

Abstract

The context of this analysis is the religious climate of the Victorian era, specifically the tension between traditional religion and modern natural science and philosophy, and the resulting narratives of crises of faith in the literature of the era. In my research on this context, I often found aspects of duality, which eventually resulted in the framework of duality and tension between opposing forces that this thesis builds on. Central to this framework is the idea of the Victorian era as an age of transition characterized by the tension between destruction and reconstruction.

This thesis centers on my analyses of three Victorian poems that I consider representations of the religious climate of their time: “Stanzas of the Grande Chartreuse” by Matthew Arnold, Alfred Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, and *The City of Dreadful Night* by James Thomson. My analyses of these poems rely on two main ideas. First, I explore how the poems, through their interplay between opposing forces, are part of the Victorian crisis-of-faith discourse, and what solutions the poems may suggest to that crisis. Secondly, I inquire into the role and purpose of poetry in this historical and literary context, and discuss the idea of poetry as a stabilizing force in a time of change, an idea represented both explicitly and implicitly in the three poems. I argue that the stabilizing property of poetry, is its function as an arena for voicing doubt and pain, but also for exploring and searching for the new certainties which the Victorians had yet to find in their contemporary society. Thus, poetry may play a key role in escaping the limbo of living between two worlds, in solving a crisis of faith, and in uniting isolated and alienated individuals.

Acknowledgements

My motivation for this project was quite simply that I enjoy close reading and analyzing poetry. Ever since I started working with poetry in school, I have loved poems for their interpretive richness. Close reading was one of my favorite things to do in school, because analyzing and finding different interpretations of poems made them feel like puzzles. As I grew older, adding pieces of historical context and intertextuality to the puzzles made them even more enjoyable. When I made interesting connections, I sometimes felt as an investigator drawing a red string from one point to another. The same enthusiasm has followed me into adulthood and student life.

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Introduction

Beginning at the end of the Industrial Revolution, the British Victorian era is considered a time marked by a break with the traditional past. Walter E. Houghton writes that the idea of the Victorian era as an era of change and transition is an “almost universal conception of the period” (1). The transitional aspects of the period were in part a break with past traditions of Christian orthodoxy, social structures of class hierarchy and agricultural economy, but the idea of transition was also influenced by reform in England and revolutions abroad (Houghton). As Houghton writes: “By definition an age of transition in which changes is revolutionary has a dual aspect: destruction and reconstruction” (3). This dual aspect also manifests in the idea of a search for new certainties to replace the old established traditions, a search some Victorian intellectuals often expressed as living between two worlds (Houghton).

Considering the idea of transition in the Victorian era as a tension between destruction and reconstruction, the framework of this thesis will be the concept of duality and tension between opposing forces. Building on the idea of two worlds, I will focus on the religious context of the Victorian era, in which we find the often-contrasting ideas of traditional religion and natural science and modern philosophy. To the Victorians, living between those two worlds often resulted in doubt, and occasionally a crisis of faith. To discuss the idea of duality, I will sometimes refer to the existence between these two worlds as a “limbo”, a word with convenient religious connotations, which I will define as a state of in-between and uncertainty, and of feeling out of place. Arguably, living in limbo is an alternative expression for what we now often characterize as the modern condition. However, the modern condition might be more fitting for a macro perspective, while the concepts of “living in limbo” and “crisis of faith” might be more easily applied to the micro perspective. Regardless, these terms all relate to the idea that living in a world of many opposing theories and movements, without unifying common belief, made people feel estranged and isolated from each other (Houghton 77). They were also oppressed by the feeling of uncertainty about their nature and place in the universe, when religion could no longer provide unquestioned certainties. The break with Christian orthodoxy left a void that needed to be filled for people to feel content. In the meantime, some felt the void fester like a disease that Houghton characterizes by the following symptoms: “The will is impotent; action is thwarted; friendship is impossible” (65).

At the beginning of the Victorian era, Thomas Carlyle famously wrote about the condition of England in *Past and Present*, and considered “a lack of spiritual unity or brotherhood among men” one of the “essential and momentous problems” (Harrison 20) of

his nation. In the Preface to *God and the Bible*, originally published in 1875, Matthew Arnold wrote that “we live at the beginning of a great transition which cannot well be accomplished without confusion and distress” (xxix). Arnold wrote about a religious transition and a “new Christianity” (xxix), and claimed that “two things about the Christian religion must surely be clear to anybody with eyes in his head. One is, that man cannot do without it ; the other, that they cannot do with it as it is” (viii). While Carlyle was concerned with the need for religion to unite the nation, Arnold was thinking of “the continued use and enjoyment of the Bible” (4) and our need for religion to guide action. Yet, these great Victorian writers were both concerned with the authority and role of religion in Britain as a nation, and the effects of religious transition and change, questions which became part of one of the most important discourses of the era. The religious turmoil, affected by many factors such as denominational disagreements, new scientific and philosophical impulses, and the emergence of agnosticism and atheism into the public sphere, caused many intellectuals to write about a crisis of faith. These crisis-of-faith writers are central in the discourse of religious doubts that became typical of the Victorian era.

In *Victorian People and Ideas*, Richard D. Altick introduces the religious climate of the Victorian era which is the central context to this thesis. Altick writes: “The ordinary Victorian had been reared in a culture circumscribed by Christian teaching” (203). Religion was the moral foundation of his life, and “had determined his whole outlook upon life, his assessment of its nature and purpose; and when what he had been taught to believe were [religion’s] eternal verities were cast into question, he suffered accordingly” (203-204). Therefore, Christian doctrine was of interest to the general educated public as it was “an inextricable part of the cultural fabric” (Altick 203). However, there were surely variations in how big of an impact scientific discovery and Bible criticism made on a people’s faith. While the Evangelicals and other more orthodox denominations were vulnerable when confronted with criticism of the Bible, the Broad Church, or Latitudinarian movement, was better equipped to handle skepticism, criticism and new scientific discovery. “Imbued with the spirit of free inquiry, they kept an open mind toward science” (Altick 208), and Charles Kingsley and other Broad Churchmen did not let theories of evolution be a threat to Christianity. Rather, they believed “Christianity did in fact find it possible to come to terms with the implications of biological evolution” (Altick 208). Altick explains that “[Samuel Taylor] Coleridge, an expositor of Christian belief, had laid emphasis [...] upon the spirituality, the non-rationalism, of religion” (208), and this kind of emphasis protected the Latitudinarian faith against Biblical critics. To Coleridge, “Faith rested not upon the literal and historical

accuracy of the Bible but upon the spiritual truths, independent of supernatural or natural “evidences”, which Revelation contained” (Altick 208), and Altick asserts that this “enabled Latitudinarians to remain relatively serene at a time when others were being driven into unhappy doubt” (208). Therefore, “the Broad Church was the most fortunate of the principal Victorian movements” (Altick 208). However, they did not only encounter Biblical criticism and scientific skepticism. There were also representatives from orthodox religious movements who were suspicious of the liberal ways of Latitudinarians. To John Henry Newman, leader of the Oxford Movement¹, “it was the halfway house to atheism” (Altick 208). In short, scientific discovery, and the Biblical criticism that followed, were a great source of conflict within the religious movements of the Victorian era.

However, the religious conflict was not solely a dogmatic dispute between denominations. It did not only concern the threatening influence of new science and critical approaches. It was a conflict about belief in general, and of Britain as a Christian nation. While the Victorian era is often portrayed as a time of crisis of faith where faith consequently declined, it is an oversimplification. According to Nickolas Conrad, the Victorian era was marked by a heightened religious discourse and a rise in religious belief and unbelief (Conrad 5), rather than being marked by a decline in faith. While some movements supported religious tolerance, others still preached the condemnation of Catholics or “papists” and refused to tolerate “infidels”. Conrad explains that atheists were being accepted in some highly educated circles, but were generally marginalized in society. He explains that “[the] central issue for the defenders of religious morality was that atheism would cause the disintegration of society by removing the moral cement that held it together” (Conrad 2). Because of this central issue, atheists and Freethinkers were still being imprisoned because of blasphemy laws in mid-nineteenth century. However, by the end of the Victorian era and after the Oath of Allegiance controversy, Charles Bradlaugh, founder of the National Secular Society, finally took his seat in Parliament in 1886 after being elected for the fifth consecutive time (Conrad 28).

Thomas Henry Huxley, who coined the term “agnostic”, spoke up against the ecclesiastic attacks on those who criticized orthodox and strict religious dogma. In his essay “Agnosticism and Christianity” published in 1889, he questions the grounds for ecclesiastic attacks on agnosticism as a threat to morality:

Greek science, Greek art, the ethics of old Israel, the social organization of old Rome, contrived to come into being without the help of any one who believed

¹ A group of Anglicans who wished to reverse the break with traditional, orthodox religion, by restoring several Catholic beliefs and practices typical of the time before the Reformation.

in a single distinctive article of the simplest of the Christian creeds. [...] So that I think that even if the creeds [...] were swept into oblivion; and even if the human race should arrive at the conclusion that, whether a bishop washes a cup or leaves it unwashed, is not a matter of the least consequence, it will get on very well. The causes which have led to the development of morality in mankind, which have guided or impelled us all the way from savage to the civilised state, will not cease to operate because a number of ecclesiastical hypotheses turn out to be baseless. (Huxley 940-41)

In this extract, Huxley presents a view likely shared by many of his contemporaries. Huxley points out in his essay that there is a difference between scientifically valid facts and religious beliefs, and if religion should claim the same authority as science, it must adapt a scientific method. To Huxley, agnosticism presumes “that it is wrong for a man to say that he is certain of the objective truth of any proposition unless he can produce evidence which logically justifies that certainty” (937-38). The ecclesiastical unwillingness to adapt is likely why many Victorians doubted the teachings of the church, and why some abandoned their faith, a tendency Conrad states was especially present in the working classes (34; 45).

This thesis centers on three writers, Matthew Arnold, Alfred Tennyson and James Thomson, whose works are part of the crisis-of-faith discourse. I consider these works to be representations of the experiences of people who suffered a religious crisis in the Victorian era. Firstly, considering the aspects of duality that marked the Victorian era, my thesis will center on the interplay and tension between dual forces in their poetry. I argue that these writers, through the interplay of opposing forces in their poetry, not only capture crises of faith, but also represent different solutions to these crises. The discussion of opposing forces in their poetry will show how the writers perceived the relation between the old and the new, specifically between traditional religion and the new scientific discoveries and modern philosophies of their time. In other words, their poetry gives the present-day reader an insight into personal feelings of living in limbo or crises of faith, which in turn represent the Victorian era as an age of transition. Secondly, I will inquire into the role and purpose of poetry in this historical and literary context, and discuss the idea of poetry as a stabilizing force in a time of change: an idea represented both explicitly and implicitly in the poetry which will be discussed. I will argue that the stabilizing property of poetry is its function as an arena for voicing doubt and pain, but also for exploring and searching for the new certainties which the Victorians had yet to find in their contemporary society. Thus, poetry may play a

key role in escaping limbo, to solving a crisis of faith, and to uniting isolated and alienated individuals.

In poetry, we find a tension between poetic rules and creative impulse, or a dyad of order and freedom. Thus, poetry itself balances opposing forces. Attaining equilibrium between opposing forces can, as a result, be one of the stabilizing effects of poetry. The presence or absence of equilibrium in the poems of Arnold, Tennyson and Thomson may inform our understanding of their intentions for writing poetry. Furthermore, it is interesting that, in the age of the great English novel, these writers chose poetry as their medium to express their deeply spiritual concerns. Poetry has been considered a noble form of art since antiquity, and the novel was only about a hundred years old at the beginning of the Victorian era. However, the novel became the dominant literary form and a great, respectable accomplishment in the Victorian era. Victorian novels often had a serious agenda of social and political change, and religious disputes were, as previously explained, a social matter too. Additionally, novels were in high demand and widely read, and writing them could provide both a broad audience and a decent income. Professional writers gradually replaced the traditional “writing for the sake of art” with the more modern endeavor of writing for money. However, there were still writers who held on to a traditional view of literature as art, who perhaps valued the craft of poetry more than producing numbers of pages. The novel may have lacked a sense of elevation or divine spark, which some might deem necessary when writing about spiritual and religious matters. Whatever their motivations were for choosing poetry as a medium, they did so despite the trends of their time.

The idea of poetry as a stabilizing force is influenced by Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*. Therefore, I have included Arnold’s theory in the introduction, as a Victorian perspective on the role of poetry which will add to the analyses in the following chapters. Arnold wrote several prose works of cultural, religious and literary criticism along with his poetry. Although not as prominent a voice of his time as Carlyle, Arnold’s prose was influential, particularly in the field of literary criticism. Arnold often voiced his opinion of poetry and its properties of influence. I was interested to see whether my understanding of poetry as a dyad of order and freedom could pair well with Arnold’s idea of “sweetness and light” in *Culture and Anarchy*. In *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold defines “Culture” as the study of perfection, and further divides perfection into two components: “But hitherto I have been insisting chiefly on beauty, or sweetness, as a character of perfection. To complete rightly my design, it evidently remains to speak also of intelligence, or light, as a character of perfection” (81). Arnold uses beauty and intelligence and sweetness and light interchangeably throughout

the text, and if sweetness is beauty and light is intelligence, beauty could equal creative impulse and intelligence could equal poetic rules. However, Arnold does not only describe sweetness and light as beauty and intelligence. He also describes intelligence as a scientific passion or an intellectual curiosity to see things as they are, and sweetness as a moral desire to stop human error. Both of these descriptions are more on the side of “order” than of “freedom”. Arnold writes:

The idea of perfection [...] is at variance with our strong individualism, our hatred of all limits to the unrestrained swing of the individual’s personality, our maxim of “every man for himself.” Above all, the idea of perfection as a *harmonious* expansion of human nature is at variance with our want of flexibility, with our inaptitude for seeing more than one side of a thing, with our intense energetic absorption in the particular pursuit we happen to be following (*Culture and Anarchy* 63).

