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Our Hidden Contemporaries

I.

CONSIDER THIS POEM FROM MATTHEW ARNOLD'S sequence of poems addressed to Arthur Hugh Clough:

The Rushlight

I love gossip
and the small-wood of humanity generally
among these raw mammoth-
belched half-delightful objects
the Swiss Alps.

The limestone is terribly
gingerbready: the pines terribly
larchy...
and the curse of the dirty water—

I have seen clean water in parts of the lake of Geneva
whose whole locality
is spoiled by the omnipresence there
of that furiously flaring bethiefed rushlight,
the vulgar Byron.

Now these lines, in the opinion of any contemporary poet, read as vastly superior to almost any of Arnold's other poems, like the numbing

True, we must tame our rebel will:
True, we must bow to Nature's law:
Must bear in silence many an ill;
Must lean to wait, renounce, withdraw.

from 'Courage'

But 'The Rushlight'—a rushlight, Wikipedia reports, is 'a type of candle or miniature torch formed by soaking the dried pith of the rush plant in fat or grease'—doesn't appear in any anthology of Arnold's poems. Its fullness of phrase ('furiously flaring bethiefed rushlight') and delightfully contrarian irascibility—a

vacation to Lake Geneva provokes a crack at Lord Byron—has escaped anthologists fixated on Matthew Arnold, the classicizing dean.

Of course, another reason this gem hasn't found its due is because Arnold left out those late-20th-century, Charles-Wright-like linebreaks. He wrote them as prose in a letter to Arthur Hugh Clough, failing to recognize them as poetry that would be far more appealing, less than a hundred years later, than his bland iambs. Here's another Arnold gem—a tenderly homosexual love poem, excavated from the same unrecognized sequence:

The Pourquoi

Perhaps you don't see the pourquoi:
but I think my love
does

and the paper draws to an end....

My feeling with regard to (I hate
the word) women:

We know beforehand
all they can teach us: yet
we are obliged to learn it
directly from them....

Farewell, my love,
to meet I hope
in Oxford:
not

 alas
 in heaven.

Some traits that we value in poetry—irregularity of rhythm, unpredictability of language, a highly personal bent—were things that the Victorians allowed themselves only in their letters. The letter also lent itself to a structural characteristic so ubiquitous in contemporary poems it is almost unrecognized: the first-person anecdote.

So Matthew Arnold is terribly out of favor among contemporary poets; I myself find much of his *poetry* unreadable. But what a shock in the Letters! 19th-century poetic conventions strictly limited how much detritus of life was allowed in verse, much like French neoclassical tragedy. This is why the Victorians were

I am universally understood

to be a person of degree
and a master of languages.

How merrily we lives that travellers be!—
if we had food and raiment.

But, in sober sadness,
any thing is better

than England.

The shifts of mood and register, that wryly pseudo-Biblical ‘signifieth,’ the Scottish Lord’s self-reflexive sarcasm (‘a person of degree’)—this is a poetry over a century in advance of its time. We even catch the half-poignant, half-bitter end note of ‘England,’ which Arnold, in spite of himself, would echo decades later in his own ‘Itinerary.’

Byron’s travels in Greece and Asia occasioned some of his best poems—but I don’t mean the so-called Oriental Romances:

Know ye the land where the cypress and myrtle
Are emblems of deeds that are done in their clime?
Where the rage of the vulture, the love of the turtle,
Now melt into sorrow, now madden to crime?
Know ye the land of the cedar and vine,
Where the flowers ever blossom, the beams ever shine;
Where the light wings of Zephyr, oppressed with perfume,
Wax faint o’er the gardens of Gúl in her bloom;
Where the citron and olive are fairest of fruit,
And the voice of the nightingale never is mute;
Where the tints of the earth, and the hues of the sky,
In colour though varied, in beauty may vie,
And the purple of Ocean is deepest in dye;
Where the virgins are soft as the roses they twine,
And all, save the spirit of man, is divine—
Tis the clime of the East—’tis the land of the Sun—
Can he smile on such deeds as his children have done?

from ‘The Bride of Abydos’

Edward Said couldn't bear this stuff, and neither can we. (Byron's contemporaries, mind you, *loved* it.) The poet's vision blurs the harder he tries to set a scene; here, Byron decides against his own memory and reaches for Goethe's 1795 poem, 'Mignon.' *Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühn?*—yes, we do know the land, both by the opening question, and the telltale 'citron.'

To understand what Byron was really capable of, both as a poet and a witness, we must turn to one of his embedded masterpieces, 'The Arrival.' Here we find a clear, Homeric eye, delighting in the accoutrements of war; here we find the poet focused on things as they are. The opening lines of 'The Arrival' belong, not in a romance, but in an epic:

The Arrival

The Albanians, in their dresses, (the most magnificent in the world, consisting of a long *white kilt*, gold-worked cloak, crimson velvet gold-laced jacket and waistcoat, silver-mounted pistols and daggers,) the Tartars with their high caps, the Turks in their vast pelisses and turbans,

the soldiers
and black slaves with the horses, the former in groups in an immense large open gallery in front of the palace, the latter placed in a kind of cloister below it,

two hundred steeds ready caparisoned to move in a moment,
couriers entering or passing out
with the despatches, the kettle-drums beating,
boys calling the hour from the minaret of the mosque...

To-day I saw the remains of the town of Actium,
near which Antony lost the world, in a small bay,
where two frigates could hardly manoeuvre.

