While critics frequently speak of the irony in Browning’s work, they do not often associate the term with the poetry of Matthew Arnold. Instead, critics such as Lionel Trilling more often comment on Arnold’s “sincerity”; and even when they perceive a certain irony in his work, it is to his prose and not to his poetry that they look. Douglas Bush, for example, in his book on Arnold, allows that “although he was to become a master of irony in prose, he rarely approached it in verse.” Yet almost every contemporary account that we have about the man, from early youth to the time of his death, testifies to his playfulness, his posturings, his poses. Many of his friends and family were surprised that he was even capable of the seriousness that they discovered in his first published volume of poems. And later, when his seriousness was no longer to be questioned, his readers were often amazed by the levity that frequently seemed to invade his work. In his autobiography the philologist Max Mueller noted that Arnold “trus[ed] to persiflage, and the result was that when he tried to be serious, people could not forget that he might at any time turn round and smile, and decline to be au grand serieux.” Jest and seriousness, artless openness and dissimulation—these seem to have been the characteristics of Arnold the man. They were also the same qualities that define his poetry.
In Arnold's world all is in course of change. Characterized by an endless process of creation and de-creation, nature in its plentitude is always in a state of becoming, everything being both itself and something else. In this world the individual, seeing that \( a \) is both \( a \) and \( a \) becoming \( b \), faces contradictions on all sides; and this perception engenders the most contradictory impulses within himself, the desire for, simultaneously, fixity and fluidity, involvement and detachment, subjectivity and objectivity, bondage and freedom. Further, the self recognizes its own instability, its essential nothingness. "I am nothing," Arnold wrote to his friend Arthur Clough, "and very probably never shall be anything—but there are characters which are truest to themselves by never being anything, when circumstances do not suit."³ And speaking of his poems to his sister Jane, Arnold urged: "Fret not yourself to make my poems square in all their parts. The true reason why parts suit you while others do not is that my poems are fragments—\( i.e. \) that I am fragments. ; the whole effect of my poems is quite vague & indeterminate. ; & do not plague yourself to find a consistent meaning. "⁴ His was, he confessed to Clough, a chameleon personality: "I can go thro: the imaginary process of mastering myself and see the whole affair as it would then stand, but at the critical point I am too apt to hoist up the mainsail to the wind and let her drive" (Letters to Clough, p. 110). For like Goethe, he was quite willing to believe that in most matters "there is no certainty, but alternating dispositions" (Letters to Clough, p. 86). Yes, "this little which we are / Swims on an obscure much we might have been." One cannot "talk of the absolutely right but of a promising method with ourselves' (Letters to Clough, p. 85). "'Hide thy life,' said Epicurus, and the exquisite zest there is in doing so can only be appreciated by those who, desiring to introduce some method into their lives, have suffered from the malicious pleasure the world takes in trying to distract them till they are as shatter-brained and empty-hearted as the world itself."⁵ Years later Arnold was to claim the chameleon personality as the ideal critic: "The critic of poetry should have
the finest tact, the nicest moderation, the most free, flexible, and elastic spirit imaginable; he should be indeed the 'ondoyant et divers,' the undulating and diverse being of Montaigne.'

An undulating and diverse being, one given to aesthetic and metaphysical play—this is the hallmark of Arnold the poet, especially in his early verses, where he assumes a number of stances and presents varying positions all of which are deemed of equal value. Let us consider the matter of fate, for example, in The Strayed Reveller and Other Poems (1849). Poem after poem deals with characters as victims of fate, yet in almost every case the working of fate is called into question. "Mycerinus" considers whether there is a "Force" that makes all "slaves of a tyrannous necessity," or whether the gods are "mere phantoms of man's self-tormenting heart" (ll. 42, 25). The chorus in the "Fragment of an 'Antigone'" praises both those who flee from fate and those who observe its dictates. The eager response of "To a Republican Friend" is mitigated in "Continued" by the "uno'erleaped Mountains of Necessity, / Sparing us narrower margin than we deem."
The laborer in "The World and the Quietist" is granted a sense of omnipotence although his and others' actions are limited by how "Fate decreed." The speaker in "Written in Emerson's Essays" contends that "the will is free," so "Gods are we, bards, saints, heroes, if we will"; but the last line of the poem asks whether this be "truth or mockery" (the manuscript reading being the more decisive "O barren boast, o joyless Mockery"). The colloquist in "Resignation" staunchly maintains that persons "who await / No gifts from chance, have conquered fate" (ll. 247–48), while also freely admitting that fate thwarts our expectations of life (ll. 271–78).