It seems beauty cannot be easily compared to freedom or creative impulse. To Arnold, freedom leads to individualism, a key source to the societal problems described in *Culture and Anarchy*. Therefore, our lust for freedom must yield to the common goal of human perfection. It appears, that in the ideal state of perfection, our intellectual curiosity should only lead to clarity and reason. Sweetness and light are what makes poetry a civilizing force, and I am not sure Arnold would agree with the idea that poetry contains the tension between order and freedom. From his perspective a dyad of order and freedom is a compromise between the good and the bad. Sweetness and light, however, are a combination of the two best aspects of humanity that lead to perfection. In an Arnoldian perspective, perhaps “order and freedom” pairs better with “Culture and Anarchy” than with “sweetness and light”.

In *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold claims that the reigning mentality of the modern world is “every man for himself” (Arnold 63). This mentality drives humanity away from sweetness and light, its best aspects, and away from the potential of perfection within. According to Arnold, cultured and “civilized” men must strive “to leave the world better and happier than we found it” (59), but also rely on reason and scientific passion. Arnold notes poetry is an endeavor fit for such a pursuit. To Arnold, poetry represents perfection in its combination of sweetness and light, therefore, it provides harmony in the tension between spirit and mind. Arnold believed that poetry could serve an instructional purpose in establishing harmony and saving society from the harmful impulses of modernity. Consequently, the ideal poet should motivate action that will lead to inner harmony and stability. In this sense, sweetness and light has a similar stabilizing function as attaining

equilibrium between opposing forces. However, what I call a stabilizing property of poetry, is to Arnold a distinctly civilizing effect, a moral and didactic guidance serving his agenda of “Culture”, and much more than simply resolving a personal crisis of faith, or escaping a feeling of limbo or isolation.

In *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold suggests that poetry as a civilizing agent would succeed more than organized religion in improving humanity, because the religion of his time had become too narrow and inflexible to lead all humankind towards perfection. Sebastian Lecourt discusses the role of religion in a selection of Arnold’s major prose works. About Arnold’s works on religion, he writes:

Matthew Arnold cuts a familiar figure in narratives of Victorian secularization, although commentators often cast him in contradictory roles. In some accounts we meet him as an elegiac liberal who laments the loss of a no-longer-tenable faith but feels powerless to produce an alternative [...]. Meanwhile other studies portray Arnold as a cautionary example of aggressive counter-secularization, a humanist whose vaunted ideal of “Culture” becomes as absolutist as the religion it is designed to replace. What both accounts share, however, is an understanding of secularization as the process whereby a definite thing called religion lost its hold upon European public life, leaving worried intellectuals to search for substitutes. (Lecourt 467)

In the first chapter of this thesis, we will see that the first of the roles Lecourt mentions is most relevant in relation to Arnold’s poetry, but it is true that Arnold presumed both roles in his literary works. As Lecourt points out, what both roles have in common is an anxiety about the loss of religion in society. Specifically, as *Culture and Anarchy* shows, what worried Arnold was the loss of religion’s societal and moral authority, and the anarchy that rose in its absence. Arnold believed “Culture” was best suited to re-civilize society after religion’s failure. According to Lecourt, it is uncertain whether Arnold saw “Culture” as “a fundamentally different sort of principle than religion, or whether it is a larger and nobler form of religion” (472). I believe “Culture” is not a religion, but an ideal better suited for modernity than religion to guide us towards perfection. However, both “Culture” and religion share the goal of human perfection, and I agree that Arnold’s use of language, which often evokes religious connotations, makes it difficult to distinguish “Culture” as something different from religion. Either way, Lecourt writes that the relation between “Culture” and religion is more complex than a matter of replacing one with the other. He notes that “Culture [...] cannot become a force for social regeneration unless it is supplemented by the “intense

and convicted energy” of religion (473). While strict religious rules and inflexible, impossible moral demands could potentially produce anarchy, Arnold claimed that Hebraism was at its core a force of strength. Hence, Lecourt suggests that Arnold believed that “in order to bring all sides of human nature to their “total perfection,” Culture has to draw upon the energy of “the religious side of man,” even if it contradicts the spirit of total perfection” (475).

In sum, *Culture and Anarchy* centers on the idea of religion’s failure to instruct and guide modern men towards a harmony between the spirit and the mind. The text partakes in the discourse of transition as a tension between destruction and reconstruction, and it aims to steer progress in the best direction. Also, *Culture and Anarchy* arguably deals with the Victorian crisis of faith, as an unbalance between spirit and mind or a tension between spiritual faith and reason. Arnold believed that men needed spirituality in their life, but that religion had been buried so deep under layers of inflexible doctrine and demoralizing moral demands. This made religion lost to the modern man, who needed his guiding principles to satisfy both his reason and his spirituality. As we will see, this unbalance is something Arnold also dealt with in his poem “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse”, where the narrator is stuck between destruction and reconstruction, unable to imagine a new and better world. In *In Memoriam*, Tennyson also finds himself torn between faith and reason, but unlike Arnold’s narrator, he is able to attain equilibrium. Through doubt and contemplation, which resembles the scientific method urged by Huxley above (“Agnosticism and Christianity”), his faith evolves and adapts to modernity. Nevertheless, both authors dealt with a crisis that could be solved by harmony between the soul and the mind. In contrast, Thomson did not believe in the soul, and wrote from a secular minority perspective. Yet, the crisis in *The City of Dreadful Night* is a secular parallel to the other two, as it also deals with destruction and reconstruction. In Thomson’s poem, people are suffering in lonely despair, alienated from an otherwise religious community, unable to realize that they are part of a brotherhood. In Thomson’s poem, the need for community equates the need for spirituality in the other poems. Moreover, all three authors dealt not only with the tension of opposing forces, but also with the role of poetry as a stabilizing force in an era of transition, as the following three chapters will show.

Chapter 1: Arnold's spiritual limbo as the crisis of faith

As the discussion of Lecourt and *Culture and Anarchy* in the introduction shows, Arnold believed religion had lost its hold as a source of guidance in his time, and the resulting chaos and crisis that followed this loss had to be resolved by something else. Religiousness could not serve "Culture" if it had become a cause for doubt, melancholy, grief or despair. If "Culture" needed to draw strength from the religious side of man, there had to be strength left in that part of him. Thus, while Arnold's grand idea of "Culture" revolves around perfecting all sides of human nature, not just his religious side, poems such as "Dover Beach", *Empedocles on Etna* and "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse" show that Arnold was concerned with a crisis of faith in his time. While we cannot know when and if Arnold experienced a crisis of faith of his own, his ideas about religion provide context for discussing the role of poetry in crises of faith, which are tied to the idea of poetry as a civilizing agent. As this chapter will show, Arnold was unable to write poetry that lived up to his poetic ideal of guidance towards perfection. Yet, his poem "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse" functions as a cautionary tale, as well as a metaphor of a modern condition that seems to be the essence of the Victorian crisis of faith as we often characterize it today. In the interplay between an old, dead world, and a new, better world powerless to be born, Arnold conveys what he believed was the modern disease, but leaves the idea of a cure up to the reader.

In his book *The Time-Spirit of Matthew Arnold*, R. H. Super writes about Arnold's religious background. Arnold was brought up Christian, but his father, a clergyman, had a faith that was different from popular conceptions of Protestant Christianity. Arnold's father warned not to anthropomorphize God, and he familiarized Arnold with criticism of the Bible. As we know from his prose, Arnold disliked strict imposition of creeds and wanted broad religious tolerance. As Super writes, "his religion was entirely undogmatic" (80). Super explains that Arnold was influenced by Spinoza, who argued that God and Nature, his eternal creation, are the same. In other words, creation does not revolve around humanity, and the creator is not a fatherly figure that will soothe men in their crises. Thus, men will have to find other ways of coping. In this philosophy, God, in terms of modern science, is "the stream of tendency by which all things seek to fulfill the law of their being" (Super, 84). This faith, amongst other characteristics, is why Arnold, according to Super, was not only an aiding friend of the modern man, "but the best representative, among the Victorians, of the modern spirit" (91).

What Super writes might explain why Arnold believed in a human need for instruction, or possibly even a human need for religion. Following the logic of God as “a stream of tendency”, religion might serve the informative role of explaining “the law of our being”, and provide guiding principles towards fulfillment. Arnold often expressed how religion had failed this mission and left a void that needed to be filled². Arnold presupposes that in the absence of guiding principles, people are stuck in a hopeless state of seeking fulfillment without the means to do so. Indeed, Arnold is a good representative of the modern spirit, both in his thoughts about religion, and in his comprehensive ideas about what caused the suffering and alienation that we might call the modern condition. In “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse”, the central conflict of the narrator culminates in the most known lines of the poem:

Wandering between two worlds, one dead
The other powerless to be born
With nowhere yet to rest my head,
Like these, on earth I wait forlorn (85-88).

To some, the essence of modern suffering was existing in a limbo between the upheaval of old traditions and truths, and the new answers and truths that were not yet settled (Houghton). Kenneth Allott notes that Arnold echoes concerns expressed by Carlyle, and explains in the footnotes to the poem that: “The idea of the age as a spiritual No Man’s Land was a commonplace in [Arnold’s] circle” (289). However, the poem mentions several failed or dead faiths: the Greeks ancient religion as exemplified in line 80-84, the monastic Catholicism the Carthusians represent, and the Protestant Christianity of the persona. Thus, like all the men who suffered through drastic transition, he is wandering restlessly, unable to imagine a future in which he is content.

The dead world in the lines above, is a world of religion symbolized by the monastery. The symbolism of death seems to indicate a sense of timelessness, but also a sense of past. The monastery is described as a “*living tomb*” (73), a metaphor emphasized by gothic imagery of “silent courts” (31) and “humid corridors” (34) in which “ghostlike” (35) figures move. As the narrator wanders the otherworldly corridors of the monastery, feeling out of place, he poses the central question: “- And what am I, that I am here?” (66). Why does the narrator seek out the monastery, if he does neither believe in God (67-69) nor wishes to become one of them (79)? The first four stanzas show that the narrator and his group are wandering in harsh,

² In *Culture and Anarchy*, failed religion is one of the causes of anarchy. See also the quotations from the preface of *God and the Bible* above on page 2.

windy conditions and thick forest, which can be interpreted as a metaphor for the modern world, or the mental state of the modern man. Eventually, the monastery is in sight: “Approach, for what we seek is here!” (25). Interestingly, the line does not say “the monastery we seek is here”, suggesting that what the narrator seeks is not the monastery in itself. What he seeks might be shelter, or metaphorically, relief from the harshness of modern life by entering the monastery, a vacuum untouched by modernity, or a place where time seems to stand still and faith still exists. The life of the monks also represents a window into the past, before modernity twisted men into a state of agony, isolation and selfishness. Specifically, if the narrator is an Englishman, the monks may remind him of England’s Catholic past, before the Reformation and Industrial Revolution, and before many long-lived traditions were broken. Alternatively, the monks represent a simpler but stricter past, where men were assigned a clear purpose.

The monks of the Carthusian order are not actually spectral beings, but men who have found a place to practice their faith, secluded from a world that no longer has a place for them. It is from the perspective of the narrator that the monastery is a “*living tomb*” (73), both because Catholic devotion estranges him and because he is inclined to believe that the age of religion, or at least Christianity, is dead. It seems that the narrator has lost his faith – first his faith in religion and then his faith in “the high, white star of Truth” (69). The latter might be rationalism, a philosophy that had both authority and practical influence in the Victorian era (Altick). Altick writes that the philosophy “was essentially an escape [from] religion” (234), a scientific approach that would prevent superstition. Because religion is not scientific, the narrator’s faith was purged early in his life by rationalist “masters of the mind” (73) who taught him to seek only truth (70), yet in his crisis he returns to religion. However, his visit to the monastery is not as simple as a return to faith. On the contrary, Stanzas 15 and 16 reveal that, because the monastery is like a gravesite to him, he has come to the “*living tomb*” (73) to rest and mourn his dead faith in peace: “Their faith, my tears, the world deride – / I come to shed them at their side” (89-90). He finds no comfort for his grief in the secular world, so he seeks shelter in the spiritual world of the monastery.

Like a tombstone reminds the living of their lost ones, the monastery reminds the narrator of a time when religion was functional and instructional in a man’s life, providing him with rules and guidance. The rationalism and modern ideas that should have replaced that function, have also failed him. Neither faith nor modern philosophy can relieve his agony. If his time in the monastery does not give him closure, he is prepared to stay there in exile:

But – if you cannot give us ease –

Last of the race of them who grieve,
Here leave us to die out with these
Last of the people who believe! (109-112)

The narrator claims he has come to grieve and move on, yet this section foreshadows that his crisis has left him depressed and defeated. He seems to hope that something will come along to end the pain, yet he imagines that when the time for new solutions comes in stanzas 27-32, he will not have the “bent” to entertain new possibilities. He asks: “How should we grow in other ground? / How can we flower in foreign air?” (207-208). These questions emphasize why the new world is powerless to be born. It is not objectively powerless, on the contrary, it is filled with “tireless powers”:

You give the universe your law,
You triumph over time and space!
Your pride of life, your tireless powers,
We laud them, but they are not ours (165-168)

But the narrator is weighed down by pessimism and hopelessness, and also by nostalgia for the dead world he was once part of. Religion after religion have failed, yet he cannot imagine a better world without them. He cannot imagine that he could live in a world defined by men and not by God. To the narrator, the new world seems to be going in a direction that he cannot follow. This suggests that Arnold believed the experience of a crisis of faith could lead to a retreat into melancholy, and a passivity that hinders personal growth and progress.

