

The Scientific and Religious Temper of the Victorian Age: A General Survey

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Abstract

In the general survey of the Victorian Age offered by Merlyn she identifies the causes for the tension at the emergence of science in the wake of renaissance and industrialism. The scientific temper in clash with the prevailing religious sensibility calling for the adaptation of the latter is what is found in most of the creative poets of the age is argued with special reference to Newman as a key intellectual representative of the era.

Keywords: Science, Religion, Belief, Progress, Intuition.

Introduction

The tension between science and religion, faith and reason, belief and doubt, the material and the spiritual, is immemorial but this tension is perhaps no where more evident than in the Victorian era. The England of Queen Victoria experienced the effects of French Revolution, Industrial Revolution and Spiritual Revolution, the rise of nationalism, construction of railways, the Reform Bill of 1832 which transferred power from the upper to the middle classes, the rise of democracy, the emergence of the press as a powerful political force, abolition of paper tax and stamp duty that led to an increase in the reading public, the introduction of free education, the Catholic emancipation, the abolition of slavery, change in the Poor Law, and the establishment of beer-houses. If Copernicus with his scientific views first challenged religious orthodoxy, destroying the geocentric world picture, in the 17th and 18th centuries, the mechanic materialism undermined the miraculous elements of Christianity.

Claims have been made in recent times that the two great ages of human intellect are that of Pericles and that of Queen Victoria. Though one is tempted to associate the age as characterized by peace and prosperity, many Victorians were far from attaining these. The old ways could not cope with the contemporary problems and the new attitude towards society was disturbing to them. This tension left them spiritually bewildered yet they were essentially religious and idealistic, willing to make sacrifices for the sake of a world beyond and brought out a considerable amount of religious poetry.

No other century except the 17th and perhaps the 12th had the claims of religion occupy so large a part in the national life, nor, men speaking in the name of religion

continue to exercise so much power as in the 19th century. The chief religious events were closely linked with the broad intellectual currents of the age and they were an inextricable part of the cultural fabric and were important issues.

The Poetic Tenor

During this period rationalism acquired immense practical influence under the Benthamites. John Stuart Mill considered as the greatest Victorian philosopher was an enlightened rationalist. According to him: "A poet in our times is a semi-barbarian in a civilized community. ...The march of his intellect is like that of a crab, backward."¹ The Utilitarians denounced poetry and was at the service of God and mammon. Ultimately it was the business of a material world they were devoted to which denied the relevancy of their spiritual quests. This paradox gave rise to social satire. Clough's sharp insight detects the real motive behind every assumed religiosity:

There is no God or if there is
The tradesman thinks 'twere funny
If he should take it ill in me
To make a little money.²

Tennyson denounces the piety of the rogue:

Who ever naming God except for gain,
So never took that useful name in vain.³

Kingsley was astonished to find the unabashed tradesman who continued to find practical uses for the Christian and Mosaic Law and to draw liberal profit from enlisting the interests of God in the service of mammon. A tradesman of the 1830s made use of child labour but would insist upon his little slaves singing hymns if they sang at all. Hence the uneasy awareness that 'something was rotten in the State of Denmark.' So the writer in every case tried to sweep away error and to reveal the underlying truth about human life. Victorians were keenly aware of their social responsibilities in their poetic practice and wrote poems to attain a philosophical synthesis of the many conflicting aspects of contemporary life. As a result there is a seriousness of the Victorian concept of poetry as a whole. Victorian poets attempted to interpret spiritual truths in the context of the requirements of their age.

John Henry Newman, the spiritual Achilles of 19th century religious revival rages war against the irreligious tendencies of the England of the day:

Tyre of the West, and glorying in the name

1 Richard D. A. Hick, *Victorian People and Ideas*, New York, Norton and Company, 1973, p. 269.

2 Cfr. Jagat S. Bright, *Victorian English Literature*, Delhi, Universal Publication, 1968, p. 6.

3 *Ibid.*

More than in faith's pure name
O trust not crafty fort nor rock renown'd
...Wielding Trade's master-keys, at thy proud will⁴

Here he warns his countrymen of the danger of greed for money and power for a reckoning would come:

O Britons! Now so brave and high,
How will ye weep the day ...
Your Christmas then will lose its mirth,
Your Easter lose its Bloom.⁵

The Tension between Science and Religion

Though the challenge of Copernicus and Galileo revolutionized science, philosophy and belief in the late Renaissance, religion after wavering rather dizzily accommodated itself to the new cosmology and remained relatively unshaken. Hence poets like Donne and Milton could go on describing universe almost as if helio-centric astronomy had never been heard of. They wrote poetry based on unquestioning faith that made it poetry first and last. It was not so with the Victorians. But now the scientific investigations of the text of the Bible and the study of Geology and Biology and Darwin's *Origin of Species*, in 1859, shocked the faith of many who broke away from the Church.

A free thinker that Coleridge was, he interpreted the Scripture according to his intuitive sense of moral fruitfulness and did not seek after any sure proof of their authenticity. He found meaning in that living core of energy which in poetry is imagination and in life is religion. For him faith did not rest on the literal, historical accuracy of the Bible but upon spiritual truths. Among the towering intellectuals of Victorian England nearly all succumbed either to actual unbelief or to some form of agnosticism. Thomas Carlyle, Charles Darwin, George Eliot, Herbert Spenser, John Stuart Mill, Matthew Arnold were all alike disturbed by the new discoveries. John Henry Newman was the only intellectual of the league who retained religious a strong belief.

What animated and held together the middle class men of this period were the moral sense and the social conscience and the need for self-purification. The 19th century reconcilers of science and religion did not deny a divine power behind it all but were just showing how that power does it. John Morley's *On Compromise*, 1874, is one of the central documents of Victorian age. He found the general mental climate to be one of profound distrust of general principals, a 'roaring trade' was all they were concerned with. Men had ceased to find aesthetic satisfaction in religion. Ruskin

4 Elizabeth Ann Noel, *An Edition of Poems of John Henry Cardinal Newman*, Diss. University of Illinois, 1956, U. M. I., 1989, pp. 121-122.

5 *Ibid.*

turned a social reformer. Pater thought that 'art for art's sake' would make life full. Carlyle restored to the age some spiritual vision. His *Sartor Resartus* stands at the head of the Victorian literature of spiritual travail.

A crisis of faith was the common feature of the early works of several writers, among whom were John Sterling, Tennyson, Arthur Hallam and Clough. Poets pass through phases of doubt and remorse to affirmation and faith apart from the case of Clough and Thomas Cooper in the 1830s and 1840s. The religious beliefs in which the Victorians had been brought up and the resultant conflict caused by an intellectual anguish brought about by science and progress mirror many poems. Tennyson's poem, *Supposed Confessions of a Second Rate Sensitive Mind* (1830) is perfectly genuine. Though his mind is tortured by a certain unbelief he knows that it is right to doubt and question. Being entangled in an insoluble conflict of affirmation and doubt he ends the poem with a cry of despair: "O damned vacillating state!"

The one who experienced the conflict agonizingly is Matthew Arnold which is poignantly expressed in *Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse* where he speaks of himself as: "Wandering between two worlds, one dead,/[t]he other powerless to be born,/[w]ith no where yet to lay my head."

Thus the poets were left with an intellectual task much more exacting than any the poets had tackled so far. While previously it was religion that taught men to adjust to the Divine order which ruled the universe, in the 19th century the scientific deity turned out to be far more beneficent than any worshipped religion and rituals. The inevitable moral decline and collapse of spirituality among the masses made Wordsworth exclaim: "The world is poisoned at heart!"

The endeavour to intellectualize the visions of the imaginative life led Arnold, Clough, Fitzgerald and James Thomson into a mood of wistful melancholy that crystallized soon into a more or less pessimistic view of life.⁶

The decade between 1830 and 1840 could be considered the beginning of a new age in English literature and society. The spirit of Romanticism was no more a leading force. A need for rationality is felt in every sphere. The literary phase was neo-classical in its principle. Desire for truth motivated all literary creation. Poetry was deeply affected by the altered socio-economic climate of the times and by the tension between science and religion, by the contradictions and the compromises.