This same ambivalence about fate marks the poems of Arnold's later volumes as well. The initial lyrics of the "Switzerland" series assume that the relationship with Marguerite is doomed to fail, and subsequent ones impute the lovers' parting to "a God [who] their severance ruled" ("To Marguerite—Continued," l. 22) because for "durability they were not meant"
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(“The Terrace at Berne,” ll. 43–44). The workings of fate are inexorable: “I knew it when my life was young; / I feel it still, now youth is o’er” (Ibid., ll. 49–50). Communication on the deeper levels of sensibility is impossible because that which seals the lips “hath been deep-ordained,’ yet occasionally there come moments when we talk openly and sincerely (“The Buried Life,” ll. 29, 87). Arnold’s speakers are forever questioning whether they are free or determined, and they conclude, hopefully but questioningly, with the possibility that they are both: “Ah, some power exists there, which is ours?” (“Self-Deception,” l. 27).

Arnold’s views of nature are also contradictory. In “Quiet Work,” “Lines Written in Kensington Gardens,” “A Summer Night,” and “The Youth of Man” nature is the great moral exemplar, teaching “toil unsevered from tranquillity” (“Quiet Work”). In “In Harmony with Nature,” “The Youth of Nature,” “Self-Dependence,” and “A Wish,” on the other hand, nature is shown to be a distinct realm of being that mankind cannot possibly emulate and would not wish to if it could: “Nature and man can never be fast friends” (“In Harmony with Nature”). No attempt is made to come down on either side of the question, as Arnold presents not certainties but possibilities. Here it is not a matter of either/or but of both/and.

The same may be said of Arnold’s many verses dealing with love. In poems like “Dover Beach” and “The Buried Life” love is regarded as redemptive, whereas in the Marguerite poems and “Tristram and Iseult” it is shown to be a snare and delusion. Though love alone appears able to fill the void in which “we mortal millions live alone” (“To Marguerite—Cont.”), passion, or the love that engenders it, is too unstable, too transient to provide a firm basis for life.

Arnold’s favorite situations are those that are intrinsically ironic. Mycerinus, the good king, is condemned to an early death while his father, who spurned justice, lived long and happily. Homer, though blind, saw much (“To a Friend”). Shakespeare, the greatest of poets, “didst tread on earth unguessed at”
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(The Duke of Wellington, the leader of conservative forces, sponsored revolution but in accordance with law (“To the Duke of Wellington”). The Strayed Reveller “enswines” himself in Circe’s palace, the enchantress having “lured him not hither” (l. 97).

From basically ironic situations Arnold develops, even in his earliest poems, narratives of more complex irony. In “A Memory Picture” lovers’ promises are made to be broken and “new made—to break again” (l. 38). The Modern Sappho waits for her lover whose attention is now focused on another but who, “as he drifts to fatigue, discontent, and dejection, / Will be brought, thou poor heart, how much nearer to thee!” The New Sirens argue that, “only, what we feel, we know” (l. 84). Yet, because feeling is evanescent and ignorance the way of life, the speaker, eschewing roses and lilies for cypress and yew, approaches love from a new point of view: “Shall I seek, that I may scorn her, / Her I loved at eventide?” (ll. 271–72). In similar fashion the speaker of “The Voice” hears a compelling voice that issues a “thrilling summons to my will” and makes “my tossed heart its life-blood spill,” yet to which his will ultimately remains unshaken and his heart unbroken. On the other hand, the speaker of “To Fausta,” in full realization that joys flee when sought and that dreams are false and hollow, nevertheless may go in pursuit of them. The gipsy child has “foreknown the vanity of hope, / Foreseen [his] harvest—yet proceed[s] to live” (“To a Gipsy Child by the Seashore”). The busy world is made aware of its power only when reminded of the vanity of its busyness, just as Darius was most mindful of his power when made aware of the one check to it (“The World and the Quietist”).

A number of the early poems dramatize Arnold’s perception that each moment is a watershed “when, equally, the seas of life and death are fed” (“Resignation.” l. 260). This is particularly true of the verses dealing with moral problems, the point of which is that the arguments are about as good on one side as another. In the “Fragment of an ‘Antigone’” the chorus is right in its praise
of Antigone, who in respect for universal law buried her brother in violation of the civil law and with disregard to her lover; but Haemon is also right in his claim that Antigone preferred a corpse to her lover. No wonder then that the chorus is forced to conclude that praise is due both him who “makes his own welfare his unswerved-from law” (1. 8) and him who “dares / To self-selected good / Prefer obedience to the primal law” (ll. 28–30).