As we know from *Culture and Anarchy*, which he began writing approximately 15 years after “Stanzas”, Arnold believed that we had the power to perfect ourselves through “sweetness and light” without strict doctrine. If we employ the ideas of *Culture* to “Stanzas”, the new and better world is arguably powerless to be born because the narrator is searching for “truth”, first in religion and then in rationalism, instead of changing his behavior. Arnold believed that “‘God’ is not a dogmatic term to be conjured with but a literary or poetic term to be felt, for religion is, after all, ‘morality touched by emotion’ and a matter of practical conduct, not metaphysics” (Butler 112). What would relieve the narrator’s pain, is to start practically applying “sweetness and light” to his conduct. He is incapable of realizing this because he thinks the modern world has left no place for his spiritual needs. But, as Butler eloquently explains, Arnold’s logic “suggests that the modern ideas are themselves godlike and are uplifting and elevating, because what they are doing to religion is allowing it to fulfil the law of its being by revealing what it is really about” (110). In other words, when science and higher criticism cast doubt on details in the Bible, they revealed that religion is not about

strict doctrine, it is about sweetness and light, the very best of Christianity. This would mean that the age of religion does not have to be over. If the narrator changes his perspective – “civilizes” himself – he will realize that he ultimate truths to feel content. Instead, he needs to apply principles to his conduct that he will find within himself, for sweetness and light is also the very best parts of human nature (Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*).

“Hebraism and Hellenism” is also a duality central to Arnold’s understanding of “Culture”, that might in part explain why the narrator is wandering between two worlds. In *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold writes: “Hebraism and Hellenism, – between these two points of influence moves our world. At one time it feels more powerfully the attraction of one of them, at another time of the other; and it ought to be, though it never is, evenly and happily balanced between them” (126-127). The main difference between these forces, according to Arnold, is that while Hellenism favors right thinking and “to see things as they really are” (127), Hebraism favors right action, and “conduct and obedience” (127). Arnold argued in *Culture and Anarchy* that the limitations of Hebraism were its rigidity and impossible demands and consequent risk of demoralization. However, Arnold did not condemn strict religiousness as utterly useless. Arnold did see Hebraism as a force of strength and action. The devotion he witnessed in the monastery was perhaps a demonstration of that strength, and a representation of a past world of Hebraism concerned with “conduct and obedience”. The narrator has a sense of nostalgia for that past, and it seems that Arnold, like Carlyle, and Tennyson as we will see, believed in a need for religion in the human soul. Hence, the Arnoldian new world of “Culture” is not necessarily a world of unbelief, but a world where religion has been stripped down to its core function of moral guidance through sweetness and light, becoming once again attainable to humanity.

If the dead world is a world of Hebraism, then Hellenism might explain the perspective of the narrator, and represent his world, rather than the old or the new one to come. The narrator seems to share the Hellenist ideal of seeing things as they are, as he is a follower of “the high, white star of Truth” (69). However, he is not perfectly content with those ideals alone, because there ought to be balance between Hebraism and Hellenism, as the section above shows. In his mind, the narrator imagines a new age “[w]hich without hardness will be sage, / And gay without frivolity” (159-160). This new age seems to foreshadow what Arnold would write about in *Culture and Anarchy*, a world of joy and wisdom, sweetness and

light, Hellenism with a hint of Hebraism³. Yet, he feels he will be unable to join the new world when it comes. In his imagined scenario, the narrator and those like him wait mutely, “like children reared in shade” (169), forgotten and hidden from sight. When the sons of the new and better world arrive, he is unable to follow and participate:

O children, what do ye reply ? –
‘Action and pleasure, will ye roam
Through these secluded dells to cry
And call us? – but too late ye come!
Too late for us your call ye blow,
Whose bent was taken long ago. (193-198).

The sons of the new world have the nudge of Hebraism (the strength and will to act) and sweetness, represented by “action and pleasure”. These are characteristics the pure Hellenist lacks in his biased preference for light and knowledge. As Arnold writes in *Culture and Anarchy*, the Hellenist is “the thinking side in man distinguished from the acting side” (135), and “this loss of spiritual balance, this exclusive preponderance given to man’s perceiving and knowing side” causes an “unnatural defect of his feeling and acting side” (135). Without the bent of Hebraism, they can only admire the new world from afar. The poem ends with the “*shy recluses*” (192) asking to be left alone, and Arnold provides no happy ending for them, suggesting that the narrator’s pure Hellenism is his tragic flaw. He is stuck in limbo, along with the rest of the people like him, who either have too much Hellenism or Hebraism to believe that the world could ever balance the two. This explains the powerlessness of the new world in the eyes of the narrator, because the new and better world of “Culture” is a balance between dual forces which he is unable to attain. Without balance, the narrator is stuck: in time, in history and in his own personal development. If read as a societal phenomenon, the unbalance of the narrator hinders progress. Thus, “Stanzas” can be read as a cautionary tale, where Arnold warns against both rationalist and orthodox extremes.

Although “Hellenism and Hebraism” have proven useful to this analysis of “Stanzas”, there are other ideas to be considered. Firstly, the narrator has what Houghton calls a typically Victorian “readiness to abandon private judgement for some external authority” (99), an authority which, in the case of “Stanzas”, is either rationalism or orthodoxy. This dependency matches how the narrator refers to himself and likeminded people as children, and can in part

³ I write “a hint of Hebraism” because *Culture and Anarchy*, as a whole, shows that Arnold favored Hellenism. What constitutes that hint of Hebraism in the new world, is strength and action, to prevent people from becoming stuck in the intellectual world of the mind.

explain his passivity in the absence of clear authority. However, dependence cannot be attributed to his Hellenism, because obedience is a trait of Hebraism. While his search for “Truth” (as in an absolute or ultimate truth) might be a product of his repressed Hebraism, the need for religion in his soul, it might also be a more general expression of Arnold’s view of modern humanity: “If we look at our own inner world, we find a disquieting absence of sure authority” (*Culture and Anarchy* 151). As previously discussed, Arnold thought men needed guidance in the absence of religious morality to avoid anarchy. In the case of “Stanzas”, anarchy is the painful limbo that follows the absence of rules and purpose. Secondly, it seems likely that depression further increases the narrator’s passivity. Melancholy and pessimism permeate his perspective. Arguably, his perspective is clouded by the modern condition, a condition of exhausting cosmological doubt, or fatigue from restless wandering and lack of hope. However, his state of unbalance might have caused his modern disease to begin with. Therefore, it seems likely that Arnold meant for the narrator’s depression to be symptom of spiritual unbalance, rather than a disease itself. Either way, we find in “Stanzas” what I think is the essence of the crisis of faith: the need to believe in a higher truth, yet being unable to because of the doubt, exhaustion and hopelessness that characterize the modern condition.

Some of Arnold’s contemporaries also believed he was able to capture the essential needs of men in his time. In the article “Matthew Arnold and Christianity” from 1899, C. E. Byles comments on Arnold’s religious writing, and notes that it was often harshly criticized and viewed by some as his least successful endeavor. Byles highlights one critic, H. D. Traill, who labelled Arnold’s religious writing as “futile” and “superfluous” (qtd. in Byles 223-224). Traill commented that those who had accepted new scientific conclusions about humanity, had managed to merge those conclusions with their belief on their own, if they still attained belief at all (qtd. in Byles 224). Contrastingly, Byles argues that that even if people managed to merge belief and scientific conclusions, they would likely find themselves in “a wavering state of mind that most of all requires guidance and instruction” (225). To Byles, Arnold’s religious writing provided this guidance. To further defend Arnold against Traill’s claims, Byles notes that Arnold had specific target readers for his religious writing, which we see in *God and the Bible* (226). In *God and the Bible*, Arnold states that “the new Christianity will call forth more effort in the individual who uses it than the old, will require more open and instructed minds for its reception; and this is progress” (xxix). Thus, Arnold explains that “I have addressed myself to men [...] of free and active minds, who, though they may be profoundly dissatisfied with the received theology, are yet interested in religion and more or less acquainted with the Bible. These I have endeavored to help; and they, if they are helped,

will in their turn help others” (xxix). The addressees of Arnold’s religiously themed prose are men in conflict, who are dissatisfied with religion as it is, but still want it to be a part of their life. Arnold devoted most the 1870s to essays and books about religion⁴, and it might prove interesting to compare the addressee above to the narrator in “Stanzas”, though “Stanzas” was written 20 years before.

If we return to “Stanzas”, the narrator has sought out the Grande Chartreuse, something we can assume he would not do if he was indifferent to religion. Furthermore, while he has been schooled in rationalist philosophy, it seems he used to be acquainted with the Bible in his youth:

For rigorous teachers seized my youth,
And purged its faith, and trimm’d its fire,
Show’d me the high, white star of Truth,
There bade me gaze, and there aspire. (67-70)

The narrator no longer believes, and his religious side, symbolized by fire, has diminished. The rigorous teachers showed him “Truth” as opposed to “belief”, thus it seems the narrator’s worldview fits someone who is “profoundly dissatisfied with the received theology” (xxix), as Arnold writes in *God and the Bible*. Additionally, youthful faith could also mean a childhood faith, which is often more literal than metaphorical. When the narrator was later familiarized with secular philosophy and rationalism, it makes sense that it felt as though his literal childhood faith was purged. This purging and trimming by rigorous teachers, is likely not the proper guidance and instruction Arnold or Byles imagine when they wrote about assisting people in crisis, so we can assume that the narrator in “Stanzas” did not receive the kind of Arnoldian guidance Byles promotes. Furthermore, the narrator, who cannot see how to prosper in a new environment (207-208), does not have a “free” and “open” mind, which Arnold believed was necessary for the new Christianity (*God and the Bible* xxix). This further supports the idea of “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse” as a cautionary tale. The poem is a picture of what could happen to those who experience a crisis of faith without proper guidance, guidance that was crucial to Arnold’s ideas about “Culture” and the future of his nation. Interestingly, the poem does not offer explicit guidance, and its instructional function relies instead entirely on the reader’s interpretation. This might suggest that, while the addressees of his prose and poetry might be the same “dissatisfied” man, Arnold’s poetry only depicts the man that his prose directly aimed to help.

⁴ *St. Paul and Protestantism* (1870), *Literature and Dogma* (1873), *God and the Bible* (1875), and *Last Essays on Church and Religion* (1877).

So far, this chapter has shown that the old world represents the religion of strict dogma, and the new world is perhaps a modern world of “Culture” where religion, in its pure form, is one of many forces working to perfect humanity. However, because of the limited perspective of a grieving narrator, the reader will never fully know the new world. Fatigue, melancholy and doubt further cloud his perspective. As the readers follow the interplay between worlds in the mind of the narrator, we get to take part in his crisis of faith. His need of spiritual nourishment, represented by his retreat to the Grande Chartreuse, cannot be satisfied by any of the two worlds. In the end, he chooses to remain in a desert (210), what I call a limbo, or to use Allot’s words once again, “a spiritual No Man’s Land” (289). Thus, the poem is not particularly didactic, and functions more as a mirror than a relief or comfort to the agonized modern man. To the more optimistic other readers, who feels some distance to the suffering narrator, the poem might function as cautionary tale. Essentially, the poem does quite the opposite of what Arnold later prescribed for the ideal form of poetry in *Culture and Anarchy*, which was to provide guidance (light) and spark good feelings (sweetness).

Arnold eventually wrote less poetry, and took the matter of providing guidance and instruction into his own hands, through dedicating himself mostly to prose for the remainder of his life. This choice could be explained by his essay “The Study of Poetry”, in which Arnold claims that the most important aspects of poetry are that it should make people happier and stronger, by “forming, sustaining, and delighting us, as nothing else can” (664). In the same essay, Arnold writes that poetry, following the laws of “poetic truth and poetic beauty” (664), which seem synonym to sweetness and light, will replace most of religion and philosophy in interpreting life for us (663). Thus, poetry had to have the highest standard, and poetry that did not provide joy, console or provide resolution, was not worth reading (Arnold, “Study of Poetry” 664). This view, which he seems to have developed throughout his life, is not particularly evident in his poetry. In fact, Arnold omitted *Empedocles on Etna* from one of his volumes of poetry, explaining in the preface from 1853 that he did so because it did not spark “poetical enjoyment”, and presented situations where

the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done. In such situations there is inevitably something morbid, in the description of them something monotonous. When they occur in actual life, they are painful, not tragic; the representation of them in poetry is painful also. To this class of situations, poetically faulty as it appears to me, that of Empedocles, as I have endeavored

to represent him, belongs; and I have therefore excluded the Poem from the present collection (“Preface to the First Edition of *Poems*” 592)

In short, *Empedocles*⁵ was too painful to be included in the edition, and too contradictory to Arnold’s later ideas of what poetry ought to do for the reader. Manfred Dietrich suggests, in his analysis of the 1853 preface, that it exemplifies the social responsibility of the poet Arnold believed in. Dietrich writes: “The Preface outlines a public poetic and assesses the poem in terms of its capacity to “inspirit and rejoice,” [...] and in this respect, Arnold feels, the poem has no moral validity – it lacks “usefulness” and seems all too clearly a counsel of despair” (322). In sum, Dietrich’s argument might highlight why Arnold eventually devoted himself mostly to prose, because he felt he could not achieve his own poetic ideal. *Empedocles* was not the only poem Arnold was dissatisfied with, and in 1853 he wrote in a letter to his friend Arthur Hugh Clough that “the Gipsy Scholar at best awakens a pleasing melancholy. But that is not what we want” (745). Arnold was not pleased with his inability to “animate” (745) and concluded the letter by stating that “[m]y poems, however, viewed *absolutely*, are certainly little or nothing...” (Arnold, “To A. H. Clough” 745). However, a letter from 1869 shows that Arnold did come to view himself as a poet who successfully represented his own time in history: “My poems represent, on the whole, the main movement of mind of the last quarter of a century, and thus they will probably have their day as people become conscious to themselves of what that movement of mind is, and interested in the literary productions which reflect it” (“To his mother” 768). As many of the examples provided so far illustrate, Arnold continued to believe in the civilizing properties of poetry, even if he saw his own poetry as often too melancholy. When we now turn to Alfred Tennyson, I will see if his tremendous success as a poet can in part be explained by him coming closer to the poetic ideal which Arnold believed could provide peace for the modern man.

