The Ebb and Flow of Spirituality in Victorian Poetry: A Contextual Study

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Absract

Ahmed in his overview of the Victorian Era in relation to religion and spirituality interfacing with poetic imagination attempts a coherent synthesis of the major streams in and through the representative poets chosen for consideration: Arnold, Tennyson and Browning.

Keywords: Supernaturalism, Secular Spirituality, Spiritual Crisis, Natural Piety.

The aim of this paper is to look into the context of the spiritual dynamics of Victorian poetry by way of an overview with special reference to the poetry of Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning and Matthew Arnold.

Defining and contextualising 'spirit', 'spiritual' and 'spirituality' must precede any meaningful discussion of the subject. For this one may turn to the most authentic source *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED)¹. The word 'spirit', derived from the Latin word spirare 'to breathe,' is also the source of English aspire, conspire, expire, inspire, perspire, respire, and transpire. According to the OED 'spirit' means "[t]he animating or vital principle in man (and animals); that which gives life to the physical organism, in contrast to its purely material elements; the breath of life" while the word 'spiritual' is defined as "of or pertaining to, affecting or concerning, the spirit or higher moral qualities, especially as regarded in a religious aspect." The lexeme also signifies "of or pertaining to, consisting of, spirit, regarded in either a religious or intellectual aspect; of the nature of a spirit or incorporeal supernatural essence; immaterial". Likewise, 'spirituality' connotes "[t]he quality or condition of being spiritual; attachment to or regard for things of the spirit as opposed to material or worldly interests". Thus, the semantic field of 'spirituality' comprises 'the animating or vital principle in man', 'the breath of life', 'incorporeal supernatural essence', and 'concerning the higher moral quality', thereby the term with its sense of disjunction and mutual exclusion also enters into a binary opposition to materiality, incorporeality and worldliness, in the common parlance.

¹ Oxford English Dictionary, CD Rom version, London, Oxford University Press, 1993.

² Frequently expressed or implied in distinction to bodily, corporal, or temporal.

To Martin S. Jaffee, a professor of Comparative Religion at the University of Washington 'spirituality' commonly appears as "an inner sense of connectedness to the ultimate forces of reality that lead to psychic wholeness and other forms of inner strength."³

Evidently, spirituality cannot be identified or regarded as synonymous with religion/religiosity. As cultural historian and Yogi William Irwin Thompson (1938 – 2010) puts it, "[r]eligion is not identical with spirituality; rather religion is the form spirituality takes in civilization."⁴

Spirituality is far more comprehensive and inclusive than the former. Every religious experience may be considered spiritual but every spiritual experience may not be religious. Unlike religion, spirituality transcends ritualistic boundaries. An atheist has no religion but he may certainly have moments of spirituality. Jaffee sees religion as a "body of imposed rules and dogmas that often smothers the natural 'spirituality' of human nature." To him 'spirituality' is plurisignative and can hence be looked at from several points of view. Thus 'religion,' in this sense is constrictive and constraining as it tries to limit 'spirituality' by: 'packaging it in received formulas.'

If 'spirit' is the breath of life and the animating principle in man then it is also the breath and animating principle of poetry. Spirituality is the quickening agent in poetry. It is that inexplicable 'something' that stirs the very depths of our being and addresses itself to intuition rather than reason. Spirituality often manifests itself in poetry in the form of the sublime, an indispensable attribute of the 'literature of power', to use De Quincy's phrase.

Hiram Corson further elucidates the term for the present context. To him 'spiritual' means:

The whole domain of the emotional, the susceptible or impressible, the sympathetic, the intuitive; in short, that mysterious something in the constitution of man by and through which he holds relationship with the essential spirit of things, as opposed to the phenomenal of which the senses take cognizance.⁵

The 'Ebb and Flow of Spirituality', to quote Corson once again, may be noted in English Poetry right from "Chaucer down to the present time, which constitutes the real life of poetry, and which should, as far as possible, be brought to the consciousness and appreciation of students."

 $^{3\,}$ Cfr. Martin S. Jaffee, 'Questions & Answers about Religion', Interview, in Microsoft® Student 2008 [DVD], Encarta Premium, Redmond, Microsoft Corporation, 2007.

⁴ William Irwin Thompson, *The Time Falling Take to Light: Mythology, Sexuality, and the Origins of Culture,* New York, St Martin's Press, 1981, p. 103.