In “The Sick King in Bokhara” the vizier is right in his respect for the law and its demand that the individual follow it unswervingly; yet the king is surely not wrong to heed the claims of conscience and seek to mitigate the punishment of the moolah. In “The Forsaken Merman” Margaret is shown to be both right and wrong in her return to land: a wife and mother, she has obligations in the sea world to her family, which she leaves desolate; but a human, she also has responsibilities in the land world, where she must fulfill her religious duties among her kind.

Such poems, which are dramatizations of irony, are reflective of the young poet’s embrace of irony as a cosmic view. In the modern world certainty is rarely if ever possible. What is required in confronting such a world, Arnold evidently believes, is an ironic posture that permits toleration of indeterminacy. Thus, whether the poet sees deeply or widely—possibilities entertained in, respectively, “The Strayed Reveller” and “Resignation”—is not easily determined, and both alternatives should be entertained. Thus, whether the universe is of divine or purely physical origin, one should be for either case prepared (“In Utrumque Paratus”) or, to use a favorite term of Arnold’s, resigned.

Much has been made of Arnold’s stoic resignation and his supposedly bleak view of life. But as his Empedocles says, one need not despair if one cannot dream (“Empedocles on Etna,” 1.2.423–26). Life is still worth living even though one has “fore-known the vanity of hope” (“To a Gipsy Child”). Often the poet’s stoic attitude seems no more than that, an attitude, a posture, a pose. Where Mycerinus was a stoic posing as a reveller, Arnold not infrequently appears to be a reveller posing as a stoic. As a
poet he is always exploring possibilities with a tentativeness, a
drawing back that does not permit conclusiveness. In his work as
in his letters there are constant oscillations while he explores
options that receive, even at the moment he seems to embrace
them, only provisional assent. The narrator's "It may be" in his
examination of Mycerinus' inner self well expresses the poet's
own qualified positions; and his explorations are not experiments
in despair but, frequently, playful exercises "not of mere resigned
acquiescence, not of melancholy quietism, but of joyful activity"
(Super, 3:177). As he told Clough, "composition seems to keep
alive in me a cheerfulness—a sort of Tuchtigkeit [sic], or natural
soundness and valiancy" (Letters to Clough, p. 146). Even in his
apparently darkest poems there is something of Mycerinus' "clear
laughter ringing through the gloom" (l. 113), issuing from
the poet's playful acceptance of the ironic fact that man is born
with desires that cannot be fulfilled:

Why each is striving, from of old,
To love more deeply than he can?
Still would be true, yet still grows cold?
—Ask of the Powers that sport with man!

They yoked in him, for endless strife,
A heart of ice, a soul of fire;
And hurled him on the Field of Life,
An aimless unallayed Desire. ("Destiny")

The "sport" of the gods can be the poet's, and the poet's serious
play is illustrative of the belief Arnold shared with Schiller that
"lofty thought lies oft in childish play" ("Thekla's Answer").

The poems of Empedocles on Etna and Other Poems (1852)
portray characters playing out their roles in complex dramas of
undefined irony. Let us look, for example, at "The Church of
Brou. To memorialize her dead husband and their love for each
other, the duchess erects a church and inside it an ornate tomb, on
the top of which are effigies of the pair lying side by side.
Eventually, she too is buried in this tomb. Centuries pass while the dead lovers are left alone in their church, undisturbed except for Sunday services. The meaning of their memorial is now forgotten as people after mass visit the tomb “and marvel at the Forms of stone, / And praise the chiselled broideries rare” until they part and “the princely Pair are left alone / In the Church of Brou” (2.36–40). Here in this lonely sepulchre there is no life, only the silent art of glass and stone. Wishing them well the narrator apostrophizes: “So sleep, for ever sleep, O marble Pair!” (3.16). And then momentarily indulging in the dream of eternal love that might have been theirs, or what at the instant might be his, he considers two possibilities of their awaking: first, when the western sun shines through the stained glass and throws a dazzling array of colors throughout the church and they will say, “What is this? we are in bliss—forgiven— / Behold the pavement of the courts of Heaven!”; or second, when the autumn rains come and the moon occasionally shines out and through the windows of the clerestory illuminates the “foliaged marble forest” and they will say, “This is the glimmering verge of Heaven, and these / The columns of the heavenly palaces!” (3.30–31, 41–42). This is of course but a fancy, and even in the fancy the lovers would be deluded, because it is not in heaven but in the church of Brou wherein the putatively awakened pair find themselves. The fact is that they continue to lie under “the lichen-crusted leads above” on which there is but the dream of listening to “the rustle of the eternal rain of love.” In the long run, art serves neither as a memorial nor a transformation; it remains but beautiful forms at which to marvel.

