Matthew Arnold’s
“Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse” (1852; 1855)

1  Through Alpine meadows soft-suffused
2  With rain, where thick the crocus blows,
3  Past the dark forges long disused,
4  The mule-track from Saint Laurent goes.
5  The bridge is cross’d, and slow we ride,
6  Through forest, up the mountain-side.
7  The autumnal evening darkens round,
8  The wind is up, and drives the rain;
9  While, hark! far down, with strangled sound
10  Doth the Dead Guier’s stream complain,
11  Where that wet smoke, among the woods,
12  Over his boiling cauldron broods.
13  Swift rush the spectral vapours white
14  Past limestone scars with ragged pines,
15  Showing--then blotting from our sight!--
16  Halt--through the cloud-drift something shines!
17  High in the valley, wet and drear,
18  The huts of Courrerie appear.
19  Strike leftward! cries our guide; and higher
20  Mounts up the stony forest-way.
21  At last the encircling trees retire;
22  Look! through the showery twilight grey
23  What pointed roofs are these advance?--
24  A palace of the Kings of France?
25  Approach, for what we seek is here!
26  Alight, and sparely sup, and wait
27  For rest in this outbuilding near;
28  Then cross the sward and reach that gate.
29  Knock; pass the wicket! Thou art come
30  To the Carthusians’ world-famed home.
31  The silent courts, where night and day
32  Into their stone-carved basins cold
33  The splashing icy fountains play--
34  The humid corridors behold!
35  Where, ghostlike in the deepening night,
36  Cowl’d forms brush by in gleaming white.
37  The chapel, where no organ’s peal
38  Invests the stern and naked prayer--
39  With penitential cries they kneel
40  And wrestle; rising then, with bare
41  And white uplifted faces stand,
42  Passing the Host from hand to hand;
43  Each takes, and then his visage wan
44  Is buried in his cowl once more.
45  The cells!--the suffering Son of Man
46  Upon the wall--the knee-worn floor--
47  And where they sleep, that wooden bed,
48  Which shall their coffin be, when dead!
49  The library, where tract and tome
50  Not to feed priestly pride are there,
51  To hymn the conquering march of Rome,
52  Nor yet to amuse, as ours are!
53  They paint of souls the inner strife,
54  Their drops of blood, their death in life.
55  The garden, overgrown--yet mild,
56  See, fragrant herbs are flowering there!
57  Strong children of the Alpine wild
58  Whose culture is the brethren’s care;
59  Of human tasks their only one,
60  And cheerful works beneath the sun.
61  Those halls, too, destined to contain
62  Each its own pilgrim-host of old,
63  From England, Germany, or Spain--
64  All are before me! I behold
65  The House, the Brotherhood austere!
66  --And what am I, that I am here?
67  For rigorous teachers seiz’d my youth,
68  And purged its faith, and trimm’d its fire,
69  Show’d me the high, white star of Truth,
70  There bade me gaze, and there aspire.
71  Even now their whispers pierce the gloom:
72  What dost thou in this living tomb?
73  Forgive me, masters of the mind!
74  At whose behest I long ago
75  So much unlearnt, so much resign’d--
76  I come not here to be your foe!
77  I seek these anchorites, not in ruth,
78  To curse and to deny your truth;
79  Not as their friend, or child, I speak!
80  But as, on some far northern strand,
81  Thinking of his own Gods, a Greek
82  In pity and mournful awe might stand
83  Before some fallen Runic stone--
84  For both were faiths, and both are gone.
85  Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
86  The other powerless to be born,
87  With nowhere yet to rest my head,
88  Like these, on earth I wait forlorn.
89  Their faith, my tears, the world deride--
90  I come to shed them at their side.
91  Oh, hide me in your gloom profound,
92  Ye solemn seats of holy pain!
93  Take me, cowl’d forms, and fence me round,
94  Till I possess my soul again;
95  Till free my thoughts before me roll,
96  Not chafed by hourly false control!
97  For the world cries your faith is now
98  But a dead time’s exploded dream;
99  My melancholy, sciolists say,
100  Is a pass’d mode, an outworn theme--
101  As if the world had ever had
102  A faith, or sciolists been sad!
103  Ah, if it be pass’d, take away,
104  At least, the restlessness, the pain;
105  Be man henceforth no more a prey
Which without hardness will be sage,

More fortunate, alas! than we,

Years hence, perhaps, may dawn an age,

But--if you cannot give us ease--

Last of the race of them who grieve

Last of the people who believe!