An elaborate description of Ottoman grandeur, followed by a three-line vignette of vanished imperial might: It is a brilliant juxtaposition, presented in the letter just as it is here, without commentary or transition. 'Immense large open'—the same could be said of Byron's poetic style here.

Besides the off-the-cuff epic snippet, Byron, at this point, was also throwing down charming poems in the confessional mode. When have we ever heard a 19th-century poet talking about his waistline and his workout routine? A familial tendency to obesity troubled Byron throughout his life, and he dilated and shrank cyclically. Here the young Byron kvetches about money—but he finds an upside to the situation:

Weights & Measures

Wine and Women have *dished* your *humble Servant*,
 not a *Sou* to be *had*; all *over*; condemned
 to exist (I cannot say live) at this *Crater* of Dullness
 till my *Lease of Infancy* expires. To appear
 at Cambridge is impossible; no money
 even to pay my College expences.
 You will be surprized to hear I am grown
very thin; however it is the *Fact*, so much so,
 that the people here think I am *going*.

I have lost 18 LB in my weight, that is one Stone
 & 4 pounds since January, this was ascertained
 last Wednesday, on account of a *Bet* with an acquaintance.

However don't be alarmed; I have taken
 every means to accomplish the end,
 by violent exercise and Fasting, as I found myself
 too plump. I shall continue my Exertions,
 having no other amusement; I wear *seven* Waistcoats
 and a great Coat, run, and play at cricket
 in this Dress, till quite exhausted by excessive
 perspiration, use the Hip Bath daily; eat
 only a quarter of a pound of Butcher's Meat
 in 24 hours, no Suppers or Breakfast,
 only one Meal a Day; drink no malt liquor,
 but a little Wine, and take Physic occasionally.
 By these means my *Ribs* display Skin
 of no great Thickness, & my Clothes
 have been taken in nearly *half a yard*.

Erratic italics and capital letters give Byron's verse their own typographical idiosyncrasy, much as Dickinson's dashes do. This very 21st century obsession with

weight is presented in a very 21st century, conversational tone, reminiscent at times of Frank O'Hara's 'I do this, I do that' poems. But here's the kicker: 'Weights & Measures' was dashed off on April 2nd, 1807. Byron was still half a decade away from publishing the single longest purple passage in English literature, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. That was the work of poetry that would make him famous; it is tough going today in a way 'Weights & Measures' isn't.

In fact, all of the Byron poems in this essay come from before 1812, the year the first part of *Childe Harold* was published. The one below comes from 1810, and is a gem of a love poem, full of clever line breaks and a surprise ending that shows why Byron was, for so long, considered disreputable:

Postscript

I almost forgot to tell you
that I am dying

for love of three Greek
girls at Athens,

sisters.

I lived in the same house.

Teresa,
Mariana,
and Katinka,

are the names of these divinities—
all of them

under fifteen.

III.

Byron did get some of this wry, playful, outrageous, capacious life into his verse—hence the enduring appeal of *Don Juan*. Others were not so fortunate. Algernon Charles Swinburne, for example: As a poet, he gives me the impression of having stitched and unstitched his verses into one seamless silken bolt of Bad:

I hid my heart in a nest of roses,
 Out of the sun's way, hidden apart;
 In a softer bed than the soft white snow's is,
 Under the roses I hid my heart.

from 'A Ballad of Dreamland'

Compare that typical snippet of Swinburnese to the chockablock, kinetic language and scatological superflux of Swinburne's 1874 flyting of Ralph Waldo Emerson. In this little-known trans-Atlantic literary showdown, Emerson called Swinburne 'a perfect leper, and a mere sodomite' in an interview. Swinburne wrote a poem in letter form to the *New York Tribune* that described the transcendental sage as, among other things,

... a gap-toothed and hoary-headed ape, carried first into notice on the shoulder of Carlyle, and who now, in his dotage, spits and chatters from a dirtier perch of his own finding and fouling; Coryphaeus or choragus of his Bulgarian tribe of autocoprophagous baboons who make the filth they feed on.

Now that puts the *burn* in Swinburne.

Tennyson is another 19th-century poet who wrote 21st-century letters. In 1853, the poet laureate described a seaside stroll like so:

... forth they came and paced the shore,
 Ran in and out the long sea-framing caves,
 Drank the large air, and saw, but scarce believed
 (The sootflake of so many a summer still
 Clung to their fancies) that they saw, the sea.
 So now on sand they walk'd, and now on cliff,
 Lingering about the thymy promontories,
 Till all the sails were darken'd in the west,
 And rosed in the east.

from 'Sea Dreams'

Just a year before, he had described something similar, in this hidden masterpiece of natural description whose keenness and immediacy prefigure Bishop and Montale:

St. Hilda's Snakes

for Emily Sellwood Tennyson

You see beautiful little ammonites
which you stoop to pick up but find them part
of the solid rock.

These are the snakes St. Hilda drove over
the cliff and falling they lost their heads, and she changed them
into stone.

I found a strange fish on the shore
with rainbows about its wild staring eyes,
enclosed
in a sort of sack with long tentacula beautifully colored,
quite dead,

but when I took it up by the tail
spotted all the sand underneath with great drops
of ink,

so I suppose a kind of cuttlefish.

I found too
a pale pink orchis on the sea bank
and a pink vetch,
a low sort of shrub
with here
and there
a thorn.