In poem after poem Arnold recalls us to the fact that what we witness in his verse is not life but art. The action of “Empedocles on Etna” centers on the Sicilian philosopher, but the last word is given to Callicles, who undercuts the poem by stating explicitly that what we have just witnessed is not the proper subject matter for poetry—“Not here, O Apollo! / Are haunts meet for thee” (2.2.421–22)—and by saying pretty much what Arnold himself
said in his Preface to the 1853 *Poems* when he explained why he was not reprinting the poem. The separation of the poet from the poem can also be witnessed in the “Stanzas in Memory of the Author of ‘Obermann’ ” wherein after praising the author and his book the poet bids farewell to both: “I go, fate drives me; but I leave / Half of my life with you” (ll. 132–33). In such verses the poet, like God, is both in and out of his creation, subjective and objective, immanent and transcendent. He “moves, but never moveth on” (“The Hayswater Boat”).

Although doubleness and dividedness are commonplaces of Victorian literature, the degree of self-reflexivity in Arnold is uncommon. Arnold is always splitting himself up into various “selves”—the best self and the ordinary self, the buried self and the masked self. On the one hand, modern life with its constant claims and banalities calling us out of ourselves necessitates this; on the other hand, the ennui of solitude and the fear that there is no real self at all compel such a separation. “Two desires’ toss the poet about: “One drives him to the world without, / And one to solitude” (“Stanzas in Memory of the Author of ‘Obermann’,” ll. 93–96). “And I,’ puzzles the speaker of “A Summer Night,” “I know not if to pray / Still to be what I am, / Or yield and be / Like all the other men I see” (ll. 34–36). The answer is clearly that he will have to be both.

The inadequacy of language, its inability to permit one to delve into oneself and express what is there or what is lacking, in part mandates the answer. Arnold perhaps best explores language’s deficiencies in “The Buried Life,” in which the speaker and his beloved, though engaging in a “war of mocking words,” cannot communicate openly. Love is apparently too weak to open the heart and let it speak, yet the desire remains to apprehend the buried life and to share it with another. After investigating the impossibility of such communication, the speaker, seemingly unmindful of the presence of his beloved, then says that it is possible: “When a belovéd hand is laid in ours, / / The eye sinks inward, and the heart lies plain, / And what we mean, we
say, and what we would, we know” (ll. 78, 86–87). This seems to be but hypothetical, however, because the nature and destiny of the buried self are not revealed. Further, in looking into his beloved’s eyes he sees himself mirrored there: his eye sinks inward and he becomes aware of his life’s flow and thinks he knows where his life rose and where it goes.

What the speaker discovers about the buried life is that which cannot be said. Silence is all that is possible in consideration of the great questions of life. Thus the models Arnold holds up for emulation can be both superhuman—like Shakespeare and the poet of “Resignation”—or subhuman—like the gipsies of “Resignation” and the gipsy child—but they have one trait in common: they do not or cannot break their silence to offer any counsel. It is each person’s own impossible struggle to find the right words. Man has the letters God has given him to “make with them what word he could.’ Different civilizations have combined them in different ways and “something was made.’ But man knows that “he has not yet found the word God would.” If only he could achieve the right words in the right order, then he would be relieved of a terrible oppression and at long last breathe free (“Revolutions”). But this will never happen: human language belongs to the phenomenal world and it can never encompass the noumenal world to speak God’s word. The poet, Arnold knows, can never fully replicate or re-present anything. That is why it must always be admitted “that the singer was less than his themes.” No, even the best of poets—“who have read / Most in themselves—have beheld / Less than they left unrevealed” (“The Youth of Nature,’ ll. 89, 104–6). The truth is that the buried self cannot be expressed because without the proper words it cannot be apprehended.

To attempt to view their inner being from various perspectives, Arnold’s heroes don masks and play roles, just as Arnold did when he assumed the role of dandy in the late 1840s. And with their roles and masks they not only view themselves but also become spectators watching others watching themselves watch
others. To refuse to engage in this kind of dramatic play is, in the mid-nineteenth century at any rate, to admit to inelasticity, to be spiritually moribund: “only death / Can cut his oscillations short, and so / Bring him to poise” (“Empedocles,” 2.232–34). Poise, peace, rest, calm—those qualities that speaker after speaker claims to desire: these are, Arnold knows, the attributes of death:

'Tis death! and peace, indeed, is here .
But is a calm like this, in truth,
The crowning end of life and youth,
And when this boon rewards the dead,
Are all debts paid, has all been said?

