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MATTHEW ARNOLD'S BOKHARA

ONE OF THE PIECES particularly admired by initial readers of Matthew Arnold's first volumes of poetry was 'The Sick King in Bokhara' (1849). '[M]ost pleasing to the ordinary mind', said *The Times* on 4 November 1853;¹ 'one of the wisest, most simple, and most genial of the poems',² added *Fraser's Magazine* the following year. The story on which the poem—probably written in 1847 or 1848?³—is based is told in Alexander Burnes's *Travels into Bokhara* (1834).⁴ It concerns the King of Bokhara who tries, generously, to overturn the death penalty handed down to a strict Muslim who had in some way violated the law. But the guilty man will have none of the King's attempts at mercy and is slain at his own demand, even though the King instructs his executioners to allow him to escape if he makes the attempt. The King weeps over the dead man's body and personally reads the funeral service for him.⁵

Arnold would, of course, continue to find in historical narratives pleasing topics for poetry (and, in 'Sohrab and Rostum' (1853) magnificently returns to the east). Subjects drawn from the past, both historical and legendary—Empedocles, for example, or Tristram and Iseult—would become a defining feature of Arnold's poetics even as he also addressed other poems to modern subjects, famously asserting to his mother Frances in 1869, long after his career as a poet was essentially over, that his verse represented 'on the whole, the main movement of mind over the last quarter of a century'.⁶ The past (and the culturally/geographically remote) or the present (and the culturally/geographically familiar): Matthew Arnold's poetry took its sources from both and it might be thought that, often enough, that there was a sharp divide between them

¹ 'Poems By "A."', *The Times*, 4 November 1853, p. 5.

² 'Poems by Matthew Arnold', *Fraser's Magazine*, 49 (1854), pp. 140-49 (p. 142).

³ See Kenneth Allott and Miriam Allott, ed., *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, Longman Annotated English Poets, second edition (1979), p. 79.

⁴ *Travels into Bokhara; Containing the Narrative of a Voyage on the Indus from the sea to Labore, with Presents from the King of Great Britain; and an Account of a Journey from India to Cabool, Tartary and Persia. Performed by order of the Supreme Government of India, in the years of 1831, 32, and 33*, 3 vols.

⁵ See *ibid.*, i. 307-9. The story is said to have happened twelve years earlier.

⁶ *The Letters of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, 6 vols (Charlottesville, 1996-2001), iii.347.

(Empedocles' is an obvious exception). The former was attractive as a source of poetic narrative because it did not come obviously freighted with the possibilities of modern political or theological meaning, which the latter more plainly addressed. What modern political allergy, after all, might have been smuggled into, or read out of, 'Sohrab and Rustum'?

An interesting issue about Arnold and the modern moment, though, arises in 'The Sick King in Bokhara'. To my knowledge, however, none of the original readers noticed it (and it has not been a topic of any subsequent discussion). This initial silence—setting aside the subsequent one—must be because of the fundamental oddity I want to suggest here: what is revealing about the context in which Arnold published his Bokhara verses in *The Strayed Reveller, and Other Poems* is that it is not a context. Arnold *didn't* notice, so far as one can tell, the potential modern loading of his subject, however obvious it might have seemed. His first readers, as I have observed, certainly did not notice—or if they did they couldn't make any sense of the modern implications and said nothing about them. This episode in Arnold's early career offers, I propose, very locally, an insight into the poet's early choice as a writer between the unfamiliar and the past, and the familiar and the present, a choice that he would continue to think about in relation to subjects for poetry across his career.

The key issue is that Bokhara—now Bukhara, the sixth largest city of Uzbekistan—was not an innocent topic in 1849. And neither, at all, was the King of Bokhara (or Emir/Ameer). At the beginning of the 1840s, there had been a suspenseful narrative reported in frequent articles and letters in the British national press that had something of the qualities later to be magnified (not least by the more advanced modern media) in the search for Dr Livingstone. The Bokhara events comprised a story of espionage as British army officers acted as intelligence gatherers, monitoring the activities of the Russian Empire and its expansionist ambitions in central Asia. This was, as Captain Arthur Conolly (1807-42 [sometimes spelt 'Connolly']) named it in a phrase that would last, The Great Game—and Conolly was peculiarly caught up in it. What happened, in short, was that in the first half of 1842 the King of Bokhara, Nasrullah Khan (reigned 1827-

60), caught and imprisoned Conolly after he, the King, had previously incarcerated another more senior British intelligence officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Stoddart (1806-42). Stoddart was initially thrown into a pit and then, two days later, according to the reports in *The Times*, was, despite assurances to the contrary, imprisoned above ground in dire conditions. There he was held, together with Conolly who had initially been sent to recuse him, with the occasional but deceiving promise of release. This situation lasted until both men were executed on an initially unrecorded day in June 1842. Both were beheaded and their bodies, as *The Times* grimly reported, were 'buried on the spot, in the graves which had been dug in their presence.'⁷

These murders, naturally, caused indignation in Great Britain. The men's story was told over and again in *The Times* and the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, addressed the matter in the Commons at the end of August 1843. Does the Prime Minister, inquired the Young Englander, Mr Alexander Baillie-Cochrane, MP for Bridport, 'in case the report on this subject [of Conolly and Stoddart] was confirmed, [have] any hope of obtaining redress against the Ameer of Bokhara, who [has] been guilty of the crime?'. Sir Robert replied solemnly that he was not surprised

that the hon. Gentleman should entertain the feelings he had manifested at so barbarous an act as the murder of two British subjects by the Ameer of Bokhara, and independent of the influence of personal feelings arising from private friendship, he was sure every subject of her Majesty must feel the deepest indignation at such an outrage upon humanity.⁸

⁷ 'Murders in Bokhara', *The Times*, 11 February 1843, p. 6.