⁵ In his analysis of this poem, “Arnold’s “Empedocles on Etna””, Walter E. Houghton describes a crisis that has many parallels to the narrator’s crisis in “Stanzas”, which might suggest that both poems were equally “poetically faulty”. For reasons of space I could not include a full comparison, but I recommend the article.

Chapter 2: Tennyson and the evolution of faith

By the publication of *In Memoriam* in 1850, Tennyson had established himself as the most popular poet of his time, and was selected Poet Laureate. What had inspired *In Memoriam* was that Alfred Tennyson's closest friend, Arthur Hallam, died suddenly in 1833, 17 years before its publication. Thus, the poem depicts both setbacks and successes in many years of dealing with grief. While it is common for elegies to move steadily from grief to consolation, *In Memoriam* does not. Its sections are sometimes contradictory; they react to each other, and may quickly turn from consolation to despair. This fragmentation also mimics the idea of the modern condition as a series of shocks, an idea from Houghton where each step towards progress is a step away from tradition, and consequently each step is a new struggle (66-67). How Tennyson deals with geologist theories of extinction, echoes this idea of successive shocks. However, as Erik Gray writes, despite "all its fragmentation, *In Memoriam* also displays an admirable unity" (xiv). Through its fragmentation, it evolves from grief and doubt to reassurance and faith. Indeed, for most readers, *In Memoriam* has a general sense of movement towards consolation where many of the themes of conflict are resolved in the end. In fact, it was very common to read *In Memoriam* as a manual of consolation, in part because "it frankly confronted the crisis of faith that troubled so many mid-century thinkers" (Gray xiii). In its conflict between the images of God and Nature, and the final unity of this contrasting pair, the poem demonstrates the process of finding spiritual harmony, both in terms of the personal experience of loss and grief, and terms of the tension between traditional religion and modern ideas of natural science. The process of finding harmony is portrayed, through fragmentation and contradiction, as an evolution. Through his loss of a friend, Tennyson experiences the religious doubt that would spark the evolution of his faltering Christian faith into a modern faith stronger and more sustainable than ever.

According to Gray, Tennyson was genuinely interested in the science of his time, and Lyell's *Principles of Geology* particularly affected him. Lyell challenged common beliefs about how the earth had been formed, proving that it was likely older than what both the church and other geologists argued. Gray explains that Lyell "disagreed with the catastrophic model of change" (xxiii), where cataclysmic events such as the Biblical flood formed the Earth's surface and wiped out entire species in the process. Instead, Lyell "posited a constant series of small changes" (Gray xxiii) that in even tempo gradually altered the earth over vast spans of time. Yet, as Eleanor B. Mattes points out, Lyell explained in his second volume that his theory "pointed to the certain extinction of species after species throughout earth's history,

as they found themselves unable to cope with the new conditions they encountered” (140). Geological theories of the extinction of species proposed human extinction, and challenged the Christian concept of the value of the individual life and soul, as well as the idea of God’s love for all his creation. Mattes writes, that in his assessment of geological evidence, Lyell concluded that species would inevitably go extinct, making the immortality of species impossible (142). However, Lyell argued that the forces behind the gradual changes had always been the same and could be observed in the present, a uniformitarian idea where the present is the key to the past. Gray notes that the idea of small changes, and of the present as key to the past, was a reassurance to Tennyson. If the present self still contained remnants of the former self, then “what seemed like a catastrophic break with the past – the death of Hallam, and therefore, the death of Tennyson’s former self – could be explained in such a way that those former selves would not seem to be wholly extinct” (xxiii) after all. More importantly, at least to this thesis, is that there is never a disastrous and permanent break with religious faith, only small changes to Tennyson’s faith. Lending terminology from Lyell’s successor Darwin, the spiritual journey of *In Memoriam* ends in a faith that is evolved and is better adapted to survive in its modern surroundings. However, “it was almost certainly his reading in the Principles of Geology that led Tennyson to write section 56”, seeing as Lyell’s theory “is incompatible with belief that God is love and love is the law of creation” (Mattes 142-143). Indeed, section LVI is perhaps the most extreme example of how doubt shaped Tennyson’s faith into a faith he could hold on to.

Section LVI is famous for encompassing the implications of natural science on Christian faith. The female personification of Nature, who appears in sections LV and LVI, represents the scientific theories Tennyson was familiar with. She is also one of the most prominent representations of violent change in the poem, and functions as an embodiment of modern attacks on traditional faith. Furthermore, while representing violent change, Nature also represents irreversible loss and the fear of a meaningless existence, and she emerges in some of the most despairing moments of the poem. She is a recurring agent throughout the poem, but in sections LV and LVI she plays the role of the antagonist, a mouthpiece for the poet’s worst fears. The speaker questions how Nature can be so selective, when doctrine teaches that the soul is a divine aspect of man that entitles us to a special place in God’s Creation:

Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type she seems,

So careless of the single life;

That I, considering everywhere
 Her secret meaning in her deeds,
 And finding that of fifty seeds
She often brings but one to bear,

I falter where I firmly trod,
 And falling with my weight of cares
 Upon the great world's altar-stairs (LV, 5-15)

Nature appears as a cunning creature “at strife” (5) with God. There is a conflict in what the speaker has learned about nature through modern natural science, and his Christian worldview. Humanity as a species, or “type” (7), is God’s creation, and Christianity teaches that every life has a purpose and place in God’s plan. This implies a personal relationship between every soul and its creator that is incompatible with Nature’s destructive “deeds” (10). In spite of God, Nature cares only for the “type”, and is selective as to which “seed” (11) or creature she chooses to nurture into being. Considering this makes the speaker’s faith “falter” (13) – it makes him doubt something he used to be so sure of – because scientific findings seem to contradict Man’s superiority, and he feels hopeless about the afterlife.

It is possible that these lines also represent Tennyson’s feelings about Hallam’s passing, though he addresses his loss more directly in other sections. Firstly, if mankind does not have a special place in the universe, then the doctrine of the afterlife is likely false. This makes it impossible for Tennyson to ever reunite with Hallam, and this pains him. Secondly, to Tennyson, Hallam was an exceptionally good and intelligent man. If Nature cared for the species, the “type”, surely, she would have let Hallam live, since he was such an exemplary specimen. However, she did not, and so we are left questioning if her selection is coldly random or cruelly indifferent. In any case, the single soul means nothing in the grand scheme of life, because God does not seem to intervene. Thus, the speaker imagines Nature is fighting God to be the acting judge of such matters. If such a cunning creature like Nature can have her way, the speaker finds himself lost in a world of “darkness” (LV 16) with only “lame hands” (LV 17) to hold on to his last sliver of hope.

In section LVI, Tennyson revisits his ideas about Nature from section LV, and takes a closer look at the implications of the scientific findings which inspired section LV. In this re-evaluation, it seems that his doubt and despair have taken a turn for the worse; the faint hope

he clung onto in the previous section is lost. “‘So careful of the type’? but no” (LVI 1), Nature cries “I care for nothing, all shall go” (4). Tennyson, likely with Lyell fresh in his mind, could not ignore that “From the evidence of fossils [...] we know that not only individuals but entire species have become extinct”, as Erik Gray explains in his footnotes to section LVI (41). Nature reveals herself to be utterly indifferent to the species she brings to life. In section LV, the speaker held the hope that Nature, in her selective ways, cared at least for humanity as a species. However, the speaker loses all hope in section LVI as he indulges the idea of extinction. He imagines Nature declaring “I bring to life, I bring to death: / The spirit does but mean the breath. / I know no more” (6-8). Nature does not seem to care much for humanity at all; in fact, it seems she has a desire for destruction. Section LVI paints a nightmarish picture of natural law, and the implications of natural science for Man’s place in the world. Nature knows no purpose, she holds no love for humanity, and she does not believe in the human soul. To her, men are creatures like all others, whom she brings to life and death. What happens in between the beginning and end has no meaning to her, and certainly not what happens after death. In his despair, the speaker reflects on the meaningless human acts of faith if the human life has no divine purpose:

Man, her last work, who seem’d so fair,
 Such splendid purpose in his eyes
 Who roll’d the psalm to wintry skies
 Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer,

 Who trusted God was love indeed
 And love Creation’s final law –
 Tho’ Nature, red in tooth and claw
 With ravine, shriek’d against his creed (LVI, 9-16)

Tennyson illustrates the absurdity of these actions if there is no purpose behind them. If it is not a loving, fatherly God, but this shrieking, bloody and beastly figure that is behind our existence, the endeavor towards an afterlife of eternal love is simply delusional. How recent geological publications (such as Lyell’s) explain the nature of the world around him has alarming implications for Tennyson’s faith, and in the two sections discussed, it is almost making him lose all hope that there is a God.

Nature is at her core a force of destruction and loss in section LV and LVI. She is selfish and cold, which terrifies the speaker and throws him into a desperate state. As a literary device, Tennyson’s personified Nature is likely the opposite of what his readers

expect from Nature as a female agent. Section LV shows that while Nature is in the most basic sense the mother of the earth's species, her mothering does not stretch an inch beyond giving life. She does not wish to nurture her children, Nature gives life only to destroy it, a realization that causes the feelings of hopelessness Tennyson portrays. The speaker of section LIV is like "An infant crying in the night" (18), feeling helpless and alone, calling out to his Father to comfort him. The image of the infant crying out for God to prove his love, followed by Tennyson's monstrous rather than motherly Nature, is very effective in conveying the utter defeat of a man whose world is falling apart. In the grief caused by losing his dearest friend, he seeks comfort and guidance in his faith. Belief, which is supposed to reassure and provide comfort, proves difficult when some portray the world as a cold and meaningless place, where even Mother Nature has turned cruel and indifferent.

Nature, as a female force of destruction, is also quite provocative in terms of traditional poetic portrayal of Nature and Victorian norms of femininity, something that James Eli Adams explores in his article. He devoted much of his it to an analysis of the phrase "Nature, red in tooth and claw"; a famous line, which he claims has "been vested by historians with power to sum up nothing less than the impact of evolutionary thought on Christian humanism" (7). However, when these historians and others use the phrase for that purpose, it is a simplification that ignores the poetic context in which Tennyson's Nature is "an extended, strikingly elaborate personification of the world-image Tennyson derived from contemporary science" (Adams 7). Adams questions why the female gender of the personification is so often ignored in use of the phrase, and finds a possible answer in that Nature as a female agent is "deeply ingrained in Western culture" (7). Yet, as Adams points out, it is exactly this traditional understanding of Mother-Nature that Tennyson aims to challenge. Women were considered delicate, an idea that "Nature, red in tooth and claw" contradicts in her forceful, violent ways. Altick explains that "strong-willed women" (54) were in fact quite unsettling to Victorians, and so we can imagine the effect of Tennyson's twisted Nature. Adams also argues that this cultural context is likely why Tennyson's personification of Nature was so striking and upsetting, because it challenged both Victorian norms of femininity and unsettled the archetypical image of Mother-Nature. He explains that "[Tennyson's] poetry demonstrates how intricately and profoundly the intellectual and symbolic order of the early Victorian period depends on a typology of woman as an agent of continuity, restraint, and coherence in a world in which schemes of history, political structures, and meaning itself are constantly threatening to fall apart" (Adams 10). Tennyson's Nature does not only represent the conflict between modern geological findings

and the teachings of the Bible, she also disrupts the image of motherhood and gender, another important aspect of the Victorian worldview. She is a force of destruction on many levels. Contradictory to Mother-Nature, Tennyson's Nature does not comply with Romantic pantheism, and she is not a motherly complement to the heavenly Father. Furthermore, she is not submissive to God's law, but warring against it. Most of all, Tennyson's Nature is cruelly indifferent. The several levels on which the personification of Nature operates, coincides with the idea of modern suffering as subsequent blows or shocks to the established worldview.

In sections such as LV and LVI it appears Tennyson's world has unraveled. Nature's indifference and destruction have pushed Tennyson's faith to its limits. Yet, the poem never fully entertains atheism as a possible outcome, thus it is never a "catastrophic break" (Gray xxiii) with faith. Tennyson does not directly question the existence of God so much as the teachings and creeds of the Anglican Church. While the poem contains doubt and despair, it never ceases to be a *religious* poem. After experiencing agonizing doubt in sections LV and LVI, the speaker gradually pulls himself out of his misery, with the help of writing poetry, the memory of Hallam, and compromise in his religious contemplation (though, not of the cosmic sort we see in LV and LVI). In Section XXXIII, the speaker reflects on religion, and imagines a brother and a sister. The brother has been through "toil and storm" (1), and has developed a faith that does not "fix itself to form" (4). This could mean a faith that does not belong to a particular denomination, as Grey suggests in his footnotes (27), or it could be a faith that is still Christian, but is less concerned with doctrine and the church. The sister, on the other hand, still has her childhood faith and "happy views" (6). She has not yet experienced "toil and storm", however, the speaker reminds himself that her faith is just as pure as his and should not be contested because of its naiveté. Furthermore, the speaker claims that the one who has developed his own faith, a "law within" (14) that "countest reason ripe" (13), will not fall into sin simply for having an untraditional faith based on both science and belief.

