

1-1-1974

David Masson's Theory of Imagination and Matthew Arnold's 1853 Preface

Michael W. Adams
University of Pennsylvania

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Adams, Michael W. (2014) "David Masson's Theory of Imagination and Matthew Arnold's 1853 Preface," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 11: Iss. 3, 141–155.
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol11/iss3/3>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

MICHAEL W. ADAMS

David Masson's Theory of Imagination and Matthew Arnold's 1853 *Preface*

David Masson, if remembered at all among scholars, is probably most renowned for his monumental biography of Milton. But such an achievement, impressive as it is, reflects only one facet of one of Victorian England's most capable critical minds. Besides his ardent interest in biography—exemplified in his biographies of Drummond, Chatterton, De Quincey, Shakespeare—Masson, as we are only recently coming to see, was one of the most original and perceptive critics of his period. Partly because of the much-needed reevaluation of Victorian aesthetics which has been going on and partly because of the revelations in works like the *Wellsley Index*, Masson is playing a progressively larger role in recent discussions of Victorian criticism. Alba Warren notices that Masson, by stressing the peculiar imaginative structure of the poem, displays one of "the most original and suggestive" of all the various theories of poetry in Victorian criticism.¹ Richard Stang uses Masson as support for his thesis that a mature theory of the novel had indeed been established as early as the fifties.² George Ford believes that Masson's *British Novelists and Their Styles* is "one of the best early histories of the novel,"³ and that Masson was perhaps the first to make the now commonplace comparisons between Keats and Shakespeare and Dickens and Shakespeare.⁴ He likewise calls Masson's essay on Keats "decades ahead of its time."⁵ Isobel Armstrong points out that Masson was one of the very few who showed "anything like an ability to grasp and analyse the poetry of the dialogue

¹ Alba H. Warren, *English Poetic Theory, 1825-1865* (New York, 1966), p. 29.

² Richard Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England, 1850-1870* (New York and London, 1959), pp. 86-88.

³ George H. Ford, *Dickens and His Readers: Aspects of Novel-Criticism Since 1836* (New York, 1965), p. 116.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁵ George H. Ford, *Keats and the Victorians: A Study of His Influence and Rise to Fame* (New Haven, 1944), p. 31.

of the mind," and that consequently, his review of Tennyson's *Maud* is exceptional for its day.⁶ Moreover Masson was one of the first to argue systematically for a more poetic prose style which culminated in prose stylism in the later part of the century. He was partly responsible for the growing respect for Shelley and for the acceptance of Dickens' kind of imaginative fiction. He was one of the main popularizers of the terms realism, idealism, and naturalism in criticism. His predictions that the novel would become more imaginative and poetic (as we see in Joyce, Lawrence, Kafka), that poetry would become more prosaic (as we see in Eliot), that Gaskell's *Cranford* and *North and South*⁷ would be regarded as her best novels in the future, that philosophy would eventually see a Transcendentalist of the Santayana variety⁸ were all borne out with uncanny accuracy. But perhaps even more significantly he was one of the few Victorians who really understood the complexity of Romantic theories of creativity. His "Theory of Poetry and a New Poet," which appeared in the *North British Review*, 1853, and which Arnold attacked in his 1853 *Preface*, was the central, but not the only, place Masson demonstrated his keen understanding of the fundamental ingredient in creativity—imagination.

Masson's concept of the imagination is essentially Coleridgean. Although never emphasizing the discovering of one's self through the imagination as many romantics (excluding Coleridge) would do, he still understands the duality of the imagination that Coleridge had established in the *Biographia*. In terms that clearly remind us of Coleridge, Masson views the imagination as a creative process not a mimetic one. It is a process which conditions "the universe anew for its own intellectual satisfaction"; it is a "carrying on the work of creation," a process of creating "a fictitious concrete, either like to something existing in nature, or, if unlike anything there existing, justifying that unlikeness by the charm of its own impressiveness."⁹

⁶ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Scrutinies: Reviews of Poetry 1830-1870* (London, 1972), pp. 47-48. Hereafter cited as "Armstrong."

