

"A Lost Pulse of Feeling:" Reconnecting with the "Hidden Self" in Matthew Arnold's "Buried Life"

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Abstract

Matthew Arnold's "Buried Life" explores the desire for genuine human connection amidst the self-isolating impositions of his speaker's society. It presents an image of a world so lacking in meaningful interaction that those who exist within it are bound to a restrictive state of half-life, disconnected as they are from the rest of humanity. While much of the critical discourse has viewed Arnold's poem as little more than a woeful lament for an unattainable state of existence, this paper considers a reading in which the speaker has succeeded in moving beyond the bounds of his collective isolation and is optimistic of there being a manner in which others can do the same. In such a reading, the methodology for replicating the speaker's success is gradually revealed throughout the text, and the plan which he proposes is a simple one. In order to unearth the life which has been "buried," he suggests, in order to reconnect — however briefly — with that "lost pulse of feeling" from which so many have grown distant, all that is required is for the members of his society to communicate freely with one another about even their deepest, most "nameless feelings."

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The world of Arnoldian scholarship has all but overlooked his 1852 poem "The Buried Life," and what little critical discourse there has been has tended to fixate upon the aspects of the text suggesting despondency or isolation. Indeed, such themes can be found at various points throughout the narrative, but, as I will argue, their inclusion in the poem has far less to do with fostering a feeling of hopelessness than it does with offering an actionable template for change. It is true, for instance, that the speaker does invest a great deal of time into an extended lament on the troubling rigidity of separation between individuals in his society, relating that he has grown weary of the pervasive extent to which "the mass of men" have "concealed / their thoughts" (16-7) from one another and strayed from "[their] true, original course" (50). The speaker does, moreover,

maintain that such behaviour, though it may have initially been intended to foster an atmosphere of well-mannered exchange, has served only to establish a burgeoning half-life or "buried life" (48), an unshakable environment of emotional self-restraint in which individuals are so disconnected from one another as to only be half alive. Significantly, however, the speaker lays bare these more typically melancholic claims with remedial undertones, inviting a reconsideration of such matters so as to break rather than bolster the divisions which are so thoroughly stifling the members of his society. An exploration of the necessity for genuine human connection amidst a growing collective isolation, the poem insists that it is indeed possible to unearth the life which has been "buried," to reconnect, however briefly, with that "lost pulse of feeling" (85) from

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which so many have grown distant. All that is required, its speaker suggests, is for "the mass of men" to communicate freely with one another about even their deepest, most "nameless feelings" (62).

Throughout the text, the speaker makes frequent mention of the extent to which his society has fostered an environment wherein he feels simultaneously alienated from himself and others. There is, for instance, the "war of mocking words" (1) by which the general mode of conversation is characterized, a social phenomenon to which the speaker draws additional attention by placing it within the poem's opening line. It is deemed to be a "war," as Alice Stitelman notes, "because it is not really communicative, but rather a shield to hide behind" (135), although the war-like maneuvering of these "mocking words" also brings to mind the social stratagems by which individuals artificially bolster the curated representations of their public selves. There is, moreover, the "nameless sadness" (Arnold 3) with which the speaker finds himself overcome, so detached from his own emotions as to be lacking even the self-knowledge required to describe the feeling with any greater precision; "the mass of men" who conceal "their thoughts" (16-7) from one another, unwilling to bear the risk of openly sharing their true selves "for fear that if revealed / they would by other men be met / with blank indifference, or with blame reproved" (17-9); the "longing to inquire / into the mystery of [the] heart" (51-2), and the realization that, having failed to follow through with this desire, "hardly ... for one little hour" "have we been ourselves" (59-60). There can, in other words, be no doubt regarding the extent to which both the speaker's life and the lives of those in his society have been "buried." Notice, too, that the speaker remains anonymous for the entirety of the poem, as readers are given no information by which to identify him and can, instead, view him only as a kind of figurehead for the anonymous crowd. Granted, it is not wholly unusual for the speaker of a poem to be unknown to the reader. It is, however, unusual that there would be no information whatsoever by which readers could identify the speaker of this poem, for a speaker will typically be identifiable in some manner, even if only through a generalized personal trait or single, gendered pronoun. In this text, even the decision to assign a male pronoun to the speaker is largely an assumption on the part of the reader, for although it is heavily suggested that the speaker is male, this is not something that is ever made explicit. Any reference, for instance, linking "a ... man" (31) or "men" (16) to the first-person plural "we" (4) or "our" (1) could simply be the gendered equivalent of the now gender-neutral 'humankind.' Ultimately, then, there exists the suggestion that this lack of identifying information comes as the result of a deliberate withholding on the part of the speaker, for such concealment serves the useful function of further underscoring the poem's striving towards connection. So long as the speaker remains anonymous to the reader, his

