

## Review Article

# Arnold's Diagnosis of the Moral Ailments of Modern Life

Dinesh

Research Scholar, CMJ, University Shillong, Meghalaya

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### OVERVIEW

Matthew Arnold has his unique, distinguished place in Victorian literature and social life. He reflects in his life as well as in his works his excessive regard for discipline and sobriety in taste and his cultured melancholy. Passion is a thing wanting in his writing, and that explains lack of enthusiasm about Arnold the creator. But his diagnosis of the moral ailments and his intellectual pessimism have had their influence on modern literature.

How is a full and enjoyable life to be resided in a modern industrial society? This is the frequent topic in the poetry and prose of Matthew Arnold (1822-1888). In his poetry the question itself is raised; and in his prose some answers are attempted. What has often been pointed out, and rightly too, that Arnold was, in the words of Ronald Carter and John MacRae, "an acutely aware social observer...His poems, from 1849, show a concern with solitude and doubt..."<sup>1</sup> He had "a restlessness in belief, as if he were perpetually crying over spiritual spilt milk".<sup>2</sup> "The misapprehensiveness of his age is exactly what a poet is sent to remedy,"<sup>3</sup> wrote Robert Browning, and yet the statement seems more applicable to Arnold's work, not Browning's. Arnold may be said have "voiced the victory of doubt over faith".<sup>4</sup> He is "an individual mixture of 18<sup>th</sup> century rationality, Romantic idealism, Victorian skepticism and modern existentialism..."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, in response to rapid and potentially dislocating social changes, Arnold makes every effort to help his contemporaries achieve a richer intellectual and emotional existence.

When Arnold appeared on the literary scene, the enslavement to machinery and the vulgarized middle classes with their newly acquired prosperity posed a great threat to the stability of the society as a whole. Inspired by indignation and pity, John Ruskin attacked the nation for

depressing art, literature, and the right values of life. The nation, he proclaimed, had become incapable of thought in its insanity of materialism. Matthew Arnold did not like the mid-nineteenth century scene. Though England had advanced by leaps and bounds industrially, on the moral front there was much left to be desired. Morally the nation was found wanting; in terms of culture, the aristocrats were mere barbarians, the middle-class mere 'philistines,' and as for the common populace the less said about them, the better. The English nation was provincial and uncivilized, lacking in the basic foundations of culture. All these views find powerful expression in the concluding lines of his famous poem, *Dover Beach*. Moreover, Arnold felt that it was his duty to awaken the nation from the stupor into which it had fallen; that he must create a climate for the creative artist to function properly, and the people must be brought to an awareness of the best that is written and thought.

There is no doubt in the fact that Arnold's poetry is mainly critical of life. In all his deepest poems, in *Thyrsis*, *Resignation*, *A Southern Night*, Arnold presents the restless energy of his time. Arnold was extremely sensitive to the ideas of his age. The glorification of England as visible in the Great Exhibition in 1851 had no appeal to him. The luminous world around him was a waste land, sprawling in all its hideousness. It was, according to T.S. Eliot, an 'unreal city'; and 'a city of dreadful night', for Thomson. To Arnold, every man was crippled and incomplete, groping in the darkness of night, crying for light. That is why his poetry is a plangent threnody.

The dictatorship of materialism and arid intellect had no charm for Arnold. He found, like his Empedocles, that men were nothing but 'naked, eternal, restless mind'. The

welcoming faith of Tennyson and the robust optimism of Browning were, in a sense, creeds of dogmatism. Arnold had neither genial faith nor optimism. During his time, England, for him, was 'a darkling plain' as he said in *Dover Beach*. Arnold was deeply distressed to make a note of the loss of faith in the then present-day England. The traditional values were fast disappearing. As he wrote in *Self Dependence*:

Resolve to be thyself, and know that he

What finds himself loses him misery.

However, he could not resolve his doubts and moral self-questionings. The superficial optimism and moral self-complacency of his contemporaries could not buoy him up. His bleeding heart is laid bare to his sister:

"To make a habitual war on depression and low spirits, which in one's early youth one is apt to indulge and be somewhat interested in, is one of the things one learns as one gets older. They are noxious alike to body and mind, and already partake of the nature of death".<sup>6</sup>

Arnold did not share Shelley's optimistic belief that the regeneration of mankind was not far behind, "If winter comes, can spring be far behind"? Nor did he share Bacon's assurance that man was slowly but steadily gaining authority over Matter and Nature. Man cannot be free from sick fatigue and languid doubt, which are the legacy of materialism. Arnold seems to be an anachronism in his age. He could not rejoice at the material prosperity and industrial expansion during his times. When everyone else was buoyed up with optimism, Arnold was writing elegies. His poetry is a vehement protest against Romanticism, which was thus the rage of the day. Notwithstanding this, there is a strain of ambivalence in Arnold's poetry. Classicism and Romanticism are found in equal proportions. As Douglas Bush Says,

