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The first significant attempt to overcome Matthew Arnold was performed by Arnold himself in the author’s preface to the 1853 edition of his *Poems* where he explains at length his omission of “Empedocles Upon Etna” from the new collection. While the poem was accurate in its delineation of the Sicilian Greek Empedocles’s feelings, Arnold explains, the poem did not succeed in inspiriting or rejoicing the reader. Thus, Arnold’s debut as a critic begins with an act of renunciation and an ethical claim for the necessity of a poetics of optimism and delight. The stated aim of James Walter Caufield’s recent study of Arnold is “simply to demonstrate that philosophical pessimism undergirds the whole of Arnold’s work and that his thoroughgoing ethic of renunciation in fact constitutes the axis on which all of his texts turn” (201). There is nothing simple about attempting such a demonstration. First of all, Caufield believes we have more than a century’s worth of critical prejudice to overcome before we can properly appreciate Matthew Arnold as an ethically significant and ever-relevant cultural critic. He offers *Overcoming Matthew Arnold* as a passionately researched antidote to this inherited prejudice.
The movement of the book is supposed to place Arnold’s ethics—by which Caufield means, Arnold’s “first principal of conduct, ‘renouncement’”—in dialogue with “important trends in modern religious and philosophical thought” (4), and to render transparent Arnold’s position within “the long-obscured nineteenth-century tradition of philosophical pessimism” (4). Citing a passage from Culture and Anarchy (1869) in which Arnold describes himself as “a Liberal tempered by experience, reflection, and renouncement,” Caufield identifies the final term by which Arnold’s Liberalism is tempered as the “long-neglected first principle of his ethics” (1). Caufield would have done well to define this key term—“renouncement”—more thoroughly for the purposes of his study at the outset. Instead, the book launches into the extensive preperatory work that Caufield deems necessary before his analysis of Arnold’s œuvre in terms of “renouncement” can begin. First, he must help the twenty-first-century reader overcome certain prejudices against Arnold’s thought by revealing the common historical and philosophical lacunae that have encouraged such fallacious critical presuppositions over the years. And so, Chapters 2 through 4 are devoted to an exhaustive (and sometimes exhausting) treatment of the “strategic appropriations and caricatural reductions that obscure our view of Arnoldian ethics” from the mid 1860s to the present (12). In this substantial section of the book, Caufield identifies five significant phases of Arnoldian caricature, these being “the Victorian logicians, the Strachey-Eliot interlude, the moment of Scrutiny, the New Left turn, and the postcolonial Arnold” (48). The earlier phases attack Arnold for his “defective logic and puny eristic efforts” (48); the latter phases simplify him for the purpose of partisan leftist critique.
While the literature review performed in the opening half (or more) of the book is thorough, to a fault, it often proceeds more as an ambling rehearsal of everything that has been thought and said about Arnold than as a strategic selection of the best examples from Arnold’s lengthy and interesting critical heritage for the purpose of establishing a critical point. Part of the goal of this survey, it seems, is to demonstrate the continuity between the early critical depictions of Arnold as an effeminate rhetorician incapable of coherent or systematic critical thinking, and contemporary attacks on intellectual historians like Stephan Collini by recent cultural and political theorists. Most importantly, the hemorrhage of hostile criticism that Arnold’s work has faced over more than a century is offered to show that we have inherited a skewed rendering of Arnold’s thought. For example, through extensive close readings of work by Terry Eagleton, Edward Said, and Chris Baldick, Caufield demonstrates that “the connection between Arnold and a socially and politically conservative humanism is largely taken for granted now by all sides of the culture wars” (37). As the survey carries on, what were first perceived as marks of logical inconsistency and discursive ambiguity come to be read as traces of “a darker design of deliberate obscurantism” (91). Baldick’s 1987 The Social Mission of English Criticism is singled out “for the sheer interpretive violence it does to Arnold’s words” (93), and Eagleton is taken to task for “mock-outmaneuvering a straw man of his own programmatic design” (95).

The great fault that characterizes all such gross misinterpretations of Arnold, according to Caufield, is their blindness to the issues of “Conduct” and “renouncement” as they inform Arnold’s work. Unfortunately, even by the halfway-point of this book, which increasingly functions as a narrowly-framed historiography of British intellectual
historians told through the lens of this tradition’s sequential reactions to Arnold, we have not been shown why the issue of “renouncement” is such a pivotal concept for the proper understanding of Arnold’s corpus. Instead, we have extensive summary of recent culture debates. Over twenty pages of Caufield’s book are spent summarizing selections form the work of Collini alone. An eight-page summary of an exchange between Collini and Francis Mulhern in the *New Left Review* from 2001 to 2004 is excessive, far too detailed an analysis of a time-specific cultural exchange. Similarly, Caufield’s detailed analysis of Said’s misinterpretation of Arnold’s political position on the Edward John Eyre affair, which hinges on a demonstration that Said mistakenly includes Arnold, along with Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin, in a parenthesis of those who supported Eyre’s use of martial law to suppress an insurrection of Afro-Jamaican citizens, makes its point, but to what end, exactly, we are not certain. Chapter 3 is the most usefully focused of the chapters that survey Arnold’s critical heritage insofar as it provides an analysis of the association of Liberalism with anti-intellectualism by tracing, in particular, the recurrent trope in the discourse of Arnold’s critics of Arnold’s unthinkingness, that is, his resistance to abstract systems of thought (61). The chapter reveals Arnold to have been perceived by his critics as the “soft underbelly of Victorian Liberalism,” as opposed to how he comes off in late-twentieth-century caricatures, “as a kind of titan of elite cultural authority and Liberal hegemony” (66).