narrative can be assigned, more generally, to anyone and everyone. This, in turn, serves to elevate his argument to a position of greater authority, as his claims are made more widely applicable than they would otherwise be if he were more concretely identifiable as an individual.

Arnold's interest in the "hidden self" — an interest that can perhaps most plainly be evidenced, within his poetic works, by this particular poem — does not make him unique among his contemporaries. In many ways, however, the manner in which he approaches this subject does. As Timothy Peltason notes, for instance, Arnold is "allie[d] ..., somewhat unexpectedly, with ... John Stuart Mill," a contemporary of Arnold's with whom he maintained a "shared interest in disinterestedness, a shared sense that clarity of vision and judgement is both rare and indispensable, the only foundation of all reasoning and reform" (758). Indeed, such a claim can certainly be made of this poem, as much of Mill's general criticisms on the triviality of poetry's forced expression work well to unearth Arnold's sense of being emotionally stifled (or "buried" [48]) by the dictates of his speaker's society. Just as Arnold's speaker disparages the extent to which disingenuous encounters have come to negatively impact his interpersonal relationships (and, as a result, himself), so too does Mill express disdain for the way in which 'true' poetry has become marred by what he calls "eloquence," a form of poetry in which heartfelt sentiments of self-expression are tainted by the desire to cater to an audience:

Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression or utterance of feeling. But ... eloquence is *heard*, [and] poetry is *overheard*. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself... Eloquence is feeling pouring itself out to other minds, courting their sympathy, or endeavouring to influence their belief ... (71)

"Eloquence" is forced, lacks in authenticity, and is formulated with the intention of "courting" the attention of others. Poetry, meanwhile, is "feeling confessing itself to itself:" it is genuine insight into the core of one's being, a morsel of self-knowledge which can only be discovered, can only be "overheard" by listening to oneself in solitude. In matters regarding authenticity of expression, then, the two men are alike. However, although they are of one mind so far as the adverse effects of social decorum are concerned, they differ as to the way in which they imagine the ideal expression of one's truest and innermost self — what Mill calls "the deeper and more secret workings of human

emotion" (67) and what Arnold calls the "nameless feelings" (62) of "our hidden self" (65) — being realized. Mill suggests that striving towards such an ideal is an endeavour of an entirely private matter, one that is to be undergone solely by oneself. Arnold, meanwhile, argues that such an experience can only be fulfilled (and must necessarily be shared) through communion with one's fellow men and women. Consider, by way of comparison, the encounter in "The Buried Life" between the speaker and his lover from lines 77-90. There, readers vividly bear witness to both the speaker's first genuine interaction with another individual ("When a beloved hand is laid in ours, / ... / Our eyes can in another's eyes read clear" [78-81]) and the speaker's first glimpse at, first understanding of his true self ("A man becomes aware of his life's flow, / And hears its winding murmur..." [88-9]). These events occur simultaneously, suggesting to readers that, unlike Mill, Arnold makes no distinction between knowing oneself and knowing one's fellow human beings, implying, instead, that one is likely to come as the result of the other.