Silent, while years engrave the brow;

Silent--the best are silent now.

Achilles ponders in his tent,

The kings of modern thought are dumb,

Silent they are though not content,

And wait to see the future come.

They have the grief men had of yore,

But they contend and cry no more.

Our fathers water'd with their tears

This sea of time whereon we sail,

Their voices were in all men's ears

We pass'd within their puissant hail.

Still the same ocean round us raves,

But we stand mute, and watch the waves.

For what avail'd it, all the noise

And outcry of the former men?--

Say, have their sons achieved more joys,

Say, is life lighter now than then?

The sufferers died, they left their pain--

The pangs which tortured them remain.

What helps it now, that Byron bore,

With haughty scorn which mock'd the smart,

Through Europe to the Ætolian shore

The pageant of his bleeding heart?

That thousands counted every groan,

And Europe made his woe her own?

What boots it, Shelley! that the breeze

Carried thy lovely wail away,

Musical through Italian trees

Which fringe thy soft blue Spezzian bay?

Inheritors of thy distress

Have restless hearts one throbb the less?

Or are we easier, to have read,

O Obermann! the sad, stern page,

Which tells us how thou hidd'st thy head

From the fierce tempest of thine age

In the lone brakes of Fontainebleau,

Or chalets near the Alpine snow?

Ye slumber in your silent grave!--

The world, which for an idle day

Grace to your mood of sadness gave,

Long since hath flung her weeds away.

The eternal trifier breaks your spell;

But we--we learned your lore too well!

Years hence, perhaps, may dawn an age,

More fortunate, alas! than we,

Which without hardness will be sage,
Notes

1] First published in Fraser's Magazine (April 1855). The Grande Chartreuse is the chief monastery of the Carthusians, situated in a wild and almost inaccessible valley, 4,000 feet above the sea, not far from Grenoble in south-eastern France. The Carthusians are submitted to an extremely ascetic discipline.

10] The Guier Mort is the stream on which Saint Laurentis situated.

42] the Host: the consecrated wafer or bread in the Christian sacrament of the mass or communion, either literally God's body (as in the Roman Catholic Church) or symbolically that (as in the Anglican Church).

83] carved with runes, letters of the early Norse alphabet.

99] sciolists: pretended scholars who have only superficial knowledge.

115] Newman, gently chided by Arnold in the analogy with Achilles, sulking in his tent before Troy and abstaining from combat. There is probably a sardonic reference here to the famous Achilli Trial (1851-53). Newman, in his Corn Exchange Lectures in 1851 (The Present Position of Catholics in England), relied only on the authority of an article by Cardinal Wiseman, savagely to impugn the character and veracity of Dr. Giacinto Achilli, an unfrocked Dominican, who was the hero of the No-Popery forces in England at this time. Newman was sued for libel, adjudged guilty, assigned a token sentence, and fined £100.

135] Missolonghi, where Byron died, is on the Ætolian shore of the Gulf of Corinth.

142] Spezzian bay: on the west coast of Italy above Leghorn, where Shelley spent his last days.

146] Obermann: the title of a book by the French writer, Senancour (1770-1846); it consists of a collection of letters treating of nature and the human soul, and supposed to be written from Switzerland and Fontainebleau. Arnold says in his note to Stanzas in Memory of the Author of Obermann: "The stir of all the main forces, by which modern life is and has been impelled, lives in the letters of Obermann; the dissolving agencies of the eighteenth century, the fiery storm of the French Revolution, the first faint promise and dawn of that new world which our own time is but now fully bringing to light, --all these are to be felt, almost to be touched there."

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