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Matthew Arnold's "Balder Dead": An Exercise in Objectivity

PHILIP RAISOR

Whether Matthew Arnold's much neglected "Balder Dead" is the poet's triumph over a dying world or his lament for that world has been the dominant problem for critics of the poem. In the only extensive analysis of "Balder Dead," Clyde De L. Ryals argues that "not only does it offer a criticism of life, it also presents a hope for the future; the poet's foot is in the *vera vita* (at least as he sees it), his eye is on the beatific vision."¹ Warren D. Anderson agrees that the poem is a criticism of life, but he would place the poet's foot in the *mala vita* and eye on the *Götterdämmerung*. "Such power as 'Balder Dead' possesses comes from its elegiac mood, from the sense of sorrow and tenderness, anguished struggle and inevitable defeat that is Arnold's own."² Both Ryals and Anderson emphasize the verbal and emotional overtones of the last eighty lines, concluding that either Balder's millennial vision or Hermod's thwarted aspiration is more important. Ryals links Arnold with Balder and his vision of a second Asgard; Anderson links the poet with Hermod and his return to Valhalla. The result, I think, is an oversimplification of Arnold's identification with his characters.

This is not to deny that Arnold did identify with his characters or that personal elements do exist in the poem. Several critics have noted similarities between Balder and Arnold, the echoes throughout the poem of Arnold's earlier lyrical poetry, his alterations and extensions of the basic Eddic myth, and parallels between his description of Valhalla and his description, in his Letters, of his own epoch.³ The action, though based on Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, has forced almost every critic of the poem to feel that Arnold, as C. H. Herford suggests, was "thinking of his own gods."⁴ Neither Herford nor Frederick Page (who attempts to connect Balder with "the fortunes of Christianity in history"⁵) can firmly substantiate this probability

¹"Arnold's *Balder Dead*," *Victorian Poetry*, 4 (1966), 81.

²*Matthew Arnold and the Classical Tradition* (Ann Arbor, 1965), p. 61

³See Ryals, pp. 67ff.; Anderson, pp. 58ff.; *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Kenneth Allott (New York, 1965), pp. 350-352ff.; C. B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry, *The Poetry of Matthew Arnold: A Commentary* (London, 1950), pp. 91-104.

⁴*Norse Myth in English Poetry* (London, 1919), p. 14.

⁵"*Balder Dead* (1855)," *Essays and Studies* (English Association), 28 (1942), 61.

from internal evidence of the poem. But the constant references to Heaven and Hell, Odin as endemic creator, the satanic Lok, the "ray-crowned Balder,"⁶ and the resurrection theme, strongly suggest that Arnold was neither unaware nor unresponsive to the parallels between pagan myth and modern Christianity.

At issue is not Arnold's presence in the poem, but his treatment of his own experience. This treatment is best seen in connection with Arnold's attempt, first expressed in his letters to A. H. Clough as early as 1847⁷ and developed in prefaces and lectures in the 1850's and critical essays in the 1860's, to arrive at a theory of dramatic poetry. The theory, as Sidney M. B. Coulling observes, is Arnold's contribution to the Victorian controversy over the poet's role in his age.⁸ In his *Essay on Shelley* (1851) Robert Browning characterized this controversy as the ordinary clash of "opposite tendencies of genius"—the subjective and the objective, and indicated his preference for the latter.⁹ A. Dwight Culler notes that a general shift from subjectivity to objectivity was taking place at mid-century: "Wordsworth and Coleridge had made it in the poems which mark the end of their creative years, and Carlyle had made it in *Sartor Resartus*. Newman made it in turning from the private judgment of Anglicanism to the dogmatic principle of the Roman Catholic Church. Ruskin made it in turning from mountains and painting to architecture and society."¹⁰ Arnold made it too, but his change was uneven. Early in his career, says Culler, Arnold was "concerned with developing an aesthetic distance between himself and his subject so that he could contemplate it without being affected by it." But "around 1849 [he] discovered that he also had problems to solve, and, as a result, the volume *Empedocles on Etna* almost totally abandoned" this formalistic view.¹¹ Arnold recovered this view in his 1853 Preface, insisting that while all experience should be available to the poet, regardless of its private or public nature, he preferred subjects drawn from the past and a perspective on his subjects which

⁶*The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Kenneth Allott (New York, 1965), p. 387—hereafter referred to as *Poems*. Also, hereafter, section and line number[s] of "Balder Dead" will be given in the text.