Thus, section XXXIII foreshadows the conclusion of the poem, and shows that Tennyson believed it possible to develop one's own faith as true as the one taught by the church. The text suggests that this belief or idea was something Tennyson had discussed with Hallam regularly. *In Memoriam* proves that Tennyson idolized Hallam, and he was a major inspiration to Tennyson, especially in what he wrote about religion. In section XCVI, Tennyson addresses those who believe that "doubt is Devil-born" (4), and counters them with something Hallam wrote: "There lives more faith in honest doubt, / Believe me, than in half the creeds" (11-12). It seems Tennyson admired Hallam for his faith: "He fought his doubts and gather'd strength, / He would not make his judgment blind" (13-14). Hallam did not have

blind faith like many others, “He faced the spectres of the mind / And laid them: thus he came at length / To find a stronger faith his own” (15-17). Tennyson believed the reason why Hallam’s faith was stronger than others, is that it had “the darkness and the light /And dwells not in the light alone” (19-20). Darkness often symbolizes doubt in the poem, but it is also a symbol of man’s earthly existence⁶. This could indicate that a faith achieved through confronting doubt is stronger than other faiths, the latter often being blind faith, rigid traditional faith or childhood faith that remains unquestioned (all of which appear in the poem). The lines 17-20 could also indicate a faith that is divine knowledge or “light”, mixed with “darkness” that is the earthly knowledge, science or reason. Either way, it seems that in finding his own faith, Tennyson was inspired by what Hallam had said about religion. In the Prologue, which we know was one of the last parts of *In Memoriam* Tennyson wrote, the idea of faith and knowledge united appears as an overall anthem of the poem:

We have but faith: we cannot know;
 For knowledge is of things we see;
 And yet we trust it comes from thee,
 A beam in darkness: let it grow.

Let knowledge grow from more to more,
 But more of reverence in us dwell;
 That mind and soul, according well,
 May make one music as before. (Prologue, 21-28)

These stanzas indicate that growing knowledge is welcome because it ultimately comes from God, suggesting that scientific findings do not contradict God even though they may contradict Christian doctrine. If humanity is reverent, reason will not breed doubt, but make us realize that new knowledge only further proves God’s greatness. Thus, in an ever-changing world filled with human trials, loss, and new knowledge contradicting the old, a renewed faith emerges in *In Memoriam* where doubting is a necessary part of evolving one’s own faith that will be stronger than a faith untested.

Eugene R. August explains that “Tennyson had renounced the familiar narrowness of conventional concepts of the universe. But the result of this daring is evident in *In Memoriam*’s terrifying fear that man is an insignificant event in a purposeless universe”

⁶ In section CVI, darkness represents earthly struggles. In section LV, the altar stairs “slope thro’ darkness up to God” (16). Several other sections, like LXXVI and CXXIV, use darkness as an ambiguous symbol for earthly life and doubt.

(219). Tennyson's remedy to his fear was a renewed faith, but critics argue that this faith is not popular Christianity. Among these critics, we find T. S. Eliot, who so famously wrote: "In Memoriam can, I think, justly be called a religious poem, but for another reason than that which made it seem religious to his contemporaries. It is not religious because of the quality of its faith, but because of the quality of its doubt. Its faith is a poor thing, but its doubt is a very intense experience" (138). From Eliot's point of view, who was a proclaimed Anglo-Catholic, it makes sense to call the faith of *In Memoriam* a "poor thing", seeing as Tennyson questions important matters of doctrine, such as man's place in the universe and the nature of the afterlife. To Eliot, it may be un-Christian to question, doubt and deviate from doctrine in the way Tennyson does. Furthermore, because the poem concerns the loss of a loved one, the faith we encounter in *In Memoriam* is also deeply personal. Its discussion of faith and doubt centers on grief and an intense hope to be reunited with a most beloved friend. Eliot sees this as confused beliefs, and a personal rather than religious motivation behind faith. Eliot insists that Tennyson's "desire for immortality never is quite the desire for Eternal Life", concluding that all in all, Tennyson's faith was "sketchy, Christian belief" (136).

However, from a non-orthodox point of view, the faith of *In Memoriam* is not so much a "poor thing" as it is a modern thing. August argues that it is "a faith so radically modern that many critics, thinking in more conventional terms, have mistakenly dismissed it as a poor thing" (218). August intentionally echoes Eliot, and explains in Tennyson's defense that Eliot and others like him dismissed Tennyson's faith only because they were too limited in their own conventional or traditional perspectives to see it clearly. Through his article, August argues that the kind of faith *In Memoriam* presents is a faith that can survive the changes of the modern world, keep up with scientific progress, and allow the religious to accept the findings of science as complementary rather than contradictory to faith. Judging from August's analysis, Tennyson's faith is the opposite of the ecclesiastical rigidity Huxley ridicules in the introduction ("Agnosticism and Christianity"). Also, *In Memoriam* shows a desire to achieve a faith that draws from both reason and trust in God's love, a faith that is quite like Arnold's ideal world where reason reigns, but the best essence of the Bible is still useful to modern men. In sections LV and LVI such a world seems almost impossible. However, following Hallam's example in section XCVI, the speaker eventually manages to work through the doubt and achieve strong faith yet again like the Prologue foreshadows. In section CXVIII, the speaker urges the reader to "Contemplate all this work of Time" (1) without concluding that "human love and truth" (3) is fleeting. Instead, the speaker proposes that what geologists and scientists have found might point to the possibility of man evolving

into a “higher race” (14). The speaker concludes this section with the following message: “Move upward, working out the beast, / And let the ape and tiger die” (27-28). What section CXVII suggests is that human “evolution” is only possible if man works toward it, actively ridding himself of his baser qualities, much like Arnold’s cultured and civilized man.

At this point in the poem, where the ideas of human evolution occur, the speaker seems to have fully overcome his previous doubts about the immortal soul: “I think we are not wholly brain, / Magnetic mockeries; not in vain” (CXX, 2-3). Thus, while geologists only concern themselves with the body, the speaker “was *born* to other things” (12), meaning he was born to be part of an evolution of both body and soul. He firmly believes that the soul must be part of man’s evolution too, and sees any other evolution as pointless. The grief and loss that Tennyson experienced, and the pain of doubt that followed, was the spark of an evolution. Houghton explains the pain of doubt as “a state of frightened anticipation” (66) caused by destructive shocks: “The history of thought from 1830 on, religious thought in particular, is a history of successive blows. Each advance in knowledge, every new theory, raises fresh difficulties; the entrenched position to which one retreats today is under threatening attack tomorrow” (67). Similarly, Tennyson goes through successive challenges of his worldview and several failed attempts at closure. His rational side makes him inspect his own beliefs, which often leads to difficulties to overcome. However, each of these difficulties is necessary for the evolution towards a firm trust in God. Like in Lyell, small yet pivotal changes led to something new, and sometimes something must die to give place for something new. Although Darwin’s publication came later, we can see in hindsight that the Tennysonian evolution could still apply: Doubt would challenge beliefs until only the best and fittest were left standing.

This principle of an evolution within is tied to another idea revealed later in section CXXIV, namely that God is not found “in world or sun” (1), or in nature alone, but in a feeling “within the breast” (13). This could support the idea of an evolution within, parallel to the evolution in nature. Out of doubt (“darkness”) came the evolution of faith:

No, like a child in doubt and fear:
 But that blind clamour made me wise;
 Then was I as a child that cries,
But, crying, knows his father near;

And what I am beheld again
 What is, and no man understands;

And out of darkness came the hands

That reach thro' nature, moulding men (CXXIV, 17-24)

It was the doubt within, and the feeling of God in his heart, that convinced the speaker of God's role in evolution. This realization contradicts Nature as the force of destruction from section LV and LVI. It seems that men should not look outward to Nature to see God, but turn inward. Purpose can be felt in the hearts of Man, who doubts, grieves and heals his faith again and again. If Man is reverent in his heart, he will see that God is working through Nature, "moulding men". Yet, evolution entails both destruction and creation. Man must trust that God and Nature work together toward evolution, and confront their doubts to fortify their faith, and "move upward" to a "higher race" (CXVIII, 14; 27). The imagined coming of this higher race is an important image in the Epilogue, where the speaker imagines a child born from a marriage. This infant is not the helpless infant crying in the night, but a child that is "a closer link" (127) or one generation closer to the higher race to be. The man this child will become, will have an evolved faith and be able to read "Nature like an open book" (132). He will be spared the doubt in sections LV and LVI, because he will not confuse evolution with destruction; he will know his purpose. As the speaker imagines the life of this child, his thoughts fall into place. In the final stanza of the Epilogue, he concludes that this world does not consist of God and Nature, or faith and science, as opposing forces. Instead, it consists of "One God, one law, one element / And one far-off divine event" (142-143), a united force following the law of Love toward the end-goal of perfection, a goal "To which the whole creation moves" (144).

August compares Tennyson's faith to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's synthesis of religion and science: "For one thing, both men believe in progress. [...] Tennyson and Teilhard mean much the same thing by progress, namely spiritual growth or what Teilhard calls "hominisation"⁷" (221). August claims that

Tennyson and Teilhard believe that evolution has shifted from a biological natural selection to a spiritual growth which is partly man-controlled. In man, evolution has become conscious of itself, Teilhard says, and "for an elementary part we hold it in our hands, responsible for its past to its future" (p. 225). It is up to men to perfect the process of hominisation. (221).

Tennyson's "radically modern" faith, or his "renewed understanding of Christianity" (August 219; 221), centers on a spiritual evolution of man similar to Teilhard's "hominization".

⁷ August defines this idea as "men rising on stepping stones of their dead selves to higher things", a progress towards "ideal manhood" (221).

Tennyson merges his newfound understanding of science with a traditional belief that men must have a purpose in the universe. The result is the belief that mankind will undergo a spiritual evolution into perfected beings. This evolution is not a Darwinian one, but an evolution where men move forward to a common goal of human perfection. Again, we are reminded of Arnold's "Culture", but also of an ideal balance of Hebraism and Hellenism. Carlisle Moore writes that in *In Memoriam*, neither natural science nor religious doctrine will provide the whole truth: "For if religious faith is necessarily incomplete, so is science. A faith which is at once intuitive and intellectual will not be attainable until faith and knowledge meet. Tennyson hoped that with evolutionary progress man would ultimately find that religion and science reveal one and the same truth (168)". We can guess that the truth Moore envisions for Tennyson is the "far-off divine event" of the Epilogue in which humanity achieves perfection. If so, *In Memoriam* offers a way to merge the new worldview with the old, where scientific discovery will only provide a better understanding of God's plan. Although nature and science cause some of the most despairing sections of the poem, it seems that doubt was always intended to be resolved by reverence, thus Tennyson's trust in God was not misplaced. August writes that "Tennyson intended the poem to portray a convincing resolution of doubt by faith", (207) arguing that Tennyson meant for *In Memoriam* to portray his conviction that those who suffer in doubt will eventually find solace in the faith in a loving God. In this sense, *In Memoriam* might be close to Arnold's poetic ideal: It ends in a joyful resolution, and functions in an almost didactic way, as a guide to both personal loss and faltering faith.

Interestingly, Tennyson seemed to doubt his power as a poet to express his feeling and ideas. This doubt came from the idea that words are limited and fleeting, like all earthly things: "For words, like Nature, half reveal / And half conceal the Soul within" (V, 3-4). There are many sections in the poem that deal with the power of words and writing, and consequently, the role of the poet who deals with words as a profession. Thoughts such as "My words are only words" (LII, 3) reveal a doubt about the utility of his poetry to anyone other than himself. In section V, the craft of writing poetry functions like drugs to numb the pain (4-8). Tennyson also expresses doubt about the poet's ability and competence regarding religious themes, and consequently wrote about a feeling of hubris or being out of one's depth. In section XXXVII, the speaker imagines what the muse Urania (here the muse of religious poetry) would say to Melpomene, the muse of tragic poetry, if Melpomene sang about divine matters:

Urania speaks with darken'd brow:

'Thou pratest here where thou art least;

This faith has many a purer priest,
And many an abler voice than thou. (1-4)

Urania does not deem Melpomene, who symbolizes the poet, worthy of speaking about religious matters. However, the poet-speaker is thinking about his “dear one dead” (17) and his reflections about religion, and chooses to continue to “[loiter] in the master’s field / And [darken] sanctities with song” (23-24). Even if he is unworthy and not equipped to deal with divine matters in his poetry, he keeps on writing about religion because it brings him closer to his departed friend.

This idea of the poet writing mostly for his own comfort is recurring in *In Memoriam*. Section LXXV begins with the lines “I leave thy praises unexpress’d / In verse that brings myself relief” (1-2) and deals with the power of words to portray Hallam’s greatness accurately. A little later, in section LXXVII, the speaker contemplates his own poetry “in the tract of time” (4). He calls his writing “mortal lullabies of pain” (5) and questions if his poetry will have a lasting impact on anyone or just fade with time like everything else. He concludes:

But what of that? My darken’d ways
Shall ring with music all the same;
To breathe my loss is more than fame,
To utter love more sweet than praise. (13-16)

In this stanza, it is more important for the speaker to write about his loss and love than to achieve fame and praise for his words. Again, Tennyson points out that *In Memoriam* was mostly written with the purpose of dealing with personal loss. He is open to the possibility that someone else may find value in his writing, but emphasizes that he was primarily writing for himself. Thus, Tennyson found writing therapeutic in his grief and his dealing with the changing world around him. It seems as comforting his readers would be a positive outcome for Tennyson, but not his main intention, because he doubted his words could have that power. It is hard to know if this is false modesty or actual humbleness. After all, Tennyson was already very successful at the time he wrote most of *In Memoriam*. Many aspects of the text suggest an intended audience. One example is section XIII where he explains his relationship with Hallam through the metaphor of husband and wife, making his loss relatable to a widow or widower. In section IX, Hallam is “Dear as the mother to the son, / More than my brothers are to me” (19-20), perhaps indicating that Hallam was not only a friend, but someone Tennyson truly depended on. He also refers to Hallam as “dearest” (LXXIV, 5), even though Tennyson “never even called him ‘dear’” as Gray explains in his footnotes (51). It is likely that Tennyson was putting to good use different aspects of love in his attempt to

convey how strongly he felt the loss of Hallam, but this variation could also be an attempt to make his text relatable to a broad audience. That *In Memoriam* was published anonymously (Gray xiii) might support the latter claim, although its theme and content may also have influenced that decision. However, because the poem contradicts itself regularly, it is hard to say what Tennyson may have imagined the effect of his poetry on his readers to be.