Given that this is a poem about the negative repercussions of withholding genuine expression from others, it may seem somewhat counterintuitive that the speaker should choose to be so vague in his descriptions regarding what it is that is being lost amidst the stifling impositions of his society. The following lines, for instance, provide an effective summary of both the speaker's views against emotional repression and the extent to which he remains unclear about what he feels is being repressed:

Yes, yes, we know that we can jest,
We know, we know that we can smile!
But there's a something in this breast,
To which thy light words bring no rest,
And thy gay smiles no anodyne. (4-8)

To begin with, it is worth noting that these lines are among the most contentious of the poem, for they serve to establish the implied situation in which the remainder of the text takes place. Given the lack of specificity in pronoun usage, critics such as Paull Baum (97), William Buckler (79), Henry Duffin (75), Park Honan (228), Anne Simpson (281), and Shrawan Sharma (74) have all suggested various readings which use these and other lines to claim this text as a love poem. These critics view the pronouns "we" and "thy" in conjunction, positing that "we" is not a general signifier for a larger mass of people but the specific indicator of the speaker and his beloved (or, in less committed terms, the speaker and "a lady" [Honan 228]). Such readings claim that the speaker's underlying struggle in the poem has not to do with his dissatisfaction with society as a whole, but rather with his dissatisfaction with his beloved, a frustration often attributed to some sort of "lovers' altercation" (Duffin 75) which has its basis in the speaker's ambiguous linking of first-

and second-person pronouns. Certainly, as we will see later on, I agree that there is a significant component of romantic love inherent to the speaker's attempts at uncovering the life which has been "buried." I disagree, however, with any readings which would go so far as to assign the entirety of the poem's narrative to that of a love poem and am aligned, instead, with the more broadly applicable reading suggested by Arnold's most recent biographer, Ian Hamilton. Bringing to the poem an intimate understanding of the trends in both Arnold's life and his poetic works, Hamilton claims that, as "'The Buried Life' is perhaps Arnold's most urgently intimate attempt to pinpoint the true source of ... his sense of being out of tune and out of touch," it is simply the case that "the first-person-plural" in this text is "Arnold's way of thinking aloud" (135). Such a reading suggests that this is not a poem of romantic dissatisfaction but of cultural criticism, a poem in which Arnold's speaker shifts his use of the terms "we," "our," and "thy" throughout the text so as to meet the various requirements of the narrative. It suggests that he separates these terms, removing them from the limited sense which would link all accounts of "we" and "our" to the speaker and his beloved. It suggests that, when necessary, the speaker elevates these terms to a much larger sense, one whereby he makes use of the first-person plural so as to link himself, more generally, to the members of his society.

With such a reading in mind, then, lines 4-8 can be read in the following manner. The speaker, in making use of the first-person plural "we," is referring to an unidentified group of individuals of whom he is one. His commentary makes reference to some sort of social setting, but it does so as a stand-in for social engagement as a whole rather than, more literally, as a reference to any individuals who may be in his immediate surroundings. The situation being described involves some sort of discussion — one which is deemed to be of a needlessly limited nature ("thy light words," "thy gay smiles") — and the speaker, with the tinge of both condescension and detachment that is implied by the repetition of select phrases ("yes, yes, we know," "we know, we know"), is unhappy with the current state of affairs. All of this is clear enough and requires no further explication. What remains unclear, however, both here and throughout the remainder of the poem, is just what precisely the speaker feels is being repressed. To say that "there's ... something in this breast, / to which ... light words bring no rest" provides readers with the general understanding that the topics of discussion are superficial rather than substantial, that there is more to be delved into and at a much greater depth, but, beyond that, any further insight into this elusive "something" is mere conjecture. Consider, for instance, the poem's varied and ambiguous usages of the term "buried life," an only slightly more precise definition of the "something in this breast" from line 6. Although the poem is very definitively titled "*The Buried Life*," either to suggest that it describes a universal "buried life" or that this

poem is so exhaustive as to capture the essence of all "buried [lives]," the first — and only — instance of the term within the text introduces an immediate shift in meaning. There, it is no longer "the buried life" but rather "our buried life" (48), a change vaguely suggesting a move towards greater specificity yet failing to provide any additional information (e.g., who, here, is the "our"?). Even this slightly more specific shift, however, continues to leave what the speaker considers "buried" undefined. Is "our buried life" a collective reference to the inner lives of individuals, 'buried' on account of their necessarily not being directly visible to the outside world, or is it a general reference to public life, and the way in which one's private self is stifled, is 'buried' by the limitations inherent to any public participation within one's society? Once again, the reader is left almost entirely to speculation, suggesting, in a manner similar to that of the speaker's anonymity, that this is a deliberate decision which serves to increase the applicability of the speaker's argument. So long as any details regarding the specific qualities of the "buried life" remain undefined, this affliction can be assigned, more generally, to a wider range of social phenomena than if it were merely tied to, say, a sense of romantic dissatisfaction, adding further support to the notion that the speaker's commentary in lines 4-8 is made in reference to society as a whole.