⁷See Arnold's letter to Clough written shortly after December 6, 1847, in *The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. H. F. Lowry (London and New York), 1932, p. 63.

⁸"Matthew Arnold's 1853 Preface: Its Origin and Aftermath," *Victorian Studies*, 7 (1964), 234.

⁹*The Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning*, portable Cambridge edition (Boston and New York), 1895, p. 1010. See Philip Drew, "Browning's *Essay on Shelley*," *Victorian Poetry*, 1 (1963), 1-6; also Thomas J. Collins, "Browning's *Essay on Shelley*: In Context," *Victorian Poetry*, 2 (1964), 119-124.

¹⁰*Imaginative Reason: The Poetry of Matthew Arnold* (New Haven, 1966), p. 204.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 200.

permitted him, as Lionel Trilling says, "to settle no questions, give no directives."¹²

Most critics have assumed that Arnold applied his theory (at least the earliest expressions of it) to "Balder Dead," but they have disagreed on his success. Kenneth Allott comments simply that the poem illustrates "the poetic creed of the 1853 Preface."¹³ Ryals and Anderson (who agree on this point) contend that the poem contradicts the creed. They argue that in spite of the renunciation of subjectivity in the 1853 Preface, Arnold was unable to re-establish "an aesthetic distance between himself and his subject," and allowed his emotional involvement in the action to determine his position in "Balder Dead."¹⁴ However, because both critics arrive at opposite interpretations of the poet's state of mind, I believe it may be maintained that while Arnold delineates a dying world that is as much mid-Victorian England as it is Nordic Valhalla, he remains, throughout the poem, committed to his aim of settling no questions, giving no directives.

Arnold had the poets of Greek tragedy in mind when, in the 1853 Preface, he wrote the following description of the proper relationship of a poet to his poem and his audience:

The terrible old mythic story on which the drama was founded stood, before he entered the theatre, traced in its bare outlines upon the spectator's mind; it stood in his memory, as a group of statuary, faintly seen, at the end of a long and dark vista: then came the poet, embodying outlines, developing situations, not a word wasted, not a sentiment capriciously thrown in: stroke upon stroke, the drama proceeded: the light deepened upon the group; more and more it revealed itself to the riveted gaze of the spectator: until at last, when the final words were spoken, it stood before him in broad sunlight, a model of immortal beauty.¹⁵

It seems to me that Arnold had this description in mind when, less than two months later, he began writing "Balder Dead."

The "old mythic story" which Arnold selected from the *Prose Edda* is the climactic tale in "The Beguiling of Gylfi" chapter (sections 49-

¹²Matthew Arnold (Cleveland and New York), 1955, p. 139.

¹³*Poems*, p. 351. See also Hugh Kingsmill, *Matthew Arnold* (London, 1931), pp. 124-125.

¹⁴Ryals, p. 80; Anderson, p. 61.

¹⁵*The Complete Prose works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor, 1960), I, 6 —hereafter cited as *Prose Works*.

53).¹⁶ One of the gods, Balder the Good, dreams that he is to be killed. Though protected by the Aesir, his dreams prove prophetic as the jealous Lok deceives the blind Hoder into throwing a fatal mistletoe bough at Balder. Frea, Odin's wife, quiets the grieving gods by sending Hermod to Hell with a request for the beloved Balder's return from the world of the dead. Hela, Lok's daughter, informs Hermod that only if all things, animate and inanimate, weep for Balder will he be returned. Odin sends forth his messengers to all parts of the world to announce the decree and report on its fulfillment. All things do weep for Balder except Lok, disguised as the giantess Thok, who is uncompromising. The angry gods pursue, capture, and bind Lok in a cave where he is to remain until the Twilight of the Gods. On this day the forces of Lok and those of Odin will conclude their conflict in a world battle of mutual annihilation. The day of Ragnarok will be followed by a renewal of heaven and earth and the reappearance of Balder in the new world.