The answer is a ringing no: “Calm’s not life’s crown, though calm is well. / ’Tis all perhaps which man acquires, / But ’tis not what our youth desires” (“Youth and Calm”). In Arnold’s world there is always more to say; there are always visions to be revised.

After 1852 most of Arnold’s better poems were written in the elegiac mode. Elegy was a congenial mode for him because it allowed for the irony of reversal: Lycidas is dead and we lament his loss as we celebrate his talents; but Lycidas is not dead, he lives on in another state. As Arnold employed it, his poems in this mode call into question the meaning of their opening parts. We see this clearly in “The Scholar-Gipsy.” The poem begins by building up the myth of the scholar-gipsy to the point where the narrator himself asserts the living reality of the young Oxonian of two hundred years ago: “Have I not passed thee .?” (l. 123). But then this assertion in the form of a question is almost immediately denied: “But what—I dream! [T]hou from earth art gone / Long since, and in some quiet churchyard laid” (ll. 131, 136–37). The scholar is indeed dead, and the verbs associated with him change to the past tense. However, this is but momentary, for while talking of how the scholar fled with his powers unsullied and undiverted to the world, the speaker again resurrects him and speaks of him in the present tense: “Thou waitest for the
spark from heaven" (l. 171). It is an imaginative recovery: the speaker grants him "an immortal lot," because he "imagine[s] thee exempt from age" (ll. 157-58). But immortal lot or not, the scholar is still apparently subject to the ills that afflict mortals living nowadays. And so if he is ever to encounter the divine spark, the scholar must flee the infection of modern life to which present-day mortals are subject and, like the Tyrian trader, establish his enterprise elsewhere.

The poem complicates itself still further by purportedly dealing with two quests that are in fact one and the same: the speaker's quest for the scholar-gipsy and the scholar's for some kind of revelation. Although the scholar quests for the secret knowledge of nature, which can be gained only by nonrational means, he himself is already the embodiment of that knowledge. For the poet makes him a kind of nature-spirit, who, in the first part of the poem, can be perceived only by the simple and untutored or by those, like poets, who live imaginatively, and who near the end of the poem is granted life "on some mild pastoral slope" listening "with enchanted ears" to nightingales (ll. 216-20). In sum, the scholar is the object of his own quest. And the speaker, questing for the scholar and the secret possessed by him, locates within himself the imaginative insight that the scholar embodies, which is to say that the speaker is the object of his own quest.

If all the elements seem to cancel each other out, what finally are we left with? In the end we are left with the poet himself, who in the elaborate simile concluding the poem reminds us that this is not a transcription of life with its sick hurry, or of nature with its pale pink convolvulus, but art—a poem, a making, over which looms the figure of the poet himself. In the end we see that the imaginative donnée of the poem is not the scholar-gipsy and his quest, or modern life with its ills, or meaning of any kind; rather, it is—as it was for Browning in "Christmas-Eve"—romantic irony, which permits the poet to rise above his finite subject matter to a realm of aesthetic consciousness.

The coda of "Sohrab and Rustum" also serves to recall the
reader from the poem to the poet. In this narrative of ironic situations two persons longing for union are frustrated in that desire and come together only through conflict. When one slays the other, the dead son is transformed into art: first, when he makes himself known by the vermilion seal, which is compared to “some clear porcelain vase” painstakingly made by a Chinese workman for the emperor; and second, when over his grave a giant pillar is erected, which also serves as a seal not only of the son but of the father too in that those who see it say, “Sohrab, the mighty Rustum’s son, lies there, / Whom his great father did in ignorance kill” (ll. 792–93). In the end Arnold makes of the concluding symbol of the Oxus the same use as Rustum made of the tomb erected for his son. It “seals” the narrative into art and reminds the reader of its maker, saying in effect: “‘Sohrab and Rustum,’ a poem, Matthew Arnold fecit.” Its composition was an exercise in the development of aesthetic consciousness, and as a result the consciousness of the poet, like the winding River Oxus, spirals toward its “luminous home” (l. 890).