Vague as the terminology may be, however, the collective involvement which is implied by "our buried life" is, through context, at least so specific as to discriminate between two primary groups of individuals from which the speaker establishes his 'argument:' society as a whole, i.e., "the mass of men" (16), and couples in romantic relationships. In the case of the latter, the poem depicts both the specific relationship between the speaker and his lover ("we, my love!" [24]) and, more broadly, such relationships in general ("when a beloved hand is laid in ours..." [78]). Indeed, it may seem somewhat unusual that a poem which disparages the lack of connection between members of society would be so limiting in terms of the scope within which such connection can occur, as though it were only within the confines of a romantic relationship that this "lost pulse of feeling" (85) could be regained or that the "hidden self" (65) could be made manifest. If, indeed, it is the speaker's desire to move beyond the repressive impositions of his society, why not depict scenes expressive of a wider range of affection? Why not present readers with images of friendship, familial love, or neighbourly care? Consider, once more, the following lines, this time specifically noting the fact that they appear in the second-to-last stanza of the poem:

Only — but this is rare —
 When a beloved hand is laid in ours,

 A bolt is shot back somewhere in our breast,

And a lost pulse of feeling stirs again. (77-85)

After belabouring the lack of meaningful connection among individuals for fully six preceding stanzas (i.e., more than two thirds of the poem), the speaker finally arrives at the conclusion that, at present, what he is seeking can "only" — and, even then, only on "rare" occasions — be attained from a romantic relationship ("a beloved hand ... laid in ours"). In this way, perhaps it can be considered somewhat disparaging to think that the fulfillment he so eagerly seeks ("A bolt is shot back ... / And a lost pulse of feeling stirs again") can, at present, only be found within the confines of one particular kind of relationship. Alternatively, however, as the lines which immediately follow this realization will suggest, perhaps the fact that such intense gratification is at all attainable, in any kind of relationship, should be considered rather hopeful.

If this poem were less optimistic about the possibility of unearthing the life which has been "buried" (48) and, in so doing, reconnecting with that "lost pulse of feeling" (85), the speaker would likely be unable to find resolution of any kind in any relationship, whether it be with a lover, a friend, or a stranger. Significantly, however, this is not the case, as the speaker is indeed able to find the intimacy and openness he seeks from at least one other person, a clear indication that his is not entirely an exercise in futility. Furthermore, as limiting as it may seem that the speaker is only successful in attaining this much-desired sense of connection from within the confines of a romantic relationship, it is also nonetheless important to note that the bond which forms between this couple is one which wholly — rather than only partially — satisfies the speaker's desire for genuine interaction with others. Notice, for instance, the way in which he describes the resulting effects of the romantic encounter: "The eye sinks inward, and the heart lies plain, / And what we mean, we say, and what we would, we know. / A man becomes aware of his life's flow..." (86-8). His heart has not merely been warmed by this interaction, but rather made fully to "[lie] plain;" the earlier emptiness of the "gay smiles" (8) and "light words" (7) has been entirely done away with, leaving no discrepancy between what is said and what is meant ("what we mean, we say"); and the life which once was "buried" (48), which once was reduced to the unknowable realm of one's "hidden self" (65), is now unburied, is now made visible to an almost omniscient extent, as expressed in the line "A man becomes aware of his life's flow...." This is certainly not a lukewarm reaction, nor is it one which makes any indication that this is an experience which has failed to live up to the speaker's idealized expectations regarding interaction with others. Indeed, the surety and the finality of his words suggests that this is an encounter which has greatly surpassed his expectations, and, in so doing, has succeeded (if only momentarily) in unearthing the life which had hitherto been "buried."

