



*Journal of Advances and
Scholarly Researches in
Allied Education*

*Vol. IV, Issue VII, July-2012,
ISSN 2230-7540*

REVIEW ARTICLE

ELEGIAC NOTES AS THE MOST STRIKING FEATURE OF ARNOLD'S POETRY

Elegiac Notes as The Most Striking Feature of Arnold's Poetry

Jyoti Malik

Research Scholar, (Ph.D Education) CMJ University, India

OVERVIEW

The agnostic intellectual Arnold could never fully go through the poetic inspiration of the Romantics like Wordsworth and Keats, many of whose sentiments and imagery he echoed. It is romantic melancholia which brought out the best of his artistic power. He was by nature and temperament suited to write elegiac poems and in English literature there is no worthy competitor to him in this particular genre. Extremely sensitive to any kind of loss, personal or general, Arnold had the capacity to express his grief gracefully and poignantly, with sincerity and an adequately restrained passion. The combination of a romantic urge and a classical taste has given Arnold an exceptional superimacy in the field of elegy.

Poetry is an appeal to the reader's imagination, recreating and communicating the deep feelings that the poet has experienced. And, of course, Matthew Arnold's self-analysis is clear-sighted, as his forecast that 'the movement of mind' would bring him readers. His diagnosis of the moral ailments of modern life is sound, but he saw also that his poems lack the tonic effect of true tragic poetry. They are intensely sad, forging new roles for literature in society.

Though his literary criticism is impersonal, Arnold's best poetry is personal. What Arnold says about Clough's poetry in "Thyrsis", is truer still of Arnold's own poetry: "his piping took a troubled sound....", and, again, "his rustic flute learnt a stormy note of men contention test, of men who groan." The subject of Rugby Chapel is his own father, in A Southern Night it is his brother; in Theses and in Westminster Abbey his most intimate friends. But even in these cases of keen personal sorrow, Arnold widens his view and deals with human destiny, almost as much as Gray does in his famous elegy. The same spirit inspires poems which are elegiac in tone and mood but which are not lament for individual men. Indeed, his command of biblical, classical, European and English literature throws a flood of light on the quality of high Victorian culture.

The most striking feature of Arnold's poetry is his elegiac note. We can even say that there is no English poet in whose work the elegiac spirit pervades

to such an extent. Elegy is a "mournful, melancholic, or plaintive poem especially a funeral song or a lament for the dead"¹ (Jess Stein). Poets like Milton, Gray, Shelley and Tennyson have given eloquent expression to their grief in single elegies. But the best known poems in this mode are Shelley's "Adonais" on Keats (1821) and Matthew Arnold's "Thyrsis" on Clough (1867). "Milton and Arnold refer to their poems as 'monodies', not 'elegies'".² No one else returns so frequently to the elegy's form as Arnold. We find in the elegy the outlet of his native melancholy, of his distress over the mournfulness of mortal destiny. It is the natural tone of an agnostic who feels regretful of the beauty, and the lost promise of that faith. Not only has Arnold written a large number of elegiac poems, but they constitute his best poetic work. The spirit of his elegiac poems is that of Gray rather than that of Milton, Shelley and of Tennyson. In other words, Arnold's elegies are charged with a sorrowful spirit, they do not have the triumphant and inspiring ring of Milton's and Shelley's. At the same time, his elegies are much more than poems written merely about individuals. He expresses in his masterpieces, with "sad lucidity" and in flawless verse, the temper of Stoic doubt. He could commemorate in Rugby Chapel his father's radiant faith, but his own mind is better reflected in the Browningesque dramatic poem Empedocles on Etna, in the noble elegies The Scholar Gypsy, Thyrsis and in the tragic cry of Dover Beach. In all these classics, the real subject is the painful conditions of modern life, its feverishness, its sick hurry, and its divided aims. The same is the case with the Obermann poems, the Stanzas from The Grande Chartreuse, Heine's Grave, and Memorial Verses. In all these poems, there is the same dignity of expression and the same sad but calm tone. They are the expression of a spirit almost crushed under the burden of life. Arnold rebukes the materialistic spirit and makes a plea for gentleness and quiet as against bustling energy and "trenchant force". He is attracted to the monastic life, and he even tries momentarily for shelter in the cloister:

"Oh, hide me in your gloom profound,

Ye solemn seat of holy pain!