Until late in Victoria's reign there was a desire for cultural synthesis. The poets envisioned a harmony which might bring together the diverse themes into a larger pattern, a meaningful Victorian counterpoint. Thus Tennyson prays in *In Memoriam* on behalf of Victorians of different intellectual persuasion for knowledge scientific and

6 Jagat S. Bright, *op. cit.* pp. 54-55.

religious to bring about greater reverence that mind and soul in harmony produce one single music:

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
But vaster.

Through the poem *Ulysses* Tennyson expresses the spirit of the age: "To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield." At the same time there is the concept of self-surrender writ large in the poems of Newman and Hopkins.

The Spiritual Amplitude

The discerning Victorian, until the 1870s at least, sought some spiritual absolute by which to interpret and control their material progress amidst the perils of change. Their impulse was deeply religious in essence even when they were misunderstood. A great deal of early Victorian poetry had been inspired by religious consciousness. *Lyra Apostolica* of the Tractarians was unalloyed, sacred, ecclesiastical verse under the spell of a spiritual mission. It was the most popular books of religious poetry published in the century. Poets such as John Keble, John Mason Neale and Stephen Hawker belong to this group. The association of beauty with religious devotion which the Oxford Movement brought about helped in liberating art from the Benthamite philosophy of utility. Poets of the Catholic revival such as Hopkins, Hawker, De Vere, Patmore, Alice Meynell, Francis Thompson, Lionel Johnson and Dawson manifest a common concern with the deeper realities of life. These poets gave to the nation religious poetry of unwavering faith in God.

Newman's poem *The Two Worlds* illustrates the bewildering juxtaposition between this world of earthly cravings and the one for which the soul is created:

This gaudy world pales before
The beauty of Thy face.⁷

The poet already having discovered that Home by faith is enlightened on the nature of this world:

Its noble toils are then the scourge
Which made Thy blood to flow;
Its joys are but the treacherous thorns
Which circled round Thy Brow.

⁷ Elizabeth Ann Noel, *op. cit.*, *An Edition of Poems*, Diss. p. 209.

Then with a mystic's insight the poet confessed to the Lord:

And thus when we renounce for Thee
Its restless aims and fears,
The tender memories of the past,
The hopes of coming years,
Poor is our sacrifice, whose eyes
Are lighted from above;
We offer what we cannot keep,
What we have ceased to love.

The Dream of Gerontius, the master piece of Newman's work in poetry is applauded by the Victorians as '...one of the noblest in the language.'⁸ The poem is in fact the vindication of all those lives lived in faithfulness to the inner voice that speaks deep within. The poet's passionate concern is that we apprehend the existence of the Invisible world, timeless and immaterial which lies unseen about us now and will be revealed after death. In over 911 lines with mystical intuition, transcendent vision and psychologically penetrating insight the poet depicts the experiences of a soul at the moment of its death, the initial experiences of the after life. Gladstone derived comfort from the poem on his deathbed, having written of it in 1868 that it is: '... the most remarkable production. .. since the unapproachable *Paradise* of Dante.'⁹

Apart from this in a large part of early Victorian poetry there was no sharp demarcation between religious inspiration and secular. Religious consciousness permeated numerous poems dealing with non-religious themes such as sexual love, social relations, and philosophical speculations. Patmore finds in conjugal love a religious creed. Religious element is conspicuous in Aurora Leigh's gospel of social work. Poets like Ebenezer Elliot and Capel Lofft are ardent Christians though fiercely anti-clerical. The essence of the idea of progress as presented in Browning's *Paracelsus* and Bell Scott's *The Year of the World is Christian*.

The doctrine of Carlyle, the sentimental art of Dickens, the religious renewal of Oxford, the aesthetic and social crusade of Ruskin were in psychological affinity with the most profound spiritual trends which had produced the works of Wordsworth and Shelley. Two great Victorians who expressed philosophical sympathies and sensibilities with the Romantics were John Henry Newman and John Ruskin. Some Romantic elements persisted in popular literature and in the social atmosphere and gave free vent to their feelings in art including poetry and fiction. Yet reticence became part of the Victorian ethic.