Edgar Finley Shannon writes in his essay about the reception of *In Memoriam* that the poem received almost exclusively positive reviews. This is also supported by Gray in the introduction. Tennyson was quickly acknowledged as one of the greatest English poets. After going over many of the reviews and critical essays, Shannon concludes that “*In Memoriam* was believed to embody all the qualities which the age expected of poetry. The poem awakened chords of universal human sympathy” and “was eminently of the day and concerned itself with the solution of current problems” (119-120). It seems safe to claim that this supports my argument that Tennyson achieved the Arnoldian ideal. Awakening “chords of universal human sympathy” seems more “animating” than the pleasing melancholy of Arnold’s own poetry. However, despite its wonderful reception, we cannot know if Tennyson intended his poem to serve a stabilizing function. What we do know, however, is what Hallam Tennyson⁸ claims he heard his father say about the poem. Hallam Tennyson writes that “he considered that his poems expressed the principles at the foundation of his faith” (106). Tennyson told his son that “This is a terrible age of unfaith” in which “One can easily lose all belief, through giving up the continual thought and care for spiritual things” (106-107). Religious contemplation, whether or not in the form of poetry, seemed essential to Tennyson in modern times, as well as love and goodness. What Tennyson said about unfaith applies not only to men who did not believe at all, but also to men of reason who only contemplated science and ignored spiritual concerns (H. Tennyson 107). However, Tennyson was always preoccupied with science, and when questioned about Darwinism, “he conceived that the further science progressed, the more the Unity of Nature, and the purpose hidden behind the cosmic process of matter in motion and changing forms of life, would be apparent” (H. Tennyson 110).

With this information in mind, as well as the sections of *In Memoriam* previously discussed, it seems that Tennyson had quite a clear idea of how to tackle a crisis of faith in his later days, whether or not he intended for *In Memoriam* to be of help in such a crisis. It seems he believed that contemplation and doubt would lead to reverence. Poetry could be a useful

⁸ Evidently, Tennyson named his son after his friend Arthur Hallam

tool in this contemplation, as *In Memoriam* shows. Thus, while Arnold's believed reading poetry would guide us to perfection, Tennyson believed writing poetry could help in evolving one's faith into something stronger and more sustainable. It may be that Arnold was more cynical about our need for guidance, thinking perhaps that there was only so much one could achieve on one's own. Hallam Tennyson wrote that "Every new fact which came within his [father's] range was carefully weighed" (107), and Tennyson mostly found science to prove God's glory, although he did sometimes find these intellectual and spiritual contemplations troubling (108). However, it seems that Tennyson despised both unbelief and dogmatism, much like Arnold did, and found it best to confront ignorance and doubt equally to develop both his knowledge and his faith. But, Arnold insisted on "Culture" as a guiding principle, while Tennyson was convinced that several "forms" of faith could fulfill humanity's purpose on earth. Hallam Tennyson wrote that his father found it impossible "to imagine that the Almighty will ask you, when you come before Him in the next life what your particular form of creed was: but the question will rather be, 'Have you been true to yourself, and given in My Name a cup of cold water to one of these little ones?'" (106). This also attests to Tennyson's belief that humanity should above all be working towards a specific purpose: an evolution into a better race and a better world where love, goodness and reason trumps despair, superstition and beastly ways. Interestingly, this evolution resembles Arnold's ideal world of "Culture" where sweetness and light reigns. Thus, their methods and terminology differ, but Arnold's and Tennyson's ideal worlds are, in their essence, strikingly similar.

Chapter 3: Thomson and the brotherhood of isolation

At first glance, James Thomson's poem *The City of Dreadful Night* presents itself as both an interesting contrast to the everlasting hope of *In Memoriam*, and to the "sweetness and light" in poetry that Arnold prefers. Like in Dante's *Inferno*, hope has been left at the gates, and there is no comfort to be found. No sweetness will end human misery in life – death is the only end in sight. There is no light or intellectual curiosity to see things as they are, but rather a desire to escape into oblivion, because the truth of existence is so dreadful, mechanical and meaningless. The poem plays out the possible apocalyptic implications of Darwinism and industrialism with what John Holmes calls "a bleak irony bordering on black comedy" (53). Indeed, some passages of the poem are almost satirical in their pessimism, and thus, some might read it as a warning or foreshadowing of an age where faith and hope are truly lost. If so, despite its lack of "sweetness and light", it might still have a stabilizing function: To scare doubters away from abandoning their hope. However, other parts of the poem are so genuine in their atheism and despair that they cannot be satirical in nature. The speaker of the poem presents the truth of his existence with such urgency that we are led to believe that the poem is not only a picture of mere pessimism and despair. We learn that the speaker seeks solace in his isolation and alienation, and is hoping to find it in the fraternity of others who too have lost hope. The speaker explicitly states that the poem is not for the hopeful young or pious spirits, it is for the "sad Fraternity" (Proem, 36) of the hopeless and miserable who wander the world without faith or hope. Rather than telling a Tennysonian story of overcoming doubt, Thomson sheds light on the isolation and despair felt by those who no longer could accept religious explanations. Unable to find alternative ways to a meaningful life, they wander in a timeless purgatory which, in sense of despair, puts Arnold's limbo between two worlds to shame. However, Thomson begins his poem with a small but present hope that some readers will recognize the scenario that *The City* describes, and feel less alone in a world where the majority still holds on to faith. Consequently, the poem suggests Thomson believed poetry had the power to convey human experiences in such a way that it could bring people together, and cure the suffering of the modern condition.

In his introduction of Thomson's works, Ian Campbell depicts *The City* as an "anti-apocalypse" (viii), "constructed round silence, the absence of energy, all-encompassing darkness, terrifying timelessness and the utter absence of the certainties which underlie any idea of judgement" (viii). Campbell claims that one of Thomson's greatest achievements with *The City*, was his ability to deny the reader's expectation of a destination to the journey of the

narrator or of “a final confrontation, good and evil, light and darkness” (x). One can imagine that this great achievement is in part why his biographer Bertram Dobell called Thomson the “Laureate of Pessimism”. With the success of *In Memoriam* still in its recent past, *The City* is very controversial in its outright cynicism. Campbell notes, that while other authors wrote satire to explore controversial ideas,

Thomson in all seriousness is describing a philosophy of “the vast black veil uncertain / Because there is no light beyond the curtain”, the antithesis of Tennyson’s tentative hope in *In Memoriam* that there might be something better “behind the veil”. [...] With this possibility Tennyson offered his readers some hope to set against the Darwinian nightmare. (x-xi)

Thomson does not offer his readers hope of a higher purpose, on the contrary, he “suggests a threatening machine universe, as well as a post-Darwinian dystopia” (Campbell xiv). If so, Thomson’s poem shows a dreary Victorian perspective on how accepting pure Darwinism and of living a life without faith and God-given purpose could play out.

If we continue to analyze this pessimism in the context of the author’s time, “atheism” was a new concept and still considered taboo in most circles. The idea that life is meaningless and death permanent was an exclusively negative worldview, because the atheism of the poem is set up against a still very religious context. As John M. Christensen writes, in *The City*, the “old cosmology had been displaced by an unfamiliar and frightening new one” (248) and the “disenchantment with Science” (248) was alienating in its dismissal of all known concepts of man’s purpose on earth. The reason why Campbell and Christensen describe the poem as a dystopia or a frightening unfamiliar world, is that *The City of Dreadful Night* shows no effort to reconcile the old worldview of hopeful religion with the new worldview of science and modernization, like writers such as Tennyson set out to do. Rather, section XII in the poem dismisses a religious worldview as an illusion, a “daydream” and a false reality. However, if *The City* is a dystopia, it can be interpreted a fictional society invented to draw attention to Thomson’s real-life society, as dystopias often do. Campbell, and others who describe Thomson as “pessimist”, seem to focus less on what intentions may motivate the invention of such a fictional society, and pay more attention to the vividness and masterful way in which Thomson captures the modern condition. However, this chapter will show that many, including myself, find it both relevant and fruitful to look for evidence in the text that suggest reform or a solution to the misery of *The City*. Such evidence may help us look beyond the pessimism, and re-examine how Thomson fits into the crisis-of-faith discourse. This could in turn give insight into his view on atheism as part of Victorian society.

Whether the poem is a representation of Thomson's own pessimism or not, *The City of Dreadful Night* is a persistently hopeless poem. While Tennyson eventually regained faith and found divine purpose in his heart, Thomson firmly rejects God as the engineer behind the machine that is our world. Though presented through the words of a stranger and not the speaker, the poem presents a worldview where, without faith in God's love for man, and without the hope of a divine plan "behind the veil", life is just a machine without a function:

Where Faith and Love and Hope are dead indeed,
Can Life still live? By what doth it proceed?

As whom his one intense thought overpowers,
He answered coldly, Take a watch, erase
The signs and figures of the circling hours,
Detach the hands, remove the dial-face;
The works proceed until run down; although
Bereft of purpose, void of use, still go. (II, 29-36)

The speaker has been following a stranger around in the city, and asks him in disbelief how it is possible that life goes on without faith, love and hope. This echoes Tennyson's disappointment and disbelief twenty years earlier when faced with the possible implications of new natural science to man's God-given purpose: "Man, her last work, who seem'd so fair, [...] / Who trusted God was love indeed / And love Creation's final law—" (*In Memoriam*, LVI, 9; 13-14). However, Tennyson only briefly indulges how miserable a life without the pillars of love, hope and faith would be. Tennyson's doubt is often strongly felt, "Yet Hope had never lost her youth;" (CXXV, 5). Tennyson, even in his most pessimistic sections, cannot imagine that life on earth is all that is:

My own dim life should teach me this,
That life shall live for evermore,
Else earth is darkness at the core,
And dust and ashes all that is; (*In Memoriam*, XXXIV, 1-4)

At the time when *The City* was written⁹, the Christian eschatology was still the widely accepted answer to the question of the purpose of humanity, despite a growing number of publications that questioned or redefined the origin and immortality of man, such as Robert

⁹ Thomson started writing *The City of Dreadful Night* in 1870, finished it in 1873, and published it in four parts in Charles Bradlaugh's secularist paper *The National Reformer* in 1874 (Huseby 229-230).

Chamber's *The Vestiges*¹⁰, Lyell's writing discussed in chapter 2, and Darwin's publications. To imagine life without God-given purpose, one had to step outside the common belief that God was the engineer behind the universe, exemplified in this thesis as Tennyson's synthesis of faith and natural science. This common belief is why Darwin's claim, that natural selection that was the force behind evolution, was particularly controversial.

The metaphor of the watch in section II refers to natural theology, where the analogy of the watchmaker explains how a design implies a designer, hence the intricate works of nature must have been designed and set in motion by God. As William Paley wrote in 1802, that after hypothetically having found a watch on the ground and observed its mechanism: "the inference, we think, is inevitable; that the watch must have had a maker; [...] who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer; who comprehended its construction, and designed its use" (8). While Paley wrote this well before Darwin's theory was published, his arguments could be used to "prove" God as the designer of evolution. However, in Thomson's metaphor, the wandering stranger represents scientific explanations of life, explanations that deny the supernatural and religious grounds of natural theology and the analogy of the watchmaker. In a paper titled "On the Physical Basis of Life", Huxley suggests that "life" is not supernatural or divine, but a chemical reaction when carbon, oxygen, hydrogen and nitrogen are combined, and "under certain conditions, they give rise to [...] protoplasm, and this protoplasm exhibits the phenomena of life" (151). Houghton explains the implications of Huxley's theory, which at the time was not yet proved: "If so, man has no spirit or soul independent of the body, but only a brain in which molecular changes, determined by external stimuli, give automatic rise to all his thoughts and all his actions. For Huxley [...] man is simply a human automaton" (Houghton 70). Thus, in using the watch as a metaphor for man as a human automaton, a meaningless and purposeless machine living in a world of indifference, Thomson vividly captures the mechanical emptiness felt by the inhabitants of *The City*.

However, the metaphor of the watch could also represent the key to end the emptiness. If the hands and dial-face are meant to signify the presence of a soul put into the human body by God, to be the physical proof of divine purpose, the machinery of the watch still functions without it. In other words, if it turns out that the definition of man as God's creation false, life still remains a fact. A similar opinion was held by Huxley¹¹, who believed the human race

¹⁰ James A. Secord has written a whole book about this work called *Victorian Sensation*, in which he briefly mentions how *Vestiges* influenced Tennyson (9-10, 530-532)

¹¹ See quotation from "Agnosticism and Christianity" on page 3-4 in this thesis

would survive even if religious creeds were proved wrong (“Agnosticism and Christianity”). However, Huxley’s approach seems more humanist, and his tone is generally optimistic. The speaker in *The City* is contrastingly pessimistic, but the basis of his statements lies in the bitter experience of having lost faith, and failed to find alternative ways of filling his life with purpose and meaning. Huxley argues from an agnostic perspective where faith is irrelevant to ontological questions. Still, the metaphor of the watch does not need to present a solely pessimistic point of view. It could also represent an early existential point of view where human existence is the only thing that is true, implicating the potential freedom of existing without the one defined function or predestined purpose. The watch’s external aspects are representations of human definitions of time, as our soul resulted from religious definitions of man. Thus, if faith, love and hope currently define the purpose and function of a human life, the metaphor explains that life still goes on when these definitions change or disappear. By removing the hands and dial-face of the watch, the watch’s machinery is exposed for everyone to see, and the onlookers can redefine it however they please.