Take me, cowl'd forms, and fence me round,

Till I possess my soul again."

Thyrsis is a pastoral monody written on the death of Arnold's intimate friend Arthur Hugh Clough in Florence. At Oxford (1845-48), they became good friends and roamed about the Oxford countryside together. Here they sought truth together, and both started to write their poems. Arnold appreciated Clough's sincerity but he didn't approve of his conception of the function of poetry. As Clough left Oxford, he could not produce anything very brilliant in literary field. And he breathed his last in 1861; leaving the question unanswered if he had actually been a failure. Though their friendship dimmed after Clough's departure, there remained an affectionate strain between the two. Arnold took five years to write down an elegy on his dead friend. However, it remains a debated question whether Clough is really the main subject of his poem because Arnold laments his Oxford days and vanished youth more than his friend.

Presented as an immortal wanderer, Thyrsis is a spirit of the 'countryside'. He was an Oxford scholar but "tired of knocking at preferment's door". He left the place to roam around the world with gypsies and to learn their "lore". This "lore" represents nay kind of divine or natural lore which cannot be learnt from books. He appears to draw some sort of comfort from the contact with nature. The calm is effectively contrasted with the noise of human life. It is an intuitive study of nature. What provoked the presentation of this wanderer was perhaps the underlying thought that "the living world was fit only to be shunned, that modern life was in itself a 'strange disease' which would infect the free spirit with doubt and despair."³

In fact, Thyrsis is considered as a companion piece to The Scholar Gypsy. It is an elegy in the pastoral convention. In a pastoral elegy, "The poet and his subjects are spoken of as shepherds or goatherds, and the setting is the classical pastoral world".⁴ Nature is also the background of the simple joys and sorrows of the Shepherds. The shepherds, the field, the pipe and all other paraphernalia are creations of the poet's fancy. They are often symbolic, standing for someone else or something else. In Thyrsis, the pasture is the university countryside, the shepherds are Arnold and Clough, the flock their common pursuits, and the shepherd pipes their poetic gifts. Corydon that is Arnold laments the death of Thyrsis. He also strikes a personal note in this poem.

Arnold believes that poetry, while being an art, must be a criticism of life. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Arnold has not taken kindly to the Victorian life, which is often extolled as the golden age of prosperity, science and democracy. He is also very sensitive to the conflicts which existed in the Victorian England: the conflict between faith and doubt, emotion and reason, tradition and innovation. He finds his contemporaries to be in the darkling plane constantly

fighting, but knowing not for what they are fighting and whom they are fighting against. His ideal is Sophocles, "Who saw life steadily and saw it whole." Arnold is an advocate of culture, and not of civilization based upon materialism. He categorically points out that materialism can never lead to truth and spiritualism:

"This does not come with houses or with gold

With place, with honour, and a flattering crew.

Tis not in the world's market bought and sold.
(203-05)

Most Victorian poetry, fiction, philosophy and social criticism explores the painful awareness that while enterprise was bringing the country unprecedented material wealth, in the bleak cities of the workshop of the world, philistinism, poverty, exploitation and economic upheaval were leading to a divided nation. Like Goethe, Arnold has also touched his figure on the malady of the age. Arnold complains that man, in the Victorian age, has lost his moral and ethical values. He has lost his pristine freshness, simplicity and innocence. Truth has been sacrificed at the altar of Materialism. Faith and religion have been replaced by scepticism. The criticism of life is followed by Arnold's message—the message of hope and optimism. Thyrsis is one of those very few poems by Matthew Arnold, where he strikes a note of hope, and not of despair:

"Despair I will not, while I yet descry

'Neath the soft canopy of English air

That lonely tree against the, western sky,

Still, Still these slopes, tis clear.