In transforming prose into poetic narrative, Arnold merely reduced the various actions to one, and made it a "terrible old mythic story." The poem begins (*in medias res*) "So on the floor lay Balder dead," and ends before the pursuit and capture of Lok. The slaying of Balder, the incarceration of Lok, and the vision of a new heaven and earth remain within the action, but only as elements of dialogue. In the dialogue, Hela predicts Lok's punishment and Balder anticipates a new universe, but because both projections are undramatized, and because both are only parts of an action, they remain subordinate to the dominant action of the futile quest for Balder's return to Valhalla. Emphasizing the futility of this quest is the narrative structure (the poem is divided into three sections: "Sending," "Journey to the Dead," "Funeral") and the dramatic structure: Balder's death precipitates the action which turns upon the possibility of his resurrection. His resurrection depends upon the outcome of the conflict between Odin and Lok. Lok's victory compounds the original disaster, increasing the degree of calamity. Both arrangements contribute to what Arnold considered, in the 1853 Preface, the necessary conditions for tragic pleasure: "the more tragic the situation, the deeper becomes the enjoyment; and the situation is more tragic in proportions as it becomes more terrible."¹⁷

¹⁶For an extended and illuminating discussion of Arnold's use of Bishop Thomas Percy's edition of Mallet's translation of Snorri's *Edda*, see Mary W. Schneider, "The Source of Matthew Arnold's 'Balder Dead,'" *Notes and Queries*, 14 (February, 1967), 56-61.

¹⁷*Prose Works*, p. 2.

Perhaps Arnold was overly optimistic in expecting his audience to be even dimly familiar with the story of Balder. At least, some fifteen years later, he found it necessary to remind a disconcerted reader of his poem (one who did not see the relevance of the ancient tale to himself as a modern reader) that the Nordic legends *should* be in his memory: "We have enough Scandinavianism in our nature and history to make a short *conspectus* of the Scandinavian mythology admissible."¹⁸ In 1853, however, Arnold may have had in mind readers like J. A. Froude who, in a review of Arnold's 1853 volume, suggested that having drawn from Persian history for "Sohrab and Rustum" the poet might next turn to Teutonic mythology.¹⁹ Or, perhaps, Arnold had in mind a less sophisticated audience who had at least read Carlyle's brief synopsis of the Balder tale in *Heroes and Hero-Worship* (1841).²⁰ To make one of these assumptions, at any rate, would allow Arnold to concentrate on what the poet must do with the statuary at the end of a long and dark vista: "then came the poet, *embodying outlines, developing situations* [italics mine], not a word wasted, not a sentiment capriciously thrown in."

How is the tragic poet to embody outlines, develop situations? Arnold studied the best authorities, and in his Preface to "Merope" he suggested that the poet follow the Greek pattern of exhibiting "the most agitating matter under the conditions of the severest form."²¹ Imitating his predecessors, Arnold in "Balder Dead" presented the "most agitating matter" of the victory of death over life.

If the title "Balder Dead" suggests the motif of death, the poem itself firmly establishes the gradually emerging triumph of the dead over the gods in Valhalla. Hermod calls Valhalla "the city of Gods/ And Heroes, where they live in light and joy" (II.198-199). In recounting for Odin and the other gods the birth of Heaven (which apparently they have forgotten), Frea observes that originally "the paths of night and day" (III.265), of Hell and Heaven, were clearly divided. Heaven was made for joy, compassion, wisdom, invention, and order.

But from the beginning (both of the Creation and the poem) doom hovers over Heaven. Odin (remembering this part of the Creation) has often told the gods that they live only until the day of Ragnarok

When from the south shall march the fiery
band

¹⁸Letter to F. T. Palgrave in 1869. Quoted by G. W. E. Russell, *Matthew Arnold* (New York, 1904), p. 42.

¹⁹*Westminster Review*, n. s., 5 (1854), 158-159. See *Poems*, p. 351.

²⁰See *Poems*, p. 351.

²¹*Prose Works*, p. 59.