"Arnold may be described as a mixture of Hardy and Keats. His romantic instincts, his desire for feeling, though half suppressed, break through the austere or prosaic surface and flower in images from nature and the simple worlds of classical and Biblical antiquity..."<sup>7</sup>

The stanzas of "The Scholar Gypsy" (1853), for instance—bathed in a deep familiarity with the changing patterns of the rural scene, from the "frail-leafed, white anemone" and "dark bluebells drenched with dews" of May to the "scarlet poppies" and "pale pink convolvulus" of August—record with sensuous care the distinct seasons of the English countryside and Arnold's nostalgic memories of the walks of his Oxford days. Imagined in an Oxfordshire landscape recreated with Keatsian sensuousness, the poem depicts

a seventeenth-century free spirit, a timeless representative of 'glad perennial youth'. Introspective, dedicative, natural, he is the image of the unstrained well-being that Victorian society could only infect:

O born in days when wits were fresh and clear

And life can gaily as the sparkling Thames;

Before this strange disease of modern life,

With its sick hurry, its divide aims,

Its heads o'ertax'd, its palsied hearts, was rife—

Fly hence, our contact fear!

Still fly, plunge deeper in the bowering wood!

Averse, as Dido did with gesture stern

From her false friend's approach in Hades turn,

Wave us away, and keep thy solitude!

But, in the end, this is the solitude of escapism. The closing allusion to Virgil's *Dido* suggests that life cannot be spent in self-indulgent reverie. And for modern man, commitment must take the place of nostalgia and yearning after will-o'-the-wisps.

Arnold's own judgment on the qualities of his poetry is interesting. In an 1869 letter to his mother, he writes:

My poems represent, on the whole, the main movement of mind of the last quarter of a century, and thus they will probably have their day as people become conscious to themselves of what that movement of mind is, and interested in the literary productions which reflect it. It might be fairly urged that I have less poetical sentiment than Tennyson, and less intellectual vigor and abundance than Browning; yet, because I have perhaps more of a fusion of the two than either of them, and have more regularly applied that fusion to the main line of modern development, I am likely enough to have my turn, as they have had theirs.<sup>8</sup>

The emphasis in the letter on "movement of mind" suggests that Arnold's poetry and prose should be studied together. Such an approach can be fruitful, provided that it does not obscure the important difference between Arnold the poet and Arnold the critic. T.S. Eliot once said of his own writings that "in one's prose reflections one may be legitimately occupied with ideals, whereas in the writing of verse, one can deal only with actuality." Arnold's writings offer a nice authentication of Eliot's seeming

paradox. As a poet, he usually records his own experiences, his own feelings of loneliness and isolation as a lover, his longing for serenity that he cannot find, his melancholy sense of the passing of youth. More than for many men, Arnold's thirtieth birthday was an awe-inspiring landmark after which he felt, he said, "three parts iced over." Above all he records his despair in a universe in which humanity's role seemed an incompatible as it was later to seem to Thomas Hardy. In the memorable lines of his "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse" (1855), he describes himself as:

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,

The other powerless to be born.

And addressing the representatives of faith that appears to him dead, he cries:

Take me, cowed forms, and fence me round,

Till I possess my soul again.

As a poet, then, like T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden, Arnold provides a record of a troubled individual in a troubled society. This was "actuality" as he experienced it—an actuality, like Eliot's and Auden's, representative of his era. As a prose writer, a formulator of "ideals," he looks for a different role—to be what Auden calls the "healer" of a diseased society, or as he himself called Goethe, the "Physician of the iron age." And in this difference, we have a clue to answering the question of why Arnold virtually abandoned the writing of poetry to move into criticism. His dissatisfaction with the kind of poetry he was writing was one of the reasons.