Our Gipsy – Scholar haunts outliving thee!" (193-197)

Never caring for material pursuits, the Scholar Gypsy was a persistent seeker of truth. Clough and Arnold are also seekers of truth. Truth alone sustained them spiritually. Clough who was also sick of materialism and scepticism like Arnold eventually left the world and alienated himself from the rest of the world in search of the truth:

"Yet hadst thou always visions of our light

And long with men of care thou couldst not stay,

And soon thy foot resumed its wandering way.

Let human haunt, and on alone till night." (227-230)

Through Thyrsis Arnold gives an account of the circumstances that crushed the spirit of Clough, and

led to his departure from the fresh and simple joys of Oxford. He found mankind in a vale of tears, haunted by doubts, despair, incertitude and perplexed questionings. As his source of joy dried up, Clough could no longer write poetry, and his subsequent poetry was marked by doubt and despair. This strain for him was unbearable. He left Oxford and eventually he died. Arnold compares and contrasts Clough and a cuckoo. The only difference between the two is that as soon as the spring is over the cuckoo leaves England for a southern country, only to come back at the advent of the spring. But Clough will not come again, to write a new kind of poetry, one of a smoother strain that will compel the world to listen. To Arnold, the natural death of *Thyrsis* i.e. Clough is an irreparable loss:

"My pipe is lost, my shepherd's – holiday!

Needs must I lose them, needs with heavy heart

Into the world and wave of men depart

But *Thyrsis* of his own will went away." (37-40)

For Arnold the death of Clough was really a kind of suicide and he said: "*Thyrsis* of his own will went away." Again Arnold says, "Hear it, O *Thyrsis* still our tree is there! ..." he finds that his friend cannot hear it and that his death in Florence is a second symbolic desertion of the *Cummor* field:

"Ah! Vain! These English fields, this upland dim,

That lone, sky-pointing tree, are not for him.

These brambles pale with mist engarlanded

To a boon southern country he is fled." (171-174)

Though the poet is left alone on the darkling plain, he wishes not only to relive past unthinking, but to renew the theme of the Scholar's search which he had left at an unsatisfactory point in *Scholar Gipsy*. Nature, however loved, is at best a congenial setting for this quest: the Scholar's light will not be found, in Wordsworthian fashion, in and through nature. What is more, Arnold draws consolation and comfort from his contact with nature. The 'signal-elm' on the lovely ridge is less mystical. Nature has symbolized the search for truth:

"...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." (238-40)

The ending of the poem is a serious reversal of the poem's direction. The poet finally achieves consolation

through his belief in the immortality of soul and the belief that his friend's voice will come to soothe him: "Let in thy voice a whisper often come/ To chase fatigue and fear" (235-236).

In *The Scholar Gipsy* the issue of the quest may remain in doubt; but the quest itself takes on a real and immediate symbolic value because the scholar lives his role. In *Thyrsis* the signal-elm has become the agent of our apprehension. Its continued existence betokens the reality of the scholar, whose quest, itself a metaphor for the artist's self-imposed isolation. The whole of the poem, says Culler, is the "product first of the heart and imagination, then of the senses and understanding, and finally, of the imaginative reason."⁴ Thus, as a fusion of his typical tender nostalgia—associated with the natural scenes he most dearly loved—with a mood not of defeatism but of acceptance, *Thyrsis* remains unique in Arnold's poetry.