In a comparison of several of Arnold's works, "The Buried Life" being chief among them, John Reed neatly summarizes the theme typical to Arnoldian thought of striving to attain "clearness of sight" (23) with two brief comments: the first being that, "in [Arnold's] view, the internal world of the ... self is distant, though not unapproachable" (21), and the second being that "if an individual could discover his soul's horizons, there seemed no real reason why mankind could not do the same" (23). In the reading I have put forth within this essay, the speaker's encounter with his beloved both addresses and asserts Reed's claims. While the sense of satisfaction that is achieved by the speaker in his romantic interaction is, to be sure, merely a starting point for lasting reconnection with his "hidden self" (or, to use Reed's words, for "discover[ing] his soul's horizons"), it is nonetheless a starting point of some significance and not a singular encounter to be disregarded or downplayed. It serves as a strong counterpoint to what Alice Stitelman notes is the poem's "rationally logical" "progression from social alienation to self-alienation," for, as she explains, "if one is alienated from his own deepest heart, he must be alienated from others since 'The same heart beats in every human breast'" (136). It follows, then, that if one is connected to one's "own deepest heart," as the speaker is in this scene of romantic encounter, one must likewise be connected to others. This interpretation largely accounts for my claim that the extent to which the speaker is left fulfilled by his interaction with his beloved is among the poem's strongest arguments for the possibility, on a larger scale, of successfully moving beyond the isolating limitations of "light words" and "gay smiles" towards a more connected existence. Their encounter serves as a kind of shorthand for the sense of connection the speaker is striving to attain, an appeal to something that is common to many as a way of ushering in something that is understood by few. It offers the speaker not merely a passing moment of romantic satisfaction, but rather a glimpse at something which is much grander in scope and carries far more lasting implications. It offers, in other words, the promise of his experiencing other similarly fulfilling – but decidedly non-romantic – interactions in the future.

Although the poem's 'thesis' is effectively concluded with the attainment of the speaker's 'goal' in the last lines of the seventh stanza, the text nonetheless continues beyond its conclusion for eight additional lines. This continuation forms a coda of sorts, aligning the poem, more broadly, with what Virginia Carmichael notes is Arnold's tendency towards "[final] passages" that "are almost always disjunctive, ... neither resolv[ing] the divisions established by the poem, nor hold[ing] open and contain[ing] the lyric tension or dialectic" (70). In many ways, there does appear to be little continuity between the coda and the remainder of the text, as those final eight lines shift the tone of the conclusion from deep contentment to vague

dissatisfaction. The speaker departs, for instance, from the seventh stanza's all-encompassing state of "flow" (Arnold 88) and moves, instead, to the ephemeral experience of "a lull in the hot race" (91), at which point his objective is no longer to connect with his fellow human beings on an intimate level so as to uncover the "buried life" (48) but merely to attain a moment of "rest" (93). Furthermore, contrary to the certainty of the seventh stanza, the speaker in the final stanza no longer "know[s]" (87) but now merely "thinks he knows" (96). There is, then, a dramatic shift in tone between these two stanzas, and it is one which seems rather counterintuitive in its giving the speaker so little time to savour the culmination of his much longed-for desire. In my reading, however, it is nonetheless still possible to establish some sense of continuity between the coda and the remainder of the poem. Arguably, for Arnold to structure the text in such a way suggests that, so far as his speaker is concerned, the momentary recovery of that "lost pulse of feeling" (85) could only ever be just that: a temporary reveal, a quick glance at something which can be partially unearthed but never fully exposed. Indeed, as the speaker expresses no regret at the rapidity of his loss, there even exists the possibility that he was always aware that this would be the outcome, that he always understood that this "lost pulse of feeling" could only ever be experienced in short, infrequent bursts if it were to be experienced at all. Said knowledge notwithstanding, however, he chose to persist in his pursuit. This suggests to readers that the brief insights into one's "hidden self" (65) which result from that "lost pulse of feeling" are of such tremendous value, such critical importance that, regardless of their ephemeral and elusive nature, one must nonetheless continue to strive for these fleeting moments of realization. To do otherwise, the poem maintains, would be merely to relegate oneself to the bleak, disconnected existence of the "buried life," a state of half-life so limited as to almost not be worth living.

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