And cross the bridge of Heaven, with Lok
 for guide,
 And Fenris at his heel with broken chain;
 While from the east the giant Rymer steers
 His ship, and the great serpent makes to
 land;
 And all are marshalled in one flaming
 square
 Against the gods, upon the plains of
 Heaven. . . . (III.475-481)

On this day, Odin says, all the gods will perish:

For ye, yourselves, ye gods, shall meet your
 doom,
 All you who hear me, and inhabit Heaven,
 And I too, Odin too, the Lord of all. (I.28-30)

Believing Odin, the gods find no meaning in life and, in time, develop habits of frivolity, cynicism, hatred, and destruction. At present "Haughty spirits and high wraths are rife/ Among the Gods" (III.79-80), Thor says. The daily routine in the tilt-yard is one of "blood, and ringing blows, and violent death" (III.140) followed by feasts of boar and mead. And Oder's "unquiet heart" (III.107) has driven him into distant lands, leaving his wife, Freya, to "vainly seek him through the world" (III.109). Frea puts it this way:

For not so gladsome is that life in Heaven
 Which gods and heroes lead, in feast
 and fray,
 Waiting the darkness of the final times. (I.122-124)

The darkness, before the final times and even before Balder's death, has permeated Heaven.

Balder's death marks a definite stage in the progression toward the final day. It proves, first, that the gods are not immortal. Only the most unimaginative god would fail to see the relationship of this fact to the old rumor. It suggests, secondly, that no defense against the invasion of death is possible:

For wise he was, and many curious arts,
 Postures of runes, and healing herbs he
 knew;
 Unhappy! but that art he did not know,
 To keep his own life safe, and see the sun. (I.210-213)

It indicates, thirdly, a further reduction of harmony in Valhalla. Regner, in his funeral oration, remembers that Balder alone of all the Scalds sung of peace and joy (III.141-143). Thor comments that Balder restrained "The others, labouring to compose their brawls" (III.85-86). Freya reminds the mourners that Balder, of all the gods and mortals, comforted her in the absence of her wandering husband. Only Balder could smooth "all strife in Heaven" (III.88).

Death, clearly, has brought Heaven towards its own environs. The world of the dead is Hell where Hela "with austere control presides" (I.317). Both Christian and classic (Arnold borrowed details from *Paradise Lost* as well as the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*),²² this "Cheerless land/ Where idly flit about the feeble shades" (II.181-182) is the domain of mortals whose lives were cowardly and whose deaths were inglorious. For them death is merely a less substantive extension of life. As Balder says, "Their ineffectual feuds and feeble hates/ Shadows of hates . . . distress them still" (III.466-467). In this realm of darkness and gloom, the ghosts can neither hope nor change; they must remain underground "Rusting for ever" (III.472). Although honor among the dead is possible, such honor has little value. The path that takes Hermod to Hela's throne, for example, leads him past old warriors who outlived their days of battle and died of disease or old age; "yet, dying, they their armour wore,/ And now have chief regard in Hela's realm" (II.168-169). This regard is transferred to Balder when he enters Hell. Being able to comfort the other dead and to relax the "iron frown" (III.463) of Hela, Balder achieves what death allows—the solace of "esteem and function" (III.470), but he remains trapped in gloom and the prisoner of Hela.

The similarity of conditions in Heaven and Hell and the roles that Balder plays in both worlds indicate the diminished quality of existence in Heaven. Even more damaging to Heaven is the preference of many of the gods for Hell. After Balder's death, for example, Frea notes that many gods "Would freely die to purchase Balder back,/ And wend themselves to Hela's gloomy realm" (I.120-121). One of these gods is Hoder, the unwitting slayer of Balder, who "distraught with grief,/ Loathing to meet, at dawn, the other gods" (I.249-250), commits suicide. In Hell, Hoder explains to the unsympathetic Hermod that it is just that absence of sympathy which precipitated his act, and asks "And canst thou not, even here, pass pitying by?" (III.400) The absence of compassion in Heaven is also at the center of Balder's acceptance of his imprisonment:

²²See Tinker and Lowry, *A Commentary*, pp. 91-104; also Anderson, pp. 58-60.

For I am long since weary of your storm
 Of carnage, and find, Hermod, in your life
 Something too much of war and broils,
 which make
 Life one perpetual fight, a bath of blood.

(III.503-506)

Through Hoder and Balder, Hermod too learns to deplore this condition. In the final moments of the final interview, Hermod is confronted by Balder's description of life as it is and life as he believes it will be after Ragnarok. The contrast overwhelms him, and watching his friends enter the interior gloom of Hell "fain,/ Fain had he followed their receding steps/ Though they to death were bound, and he to Heaven . . . (III.555-557). Preferring Hell to Heaven, Hermod adds his voice to the pervasive criticism of life.

In presenting this "most agitating matter" Arnold was concerned not only with the victory of death over life in the past, but also, as many critics have observed, with that victory in the present.