⁵ Hiram Corson, *An Introduction to the Study of Browning*, 1982. URL:classiclit.about.com/library/bl-etexts/hcorson/bl-hcorson-intro-4.htm

A thought conveyed in a poem, however powerful and of whatever kind, can never compensate for the loss of spirituality too often caused by affectation, dry pedantry and sentimentality. The study of poetry almost in any institution is solely intellectual, blurring thereby the distinction between the study of discursive prose and spiritually livened poetry, precluding thereupon any scope to address the spiritual aspect of a student's personality.

After Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton, the Restoration Age and the first half of the eighteenth century witnessed a marked decline in spirituality as a poetic quality; it is evident from such representative poems as Dryden's 'Mac Flecknoe', 'Absalom and Achitophel', and Pope's 'The Rape of the Lock' and 'Dunciad'. Indeed, possibly it was this loss, caused by the separation of thought from emotion and feeling, that made Eliot apprehend a 'dissociation of sensibility' in the poetry of this period. With the onset of the Age of Sensibility after the death of Pope, represented by William Cowper, Robert Burns and then William Blake there was a revival of spirituality that reached a point of considerable growth in the poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats. Romanticism as a revolt was directed among other things against the religious/Christian elements in poetry as exemplified by such poets as Spenser and Milton. The Christian supernaturalism of these poets was to give way to, to echo M H Abram, 'Natural Supernaturalism', that in turn upheld a revival of interest in pantheism and paganism:

...Great God! I'd rather be
A pagan suckled in creed outworn—
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.⁷

The excerpt evidences a growing sense of disillusionment with the Christian faith in the poet and a more secular spirituality can be seen to be supplanting the aggressive religiosity of the earlier ages.

An overriding concern with the question of spirituality and the loss of religious faith characterizes the Victorian ethos. It may be seen perhaps as the most spiritually charged age and of all the literary forms it is poetry that captures and reflects this spirit of the period. Bernard Richards has the following pertinent observations to make in this connection: "One of the major facets of the Victorian Age was the loss of faith; it was inevitable that this should show up in the poetry."

The loss of faith became a major poetic subject, and much of the poetry it prompted was powerful and moving finding its climactic expression in the poetry of Tennyson

⁷ Wordsworth, *The World is too much with Us*, URL:quotations.about.com/cs/poemlyrics/a/The_World_Is_ To.htm

⁸ Bernard Richards, English Poetry of the Victorian Period 1830-1890, London, Longman, 1990, p. 217.

and Browning, followed by Arnold, Hopkins and Hardy, to name but a few. Victorian spirituality has conflicting manifestations following the ripples caused in the relatively placid intellectual pool by the Darwinian as well as the pre-Darwinian evolutionary notions. Long before Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1959) and Robert Chamber's *Vestiges of Creation* (1944) there was widespread spiritual skepticism engendered by the prevalent knowledge of the evolutionist hypotheses. The most abiding legacy of religion to Victorian poetry is, as pointed out by W. David Shaw, The quality of the poetry's religious despair and the intellectual urgency of its search for an *agnostos theos* or unknown God.⁹

Indeed, long before Tennyson thought of In Memoriam and came to know about the works of Robert Chambers and Charles Darwin, in 1850, in the *Poems chiefly Lyrical* of 1830 he had written:

Yet,' said I, in my morn of youth, The unsunn'd freshness of my strength, I went forth in quest of truth,' It is man's privilege to doubt.' ... Ay me! I fear All may not doubt, but everywhere Some must clasp Idols. Yet, my God, call I Idol? Let Thy dove Shadow me over, and my sins Be unremember'd, and Thy love Enlighten me. Oh teach me yet Somewhat before the heavy clod Weighs on me, and the busy fret Of that sharp-headed worm begins the gross blackness underneath. Oh weary life! oh weary death! Oh spirit and heart made desolate! Oh damned vacillating state!

This 'vacillating state' lies at the centre of the Victorian consciousness lending a note of melancholy to a large gamut of poetry of the period whose chief representative is Matthew Arnold who describes himself as "wandering between two worlds, one dead,/[t]he other powerless to be born", in 'Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse'. A deepening spiritual crisis is antecedent to his essentially pessimistic poetic vision. A fair measure of his poetry is acutely retro-introspective and reflects a kind of suspended consciousness. It is a record of a bleak transition that impinges on a mind resigned to embrace the inevitable yet unable to come to terms with it: 'From change to change their beings roll' (*The Scholar-Gipsy*). What ails Arnold is the lack of moral and spiritual stability and the essentially materialistic and positivist notion of progress. Arnold refuses to allow himself to get dazzled by the scientific and technological advancement

⁹ Shaw in R. Cronin et al, A Companion to Victorian Poetry, London, Blackwell, 2007, p. 473.

brought about by the Industrial Revolution. To him every change cannot be progress; a progressive change must have its spiritual content intact. He can no longer cling to and derive solace from the robust faith that he found in his father Thomas Arnold of Rugby and back in the sixteenth century Renaissance.