Coming to what shaped the course of his poetry, we see that intellectualism and classicism are inextricably intertwined in Arnold's poetry. Without being swayed away by the beauty of the separate parts, he insisted upon the vital importance of regarding the whole. In fact, he was championing the cause of Hellenism as well as intellectualism. He had a never-ending quest for simple and pure style but weighed with thought. It is this thoughtfulness that distinguished Arnold from the traditional Romantic poets. He thought seriously about the problems that faced the Victorians. Materialism was welcomed by everyone. Arnold, however, struck a discordant note and felt that without criticism and culture no real civilization would be possible. He felt that civilization, which in the actual sense of the word is an advancing culture, was then fast declining. This view is injected largely in quite a few of his major poems. Goethe once said about Arnold; "Whenever he thinks, he becomes a child", i.e. thoughtfulness was not his strong point. It is just the other way round with Arnold, who was

deeply meditative and speculated on the problems of life. Goethe further commented that Arnold is not one of those who sing because they must. In fact, he is not one of those who have to sing, rather one of those who have something to sing. Often he is more like one who has thought out first and then set himself deliberately to give them a practical form, than one to whom verse is the most natural vehicle of expression.

Generally many expressions are found in Arnold's poetry, but one which is found in abundance in his poetry is the elegiac note. Arnold is regarded as the supreme master of the elegiac note in poetry. There is a deep melancholy in his verse. His poems are full of lament and mourning. He wrote various types of elegies—personal, encomiastic, commemorative, and pastoral. He weeps for the loss of several personalities—Senancour, Wordsworth, Charlotte Bronte, Clough, on his brother and father. Most of the subjects of his elegies were public figures representing certain intellectual and moral tendencies of the age. *Balder Dead* is essentially an elegy drawn out in epic proportions. *Sohrab and Rostum*, initially is an elegy for the lost youth. *The Sick King in Bokhara* is a twofold elegy both for the kind who becomes well, and for the Mullah who is redeemed through punishment and understanding. *Tristram and Iseult* is another double elegy. *Empedocles on Etna* is as well an elegy. All of Arnold's love poems may be taken together, regarding as constituting one large elegy in which women dies as *Marguerite* and is reborn as *Mrs. Arnold*. Thus, even apart from the elegies proper, the bulk of Arnold's poetry is characterized by an elegiac temper.

The fact is that the advancement of scientific knowledge shook the religious faith of many people in the Victorian Age, and Arnold himself could not escape this calamity. The loss of all positive faith came as a momentous experience to him as to many of his generation, and hopelessly wiped out all his joy of life. It is this spiritual isolation which saddens his poems. On the other hand, Arnold got troubled by doubts and skepticism throughout. Of course, Arnold was a sworn enemy of the materialism of his age. What Arnold saw all around him is that people worship the God of wealth and machinery to the exclusion of higher things. This too troubled him a great deal. As a result, the mood of "plaintive reflection" is to be found in the bulk of his poetry. Even in the elegies proper he not only concentrates upon the sufferings of the individual, but widens his view to human life in general.

Arnold's poetic work is the most complete expression of one great phase of nineteenth century thought. Arnold attacked the majority of prevailing religious dogmas, though that does not make him non-religious. He disbelieved in the divinity of Christ and doubted

immortality, and he defined God as a stream of tendency, not we, which makes for righteousness. His intellect separated him widely from the Catholic Church, but he was never unsympathetic towards it. On the contrary, his sympathy for it is one of the most significant features of his poetry. Even in the poems which express his theological disbelief, there is a tone of sadness indicating that he would have liked to believe if he could. In "Dover Beach" the poet hears the "melancholy long with drawing roar" of the sea of faith. This attitude towards religion is most characteristic of him. He did not believe in dogma; but he felt a heartbreaking regret at his inability to believe in the common faith. He had a negative attitude towards dogma, but although he had no creed, he felt sorry over the decline of religion.

Arnold could look back at the French Revolution and its effects in a spirit of criticism. It had shattered the old world, and had felt only confusion. The new world which must arise from the ruins of the old was nowhere in sight. He therefore regarded himself as:

"Standing between two world, one dead.

The other powerless to be born"

Arnold found that there was no force capable of reconstructing society. The age that had just passed had brought about destruction but was powerless to create. It had proved to be "Europe's dying hour of fitful dream and feverish power." Arnold was attracted towards Senancour (the author of *Obermann*) because Senancour too had felt the vastness of the change. Persons holding such opinion must inevitably be melancholy and Arnold the poet is habitually melancholy. In this respect, his poetry is to be contrasted with his prose which is characterized by a charming gaiety and playfulness.

While presenting the reflection of melancholy, sadness, and isolation in his poems, Arnold uses the objects of nature. He loved Nature in her quieter and more subdued moods; i.e. preferred her silences to her voices, moonlight to sunlight, the sea retreating from the "Moon-blanch'd land" with "its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" to the sea in tumult and storm. The sea—"the unplumb'd salt, estranging sea"—was, for him, the one element in which he discovered the deepest reflection of his own melancholy and sense of isolation. Above all, what he worshipped in nature was her steadfastness and calm, ever teaching the lesson of self dependence.

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