There is no mistaking the impression that Arnold included the Victorian wasteland in his Nordic desert. Ryals accurately observes that

Everywhere there is evidence of the depression and ennui which Arnold in his inaugural lecture at Oxford had classified as characteristic of modern times; everywhere there is manifest the sick hurry, the divided aims, the overtaxed heads, and the palsied hearts which are the symptoms of "this strange disease of modern life" diagnosed in "The Scholar-Gipsy."²³

To anyone familiar with Arnold's poetry, it is not difficult to hear precise echoes of these conditions in innumerable lines, characters, and situations of "Balder Dead." The battlefields of Valhalla are simultaneously the "darkling plain" of "Dover Beach." The "great road" that Oder takes in his restless and "faithful search" is the same road taken by the narrator of "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse" and the same road that, later, Thyrsis will take in his quest for "A fugitive and gracious light." The final scene of the poem (the interview in Hell between Hermod and Balder) is a re-enactment of the dream separation of Arnold and Senancour (a living and a dead poet) in "Stanzas in Memory of the Author of 'Obermann.'" Division is always, in the early Arnold, the index to contemporaneity.²⁴

²³Ryals, pp. 69-70.

²⁴In terms of an attitude and frame of mind, Arnold characterized this division as follows: "What those who are familiar only with the great monuments of early Greek genius suppose to be its exclusive characteristics, have disappeared: the calm, the cheerfulness, the disinterested objectivity have disappeared; the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced." *Prose Works*, p. 1.

My equally distinctive impression is that Arnold included not only symptoms but also causes of the modern disease in this episode. I would go even beyond the intuitions of Herford and Page, and observe that Arnold was thinking of his own world so much that he gave precedence to explanations of a dying world which he later developed in *Culture and Anarchy*. It is not difficult to see that Odin, Frea, and Balder express or embody the ideas which Arnold found in Hebraism, Christianity, and Hellenism. Nor is it difficult to see that the central action of the poem, the attempt to recover Balder from death, is a dramatic consideration of the idea of *resurrection* which was to engage Arnold in his chapter "Porro Unum Est Necessarium" and in greater detail in *St. Paul and Protestantism*. Nor, finally, is it difficult to see that Lok is the manifestation of *sin*, which Arnold in "Hebraism and Hellenism" referred to as that "something which thwarts and spoils all our efforts" to achieve perfection.²⁵ It is clear that while exposing the nature of the Nordic world, Arnold was also revealing the essence of the modern world.

Arnold termed this synthesis a "connexion," and insisted, in his inaugural lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford (1857), that it was necessary for an adequate comprehension of a subject: "no single event, no single literature, is adequately comprehended except in its relation to other events, to other literatures."²⁶ In considering the practice of the great tragic poets, Arnold found the simultaneous representation of past and present worlds central to their vision:

Aeschylus and Sophocles represent an age as interesting as themselves; the names, indeed, in their dramas are the names of the old heroic world, from which they were far separated; but these names are taken, because the use of them permits to the poet that free and ideal treatment of his characters which the highest tragedy demands; and into these figures of the old world is poured all the fullness of life and of thought which the new world had accumulated.²⁷

By "the fulness of life and of thought" Arnold did not mean simply the poet's own life and thought nor merely contemporary views on contemporary problems; he meant "the general intelligence of his age and nation."²⁸ From the 1853 Preface through "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," Arnold insisted that the intelligence of his age was unequal to that of the ages of Aeschylus and

²⁵*Culture and Anarchy*, ed. J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge, 1966), p. 135.

²⁶*Prose Works*, pp. 20-21.

²⁷*Prose Works*, p. 31.

²⁸*Prose Works*, p. 26.