Arnold’s twistings and turnings in his memorial poems are remarkable in the “Stanzas in Memory of Edward Quillinan.” While his friend was alive, the speaker wished him health, success, and fame—qualities that are their own reward, “leave no good behind,” and “oftenest make us hard, / Less modest, pure, and kind.” But the dead man did not receive them, and thus he was “a man unspoiled.” Implicit in the tribute is the notion that Quillinan is therefore better dead than alive: “Alive, we would have changed his lot, / We would not change it now.”

In “Haworth Churchyard,” the elegy for Charlotte Brontë and prematurely for Harriet Martineau, Arnold followed the usual elegiac reversal of awakening when the poem was first published in 1855:

Sleep, O cluster of friends,
Sleep!—or only when May,
Brought by the west-wind, returns
Back to your native heaths,
And the plover is heard on the moors,
Yearly awake to behold
The opening summer, the sky,
The shining moorland—to hear
The drowsy bee, as of old,
Hum o'er the thyme, the grouse
Call from the heather in bloom!
Sleep, or only for this
Break your united repose!

(ll. 112–24)

When the poem appeared in revised form in 1877, Arnold added an Epilogue, which is nothing less than a palinode. Denying the possibility of a May awakening, the Muse angrily shakes her head and says that this shall not be: these “unquiet souls” will not awaken but will remain “in the dark fermentation of earth,” “the never idle workshop of nature,” “the eternal movement” of the universe of becoming, and there “ye shall find yourselves again!” (ll. 125–28).

With even less cordiality Arnold elegizes Heinrich Heine in “Heine’s Grave,” a short study of the kind of ironist that Arnold wished not to be, of “infinite absolute negativity,” such as Kierkegaard falsely accused Friedrich Schlegel of being. Heine was of course an ironist, says Arnold, but he lacked love and charm, a concern for others, a real desire to communicate or sympathize with his fellows; and his irony was in consequence bitter. Properly situated in Montmartre Cemetery in Paris and not in Naples’ bay or among Ravenna’s pines or by the Avon’s side, where poets like Virgil, Dante, and Shakespeare belong, Heine’s grave reeks of a kind of poison distilled from the harshness and malignity of his life. Once the poet had admired the dead man, but it was necessary that he part from Heine lest he be infected by his scornful laughter. Obviously Arnold has come to re-bury Heine and not to praise him. Yet near the end of his elegy, after 198 lines
of mocking derision of the German writer, the poet decides not thus to take leave of him but “with awe / Hail, as it passes from earth / Scattered lightnings, that soul!” (ll. 203-5). At the very end however the poet returns to himself as he asks “the Spirit of the world” to grant that “a life / Other and milder be mine” and that his work be made “a beat of thy joy!” (ll. 225-26, 232). It is evident that what Arnold repudiates in Heine is not his irony but his lack of playfulness, love and joy, an ethical concern characteristic of a higher irony.

In “Thyrisis” Arnold is again critical of the subject to be elegized. Clough-Thyrisis was a “too quick despairer” who deserted the landscape of the scholar-gipsy’s haunts by his own will, and because of the storms of which “he could not wait their passing, he is dead” (ll. 61, 50). It is as though Thyrisis, out of silly impatience, had willed his own death, leaving the speaker here alone in these fields that “our Gipsy-Scholar haunts, outliving thee” (l. 197). Yes, the scholar-gipsy remains “a wanderer still; then why not me?” Why not indeed? And so the speaker and the scholar go off, as fellow questers, seeking for the light of truth and apparently putting Thyrisis, the deserter, out of mind. This is, however, an elegy in memory of his friend, and Arnold cannot afford to leave the matter at this point. Adding three final stanzas to the poem, he allows that Thyrisis too was bound on a like quest though in foreign territory. Further, he gives Thyrisis the last word. But addressed to the poet, it urges him to wander on in his quest, thereby in the end returning the focus of the poem to the poet himself who hovers above the work.

From this survey of Arnold’s poetry we see many of the conflicts that the poet faced and found unresolvable. He was well aware of “wandering between two worlds” (“Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse,” l. 85) and being caught between at least “two desires” (“Stanzas in Memory of the Author of ‘Obermann’”) and of the impossibility for him to take either side or bring them into accord. So much about Arnold has long been clear. But what has not been clear is the degree to which Arnold
exhibits his conflicts ironically—so as to transcend them. Far from being the poet of "sincerity," Arnold is self-conscious, seriously playful, problematic, and equivocal. His is, in sum, the art of the romantic ironist that presents a self always in process and always relishing and extolling its own self-activity.