This reading proposes that Thomson was well ahead of his time in the existentialism that permeates *The City of Dreadful Night*, as it echoes Jean-Paul Sartre’s proposition that *existence* precedes *essence*¹². In this context, the *essence* Thomson debates is the spiritual nature of man, or man created in God’s image, where the purpose of his life is, essentially, the afterlife. A shift in perspective, where *existence* precedes *essence*, means that man is free to define his own purpose and self. Existence, then, is a matter of perspective. The stranger does not say “The works proceed until run down; although / Bereft of [*its perceived*] purpose, void of [*its original*] use, still go”. He is far too pessimistic, because his life has been defined meaningless by others, and most importantly, by himself. Again, we can draw from Sartre: The inhabitants of *The City* suffer from *bad faith*¹³. Thomson addresses a false sense of emptiness and meaninglessness that the inhabitants of the city experience by pointing out that, ironically, the inhabitants walk the streets of the city in a depressive and alienated state alongside each other, but not together. Interestingly, what separates Thomson from the later existentialists, is that the solution to the angst is not to realize the truth and act on ones’ individual freedom, but rather, to realize a common human condition. Thomson sees the

¹² An antithesis to the common philosophy that *essence* precedes *existence* (a man’s nature is defined, e. g. as rational). Sartre opposed that man first and foremost exists, and is free to define his own nature. In Sartre’s view, individuals construct their own world and being (Churchill and Reynolds, 165-167)

¹³ A form of self-deception where we keep the truth hidden from ourselves, and prevents us from taking responsibility for, and acting on, our freedom. “Bad faith” explains among other things why people hold on to widely spread false beliefs. (Churchill and Reynolds 118-128)

people of the city as a group that are isolated from each other because they think they are alone, and have yet to realize that they are a secular minority in an otherwise religious society.

Before I transition into discussing this secular minority, or “Sad Fraternity”, we will look further into why so many of the inhabitants of the city are in a state of depression and isolation. As mentioned above, the experienced isolation of the inhabitants is one cause for depression and misery. William D. Schaefer explains that we can also read *The City* as a city of the mind, where the goddess “Melencolia”¹⁴ reigns. If so, *The City of Dreadful Night* is a journey into the introverted and depressed mind. Isolation and alienation is in this sense an inability to escape the sadness of one’s own mind, and perhaps the feeling of being unable to engage with the world and connect with the people in it. As Schaefer argues in his article “The Two Cities of Dreadful Night”, the city is “not a specific place to which men are transported after death; it is a state of mind in which the living [...] suffer what [Thomson] calls a “timeless hell” [...] a nightmare city of the mind” (611). As Schaefer notes, this separates *The City* as a mental state from Dante’s physical journey in *Inferno*. However, the city within *The City* is a place of silence and solitude, where the inhabitants do not speak much to each other, and are mostly engaged in their personal suffering:

Each wrapt in his own doom, they wander, wander,
Or sit foredone and desolately ponder

Through sleepless hours with heavy drooping head (I, 54-56)

These lines illustrate how the inhabitants live without seeing each other, and so they fail to notice that they all suffer from the same condition. In their minds, they are alone. However, while pondering one’s own doom is indeed melancholic, there is a restlessness in the wandering and pondering that suggests they have not come to terms with their doom. Or, if they have come to terms with it, then perhaps they are restless to find the best way to live with their suffering. If so, the inhabitants are melancholy, but not defeatist. If *The City* is a melancholic mind, it is a state of inability to escape constant negative thought rather than a state of apathy. One may think, in terms of depression, that the presence of pain indicates a better prognosis than apathy. However, the poem frequently insists that all hope is lost – that the inhabitants are defeated and suffering. Indeed, Thomson evokes Dante’s Hell in the epigraph, by quoting the inscriptions on the gates (Schaefer 611), setting the scene for the entire poem. *The City* does not represent Tennyson’s perspective of faint optimism and hope,

¹⁴ Archaic spelling borrowed from the title of Albrecht Dürer’s engraving *Melencolia I* (1514), the engraving which inspired Thomson’s patroness.

that good will eventually arise from suffering, that it is always darkest before the dawn.

Tennyson wants to hope, and he wants to believe

That nothing walks with aimless feet;

That not one life shall be destroy'd,

Or cast as rubbish to the void,

When God hath made the pile complete; (LIV, 5-8).

The City, with its river of suicides, and inhabitants wandering without aims or purpose, is the embodiment of Tennyson's worst fears. The inhabitants of *The City* do not cling to hope, because they are beyond doubt, and they are stuck in the emotional and intellectual aftermath of that trauma. They all feel like they have been "cast as rubbish to the void". What the inhabitants have in common is that they have all given up hope of something behind the veil, which is the very reason why they gained entrance to *The City of Dreadful Night*.

In his analysis of *The City*, Schaefer also concludes that the city, while being in part a melancholy and personal city of the mind, is also a symbolic city of a modern condition where men "are actually members of a secret fraternity banded together [...] because they have intellectually arrived at the realization [...] that all life is fraudulent and meaningless". The conclusion the inhabitants have arrived at, is that life is fraudulent because religious faith is an illusion and a daydream (section XII). This might suggest that Thomson believed their suffering was caused by intellect and intelligence, because the inhabitants have figured out something that others have not. Melancholy was, historically, often seen as the price for genius. Furthermore, while superior intelligence might be a key factor, Schaefer seems to suggest that there is a kind of exclusivity similar to a fraternal order to the poem and its readership. The way Thomson addresses his readers in the Proem can support this idea: "None uninitiate by many a presage / Will comprehend the language of the message (40-41). This suggests that the poem works as a secret code only comprehensible to those who possess the key. What makes this group exclusive, is that the scientific discoveries have not swayed them from one truth to another, and they have not found synthesis to unite two realities. Instead, they have uncovered a false reality and replaced it with truth, a truth where no being or force influences human lives or the destiny of the human race. The inhabitants are now looking beyond the illusions to see things as they truly are. If this is the message of *The City* as a poem, it has a function similar to Arnold's "light" after all. However, it seems evident that the inhabitants do not like what they see. Seeing the truth makes them miserable, and so they turn inward in their suffering because looking out into the world only further increases their pain. They have much in common with Arnold's narrator, who followed "the high, white star of

Truth” (69) down a path of pain and had to retreat from the world. In a way, the inhabitants replace one false truth for another when they believe they are alone in their despair. If we read *The City* like this, the inhabitants are blinded by grief, and shielding themselves from the reality of their existence. Thus, what would give *The City* the property of “light” Arnold championed in poetry, would be if it urged readers to realize that they are not alone in their awakening to the truth. This would perhaps make the inhabitants seek each other out rather than turn inward in their melancholy. However, the poem is after all a poem of “dreadful night”, which in a literal sense is quite the contrast to Arnold’s “sweetness and light”.

While imagery of isolation and alienation is constantly present in *The City*, it does at times address the concept of unity in suffering, such as in the part of the Proem already discussed. Schaefer, who in his article suggests a duality to *The City* – that it can be read in two different ways – notes that *The City* is also “a meeting place, a rallying point for those who have mastered their geology, evolution, and Biblical criticism and take an admittedly morbid but highly enthusiastic delight in pointing out the absence of a God” (615). This “morbid but highly enthusiastic delight” seems rather disputable, because most of the inhabitants suffer in silence and solitude. They are not consciously part of an exclusive group, on the contrary, they are marginalized, isolated and alone. However, Schaefer might have a valid point if referring to the potential readers of the poem rather than the inhabitants of the poem. Especially those readers who wished to spread atheism and secular ideas, who are represented by the person preaching to the crowd, a part of the poem that effectively illustrates Schaefer’s idea of *The City* as a “meeting place”. In Section XIV, the inhabitants of the city are gathered in the cathedral when a figure with “steadfast and intolerable eyes” (19) and “great sad voice deep and full” (24) addresses them. The scene evokes the association of a Christian priest giving a sermon. However, the message this priest conveys is anti-Christian, or of a “post-Darwinian”, “threatening machine universe” (xiv), to use Campbell’s terms. The priest claims that “There is no God; no Fiend with names divine” (40-41), there is no afterlife, and there is nothing special about the human race. “We finish thus; and all our wretched race / Shall finish with its cycle, and give place / To other beings, with their own time-doom” (55-57), the priest states, and thus establishes Tennyson’s nightmarish “Nature red in tooth and claw” as reality. Races will go extinct, humanity included: “We bow down to the universal laws / Which never had for man a special clause” (61-62). The preacher crushes the hopes of both doubters and believers that man has a higher purpose than other races, a purpose that gains us access to an afterlife. While Tennyson ultimately concludes that man has a special destiny, the preacher in *The City* claims that human life is short and painful, and that men are

free to do with their lives as they please, even commit suicide if the emptiness of existence is too much to bear (79-84). This reality is what the inhabitants see, and it is what grants them membership in Thomson's sad fraternity.

While *The City of Dreadful Night* is known for its pessimistic yet heartfelt description of the modern condition, many writers look beyond *The City* as a vividly pessimistic picture. Those who look beyond find another key aspect of reading *The City*, something Amy K. Huseby calls "Thomson's intention to create a work of rupture and disorientation" (230). Indeed, readers who study *The City* might find it rather inconsistent at times. As examples, Huseby points out that the contrast between the Proem (that calls for unity) and the ending of stoic endurance makes the intention of the work unclear. Furthermore, the sections of the poem are often not related to each other and seem to tell different stories. Thus, in its "dislocation and reorientation" (Huseby 229) it causes the reader to have to constantly shift his perspective. One effect of this technique of disorientation, is that it strengthens the motif of isolation. In contrast to *In Memoriam*, there is no evolution of small changes in this inconsistency, and *The City* does not end in the reassurance of evolved faith. Rather, it ends with the word "despair". Campbell suggests that the effect of Thomson's urgent insistence on darkness and hopelessness is to unsettle the reader's layers of defense against "revolutionary and upsetting ideas" (xiv), and to provide them with the "means of expression [...] to give voice to a set of beliefs inimical to what was still, to many Victorians, the public consensus of belief" (xi)¹⁵. In short, Campbell claims that *The City of Dreadful Night* provides the necessary arena for the reader to explore his crisis of faith in other ways than of the majority.

Thus, Campbell's conclusion is quite different from his description of the poem as constructed around "silence" and "the absence of energy"¹⁶. There is not a total absence of energy, because the poem reveals at times a small hope for comfort. And while the inhabitants mostly walk in silence, there is one voice, Thomson's voice, that aims to reach others like him. Furthermore, there is a sense of empowerment to the poem as an arena for voicing marginalized opinions, and cutting through layers of false and shielding beliefs. Similarly, Huseby suggests that Thomson's aim was to disrupt to make room for new realizations and ideas of reason for people to gather around (235). "In other words," Huseby writes, "interacting in a space where particular units of knowledge are brought together can transmit knowledge and a sense of intellectual community" (236). Huseby suggests that rather than to

¹⁵ This idea mentioned in Campbell's introduction to my edition of *The City of Dreadful Night*, is the main argument of an article Campbell wrote called "'And I Burn Too': Thomson's 'City of Dreadful Night'".

¹⁶ See page 34

challenge the beliefs of people outside his circle, “Thomson was trying to undo the estrangement of modernity [...] by forming a secularist community, one which would enable him to “overcome the very isolation” from the divine that is itself the central condition of modernity conveyed by the poem” (238). To become part of the secularist community, and to engage in its disruptive discourse, one had to first experience the isolation of breaking with the majority of one’s society (Huseby).

Likewise, in his article “Learning to Read “The City””, William Sharpe writes: “What makes [*The City of Dreadful Night*] remarkable among Victorian poems about the city is that it offers a solution to the familiar catalogue of urban complaints and fears, a way of dealing and living with the urban despair to which it at first appears to succumb” (66). While *The City* has been applauded for its pessimism and vivid portrayal of a nightmarish modern condition, as Sharpe also points out, it seems that Thomson did not intend to use his poetry to spread pessimism about the modern condition. Sharpe argues that Thomson ultimately intended to bring solace to urban victims by addressing them as a “fraternity” of isolated wanderers to spread an awareness that they were not alone (69). In the Proem, Thomson directs his poem to this very fraternity, and we can sense a flicker of hope; not a hope for a divine purpose to life, but a hope to overcome the isolation and alienation that causes so much suffering. Sharpe explains that the author’s hope is that likeminded readers “[w]ill understand the speech, and feel a stir / Of fellowship in all-disastrous fight” (Proem, 29-32), and thus wake up from their lonely journey through a meaningless existence. Through the power of poetry, Thomson “uncovers the links, however hidden or perverted by city life, between all men living there and brings them to “self-knowledge” and identity, changing dispirited phantoms into unflinching endurers of urban emptiness” (Sharpe 69). Thomson urges his fraternity to fight their modern condition “through self-awareness, fellowship and sober contemplation” (Sharpe 84). In Sharpe’s reading, *The City* is both a vivid portrait of human despair, and a call for action, and he ends his article by underlining that “Out of his “great expression of the spirit of despair,” Thomson fashions a persuasive program for collective identity and defiant self-consciousness which each weary wanderer can achieve through learning to read the city” (84). Interestingly, in this call for action, Thomson realizes Arnold’s wish to “animate” (“To A. H. Clough”) with his poetry, although some of the critics above would argue that it aims to “animate” only a select group, rather than humanity as a whole.

However, “learning to read the city” (Sharpe 84) is perhaps an endeavor in which many will fail. Arnold did after all insist on “sweetness and light” in poetry because, by portraying the ideal and perfect world, poetry would unambiguously spark joy. *The City* can

be read in many ways, but it is not an idealist poem, and the call for action is hidden beneath a consistently pessimist worldview, and a constant denial that any hope is present. Unlike *In Memoriam*, the continued disjointedness of *The City* is never set aside for a final happy ending. Thomson does not indulge the idea of a world where isolated suffering ends, and seems unwilling to fully explore the possibility of a marginalized but united society of secularists as a substitute community in his poetry. What Sharpe and Huseby read as a call to unite exists only in subtle hints, which in some cases might prevent the message from reaching its addressee. However, as the Proem shows us, Thomson intended the true message of his poem to be available only to a select few. When he seems to reveal that life is meaningless and miserable, a truth only the fraternity will relate to, he is actually providing a solution exclusive to them, which is to recognize that meaninglessness links them together, and the way forward is to endure this meaninglessness together.