⁷ See his essay "Mrs. Gaskell," *Macmillan's Magazine*, 13 (Dec. 1865), 153-56.

⁸ See his *Recent British Philosophy: A Review With Criticisms* (New York, 1866), p. 69.

⁹ David Masson, "Theories of Poetry and a New Poet," *North British Review*, 19 (Aug. 1853), 301. Hereafter cited as "Theories."

The faculty responsible for creation Masson defines as "*the power of intellectually producing a new or artificial concrete*; and the poetic genius or temperament is *that disposition of mind which leads habitually, or by preference, to this kind of intellectual exercise*."¹⁰ "Artificial concrete" is obviously Masson's term for the Romantic process of producing images, scenes, characters and other imaginings that correspond to or actually represent the poet's thought. That is, when a poet thinks, instead of thinking in words or formulae as the scientist might, he actually thinks in images, in circumstances, scenes, states of feeling and so on. He is clothing "his feelings with circumstance." Thus, when the poem is produced it is actually a kind of allegory of his mind, a representation through characters, scenes, feelings, etc., of the thoughts that beset him in the first place. Masson calls it "innate analogy" and links it with the mythology of ancient man who had the tendency to think metaphorically. When the wind blew, for instance, the ancient men, not having an abstract language saw the wind as a deity blowing air from a cave. Every thought they had about whatever matter was necessarily a new act of imagination, a new excursion into the ideal concrete. The poet's thought is the same. Every thought is

transacted not mainly in propositional language, but for the most part in a kind of phantasmagoric or representative language, of imaginary scenes, objects, incidents, and circumstances. To clothe his feelings with *circumstance*; to weave forth whatever arises in his mind into an objective tissue of imagery and incident that shall substantiate it and make it visible; such is the constant aim and art of the poet.¹¹

The "poet, *par excellence*," says Masson, is one "whose intellectual activity is consumed in this kind of exercise"; he is "of imagination all compact." Living and moving in the "ideal concrete,"

He teems with imagination of forms, colours, incidents, physiognomies, feelings, characters. The ghosts of his senses are as busy in an unseen world of sky, sea, vegetation, cities, highways, thronged markets of men, and mysterious beings belonging even to the horizon of *that* existence, as his real senses are with all the nearer world of nature and life. But the notable peculiarity lies

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 309.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 315.

in this, that every thought of his in the interest of this world is an excursion into *that*.¹²

All this is not to imply that Masson's "allegory of the state of one's own mind" is Shelley's "genuine picture" in "The Revolt of Islam" or his "Idealized history of my life and feelings," in "Epipsychidion." Nor is it to imply that Keats's negative capability or chameleon poet is Masson's. Shelley's "history," in Masson's eyes, is so subjective and so lacking in human concern that its value is diminished. "The poetry of the 'subjective' poet is nothing else than an effluence from his personality through the medium of his imaginations. . . . He lives in a house of glass, expressing his feelings as to what he sees in gestures visible to all about him, and employing the poetic art only as a means of flashing his own image."¹³ Although such comments reflect a very serious blind spot in Masson's critical eye, he at least demonstrates his awareness of the limitations of the egotistical mode of imagination. And Keats is equally mistaken, says Masson, in assuming that the "poet approaching most nearly to the perfect type must be a man having no strong individuality, no permanent moral gesture."¹⁴ Indeed, the great poetic geniuses—Chaucer, Scott, Milton, Shakespeare—all possessed a distinct character and decided moral stance and still managed to achieve a high degree of objectivity in their art.

What is meant is that, when they betook themselves from miscellaneous action among their fellows to the exercise of their art, they all, more or less, allowed their personality to melt and fold itself in the imagination. They all, more or less, at such times, stood within themselves, as within a chamber in which their own hopes, convictions, anxieties, and principles lay about neglected, while they plied their mighty craft, like the swing of some gigantic arm, with reference to all without.¹⁵

Masson's allegory, thus, is more closely akin to Wordsworth's "history of the Author's mind" in the preface to *The Excursion*, a history that we see best in Wordsworth's ballads where we find a blend of the

¹² Ibid. Masson also believes that the tendency of excessive imagery in the Gothic and Romantic as distinct from the Hellenic or Classical imagination can probably be accounted for by the fact that poetry is now read instead of being heard.