Shakespeare. Yet his own epoch, he said in his inaugural lecture, contained the contrasts between confusion and clarity, depression and energy, which characterized all epochs. The poet who would adequately interpret his time must work with these contrasts if his view is to have a proper depth and completeness.²⁹

Part of this view is voiced by Balder who, in some respects, is the poet of "A Summer Night" torn between the demands of the world and those of the self (a typical Arnoldian dilemma) who is "Never by passion quite possessed/ And never quite benumbed by the world's sway." More prominently, he is the poet, like Empedocles, whose greatness is "Railed and hunted from the world." Just as Arnold, spiritually isolated from a deceptive world in "Dover Beach," seeks in personal love the means to endure his seclusion, so Balder, both physically and spiritually isolated from his world, seeks with his wife Nanna, who is with him in Hell, "Some solace in each other's look and speech,/ Wandering together through that gloomy world" (I.327-328). An even more important parallel is the step beyond "Dover Beach" in which Balder, rejecting mere melancholy endurance, finds, in a broader circumference, the means to hope for a renewal of life:

For I am long since weary of your storm
Of Carnage, and find, Hermod, in
your life
Something too much of war and broils,
which make
Life one perpetual fight, a bath of blood.
Mine eyes are dizzy with the arrowy hail;
Mine ears are stunned with blows, and sick
for calm.
Inactive therefore let me lie, in gloom,
Unarmed, inglorious; I attend the course
Of ages, and my late return to light,
In times less alien to a spirit mild,
In new-recovered seats, the happier day.

(III.503-513)

This step, in both detail and spirit, looks forward to the concluding paragraph of "Porro Unum Est Necessarium" in which Arnold expresses directly what he had expressed indirectly, through Balder, some fifteen years earlier.

And now, therefore, when we are accused of preaching up a spirit of cultivated inaction, of provoking the earnest lovers of action, of refusing to lend a hand at uprooting certain

²⁹*Prose Works*, pp. 21, 35. See also "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," in *Essays in Criticism, First Series* (London, 1966), pp. 24, 34.

definite evils, of despairing to find any lasting truth to minister to the diseased spirit of our time, we shall not be so much confounded and embarrassed what to answer for ourselves. We shall say boldly that we do not at all despair of finding some lasting truth to minister to the diseased spirit of our time; but that we have discovered the best way of finding this to be not so much by lending a hand to our friends and countrymen in their actual operations for the removal of certain definite evils, but rather in getting our friends and countrymen to seek culture, to let their consciousness play freely round their present operations and the stock notions on which they are founded, show what these are like, and how related to the intelligible law of things, and auxiliary to true human perfection.³⁰

It is at this point that one might agree with Ryals that "With its closing note of hope for the future *Balder Dead* marks a turning point in Arnold's development."³¹ Yet I observe that the closing note, the very final note, is not one of hope.

At the end of the poem both Balder and Hermod eye the same goal—a new Heaven. Balder describes to Hermod his vision of a second Asgard:

'Far to the south, beyond the blue, there
 spreads
 Another Heaven, the boundless—no one yet
 Hath reached it; there hereafter shall arise
 The second Asgard, with another name.
 Thither, when o'er this present earth and
 Heavens
 The tempest of the latter days hath swept,
 And they from sight have disappeared, and
 sunk,
 Shall a small remnant of the Gods repair;
 Hoder and I shall join them from the grave.'

The creation of the new Heaven will evolve out of the destruction of the first Asgard, and will, by the nature of its evolution, exclude the possibility of conflict:

'There re-assembling we shall see emerge
 From the bright ocean at our feet an earth
 More fresh, more verdant than the last,
 with fruits

³⁰*Culture and Anarchy*, pp. 163-164.

³¹Ryals, p. 78.

Self-springing, and a seed of man
 preserved,
 Who then shall live in peace, as now in war.'
 (III.518-531)

Peace and contentment, as opposed to war and anxiety, are here intimately related to the absence of a personal creator, and the natural process by which the new Heaven will emerge allows for no flaw in the creation.

It is apparent that Balder's vision is the *vera vita* and that, accepted in Hela's kingdom, willing to endure the gloom of Hell, accompanied by Nanna and Hoder, satisfied with his rejection of Valhalla, and convinced of the inevitability of the second Asgard, Balder is at last in harmony with the spirit of the universe. It is also apparent that Hermod, watching his friends enter the interior gloom of Hell, is condemned to live, to suffer:

But Hermod stood beside his drooping
 horse,
 Mute, gazing after them in tears; and fain,
 Fain had he followed their receding steps,
 Though they to death were bound, and he
 to Heaven,
 Then; but a power he could not break
 withheld.
 And as a stork which idle boys have
 trapped,
 And tied him in a yard, at autumn sees
 Flocks of his kind pass flying o'er his head
 To warmer lands, and coasts that keep
 the sun;
 He strains to join their flight, and from
 his shed
 Follows them with a long complaining cry—
 So Hermod gazed, and yearned to join his kin. (III.554-565)