Once the initial challenges were over, poetry settled down to a long process of easy adaptation which lasted up to the 1890s with out any new intellectual upheavals of

8 Aubrey de Vere, *Autographs, Letters and Sources*, Birmingham Oratory, VC 75, 2 Jan.1868, p. 14.

9 Ian Kerr and Thomas Gornall, (ed.), *Letters and Dairies of John Henry Newman*, Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 24.

the first order to stimulate the poets to higher things. The 17th century thought and feelings were poetically fused by means of pregnant symbols and sublimated wit but the Victorians dramatized the thought and brought out its emotional intensity. Even if they have not added greatly to the store of world knowledge, they definitely have added to our spiritual wealth.

The Victorian era resembled the Elizabethan age in its many-sided concerns with manners, morals, conduct-books, pamphlets, plays, sermons and poems as it explored the problems in an expanding economy. Both these periods brought to the present a deep sense of the national past based upon high scholarship and eager research. Instead of sinking beneath the weight of its 'moral' their art followed new experience beyond the horizons of thought. Many Victorians captured the almost Elizabethan exuberance that led Hurrell Froude to exclaim on the launching of the Oxford Movement, in 1833, that it was fun to live in such times as theirs. Carlyle's passionate prose bears tireless emotional energy. Like the Elizabethans, the high Victorians valued a manifold competence. Ruskin like Bacon took all knowledge to be his province, left his mark on many. So there is some truth in John Addington Symonds conclusion: '... the English Renaissance of the 16th century became renescent in the 19th.' Along with its buoyancy and promise the Victorian period had in it elements of 'world fatigue,' which were quiet alien to the Elizabethan temper.

The desperate unbelief in Arnold's writings arose from Victorian cultural traditions, a sad contemplation of withering faith and an unprecedented fear of encroaching materialism. The paralysis of doubt that gripped Arnold's generation is far removed from the 'divided aims of a disillusioned Hamlet.' These cross currents of Victorian assent and denial are not Elizabethan in source or direction. The tensions arising from the rapidly changing society battled against complete spontaneity and singleness of purpose. At the same time there was also a self-consciousness that is 'the strange disease of modern life' and the genesis of analytic science.

Newman, who combined in himself both the embodiment and the contradiction of the spirit of the age, was the philosopher and interpreter of the Christian renaissance of the century as a staunch champion of religion. His poem *Lead Kindly Light* was a sure guide not only to the Victorians lost in a spiritual wilderness but also to all those who regardless of caste and creed differences set high value on spiritual guidance. Thus, Mahatma Gandhi living in an entirely different milieu at a later time, experienced the spiritual power inherent in the poem and wrote to a correspondent who found it hard to believe in God to make Newman's poem his prayer.¹⁰

Newman is the philosopher and interpreter also of the spiritual renaissance. Men like Newman and Coventry Patmore who would have been mystics in any case were driven to be staunch religious champions in the midst of a society which struggled

10 *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol.37, New Delhi, The Publication Division Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1970, pp. 347-350.

between the old spiritual theory and the new scientific, materialistic and rationalistic theories. Poets of such discernment and mystic insights were successful in bringing about the needed stability to the Victorians. Thus "Newman's heroic refusal to fall in line with the Victorian intellectuals at the cost of his Christian spiritual vision would definitely place him at par with the uncompromising spiritual geniuses of all times. This champion of Christianity would remain as an image of a noble soul clothed in moral and spiritual grandeur and as a symbol of the triumph of soul over materialistic, hedonistic and fleshly urges of human life on its journey towards the Divine.

Conclusion

A considerable portion of the poetry of the Victorian era illustrates the consequences of the revolutionizing industrialization and the revolutionary scientific discoveries, the unprecedented march of the mind and progress on the Victorians as a whole regardless of the fact that they were the literary giants of the age or the average individual on the street. It is true that the age with its 'sick hurry' and 'divided aims' left a disillusioned Arnold forlorn and the age was powerless to produce poets like Goethe or Keats, yet what one finds is an underlying quest for 'something deeper and truer' than what gratified the previous century. From this point of view also Newman, Hopkins and other religious poets of Victorian age have continued relevance even in this age of postmodern fragmentary hyper realities.

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