¹³ David Masson, "Life and Poetry of Shelley," *Macmillan's Magazine*, 2 (Sept. 1860), 346.

¹⁴ David Masson, "Life and Poetry of Keats," *Macmillan's Magazine*, 3 (Nov. 1860), 10. Hereafter cited as "Keats."

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 10–11.

subjective and the objective, the dramatic and the egotistical. Masson, by uniting the egotistical sublime with the chameleon poet, is attempting to put back together two opposites that Coleridge had recognized as one. Indeed Coleridge's comparison between the protean Shakespeare and the egotistical Milton is restated by Masson in his comparisons between Shakespeare and Goethe. Coleridge says that Shakespeare

darts himself forth, and passes into all the forms of human character and passion, the one Proteus of the fire and the flood; the other [Milton] attracts all forms and things to himself, into the unity of his own ideal. All things and modes of action shape themselves anew in the being of Milton; while all things, yet forever remaining himself.¹⁶

Masson in "Shakespeare and Goethe" makes a similar distinction.

Shakespeare's genius we defined to be the genius of universal expression; of clothing objects, circumstances, and feelings with magnificent language; of pouring over the image of any given situation, whether suggested from within or from without, an effusion of the richest intellectual matter that could possibly be related to it. Goethe's genius as here defined by himself, was something different and narrower. It was the genius of translation from the subjective into the objective; of clothing real feelings with fictitious circumstances; of giving felicitous intellectual form to states of mind, as to dismiss and throw them off. Let this distinction be sufficiently conceived and developed, and a full idea will be obtained of the exact difference between the literary many-sidedness attributed to Shakespeare and that also attributed to Goethe.¹⁷

Coleridge of course, was perceptive enough to add the small but weighty phrase "yet forever remaining himself." Had more nineteenth-century critics carefully scrutinized those lines perhaps we would not have wound up with such dichotomized views of the two modes of imagination. Whether dramatic, objective, naive, or protean, the poet still must remain himself. Again closely following Coleridge, Masson insists that the "Imagination is not, after all, creation out of nothing."¹⁸ "The imagination, though it seems to fly round and round the personality,

¹⁶ J. Shawcross, ed., *Biographia Literaria* (Oxford, 1907), II, 20.

¹⁷ David Masson, "Shakespeare and Goethe," *British Quarterly Review*, 16 (Nov. 1852), 543. Masson, more than likely, is borrowing from Carlyle who started the Goethe-Shakespeare comparisons and continued them in his Goethe essays 1828-32.

¹⁸ David Masson, *Shakespeare Personally* (London, 1914), 130.

and often at a great distance from it, is still attached to it and governed by it in its flight."¹⁹

This realization that in theory *only* can a poet be completely removed from his creation is an important one because it removes Masson from the chameleon category where so many, on cursory reading, might tend to place him. Yet his insistence that the poem appear "objective" removes him from the egotistical sublime category where some critics, notably Arnold, would place him on the basis of his "allegory of one's own mind" passage. Masson would never agree with Browning that in objective poetry we can never really know the personality of the poet (he devotes an entire book to just such an investigation of Shakespeare), nor would he agree with Arnold that lyric poetry lacks human concern. For Masson's view is a kind of combined Wordsworthian and Coleridgean one. He recognizes the great diversity of the imagination, allowing for either the protean or Miltonic and, of course, blends of both. But he likewise rejects both complete "disinterestedness" and complete "subjectiveness" by requiring the universal thoughts of man. This is in part the reason why he can appreciate and highly laud the imaginative faculties of both Keats and Shelley and yet still be critical of their lack of human concern.