Hermod's anguish results, not from his inability to believe in Balder's vision, but from his inability to break the power that separates him from his goal of contentment. He longs to be with the kindred spirits Balder, Hoder, and Nanna in their unthreatened calm, and he would commit suicide if he could, but he is not free to choose the time or means of his death. The echo of Arnold's "Stanzas in Memory of the Author of 'Obermann'" is unmistakable:

We, in some unknown Power's employ,
 Move on a rigorous line;

Can neither, when we will enjoy,
Nor, when we will, resign.³²

Unable to resign from life, Arnold, thus, says farewell to Senancour, his mentor and kindred spirit, who has

gone away from earth,
And place with those dost claim,
The Children of the Second Birth,
Whom the world could not tame.³³

The echo suggests the parallel of Arnold with Hermod and Balder with Senancour. This connection makes it possible to argue that the final note of the poem is one of despair—Arnold, like Hermod, finding himself a helpless victim of fate. It is at this point that one might agree with Anderson that although Arnold attempted to write a dramatic poem, his temperament was so fixed that “instinctively” he was “making visible the sombre shapes of his inward vision.”³⁴

Yet, as I have indicated, Arnold identified not only with Hermod, but also with Balder. This double identification suggests that Arnold accepted two possibilities for the future. If Hermod feels a mysterious power at work which acts frivolously and contrary to his deepest desires, Balder sees the course of ages moving naturally and in harmony with the gods’ desires towards perfection. In this respect Arnold has one foot in the *mala vita* and one foot in the *vera vita*. I see nothing in the poem to suggest that Arnold rejected either possibility. In fact, it is precisely the preservation of both possibilities that allows “Balder Dead” to fulfill Arnold’s own requisites for tragic pleasure.

It is important here to recall, I think, that in the 1853 Preface Arnold tacitly admits that he understood the proper conditions for tragic pleasure (those conditions and that pleasure being defined largely by Aristotle) only after he had published “Empedocles on Etna.” The problem with “Empedocles,” he says, is that it gives primary attention to the mental and emotional states “in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done.”³⁵ This type of situation, Arnold avers, produces pain not pleasure. Yet, he continues, “In presence of the most tragic circumstances, represented in a work of art, the feeling of enjoyment, as is well

³²*Poems*, p. 136.

³³*Poems*, p. 136.

³⁴Anderson, p. 61.

³⁵*Prose Works*, pp. 2-3.

known, may still subsist; the representation of the most utter calamity, of the liveliest anguish, is not sufficient to destroy it."³⁶ To properly represent a tragic circumstance, Arnold had to discover how "utter calamity" need not be morbid and could be enjoyable.

As would be expected from his comments on "Empedocles," Arnold concentrated in "Balder Dead" on avoiding unrelieved suffering. Balder's death does precipitate grief so intense among the gods that all "Valhalla rang/ Up to its golden roof with sobs and cries" (I.11-12). But this anguish is relieved by Frea's proposal that Balder might be returned if Hela's terms are fulfilled. At first

Through the world was heard a dripping
voice
Of all things weeping to bring Balder back;
And there fell joy upon the gods to hear.

(III.317-319)

This joy proves to be momentary, however, when Lok refuses to weep. The result is pain proportionate to the degree of delight:

And as seafaring men, who have long
wrought
In the great deep for gain, at last come home
And towards evening see the headlands rise
Of their dear country, and can plain descry
A fire of withered furze which boys have lit
Upon the cliffs, or smoke of burning weeds
Out of a tilled field inland; then the wind
Catches them, and drives out again to sea;
And they go long days tossing up and down
Over the sea-ridges, and the glimpse
Of port they had makes bitterer far their
toil—
So the Gods' cross was bitterer for their joy.

(III.357-368)

In spite of the sense here of a *lesson taught*, this pattern is repeated when Balder offers to Hermod the hope of a happier day. This vision stimulates Hermod to great excitement, but it proves to be a lever to profound pain when he discovers that he cannot willfully turn dream into reality. Along with Lok and death, suffering prevails, but its progress is not unbroken by expressions of hope and attempts, though disastrous, to act on a belief that something can be done to avert catastrophe.

³⁶*Prose Works*, p. 2.