Arnold's *Rugby Chapel* is an elegy written with a view to commemorate his own father, Dr. Thomas Arnold, the famous headmaster of Rugby, who raised a public school to a very high position in the eyes of the British public. Recognized as one of the greatest modern educational reformers, Dr. Arnold rendered invaluable service to the cause of education in England. In 1857 appeared Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's School Days*, in which the author, an old pupil of Dr. Arnold's, represented him as a prig. The book was favourably reviewed by Fitz James Stephen in *The Edinburgh Review*. Shocked as much at the book as at the review, Arnold sought to vindicate his wrongly-maligned father. Not that the poem was written immediately after Dr. Arnold's death (in 1842), it was written some fifteen years or more afterwards. *Rugby Chapel* is a splendid tribute paid by a son to his father. The poem seems to have been intended as an enlargement of the view that the poet had, already in 1855, expressed about his father in a letter to his mother. In the letter he had written: "This is just what makes him great, that he was not only a good man saving his own soul by righteousness, but that he carried so many others with him, and saved them, if they would let him, along with himself". This idea was reinforced when Arnold read the novel *Tom Brown's School-Days*.

Written by Arnold primarily as a tribute to his father, *Rugby Chapel* is a noble eulogy of a father written by his son. Arnold compares his father to a mighty oak that had provided shelter to him and to others against sunshine and rain. Indeed, the principal quality of Dr. Thomas Arnold, singled out by the poet, is the great headmaster's helpfulness to others. Dr. Arnold's work upon the earth, according to the poet, was to revive and succour those who wavered between vice and virtue. Dr. Arnold did not believe in conquering alone and reaching his goal alone. He used to beckon the trembler, and give his hand to the weary. What

Arnold tries to inculcate is that it will not do to be righteous oneself, one must be prepared to help others as well as in their moral predicaments. In his testament, *Culture and Anarchy*, Matthew Arnold has written in a similar vein: "The individual is required, under pain of being stunted and enfeebled in his own development if he disobeys, to carry others along with him in his march to perfection..." Dr. Thomas Arnold is depicted in the poem as a person who tried to carry others along with him in his onward march.

Arnold tends to make wider the scope of his elegies by giving us his comments not only on the individuals whose death he laments but also on the state of affairs prevailing in his times. Dissatisfied with society as he was, these comments are invariably adverse. In *Rugby Chapel*, Arnold describes the purposeless survival of most people who strive blindly, achieve nothing, and pass away unnoticed.

He expresses a low opinion about the race of men whom he calls "so soulless, so poor". The mainstream of people, according to him, blusters or cringe, and they make life "hideous, and arid, and vile". The people, he goes on to say, have no unity of purpose and are weak-minded:

"Sore thirst plagues them; the rocks,

Rising all rounds, overawe;

Factions divide them; their host

Threatens to break, to dissolve." (178-181)

The poem displays Arnold's vague belief in God and immortality: As is well-known, Arnold became a sceptic or an agnostic under the influence of the scientific ideas of the time. His loss of religious faith made him very forlorn. But here and there in his poems he still expresses a vague belief in immortality and in the existence of God. For instance, in this poem he refers to his father's soul as continuing to exert itself in some noble cause in some distant, shining region. His father's soul, says Arnold, now lives in God:

"Yes, in some far-shining sphere,

Conscious or not of the past,

Still thou performest the word

Of the spirit in whom thou dost live—" (44-47)

Of these, the two lines might have been written by an orthodox Christian. Arnold reiterates this faith in God later in the poem when he describes the noble-minded and heroic persons as servants or sons of God who know their "Father's innermost mind". Referring to God, Arnold says that He "unwillingly sees/one of his little ones lost". Again, he compares these noble-minded persons to angels who "appear radiant with ardour divine", and who try to lead mankind to the "City

of God". Thus religious faith of a sort persisted in Arnold to some extent and reasserted itself on occasions.

There are plenty of moral elements in the poem. In fact, the poem seems to have been prompted as much by a didactic intention as by a desire to pay a tribute to Dr. Thomas Arnold. The lines in which the poet admires his father for the work he did on the earth are clearly moralizing. Dr. Arnold, we are told, rescued those who wavered between vice and virtue. He beckoned the trembler, and gave to the weary, his hand. Arnold's object obviously is to inspire his readers with a similar ideal of service to society. Similarly, the concluding forty lines or so are didactic in character. In these lines the poet admires the spiritual leaders of mankind who show the right path to human beings and at whose words courage and order return to the stragglers and the downhearted persons. These spiritual leaders are compared to angels who are radiant with a divine ardour. They are beacons of hope. Addressing them, the poet says:

Langour is not in your heart

Weakness is not in your word,

Weariness is not on your brow.