Masson's acute understanding of the "translation from the subjective into the objective," can be seen nowhere more clearly than in his remarkable review of Tennyson's *Maud*.

He seems to have resolved in this instance to make the attempt, suggested by the partial example of some of his former poems, to write a work in which a continuous story, implying a certain moral lesson, should be evolved, not in the usual narrative manner, but in a series of songs, or lyrical effusions. This he has accomplished by the simple and yet happy device of concentrating the attention on the principal personage of the supposed history, and representing the facts of the history itself through the medium of twenty-six lyrical soliloquies, each imagined as being uttered at a critical moment in the progress of the history. It would be well if those critics who have been accusing the poet of diseased 'subjectivity' and what not, were to attend to this peculiarity of the present poem. All songs or lyrical pieces are, in their very nature, 'subjective,' being expressions either of the poet's personal feelings or of feelings imagined by him as belonging to such and such circumstances; and the positive peculiarity of *Maud* is, that the poet has there contrived to weave together a

¹⁹ Keats, p. 11. Masson's allegory of the mind is equivalent to Eliot's "objective correlative," being more symbolic than subjective allegory. See Eliot's "Hamlet and His Problems," in *The Sacred Wood*.

poem which, though 'subjective' in its parts, is as 'objective' as any one could desire in its total impression.²⁰

Such a statement, as Isobel Armstrong points out, not only reflects an exceptional ability to "analyse the poetry of the dialogue of the mind," but it also remains a rarity in the general critical reception of Tennyson's *Maud*.²¹ In *British Novelists and Their Styles*, Masson makes a similar defense of certain kinds of subjectivity stating that "that phenomenon of intellectual restlessness, which is exhibited over and over again in the poems in question, is a phenomenon of universal time." Thus if the poet's subjective thoughts are likewise "Recurring and fundamental" to mankind, then he "is not neglecting the world of past and present fact."²²

In another notable essay on Browning's *Men and Women* Masson deals with the counterpart of Tennyson's lyricism—dramatic poetry. In this essay, which was one of the first thorough appreciations of Browning's latest publication, Masson emphasizes the sheer imaginative abundance and variety exhibited by the poet, who "thinks *representatively*, and expresses his meaning rather in images, phantasies, fictitious trains of scene and incident, beautiful in themselves." Browning, says Masson, "had trained himself, as it were, never to think in the purely logical manner, but always through the imagination."

If he meditated some connected exposition of his own philosophy, even this must be accomplished through the medium of some drama or other tale—thoughts, opinions, and modes of speculation being distributed out among characters severally engaged in the evolution of the catastrophe, and the author's own judgment only vaguely appearing in the impression made by the total synthesis, or declaring itself more obviously in the manner in which justice and mercy were meted out, according to desert, at the close.²³

Masson's singularity in grasping both the dramatic and the lyrical modes of creativity cannot be over emphasized.

²⁰ David Masson, "Maud, and Other Poems," *British Quarterly Review*, 23 (Oct. 1855), 482.

²¹ Armstrong, p. 47.

²² David Masson, *British Novelists and Their Styles* (Cambridge, 1859), p. 286.

²³ David Masson, "Browning's Men and Women," *British Quarterly Review*, 23 (Jan. 1856), 152, 153. For Rossetti's mention of this review by Masson see *Browning: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Boyd Litzinger and Donald Smalley (New York, 1970), 183.

Masson also places an important qualification on the creative process. The poet produces an "artificial concrete" not contemplatively or passionately, but intellectually. The distinction is significant in that it removes the kind of contemplative transformation which both Coleridge and Wordsworth acknowledge from a theory that is in every other way Coleridgean. The familiar phrases "poetic fire," "poetic passion," and the like, as true and useful as they may be, says Masson, simply mislead.