The Arnoldian desideratum is that unique tutelary protection, the equanimity that Wordsworth found as a worshipper of Nature: "The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,/[t]he guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul/[o]f all my moral being."10 Such a spiritual security is denied to Arnold as he cannot fall back upon a religious faith which is a thing of the past and is hence no longer available to him. Shelley in his Defense of Poetry has already questioned and found redundant the existent Christian moral systems/codes for their ineffectiveness in bringing about meaningful social transformation. An awakened revolutionary consciousness can never be the fruit of such worn-out systems. Only poetry, according to Shelley, has the inner mechanism to bring about such a transformation. Of course, Shelley uses the word 'poetry' in a very loose and generalized sense rather deliberately. To him every manifestation of the creative within an individual is poetry. It is precisely for this reason that, continuing the Sheleyan line of thinking, Arnold replaces religion with poetry, Wordsworth as a follower and practitioner of the eighteenth century Hartleyan philosophy allows considerable space to his spirituality. He evinces a unique capacity to absorb change. His 'Natural piety' has a formidable pagan component to it and yet he remains 'whole'. His inclusive piety often serves as an antidote to religious despair and alienation.

By contrast, Arnold experiences a gnawing sense of alienation from his faith and makes his poetry one of anguish. Not that he does not make valiant attempts to come out of this morass of ever deepening angst; he does try to seek resolution in an alternative spirituality by adopting the Wordsworthian type of natural piety in a poem titled 'Lines Written in Kensington Gardens' but his overall weltanschuung remains unaltered. The modern man's faith has waned beyond recognition. It has shrunk into a mere 'casual creed' in the minds of 'light-half believers' sans unity of purpose, sans a sense of direction. Such are the people of the modern world:

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;
Who wait like thee, but not like thee in hope.
Thou waitest for the spark from heaven! And we,
Light half-believers of our casual-creeds...¹¹

There cannot be a better and more effective way of characterizing the spiritual depletion of the Age consequent upon the loss of faith than the last line of the excerpt.

¹⁰ William Wordsworth, 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey on Revisiting the Banks of River Wye', July 13, 1798.

¹¹ Arnold, The Scholar-Gipsy,' emphasis mine.

The modifiers 'light', 'half' and 'casual' coalesce to enforce the marginalized state of the Christian faith and a sense of spiritual stasis resulting in the corresponding diminution of its 'half-believers' stature. However, this modern urban world with all its turbidity and dreariness is contrasted with the Arcadian poise, peace and serenity around Oxford: "Those wide fields of breezy grass / [w]here black-wing'd swallows haunt the glittering Thames" (*The Scholar-Gipsy*) and "[t]he mowers, who, as the tiny swell / [o]f our boat passing heaved the river-grass, / [s]tood with suspended scythe to see us pass." (*Thyrsis*) It is in this desired state that the poet finds temporary refuge.

The desperate unbelief that informs so much of Arnold's verse arises from distinctly Victorian cultural conditions, a sad contemplation of withering faith and an unprecedented fear of encroaching materialism. To quote Buckley: "The paralysis of doubt that is said to have gripped Arnold's generation is far removed from the divided aims of a disillusioned Hamlet." ¹²

This loss of religious faith in the Victorian age and Arnold's response to it finds a profound exposition in one of his most famous and anthologized poems 'Dover Beach'. It is a poem about achieving an alternative spirituality founded on human love relationship in the event of the loss of religious faith that is described in elemental terms: "The sea of faith/[w]as once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore/[l]ay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd." He develops the image of the sea of faith through five haunting lines. What should be particularly noted in these lines is the poet's manipulation of sounds, particularly vowels, to create a sense of fluidity, the ceaseless ebb and flow of the tidal waves which becomes an extended metaphor for and a hauntingly powerful image of the ebb and flow of religious spirituality. The sequence of open vowels with the near-rhyme 'draw: roar', gives an eerie resonance which echoes throughout the sentence. From the main verb 'hear', introduced early, the whole sentence falls away in keeping with the ebb of the tide, and of religious faith, which it describes:

But now I only hear Its melancholy, long withdrawing roar, Retreating to the breath Of the night-wind, down the vast edges draw The naked shingles of the world.