Ye alight in our van! At your voice,

Panic, despair, flee away. (193-197)

In fact the whole value of this poem is moral and ethical. The poem may be treated as an excellent guide to conduct. It unfolds and urges a great humanitarian ideal. This is not one of those poems which possess an aesthetic quality and which give keen pleasure to the reader. It is a eulogy of a great man and it aims at spreading that great man's message and gospel. Nevertheless, from the ethical viewpoint, it is a noble poem and ranks with such works as Wordsworth's *Ode to Duty*.

Arnold is very effusive and even sentimental in his poetry. Through *Thyrsis*, Arnold pays tribute to his friend Clough, and in the same manner he pays glowing tribute to his father, Dr. Thomas Arnold, passionately in his poem *Rugby Chapel* which is strikingly meditative in spirit. The poet does not mourn the death of his father. He simply mourns the suffering and the misery, the weakness and weariness of mankind, that has been led astray, and whom his father, like God's good angel, has come to rescue. He glorifies his father and does not shed tears over his death. Although Arnold does not shed tears on his father's death but his heart is filled with a void and once again he feels alienated or unfocused himself from the world. It is so because his father was his teacher who gave him the moral values to continue his life. In *Rugby Chapel* Arnold speaks of three types of people:

- (i) those who are completely devoid of ideals;
- (ii) those who have an urge for idealism, but do not have the strength and tenacity to pursue their ideals; and
- (iii) Those who lead virtuous and help others to march along the right track and attain the spiritual goal.

The majority of people in the world have no ideals. The few idealists, who lead a life of holiness and righteousness, think of their own salvation, and want to arrive alone in the City of God as that of Marguerite in The Forsaken Merman. For that kind of people God never feels sympathy rather he demands the compassion for suffering humanity.

Therefore Rugby Chapel is not a mere elegy mourning the death of an individual. It is not a mere tribute to his father, but a tribute to all the noble sons of God, who help the weak and the frail in their spiritual adventure. It is a profound meditation on life. What Arnold mourns is the lack of idealism and moral endeavours. Rugby Chapel is Arnold's criticism of life. Although Arnold is trying to show the nobility of his father through this poem, he cannot escape from presenting the bleakness which prevails his life. Through the description of nature, he presents the desolation of his own spirit. Autumn is again here representing the sad milieu which is spreading throughout the world. Arnold says, "the dark and yellow drifts of autumn, the fading light", and the silence all around heightens the solemn atmosphere of the poem. The gathering darkness and the cold provide a suitable background for the melancholy mood of the poem. The spirit of the poem is summed up in the words:

"Coldly, sadly, descends

The Autumn evening." (1-2)

Besides the seriousness in the tone of the poem, there appears the feeling of grief and desolation. It is said that Arnold loves Nature in her quieter and more subdued moods, and prefers her silences to her many voices. In Rugby Chapel he speaks of the whirl in an eddy of purposeless dust, the snow, the storm, sleet, avalanches, rugged precipices and deep hidden gorges, which may devour the humanity.

What we may conclude is that Arnold seems to show a universe deprived of illusions and of light in his poetry.

REFERENCES:

1. Jess Stein, ed. The Random House Dictionary of the English Language (1966, rpt. Bombay: Tulsi Shah Enterprise, 1970), 461.

2. Peter Childs, The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms (1973; rpt., Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, London and New York; 2008), 67.
3. Henry Charles Duffin, "The Man and the Poetry" Arnold the Poet Oxford Univ. Press, 1962), 27.
4. Karl Backson and Arthur Ganz, Literary Terms: A Dictionary (1960; rpt., Vishal Publishers, Punjab University Enclave, Sec – 14, Chandigarh; 2009), 71.
5. A Dwight Culler, "The Use of Elegy"; Imaginative Reason: The Poetry of Matthew Arnold (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1967).