

Spirituality in Mathew Arnold's Poetry

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Abstract

Sisodhara takes a keen look at the character and personality of Arnold and how it features in his poetry with special reference to *Scholar Gypsy*, *Thyrsis* and *Dover Beach* in order to highlight the way he offers, to his contemporaries, out of the confusions of the times they lived through especially by having recourse to poetry as containing a bulwark of secular spirituality.

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Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) was born at a time when England was going through a period of immense religious and social disintegration of values. Though the Victorian age saw England taking immense strides - in the industrial field, the scientific field and in the rise of democracy - yet these very triumphs proved to be the disintegration forces of the age.

The Industrial Revolution which changed the economy of England from an agrarian economy to an industrial one, gave birth to a new merchant class, which in turn wanted to bring about a change in the accepted order of things. Hence the customs and traditions of old Agricultural England were being subjected to great pressure. It was an era also of religious conflicts and tensions - the conflict between Anglicans and Evangelicals, between Catholics and Protestants. More importantly the era witnessed the Oxford Movement, which was a movement for religious reform. It arose as a reaction to the expansion of science and its reformers aimed at re-establishing the purity and dignity of the church by freeing it from the grasp of secular authority. However, the conversion of its leader John Henry Newman from an Anglican to a Roman Catholic, only contributed further to make one question the faith in religion. Then, of course, with the publication in 1859 of Darwin's *Origin of Species* the controversy between science and religion came to a climax. Darwin's theory of evolution which contradicted the account of man's origin as given in *The Bible* seemed to create a great chasm between God and Nature and proved to be one of the greatest dissolvers of faith in mid-Victorian England.

The Victorian era was, thus, a period of new questions, new ideas and new motives. Every ancient opinion, every old belief was being challenged. In place of faith and belief, there was skepticism and pessimism and no one could predict whether there was to be a total annihilation of religious belief or the dawn of a pure and stronger faith. So, Matthew Arnold (who was born in 1822) grew up in this atmosphere of turmoil and fierce questionings and was almost engulfed by it. He came at a period

when the wonderful revelations of science were still too raw, too cold and hard, to satisfy the yearnings of the poetic soul. Therefore, his poetry is characterized by a great deal of skepticism and melancholy; the source of his melancholy being his deep sense of spiritual crisis. Though most of his poetry has this note and tone of skepticism and melancholy, for the want of time only *The Scholar Gypsy*, *Thyrsis* and *Dover Beach* will be considered for the discussion. Though Arnold, as a poet, was against the mood of self-pity and stated that the purpose of poetry was "to animate and ennoble (wo)/men – not merely to add zest to their melancholy of grace to their dreams" he was not always successful in putting these precepts into practice in his own poetry. After all "the true note of Arnold's temperament is a pensive melancholy, essentially Romantic in origin, which gains sterner tones from the more definite anxieties of the century". When we speak about the spirituality of a person reflected in his/her works, we mean an inner path enabling a person to discover the essence of his or her being, or the deepest values and meanings by which people live. So it is my work here to show how Arnold as a Victorian poet had understood this wholeness of life and how this spirituality is permeated in his poems.

Arnold was not only too weak to resist the skeptical spirit of his age and assert his own clear aim and bold faith, but also became its victim. 'Unlike Shelley who had the optimistic faith to stand against the tendencies which he disliked, Arnold sat apart from them in a silent and brooding manner' As a result his poetry 'contended, mourned, analyzed'. However, he is more successful when instead of merely ruminating, he presents for our contemplation something which will powerfully suggest his thoughts and feelings to us-like the Berkshire countryside with which he associates his thoughts in *The Scholar Gypsy* and *Tyrsis* or the shore of the English channel with which he fuses them in *Dover Beach*.

If there is a poem of his in which one would expect to find the joyous of life apart from the dissatisfaction of modern civilization, it would be in *The Scholar Gypsy*. It develops along a sort of dialectical pattern. Broadly speaking, it juxtaposes two diametrically opposed worlds, the idyllic world of the Scholar-Gypsy and the sick and inert world of the poet-speaker. The tension of the poem springs from this juxtaposition. The poem falls into recognizable sections and grows by discernible stages. The opening section of three stanzas presents a mellow rural scene of quiet and restful peace near Oxford, as viewed by the poet from a vantage point of 'this nook over the high, half-reaped field.' At the end of the description, he settles down to read 'the oft-read tale' of the Gypsy-Scholar from Glanvil's book. The description of the Comer country forms an important aspect of the poem, for it represents the country of Arnold's imagination, an image of freedom from the futile, depraved world of power and profit with all its materialism and its dissatisfaction with our way of life. That world according to him was a brazen prison, 'a darkling plain' the world of 'sick hurry' and 'divided aims' of 'heads o'ertax'd' and 'palsied earts'. But the Scholar Gypsy had left this world a 'brazen prison' and found a life for himself which was so different from ours:

O life unlike to ours!
Who fluctuate idly without term or scope,
Of whom each strives, nor knows for what he strives,
And each half lives a hundred different lives.