There may be fire, there may be passion in the poet; but that which is peculiar to the poet, that which constitutes the poetic tendency as such, is a special *intellectual* habit distinct from the intellectual habit of the man of science. The poetic process may be set in operation by, and accompanied by, any amount of passion or feeling; but the poetic process itself, so far as distinctions are of any value, is an *intellectual* process.²⁴

Masson's almost over-exaggerated emphasis on intellection often applied to the entire poetic process involving both the speculations and the imaginings. In his attacks on the "spirit rappers," the school of "metaphysic," and the Swedenborgians, Masson stresses their lack of intellection. Poets who engage in on-the-spot imaginings, quick fluttering, images, and passing speculations and who swoon themselves into a state until a power seizes them and forces their hand to move, producing what Masson calls "terrible stuff," are in his eyes not poets at all.²⁵ A mere creation of new images on the part of the poet is not nearly enough; the images must be intellectually produced. Admittedly Masson's insistent demand for intellection misleads his readers into assuming that he prefers less emotional, less passionate, less lyrical poetry. But, in fact, Masson repeatedly guards against this conclusion, stating that it is only through the intensity of the poem that we can often be sure whether the thought in the poem was really felt by the poet. And ironically, he even attacks Wordsworth for not displaying this intensity of emotion. "His ink is rarely his own blood,"²⁶ he says. Masson is once again, then, unifying in the Coleridgean sense. Just as he synthesized the speculative with the permanent, the subjective with the objective, he likewise requires a union between the emotional

²⁴ Theories, pp. 309-10.

²⁵ David Masson, "Genius and Discipline in Literature," *Macmillan's Magazine*, 7 (Dec. 1862), 90. Hereafter cited as "Genius."

²⁶ David Masson, "Wordsworth," *North British Review*, 13 (Aug. 1850), 507.

and the intellectual. It is just such a blend that Masson sees in De Quincey whose style for all its passion is "prevailingly intellectual." "Even when his pathos or his feeling of the mysterious and sublime is at its highest, and the strain accordingly becomes most lyrical, we are aware of the presence of a keen intellectual preceptiveness, an artistic self-possession, a power of choosing and reasoning among different means towards a desired effect."²⁷

Masson's "intellection" in this context is more an alertness, an ability even under the excitement of emotion, to remain aloof, to remain reasonable. Paradoxically the tension between two such activities—passion and intellection—produces a unified, and in Masson's eyes, a more profound poem.

Masson's demands for the "intellectual" and "speculative" may lead one to believe that Masson prefers philosophically oriented poetry—and this is, in fact, at least partly true. Greatly interested in the philosophy of his day, as his study *Recent British Philosophy* indicates, Masson certainly in all his criticism tends to endorse the philosopher-poet. But although philosophical speculations are perhaps the most essential ingredient in poetry, they are not the only subjects for intellection or imagination. There are many kinds of "imagination," as Masson calls them, besides those of the philosopher, and, indeed, it is these imaginings which make the poet even more valuable than a philosopher who limits his "imagination" to cosmology or epistemology. The poet has the distinct advantage over the philosopher in that he can present thought not just abstractly expressed, but "thought expressed and thrown off in the language of representative circumstance." A highly speculative thought can be even finer and more impressive when it is colored by the circumstance and character of "Hamlet with the skull in his hand and Homer's heroes wailing by the *πολυφλοίσβοιο*."²⁸

Ever since Arnold's 1853 *Preface*, David Masson has been the object of misunderstanding both by Arnold and subsequent critics. Part of the cause for such misunderstanding can perhaps be accounted for by Masson's failure to set his complete poetic theory down in any one

²⁷ David Masson, *De Quincey*, in *English Men of Letters* series, ed. John Morley (New York, 1887), p. 152.

²⁸ *Theories*, p. 18.

place. Except for his "Theories of Poetry" (1852) we must survey a number of articles and books to compile his total concept of poetry. But the largest cause of misunderstanding must simply lie with those, including Arnold, who read him carelessly and in most cases incorrectly. Although Masson has been considered only a peripheral figure in the 1853 controversy, the increasing attention that is being paid to him requires that his role finally be placed in the correct light.