⁸ HC Deb 24 August 1843 vol. 71 c. 1010.

But Sir Robert went on to say—starting a discussion that would be pursued in *The Times* at even greater length than the original story—that the British government was not actually sure that the King of Bokhara *had* executed the two men. Evidence needed to be found.

And it was the Revd Dr Joseph Wolff (1795-1862), the celebrated ‘missionary to the world’, who set out to find it. This while others angrily complained that Sir Robert was failing a promise of protection historically due to those who held British citizenship. ‘Has the glory of England departed?’ retorted ‘A Naval Officer’ in *The Times* a few days after the Prime Minister’s August speech:

Is a British subject on a foreign shore no longer to be confident that the whole power of our empire will be exerted in his defence? Has miserable party spirit extinguished that stern feeling of a nationality which even Cromwell displayed when he said that ‘he would make the British name as respected abroad as was ever that of ancient Rome?’⁹

Wolff, keeping in continual touch with home, and not least *The Times*, reached Bokhara where, on the way, he had heard many rumours that, as Sir Robert had wondered, the two intelligence officers were very much alive and that accounts of their execution were mischievous fictions. There was some excitement announced in the newspaper, accordingly, on 8 September under the promising headline, ‘Rescue of British Officers from Bokhara’. But it was not to be. To Dr Wolff, two unfortunate things presently happened. He discovered that Conolly and Stoddart had indeed been murdered. And then the King of Bokhara imprisoned Wolff himself, with threats of further violence. Wolff, a correspondent notified the government, ‘is now prisoner at Bokhara’, and ‘in spite of all the promises of the King [...] he has not the least hope of being soon released.’¹⁰ Wolff in due course was to be freed. But it had been touch and go. Eventually, the

⁹ ‘The Murders in Bokhara’ by A Naval Officer, *The Times*, 28 August 1843, p. 3.

¹⁰ ‘Dr Wolff’s Imprisonment at Bokhara’, *The Times*, 28 August 1844, p. 2.

missionary would tell a meeting at Exeter Hall in London on 30 April 1845 about his ordeal and the fate of Captain Conolly and Colonel Stoddart. The speech lasted an understandable two and a half hours.

Each stage of this brutal, tense narrative as it was happening was communicated to *The Times*, which carried report after report. It was a matter for discussion in the Palace of Westminster in 1843 and, again, in 1846, where the issue of British government compensation to the families of the two officers was addressed by the Prime Minister.¹¹ And the whole history would be relayed in far greater detail than the Exeter Hall speech in Joseph Wolff's two-volume account, published in both London and New York, *Narrative of a Mission to Bokhara: in the Years 1843-1845, to Ascertain the Fate of Colonel Stoddart and Captain Conolly* (1845). That was in its fifth edition by 1848.

No one knows when Arnold wrote his poem nor when he read Burnes's *Travels into Bokhara*. But if 'The Sick King in Bokhara' really was composed in 1847 or 1848, the sensational story of Conolly and Stoddart was still a vivid memory—just as Wolff's book was still selling well. And, besides, the broader political context—the vital matter of Russian presence in central Asia—was still, as it remains to-day, an enormous source of concern and a situation with perpetually simmering violence. Arnold, however, seems to have been oblivious of all this, as his other King of Bokhara frets not about Russia but about the sternness of the moral law and his inability to persuade the Moolah to accept mercy. At a local level, this obliviousness leaves some moments in the poem with a strange aura of awkwardness, a sort of accidental but embarrassing tactlessness. Where Conolly and Stoddart at the King's command, for example, had watched the digging of their own graves, Arnold's other King orders the construction of the Moolah's grave to honour him. 'Bring water, nard, and linen rolls', Arnold's monarch declares in the last stanza:

¹¹ See HC Deb 24 April 1846 vol. 85 cc. 979-80.

Wash off all blood, set smooth each limb!

Then say: 'He was not wholly vile,

Because a king shall bury him.'¹²

How differently that *could* have been read—how insensitively and unpatriotically—in 1849. Yet as with an anti-pun, readers of this poem in its early years, if they recalled how Bokhara and its King had appeared in the news in recent times, would have had to push those recollections out of their mind. Arnold's choice of the unfamiliar and the historical (here, recent history from Burnes's book) involved in 'The Sick King in Bokhara' a remarkable requirement for the reader to box off any modern implications or allusions. Despite appearances, the poem has to say: do not make connections.

Arnold, reading Burnes's book, desired a neutral narrative from a far-flung place. The fact that contemporary international politics, the troubles of Conolly's Great Game, could tread on the poem's toes reveals, at the broadest level, just how difficult it is, for Arnold or for anyone, to be sure of such neutrality. And there is a more specific matter for Matthew Arnold's poetics. His hope that modern poetry could sometimes relieve itself of being modern by being absorbed into, or by, past narratives and distant locations was not always easy to bring off without Arnold unknowingly requiring the reader to take him or herself rather thoroughly out of his or her own day. Sometimes, that is to say, Matthew Arnold's poetry avoids the modern world only because the reader, blocking memory, has to allow it to.

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¹² Allott and Allott, p. 88, ll. 229-32.