If Arnold observed that these moments of relief were necessary for tragic pleasure, he also made another discovery, which he explains most clearly in his Preface to "Merope." If a tragic situation is to please, he says, it must, following the Greek pattern, not only exhibit "the most agitating matter under the conditions of the severest form," it must also restore a proper balance of conflicting forces. He continues,

Sometimes the agitation becomes overwhelming, and the correspondence is for a time lost, the torrent of feeling flows for a space without check: this disorder amid the general order produces a powerful effect; but the balance is restored before the tragedy closes: the final sentiment in the mind must be one not of trouble, but of acquiescence.³⁷

This Aristotelian *catharsis* receives considerable emphasis. As the action moves toward a final calamity

the thought and emotion swell higher and higher without overflowing their boundaries, to a lofty sense of the mastery of the human spirit over its own stormiest agitations; and this, again, conducts us to a state of feeling which it is the highest aim of tragedy to produce, to *a sentiment of sublime acquiescence in the course of fate, and in the dispensations of human life* [Arnold's italics].³⁸

Such a state, he suggests in the 1853 Preface, leaves the audience free of "all feelings of contradiction, and irritation, and impatience."³⁹

How did Arnold, having established the victory of death over life, balance at the end of the poem these conflicting forces? A major step in achieving this balance is to indicate that Fate (Arnold's term)—whatever its nature—holds life and death in its control. From Odin's opening statement that Balder's death is not the responsibility of either Hoder or the other gods, but simply the fulfillment of an end long ago predetermined (I.23-35), the poem increasingly emphasizes this theme. It becomes a common denominator that all the gods are agents (or victims) of Fate. Another step is to show that a mastery of the spirit over its own deepest fears is achieved by perception of and submission to a power beyond itself. Balder does dominate his anger and self-pity (when he understands that he cannot be returned to

³⁷*Prose Works*, p. 59.

³⁸*Prose Works*, pp. 58-59.

³⁹*Prose Works*, p. 14.

Valhalla) by accepting death and looking forward to the future. Hermod, too, in the final line, overcomes, perhaps, his desire for death and accepts life, returning with a "sigh" to Heaven. Whatever their separate conceptions of Fate, both do submit to their given conditions. A final step in achieving a balance is up to the reader. If he has followed, "stroke upon stroke," the progression of the separate thoughts and feelings of each character, then he is in a position to see, what neither Balder nor Hermod can see, that Lok's victory has not fundamentally changed the possibilities open to the living gods. Death and Life do remain within the order of things.

It may seem odd that one who commends impersonality should write about himself. But there is no paradox here. Arnold attempted to use biographical and contemporary materials in a purely formal manner. Because he used his materials as he thought the Greek tragic poets had used theirs, it seems legitimate to say that Arnold considered himself a part of the classical tradition. To say, as John P. Farrell does,⁴⁰ that Arnold's commitment to a particular historical view (rather than his commitment to the ancients) shaped his tragic vision is, I think, unsupported by "Balder Dead." To Arnold, says Farrell, "Tragedy ends in a sterile future because the essence of tragedy is historical stalemate."⁴¹ While Farrell emphasizes the expressions of Balder, the centrality of Falkland to the form, and the primacy of history, it seems to me (as I have attempted to show) that Arnold subordinates both expression and character to action, that the "old mythic story" is the governing form, and that history is meaningless in the face of a mysterious cosmic scheme.

Arnold's detachment from and attitude toward the historical process is apparent in his treatment of the problem (which engages all the characters) of how to live in the presence of death. Odin demands that the gods live "With cold dry eyes, and hearts composed and stern" (I.35), their daily life in Heaven; Frea, who contends that "much must still be tried, which shall but fail" (I.130), argues for a self-sacrificial attitude and pattern of behavior in quotidian life; Balder moves from Frea's position to one in which he is willing to simply "endure Death" (III.544-545) until Life is restored. Arnold treats each of these approaches with sympathy. But because he is governed by the dramatic principle that how the gods live has no effect on the future course of events, it is not surprising that he gives no directives on how

⁴⁰"Matthew Arnold's Tragic Vision," *PMLA*, 85 (1970), 107.

⁴¹Farrell, p. 117.

to live. What Arnold does give is the impression that the consideration of how to live deepens the richness of thought and feeling—and in this he is neither simply personal nor didactic, but in the finest sense dramatic.

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