Arnold's misreading, which still remains the most blatant as well as the most famous, can be attributed to a number of causes: careless reading, unwarranted preconceptions of his own, a failure to recognize a Romantic theory of poetry, and perhaps his own blindness to the validity of the lyric form of poetry.

As Garrod pointed out first, a large part of Arnold's failure to grasp Masson's aesthetic can be accounted for only by careless reading.²⁹ Apparently referring to Masson and his review of Alexander Smith in the *North British Review* (1853) Arnold, in his Preface, chides,

We have poems which seem to exist merely for the sake of single lines and passages; not for the sake of producing any total impression. We have critics who seem to direct their attention merely to detached expressions, to the language about the action, not to the action itself. . . . They will permit the poet to select any action he pleases, and to suffer that action to go as it will, provided he gratifies them with occasional bursts of fine writing, and with a shower of isolated thoughts and images.³⁰

But on this point Arnold has no quarrel with Masson. For Masson himself had made the same observation about Smith.

Indeed, the great fault of the poem is that it is composed of separate pieces, and does not seem to be in itself, as a whole, a complete and coherent act of the imagination. . . . But it is not compact and clearly imagined as a whole; and even a serious and attentive reader can find nothing very masterly or skillful in the poem, considered as a connected story, and not as a collection of poetical scenes and passages.³¹

²⁹ H. W. Garrod, "Matthew Arnold's 1853 Preface," *Review of English Studies*, 17 (July 1941).

³⁰ A. Dwight Culler, ed., *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold* (Boston, 1961), p. 208. In his note to the Preface Culler still believes the author of the "Allegory" passage is John Ludlow.

³¹ *Theories*, p. 338.

And later,

But we think, that if, in any future poem, Mr. Smith were to make it his aim more thoroughly and coherently to imagine first of all the entire stem of incident and circumstance meant to constitute the poem from beginning to end, and then to attend to the parts and filling up, he would leave to many of his critics much less to be said against him.³²

As for Arnold's indictment of excessive imagery in Smith, Masson had likewise already stated,

The importance attached to sensuous richness of language as part of poetry is, Mr. Dallas thinks, too great at present; . . . he proposes that a power of appreciating such severe literary beauty as that of Sophocles shall, more than anything else, be reckoned to the credit of a man's poetical taste. We think Mr. Dallas, on the whole, is in the right.³³

Arnold also directly attacks Masson for comparing Keats's *Endymion* with the *Faerie Queene*. But Masson's comparison bears no relation to the topic Arnold is discussing, nor does Arnold himself explain why the comparison is a bad one. Masson, in the passage Arnold has in mind, was using Keats and Spenser as illustrations of gradations in sensuous poetry and nothing more. Moreover, a few pages later Masson himself utters words that anticipate Arnold in the Preface. "Keats' *Endymion*, one might safely, in reference to such a distinction, pronounce to be too rich; for in that poem there is no proportion between the imagery, or accessory concrete, and the main stem of the imagined circumstance from which the poem derives its name."³⁴ Such blatant misreadings on the part of Arnold surely can only be the result of hasty reading and distortive preoccupations of his own.

But Arnold is guilty of even more serious misinterpretations. Arnold assumes that Masson's qualified defense of Smith is a defense of the Spasmodics in general and implies that Masson's discussion of "a true allegory of the state of one's own mind" is an approval of that kind of wailing.³⁵ Though it would make no difference in Arnold's ultimate estimation of Smith, Masson was simply not defending the Spasmodic

³² Ibid., p. 338.

³³ Ibid., p. 325.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 327.

³⁵ Although Arnold did not specifically apply the term "Spasmodic," he is still lumping Smith in the camp of subjective poets who were receiving the label.

School. Masson, on the contrary, was defending Smith as a poet apart from and superior to the "mere spirit rappers." In his second review of Smith (*Macmillan's*, 4, Sept. 1861), Masson, specifically taking up the popular charge against Smith, admits that the term "the Spasmodic School" "did hit a blot in the species of poetry it was meant to satirize," but reaffirms that Smith could be defended against such epithets.³⁶ And again in his third review of Smith (*Macmillan's*, 15, Feb. 1867) Masson makes it clear that, excessive though Smith is, he was not a true Spasmodic.