Interestingly, Thomson's solution to urban emptiness relies solely on the power of poetry to convey his message so effectively and elegantly that it can have the effects discussed in the paragraphs above. As argued so far, *The City* is a poem intended for a specific group of readers, and its aim is to make the members of this group "feel a stir" (Proem, 31), rise to consciousness, and gather as a fellowship. Thomson does not boast about his ability to write poetry, but writing poetry gives him some feeling of being alive and in control: "Because it gives some sense of passion/In helpless impotence try to fashion / Our woe in living words howe'er uncouth" (Proem, 12-14). The Proem shows both Thomson's personal motivation for writing *The City of Dreadful Night* and the intention of serving a common good for the "desolate, Fate-smitten" (27). Because he writes "Our woe" (14), he makes it clear that he speaks on behalf of his community, and is assured that they will relate to the text because of shared experiences rather than clever metre and rhyme. Again, Thomson contrasts Tennyson's ideas, this time about what purpose poetry may serve. In *In Memoriam*, section V, poetry cannot be truly relatable because it cannot fully convey human experience. Furthermore, poetry in *In Memoriam*, is not a call for action on behalf of a community, but a personal comfort and a numbing of pain. Tennyson does not think of poetry as clumsy and urgent expression of passion, but finds poetry helpful in overcoming grief and contemplating doubt. The poets seem to agree that poetry can comfort pain, and they both attribute a "stabilizing" function to poetry, but in very different ways. While Thomson seems to believe that his poetry conveys his experience well enough to be felt by others, and is in that sense more socially oriented, Tennyson feels guilty about his purely personal reasons for

writing. It seems that in this case, Thomson was the optimist of the two, though none of them can match Arnold's optimism about the "civilizing" power of poetry.

In Sharpe's view, learning to read the city means looking beyond the pessimism to find the urgent wakeup call for atheists and other non-believers and realize their common situation of false isolation. To reach his likeminded readers, Thomson published *The City of Dreadful Night* as a serialized long poem in the secularist weekly paper "The National Reformer". Huseby explains how "The National Reformer was a fitting location for [Thomson's] poem" (229), because both the newspaper and poem had an aim to unite the secularist community, and notes as the others in the discussion above, that "Thomson clearly stated that the audience for his poem was fellow secularists. The Proem describes the audience as those who, like Thomson, have lost their faith. Only they, it claims, can appreciate the poem's message" (231). Furthermore, Huseby asserts that alienation and isolation is the basis of Thomson's fraternity, but also the way of overcoming it. If so, Huseby also sheds light on why Thomson would not provide a final resolution to the poem, or an ending where the misery finally ends. Rising to self-awareness and a common identity will not end the isolation and alienation, only make it easier to endure. Being a community does not change the worldview they hold, which contradicts the majority, and their lives are still empty of a God-given purpose. However, Huseby's secular congregation seems like a valid alternative to fill life with new meaning. This new meaning, in light of Huseby, would likely be found through humanist and/or enlightenment values as alternatives to religious values.

There is a small and flickering hope in *The City of Dreadful Night*, but it is not a Tennysonian hope of God behind the veil. It is a hope that someone likeminded is out there, who will recognize their own lonely, faithless existence in Thomson's description. In this recognition, an awareness of brotherhood will spark a relief from isolation. Despite his pessimism, it seems that Thomson, much like Carlyle, hoped community could cure the suffering of the modern man. If so, Thomson's brotherhood of isolation is a secular alternative to Carlyle's "spiritual unity" mentioned in the introduction to this thesis. However, it seems that to most Victorians, *The City of Dreadful Night* lacks resolution, particularly in the form of the achieved fellowship that could cure isolation. The imagery of isolation and fraternity are juxtaposed, and the poem is contradictory in its insistence on dead hope while Thomson states that sparking empathy in a few readers is its main purpose. However, what makes Thomson appear as a pessimist in the end, is his unwillingness to provide a true resolution or a convincing synthesis to support his claims in the Proem. In Arnold's terms, while "light" is arguably present in Thomson's poem, the poem lacks "sweetness" in the sense

of a moral desire to stop human error. Thus, *The City of Dreadful Night* does not achieve “perfection” or harmony in the tension between spirit and mind. This leaves the civilizing property of the poem uncertain, a property that could have been represented in unifying the inhabitants of the city. The dream of unity ultimately stands as a faint hope against an endless desert of pain, perhaps the same desert in which Arnold’s persona is stranded. In the end, *The City* offers “iron endurance” (XXI, 82) as a stoic remedy to the suffering, an alternative available only to the select few who stand strong because they have recognized their fellow brothers of woe. The rest are left in eternal misery, and wherever they look, they find only a “confirmation of the old despair” (XXI, 84). As a “post-Darwinian dystopia”, as Campbell called it, *The City* concludes that only the fittest of the inhabitants will be able to survive, and we can picture the weak soon floating down the river of suicides. However, while we can imagine this would be the concluding reading of many Victorian readers, Sharpe, Huseby and others have pointed out that some would read the poem very differently. To this group, the poem would have a stabilizing property. When finding the hidden message of the poem, this group would see the truth of their existence a little differently, and they would have a community to explore this truth with together. Thus, they would overcome emptiness and replace it with a new meaning to life. Moreover, and what moves Thomson even further away from the pessimism many cannot look beyond, is the idea that poetry, as an arena giving voice to marginalized opinions, has the power to bring people together. Thus, poetry can cure the isolation of the modern condition. To Thomson, faith was not the solution to the human suffering of his time. Instead, if the people of his time could unite through art, and form bonds of community and intellectual effort, they could better deal with their modern condition, and cure their own misery without divine intervention.

Conclusion

A common idea we find in all the poems discussed, is the idea that poetry has the power to ease the distress of transition, and even serve an instructional purpose for the establishment of a new and better world in the future. The idea of literature as a means to social reform was indeed very Victorian, yet, this idea of literature is perhaps more often associated with the social novel than poetry. However, as I have suggested, poetry is particularly well fitted for dealing with the modern condition or crises of faith, because poetry exists in its best version as a balance between poetic rules and creative impulse, or as Arnold would argue, in the perfect balance of sweetness and light. Furthermore, when poetry achieves equilibrium in opposing forces, it functions in a stabilizing way, especially when we view the modern condition as a tug of war between two worlds.

In “Stanzas of the Grande Chartreuse”, we find the narrator in a limbo between two worlds, unable to imagine a future world to replace the dead world of religion. While my idea of limbo is tied to transition, and thus indicates temporality, the narrator never escapes his limbo. The poem does not attain equilibrium, because equilibrium entails a sense of content which does not comply with the narrator’s restless wandering or depressed endurance. The pessimistic reader might only see “Stanzas” as a “confirmation of the old despair”, as some of the inhabitants of *The City* do when they gaze upon the patroness Melencolia in the last line of Thomson’s poem. Indeed, there is a strong sense of melancholy in both poems, which weighs heavily against their stabilizing function. I argue that “Stanzas” could at least be instructional in its function as a cautionary tale that could nip the buds of hopelessness before it truly settled. However, the idea of poetry as an active force in the transition from chaos to the establishment of a new world, is something Arnold only directly deals with in his prose. Thus, the poem serves mostly to exemplify the crisis he deals with in much of his prose.

“Stanzas” and *In Memoriam* share a sense of grieving over the loss of meaning and certainties. While the narrator’s loss in “Stanzas” remains quite abstract and philosophical, loss manifests in the death of a close friend in *In Memoriam*. To make sense of Hallam’s meaningless death, Tennyson needed to believe that Hallam was with God, and that he would see him again in the afterlife. However, when Tennyson examines Christian doctrine to find reassurance, he finds new doubts instead. Yet, *In Memoriam* separates itself from “Stanzas” by never purging faith or stagnating progress. We find both narrators in a state of grief and doubt, but Tennyson is not necessarily in a state of limbo. Overall, the interplay between opposing forces in *In Memoriam* is not characterized so much by depression and hopelessness

or restless wandering as the other two poems, which makes the idea of limbo less fitting to *In Memoriam*, unless we interpret doubt as a position between belief and unbelief. However, the poem deems doubt a necessary part of sustainable faith in the modern world of progress, a world which will continue to challenge belief. The resolution of *In Memoriam* happens when Tennyson does what Arnold's narrator fails to do. Tennyson attains a sense of equilibrium between two worlds – the worlds of faith and reason – that allows him to evolve his faith concurrently with modern progress. *In Memoriam* owes its optimism in part to the stabilizing function of poetry. To Tennyson, poetry served a personal stabilizing function as an arena to contemplate doubt. In section V “Measured language” (6), or the balance between poetic rules and creative impulse, distracted him from his grief, and poetry ultimately played a role in his evolved faith. Furthermore, *In Memoriam* as a narrative, as an evolution of faith sparked by doubt, might suggest that the poem could function as an example to be followed.

Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night* seems fitting as a foil to *In Memoriam*. While both poems play out the implications of natural science and reason upon faith, *In Memoriam* reaches a hopeful, religious conclusion that *The City of Dreadful Night* insistently denies. While *The City* is a monotone and pessimist world of despair, where faith and hope are illusions and daydreams, *In Memoriam* is a world where faith that will survive an age of progress, because tested faith only grows stronger. Arguably, one is a dystopia, the other is a utopia, and Arnold's “Stanzas” is the limbo in between. Many readers would probably read *The City* as a dystopia or cautionary tale. However, underneath the pessimism of *The City* is a call for action. There is hope in *The City*; not hope of divine purpose, but a hope that the marginalized unbelievers can form secular community, where they will not only endure the modern condition, but intellectually and collectively thrive. This makes *The City* a state of limbo in awaiting a new and better existence, but it is a far more hellish limbo than “Stanzas”. Yet, *The City* attains equilibrium between isolation and brotherhood in the idea of a secular community, which gives it a stabilizing function specific to the secular reader. *The City* functions as an arena giving voice to those who feel out of place in a still religious society, a society which came to accept the honest doubts of *In Memoriam*, but was still not tolerant of outright atheism. *The City* shows that the opposing ideas of isolation and brotherhood are in truth two sides to the same coin: the cause of isolation is also the basis of brotherhood. This kind of equilibrium resembles Tennyson's synthesis of God and Nature. Isolation seems contrasting to brotherhood, but as *In Memoriam* reveals that God works through Nature, Thomson reveals that there is brotherhood in isolation.

What this thesis ultimately shows, is that each writer had his own vision of the transition that is modern progress, and of the role of religion in the future. While Arnold feared the moral and societal consequences of weakened Christianity, and devoted himself to instruct modern men, Thomson's poem suggests that human community could substitute religion as a glue to society, at least to the social groups no longer held together by faith. Both writers were concerned with a lack of unity in their time. Tennyson is perhaps most successful in uniting faith and modern thought, but his conclusions are religious. Atheists and agnostics would likely disagree with his synthesis of religion and natural science, which makes his poem stabilizing only to doubting believers. All three poems serve a stabilizing function to the opposing impulses of the era in which they were written, though some more successfully than others. The poems illustrate tension in different ways, but the interplay between opposing forces does not necessarily end up in resolution. Nevertheless, by depicting crises of faith, and by highlighting the causes and effects, the poems may still have influenced readers in a positive way, and perhaps helped them avoid or overcome their own crises. The effect of using a duality of opposing forces to depict a crisis of faith, is the idea that equilibrium might be attained. Arguably, this reveals a hope shared by all three writers, that if their poems could manage to engage the reader in the discussion of attaining equilibrium, then they would bring society closer, one reader at the time, to finding the new certainties to replace the old, and thus accelerate the process of transition toward an easier existence.

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The master's thesis' relevance for the teaching profession

While I would have also liked to write a didactical master's thesis, my thesis concerns English literature exclusively. However, I still think there are several reasons why this master's thesis is relevant for the teaching profession. Firstly, I believe that my future students will benefit from having a teacher who has specialized knowledge about a literary subject such as this one, which combines and highlights the connections between culture, society and literature, three aspects which form one fourth of the competence aims in the English Curriculum. The subject area "Culture, society and literature" concerns how texts, in a broad sense, are forms of cultural expression. This thesis is essentially an in-depth study of how, and in what way, poems can be viewed as expressions of cultural and societal concerns. Therefore, after having written this thesis, I feel better equipped to explain and explore the connections between culture, society and literature in the classroom.

Secondly, in this thesis I have combined my subjects¹⁷ in an interdisciplinary manner that I think will prove useful for my future as a teacher. I have combined English Literature and Religion mostly, but I also think that this thesis draws on Sociology, because it shows how individual stories, or the micro perspective, may inform our understanding of the macro perspective. Overall, I think interdisciplinary work is very valuable for the teaching profession, not only because it allows the individual teacher to utilize their knowledge base more fully, but also because it allows for better cooperation between teachers across subjects. Also, I believe the interdisciplinary work of teacher will facilitate students in making their own valuable connections between subjects.

Lastly, this thesis shows that close reading and analyzing poetry is not a useless skill, and it does not need to solely concern rhythm and rhyme. It is not uncommon to hear poetry analysis as an example of things you will never have use for when you have finished upper secondary school. Well, for one, poetry analysis can earn you a master's degree. Moreover, and on a more serious note, analyzing poetry is a useful and rewarding way of working with historical and cultural sources. Literature is not mere fiction, it can help us learn something about history and about people. I believe that my work with this thesis has made me better equipped to convey the value of what my students will learn in school, and to motivate them through my passion for the subject, especially if I end up teaching the subject "English literature and culture" one day, as I hope I will.

¹⁷ My main subject is English, and my secondary subjects are Religion, Sociology and Psychology