In the above lines the elemental water imagery and Arnold's use of the Sophoclean image of the waves, through an evocative poetic ambience with powerful subtexts, signifies spiritual recession of the age. The 'melancholy, long withdrawing roar' is an auditory projection of the gradual but inevitable disappearance of religious faith. It should be borne in mind that in the context of British literature in general and Victorian literature in particular, religion is more or less synonymous with Christianity. Disillusioned and shorn of hope in the spiritually impoverished 'modern world' the

poet too 'withdraws' but into a private, personalized world of love-relationship to look for human values and attributes so alien to the changing modern world:

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! For the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And here we are as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Incisive and brief, enunciative yet suggestive, the last line embodies Arnold's most moving and memorable comment on the strangeness and horror of the modern world. The whole drama of bewildered humanity is enacted upon a 'darkling plain'. Here 'darkling' means both 'dark' and 'darkening or obscuring', signifying thereby a state of spiritual darkness, obscurantism, as well as a process of a gloomy transition towards that state, a gradual withdrawal of spiritual illumination in the regime of a despotic intellect.

Just as materialism poses a threat and stands in opposition to spirituality in the significant part of the Victorian Age, so does the intellect when glorified for its own sake and divorced from emotion which is an important component of spirituality. For many science becomes a metonym for unbridled intellect and at variance with the spirit. It leads to a breach of the synthesis of spiritual and intellectual pursuits in a man. Intellectuality and spirituality, intellect and feeling become disjunctive and thus mutually exclusive after 1880 but the process of separation is visible well before that. Although the major Victorian poets like Tennyson and Browning were able to sustain and uphold this intellect-spirituality, intellect-feeling bond in their poetry they could not have escaped the torments of this prolonged and agonizing process. Buckley in his book *The Victorian Temper* takes note of this: "Though later critics might charge the Victorians with divorcing intellect and feeling, the liaison was in fact well sustained into the 1870's, and the process of separation was prolonged and painful."13 The ideal state of manhood is a well-poised, harmoniously operating duality of the active or intellectual or discursive, and the passive or spiritually sensitive. This is the idea which underlies his major poems like 'The Princess', in In Memoriam and The Idylls of the King. Tennyson also saw it as an opposition between soul and mind. He prayed for his whole generation a prayer which might be echoed by Victorians of vastly different intellectual persuasions:

Let knowledge grow from more to more, But more of reverence in us dwell;

That mind and soul according well, May make one music as before.

Tennyson's representativeness as a Victorian poet chiefly consists in the comprehensiveness of his poetic vision that encompasses the conflicting trends and voices of the age and upholds its dynamic polyphony unlike Arnold. Embodying a progressive spirituality Tennyson had no quarrels with the growth of knowledge including the knowledge of evolutionism nor did he deplore change and scientific progress for it could very well be one of the ways in which God fulfils himself: "Old order changeth/[y]ielding place to new;/God fulfills himself in many ways,/[l]es one good custom should corrupt the world" (*Morte d'Arthur*).

Tennyson's poetic multivocalism finds its most profound articulation in his *In Memoriam* whose genesis is, to quote Andrew Lang: 'The sad mechanic exercise' of verse allaying the pain.¹⁴ It was not intended for publication but Tennyson offered it as a monument to friendship, and a book of consolation. The poem holds up a mirror to Tennyson's complex spirituality. What immediately strikes the reader about *In Memoriam* is the poise, the calm detachment with which Tennyson analyses his sorrow. This 'calm despair' is far from the incantatory rhythm and helpless gesturing of 'Break, break'; and is all the more effective for its somber clarity:

What words are these fall'n from me?
Can calm despair and wild unrest
Be tenants of a single breast,
Or sorrow such changeling be? (*In Memoriam*)

The 'calm despair' and 'wild unrest', caused by "...the busy fret/[o]f that sharpheaded worm", quoted earlier, comprise the two crucial dimensions of Tennyson's poetic multivocalism. However, 'It must be remembered' Tennyson wrote, 'that this is a poem, not an actual biography. ...The different moods of sorrow as in a drama are dramatically given, and my conviction that fear, doubts and suffering will find answer and relief only through faith in a God of love. He further continues, 'I' is not always the author speaking of himself, but the voice of the human race speaking through him...'15

Tennyson's poetic spirituality has an androgynous aspect to it. This is the inherent duality in every human personality. Masculine and feminine principles constitute the essential human consciousness; these two principles must coexist to constitute a harmonious whole without which the human personality is incomplete. Jung calls them the anima and the animus and in Indian philosophy this male-female equipoise in an individual is referred to as *ardhanariswara* or *Siva* and *Sakti*. In 'The Princess', the Prince, speaking of the relations of the sexes, says:

¹⁴ Andrew Lang, *Alfred Lord Tennyson*, e-book, cfr. URL:classiclit.about.com/library/bl-etexts/alang/bl-alang-aten-5.htm

¹⁵ Cfr. Andrew Cecil Bradley, A Commentary on Tennyson's In Memoriam, London, Kessinger Publishing, 1901 (2008).