By the time one reaches page 125 of this 200 page book, one is left asking if such a degree of detail in the exposition of the critical reception of Arnold was truly necessary. The book provides not so much a genealogy as a parade of partisan caricatures of Arnold. These preparatory chapters could have been reduced significantly without great loss to
Caufield’s main point (not always prominent in the analysis) that these recurrent misrepresentations of Arnold work to formulate his definition of culture as egoistic by omitting the significance of “renoucement” in Arnold’s ethical vocabulary (44). In short, the true point of this lengthy survey of Arnold’s critical heritage, for the purpose of Caufield’s thesis, is that all critiques of Arnold focus on his idea of culture and ignore conduct.

In Chapter 5 the author admits that the work done thus far has been “almost exclusively negative: an attempt to relieve Arnold’s image, blackened as it is with the smoke of a more-than-lifelong conflict in the field of cultural politics, of some of the partisan soot that obscures his ‘Culture’ and ‘Conduct’” (125). Chapters 5 and 6 aim to explore what happens to this critical reception when you analyze the question of Arnold’s philosophical pessimism. Unfortunately, these final chapters provide little in the way of analysis. Instead we find thematic readings of Arnold’s oeuvre (poetry and prose) that demonstrate the presence of pessimism in his writings, combined with summary discussion of pessimism and suffering as it was defined by Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Bernard Williams, Emmanuel Levinas and the Catholic Encyclopedia, among other sources. When Caufield comes to a point of apparent resolve in his discussion of models for philosophical pessimism that may have informed Arnold, the conclusion he draws, “that Arnold’s religious ideas generally, like his notion of ‘renouncement' particularly, receive little or no critical attention today,” (133-134) is one that has been made ad nauseam in the book, without much substantial rectification of the alleged dearth of attention to this aspect of Arnold. One notable exception, however, occurs when Caufield borrows the categories of personal vs. philosophical pessimism
from James Sully’s *Pessimism: A History and a Criticism* (1877) and applies them to an analysis of Arnold’s work. While the application of this distinction to Arnold is more random than necessarily meaningful, the discussion leads into the most interesting part of the book, where Caufield attempts to explain the relationship between Arnold’s “ethical import” and “his rhetorical strategy” (137).

Back in the introduction to his study, Caufield promised to provide a fresh perspective on Arnold’s critical style. In this task he does some admirable work, unpacking the significance of Arnold’s “method of ethical exemplarity” as an antidote to more systems-oriented methods of thought and philosophical presentation (10). Caufield interestingly elucidates upon the common observation that Arnoldian criticism as a distinctive mode of cultural and ethical critique survives in its “rhetorical strength” and “gem-like apothegms” rather than in any coherent structure of thought (49). Arnold’s “critical method” is shown to have been an anti-method that prefers to engage in a series of rhetorical topoi in lieu of systematic argument (69). This fact led to a common line of attack throughout the nineteenth century which focused on Arnold’s “supposed paucity of logical rigor and his overemphasis on emotional and intuitive aestheticism” (72) and led modern critics to find him difficult to pin down, politically, due to the “curiously duplex aspect…at once historicist and idealist, empiricist and rationalist” (51) that comes through in his writing. For example, according to Caufield’s analysis, T.S. Eliot’s description of Arnold as a second-order mind, “rather a ‘propogandist for criticism than a critic, a popularizer rather than a creator of ideas’” (58), is due to Eliot’s misunderstanding of Arnold’s critical style.
In sum, *Overcoming Matthew Arnold* gives far too much space to the summary of Arnold’s critics, and not enough to the demonstration of why pessimism functions as the key axis of Arnold’s work. However, the study does contribute to our understanding of how Arnold’s rhetorical style represents a strategically calculated critical method. In demonstrating how and why Arnold deliberately eschewed a systematic presentation of his ideas and embraced, instead, a “rhetorical style of ethical exemplarity” (158), Caufield manages to explain why so many of Arnold’s critics considered him a lazy thinker.

**Biographical Notice:**