When Spasmodic poetry got abroad, and began to serve, with clever people as well as with blockheads, as a convenient substitute for further inquiry into the thing it designated, Mr. Smith was necessarily included in the obloquy. The good-humored Aytoun was far from having intended this, for he was one of Smith's most familiar Edinburgh friends.³⁷

Masson was as contemptuous of the Spasmodics as were Arnold and Froude, though he may have too uncritically exempted Smith from the odious classification. He repeatedly attacks what he calls the "spirit rappers" who swoon themselves into a state until a power seizes them and forces their hand to move, producing "terrible stuff." And on the other hand Masson attacks critics who jump at every appearance of flamboyant imagery.³⁸ Masson simply does not belong in the category of critics in which Arnold so casually places him.

Ironically Masson at times even accepts the Arnoldian judgment of Smith.

Naturally, [he says in 1867] there had been honest and reasonable dissentients from the verdict, or at least from the absoluteness of its terms, from the first. The feeling that splendid passages, or brilliant images, strewn through a poem, are not enough, was clearly a sound one; and there were some really careful critics not unfriendly to him, in whom the application of this feeling to him in particular had taken the form of a conviction that some abatement of the first *furor* in his favor might be desirable.³⁹

³⁶ David Masson, "Mr. Alexander Smith's Former Poems and His New One," *Macmillan's Magazine*, 4 (Sept. 1861), 406.

³⁷ David Masson, "Alexander Smith," *Macmillan's Magazine*, 15 (Feb. 1867), 347.

³⁸ *Genius*, p. 91.

³⁹ "Alexander Smith," p. 346. It is interesting to compare this last essay on Smith to Masson's earlier comments on Shelley ("Life and Poetry of Shelley," *Macmillan's Magazine*, 2 [1860], 346) and his comments on sub-

Although Masson may think isolated passages and images are not the basis on which to judge a poem, he also restates his insistence that images and passages are clearly indications of a highly imaginative and poetical mind at work.

More significantly, however, an even larger part of Arnold's misunderstanding is attributable to his failure either to understand or to recognize a Romantic theory of poetry. Masson's theory, as we have seen, is far from mere passionate subjectivity. His "allegory" is not esoteric thought, but a "translation," a "representation" of the poet's thoughts on the permanent and elemental in life. Masson had said in the very article Arnold quotes (or misquotes, by omitting the phrase "whether narrative or dramatic in form," a key point in Masson's theory) that once the allegory has passed into the concrete, then "the mood has passed into the objective."⁴⁰ He likewise names Homer, Dante, Cervantes, Scott, and Shakespeare, each of whom has "slowly translated his whole life into one representative performance."⁴¹ In the essay Masson is applying his understanding of Romantic theory that Patricia Ball has so clearly explained. "To the Romantic mind, all creativity is concerned with self, the protean equally with the Miltonic: self is sought and discovered by the process of darting forth as much as by the opposite, drawing in activity, and both modes may be approved and welcomed. Selfishness is not in question."⁴²

The most accurate treatment so far of Masson's role in the 1853 *Preface* is Isobel Armstrong's section "Arnold and the 1853 Preface," in *Victorian Scrutinies*. She points out that Arnold "does not even

jective poets in *British Novelists and Their Styles*, p. 286. In all three he seems to see a mood more tolerant of the Byronic and Shelleyan kind of poetry. In this 1867 essay on Smith he says, "Has not the notion been gaining ground of late that the poetry which the world most needs is such poetry as is the translation into imaginary forms of a mind itself tumultuous, rebellious, angry with the fierce seeds of future novelties, and feelings forward into the philosophy that may or may not be coming? In the past we have Shelley as an instance, and perhaps in the last recognition of a poet in England this feeling has had part" (p. 350).

