold III:376). Blending races will always mean some loss, because the perfectness of a blended race’s original constitution and mode of expression will be gone. Perhaps unconsciously, Arnold’s readers feared hybridity, feared his eclectic method, because it would lead ultimately to the loss of singularity, of English national identity. Though keenly aware of the values of difference and variety, Arnold found that comparison, union, fusion, and mixture would be of more benefit to the future of literature. His own work, so indebted to diverse European sources, might have lost something of the power of the original, but it brought new color and new strength to English literature.

From Heine, Arnold derived one of his most fruitful oppositions, that of the two Renaissances of the sixteenth century: the Hellenic and the Hebrew. Within the German Romantic poet, these two forces coexisted, but Arnold sensed they were out of balance, the Greek side being, perhaps, too dominant. In “Pagan and Medieval Religious Sentiment,” another of the Essays of 1865, Arnold acknowledges that Heine could keep himself alive by “colossal irony” and “sinister mockery,” but the moral dimension required by the millions is absent (III:229). Arnold’s most famous work of social criticism, Culture and Anarchy, is often read as an argument for privileging the classical, high culture to which many of his middle-class contemporaries lacked access or for making poetry into a new religion. While there is certainly a pervasive sense of anxiety about “low” cultures in Arnold’s 1869 work, he is in fact charting the course for a middle way appropriate to a democratic, middle-class-dominated society. Above all, it is a call for balance and moderation, for the perfection of a “many-sided development” (V:239). Arnold’s strategy for guaranteeing the future of literature rested mainly on preservation of and regular contact with the great minds of the past. This mandate was directed not only, nor even principally, toward future academicians, but toward the general educated reader on whose shoulders would fall the burden of selection. Part of dealing with the condition of being “between two worlds” is finding what they have
in common and creating a meaningful synthesis. In both the poetry and the criticism, Arnold developed a trans-historical styles discourse, aimed at the discovery of a new style appropriate to the age. By listening to the adverse voices of history, Arnold found a way to live in adversity and with diversity. By approaching the truth from all sides at once, Arnold found, at least, his own intellectual deliverance.