Nowhere was the sense of the fragmentation in the human soul and its spiritual alienation more starkly expressed than in these lines. Spirituality means the unity of your being; a state when you are at peace with yourself and your creator, it is a sense of remaining whole. So, when one is living a hundred different lives, spirituality can only be a remote affair. For Arnold, change was not progress, it was only a state of flux:

For what wears out the life of mortal Men?
'Tis that form change to change their being rolls

Now one can't help comparing this to Tennyson's:

Old order change yielding place to
new God fulfills himself in many way.
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world

This offers a completely contrasting view of change, and sees it as progress. But, for Arnold, change meant loss. After, thus, diagnosing the disease of modern life, Arnold seeks to offer his solution, in the form of the life that the scholar gipsy has chosen for himself, a life that has withdrawn from 'the world without' and sought refuge among primeval people from the torment of civilization and most importantly, a life that has '[o]ne aim, one business, one desire'. It is this possession of a single aim, business and desire that imparts immortality to the scholar gipsy. Here immortality could mean immortality of the soul rather than immortality of life, thus suggesting liberation or spiritual salvation. However, in order to achieve this, the scholar has to continue forever to: 'Fly our paths, our feverish contact fly'. So by suggesting that the scholar should reject the world permanently, Arnold is almost escapist. But nevertheless, this is one of Arnold's finest poetic statements of the deepest misgivings of his age.

Thyrsis which we can even call the sequel to *The Scholar Gipsy* has the same theme as the earlier poem but the greater optimism of Arnold's later work is unquestionable. Here too we get a criticism of life and the same solution to life's problem i.e. to shun the peopled society and dedicate oneself to the quest of truth. It is only nature that can cure the heart aches of 'Contention-tost man' in the absence of faith. The realization of the death of religion and a yearning for a spiritual rebirth is as strong as in his other poems.

A fugitive and gracious light he seeks,
Shy to illumine; and I seek it too.

Though it is a memorial poem for his friend, Arthur Hugh Clough, the theme is actually Arnold himself and his own doubts and problems, but the last feeling is of optimism in the voice of *Thyrsis*:

Why faintest thou! I wonder'd till I died
Roam on! The light we sought is shining still
Dost thou ask proof? Our tree yet crowns the hill,
Our scholar travels yet the loved hill- side.

The Scholar Gipsy involves a dream of being from the world of becoming and leaves undetermined whether the dream was a delusion. Thyrsis instead devotes itself to recovering a vision of being from the world of becoming and insists that it is true.

In *Dover Beach* Arnold once again bemoans the loss of faith and the birth of a new ugly world. He begins with a calm and soothing picture:

The sea is calm tonight.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair

However, soon the ocean becomes noisy.

With tremulous cadence slow
And bring the eternal note of sadness in

The poet wants to suggest that nature itself - the sea, stars, darkness, wind - has not changed. It is the shift in the human perspective from the Christian tradition to strange and impersonal world of science and discovery coupled with the sense of a new, comfortless and overwhelming knowledge that has transmuted the sea, the air, the French coast and charged them with sinister overtones. Arnold here, very successfully portrays the spiritual anxiety and bewilderment of the Victorians. He then, openly laments the loss of faith'.

The sea of faith
Was once, too at the full, and round earth's shore
But now I only hear.
Its melancholy, long withdrawing roar.

In the final stanza he not only offers a bleak view of the world, its desolation relieved only by personal love "but also advances the recurrent Arnoldian thesis that most humans survive through the deluded dreams of a 'beautiful' world". It is only someone like him with 'his sad lucidity of soul' who cannot find 'peace, nor help for pain'. And in the image of 'ignorant armies' clashing by night we find the climax of Arnold not only pointing to the central dilemma of his times, but also wanting to awaken in his fellow Victorians a spiritual revival. Though the poem ends in a note of pessimism and disillusionment, the piercing melancholy only serves to enhance the reality of love

and faithfulness and makes us crave for them even more. R H Hutton, summing up what Arnold's poetry has done for his generation, says "no one has expressed more powerfully and poetically its spiritual weaknesses, its craving for a passion that it cannot feel, its admiration for a self mastery that it cannot achieve, its desire for a creed that it fails to accept, its sympathy with a faith that it will not share, its aspiration for a peace that it does not know".¹

Hence I would like to conclude by saying that in his mourning of the loss of faith, of peace, of stability, in his melancholy and pessimism we can discern a message for mankind and amidst all that negativism we can still find optimistic notes like 'Resolve to be thyself; and know, that he who finds himself loses his misery'. Or 'the light we sought is shining still'. Though, steeped as it is, in gloom and desolation, yet Arnold's poetry could guide us in our struggles for perfection. In its depths of despair we can still find a ray of hope. Arnold seems to belong to a pragmatic middle ground that is more concerned with the poetry of religion and its virtues and values for society than with the existence of God. He wrote in the preface of *God and the Bible*, in 1875, "[t]he personages of the Christian heaven and their conversations are no more matter of fact than the personages of the Greek Olympus and their conversations." The sentiment conveyed here leaves us with the opening statement, as it were, for a secular spirituality that still continues to seek its heights.

1 Cfr. Richard Holt Hutton, *English literature -History and Criticism; Great Britain - Politics and Government*, Vol. 4, Morgan Forrest, 1852.

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