⁴⁰ *Theories*, p. 318.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

⁴² Patricia M. Ball, *The Central Self, A Study in Romantic and Victorian Imagination* (London, 1968), p. 8.

acknowledge the dramatic aspect of Masson's theory but simply implies that it exposes poetry to a riot of feeling."⁴³ Over a hundred years after the *Preface*, Isobel Armstrong has finally vindicated Masson from the charges leveled by Arnold. But even she is guilty of a slight misunderstanding. In her defense of Masson she accurately demonstrates that his theory is dramatic. "The poet's imagination is exercised mainly through the exploration of states of feeling alien to him and these are likely to be associated with the character and thus to become essentially dramatic in spirit if not in presentation."⁴⁴ But she fails to acknowledge the lyrical aspect of Masson's duality, which enables a poet to think thoughts that are *his own* (and not necessarily "alien to him") and to communicate these thoughts in an objective equivalent called an "artificial concrete." She concludes, "Yet however much the poet works through interpreting moods and feelings, these are externalized by being translated into an objective equivalent, what he calls an 'artificial concrete,' a kind of allegory, and are *not* the poet's own."⁴⁵ She is making Masson's theory entirely dramatic, instead of a give and take of both the egotistical sublime and the protean modes of creativity. Masson, in his explanation of "an imagined piece of concrete," specifies, "in so far as it is an imagination by the poet of the state of feeling of another mind, *or of his own mind in certain circumstances*."⁴⁶ Masson's inclusion of "his own mind" is central in his and Coleridge's theory. In fairness to Mrs. Armstrong it must be pointed out that she does recognize Masson's lyrical and dramatic duality when she considers his review of Tennyson's *Maud*. In that review Masson says that the "subjective" expressions of Tennyson weave themselves into an "objective" whole. And she rightly acknowledges that Masson, "who saw the poem as essentially dramatic," is one of the few who "show anything like an ability to grasp and analyze the poetry of the dialogue of the mind."⁴⁷ Her insistence that Masson's theory is dramatic is not wrong; indeed she is one of the first to shed even this much light on Masson. But her exposition can be misleading, in that it oversimplifies a theory that is more complex.

⁴³ Armstrong, p. 39.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 39. Italics hers.

⁴⁶ *Theories*, p. 314. Italics mine.

⁴⁷ Armstrong, p. 47.

To underscore just how long Arnold's misconception of Masson has continued through the years, I need only cite Sidney M. B. Coulling's fine essay, "Matthew Arnold's 1853 *Preface*," in *Victorian Studies* (1964). Coulling, like Arnold, says that Masson "saw in the Spasmodic poet 'certain real merits,'" ⁴⁸ not realizing that Masson did not consider Smith one. He thinks that Masson was espousing romantic subjectivism. As far as Masson's remark, "Now, as the very essence of the poet consists in the incessant imagination of concrete circumstance, a language rich in imagery is in itself a proof of the possession of poetic faculty in high degree," ⁴⁹ which is only a corollary statement, Coulling mistook it for the main thesis in Masson's treatise. He assumes that as a critic Masson is diametrically opposed to Dallas and Arnold. And perhaps worst of all, "If the review was not altogether cant, it still contained enough cant to demonstrate for Arnold the critical 'confusion of the present times.'" ⁵⁰ With Isobel Armstrong's re-examination of the 1853 *Preface*, perhaps future critics will not be so casual in dealing with Masson.

It probably should be noted in passing that in the *Preface* to the Second Edition of *Poems* Arnold vaguely attempts a concession and admits that his first *Preface* applauded only the narrative and dramatic and excluded any real appreciation of the lyric. Though such an admission may have marked the beginning of Arnold's repentance concerning lyric poetry, it failed to make amends for his misinterpretation of Masson; it may have put Arnold in a better light, but certainly not Masson.

University of Pennsylvania

⁴⁸ S. M. B. Coulling, "Matthew Arnold's 1853 *Preface*: Its Origin and Aftermath," *Victorian Studies*, 7 (March 1964), 236.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 237.