In the long years liker must they grow; The man be more of woman, she of man; He gain in sweetness and in moral height, Nor lose the wrestling thews that throw the world; She mental breadth, nor fail in childward care, Nor lose the childlike in the larger mind; Till at the last she set herself to man, Like perfect music unto noble words; And so these twain, upon the skirts of Time, Sit side by side, full-summ'd in all their powers, Dispensing harvest, sowing the To-be, Self-reverent each and reverencing each, Distinct in individualities, But like each other ev'n as those who love. Then comes the statelier Eden back to men: Then reign the *world's* great bridals, chaste and calm: Then springs the crowning race of humankind.(*The Princess*)

Andrew Lang succinctly sums up the cardinal Tennysonian idea "Man must realize a *womanly manliness*, and woman a *manly womanliness*." The skeptical philosophy of the Victorian age had a considerable influence on the formative phase of his genius as evident from the poem under discussion. In fact one can go to the extent of calling his *In Memoriam* a poem of nineteenth century scepticism to which he has applied an 'all-subtilizing intellect'. It is presented in the form of a poetical 'concrete' with a commendable artistic skill, and over and above, Tennyson has subjected it to the spiritual instincts and apperceptions of the feminine side of his nature, which encompasses in turn a larger faith. But it is, after all, not the vital faith which Browning's poetry exhibits, a faith proceeding directly from the spiritual man. It is rather the faith expressed by Browning's Bishop Blougram who says in the poem of this name: "With me faith means perpetual unbelief/[k]ept quiet like the snake 'neath Michael's foot,/ [w]ho stands firm just because he feels it writhe." This is secular, or rather agnostic spirituality of a Victorian nonconformist but the irony lies in the fact that the speaker is a 'bishop'.

Browning may be considered one of the most intellectual of poets. His poetry is charged with discursive thought in a manner that has few parallels in English literature but he is also the most spiritual and transcendental of poets, the 'subtlest assertor of the Soul in Song', resistant at the same time to the despotism of thought, a common Victorian menace. His thought always remains subservient to an ulterior spiritual end. His whole endeavour has been to show an abiding correspondence between the universe and God, the natural and the spiritual, and the actual and the ideal. Browning's 'Amphibian' represents his unified and unifying poetic vision

and is the Prologue to 'Fifine at the Fair'. Amphibian is very significantly one who unites both lives within himself, the material and the spiritual, in complete concord and mutual subservience — one who 'lives and likes life's way' and can bask in the sunshine of free intellectuality quickened by the spirit. Such a man may be seen as Browning's ideal man, the complete man. He has always recognized the value and significance of flesh in his poetry. Although Browning has always warned the readers against identifying him with his poetic personae Rabbi Ben Ezra well articulates the Browningesque philosophy: 'All good things are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now, than flesh helps soul.' He is able to sing of the full physical life, in its relation to the spiritual.

The ebb and flow of spirituality exhibited in English poetry of the Victorian age, which has been the subject of this paper testifies to the fact that human nature will continue to assert its wholeness in the civilized man and there must come a time, in the progress of civilization, when this ebb and flow will be less marked than it has been so far when the intellectual and the spiritual will constitute a harmonious whole, a spirit-intellect symbiosis and the intellectual and spiritual inclinations in the nature of a man will no longer be at variance. Robert Browning turns out to be one of the most complete embodiments of this equipoise.

It is evident from the above discussion that Victorianism was not a monolithic entity and the age was highly polyphonic, particularly in its negotiations with spirituality and religion. Almost all the poets of this great age and particularly Tennyson, Browning and Arnold had their own modes and levels of responses to the complex issues of religion and spirituality. Arnold and Browning present in their poetry very different visions of life and often polarized attitudes to the changing reality. Arnold's pessimistic 'darkling plain' stands in sharp contrast to Browning's unwavering optimism founded on robust spirituality, while Tennyson, a Janus-like amphibian, embraces both, treading alike the conflicting territories of skepticism and aggressive questioning as well as collectedness and equanimity, brought about by his deep faith and his sustained endeavour to 'justify the ways of God to man' in the manner of Milton. This capacity to amalgamate within his poetic consciousness the conflicting voices and attitudes of the age makes him the most comprehensive of the Victorian poets. The Victorian age being very much an age of transition from Romanticism to high modernism, the spirituality exhibited by the poets of this age has its vital Romantic antecedents and inevitable consequents as reflected in the poetry of Yeats and Eliot.

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