

Self-Illumination in the Poetry of Matthew Arnold

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Abstract

Matthew Arnold is the most complete expression of one great phase of nineteenth century thought. His poems describe simply and gracefully his constant struggle to achieve stability to make his romanticism submit to realism, his unruly longings to his sense of things as they unalterably are. Lionel Trilling referred to the constant success Arnold had with the theme of control and self-pity. The modes of loss and regret, melancholy and endurance, find their expression in most of his representative poems. The present article, pregnant with the ideas of illumination based on the study of the Bhagwati, unveils and unmask the concept and theory of self-illumination in the protagonists of Arnold who are self-motivated, selflessly motivating and illuminating and guiding the wandering humanity in particular as lord star or pole star does to the wandering ships in the ocean in general.

Keywords: *elegy, Bhagavad-Gita, mighty Oak, melancholy, God.*

Reference to this paper should
be made as follows:

Capt. Dr Satendra Kumar,

*Self-Illumination in the
Poetry of Matthew Arnold*

Notions 2019,
Vol. X, No. 1,
pp. 1-7,

Article No.01

Online available at :
<http://notions.anubooks.com/>

Introduction

Matthew Arnold is the most complete expression of one great phase of nineteenth century thought. His poems describe simply and gracefully his constant struggle to achieve stability to make his romanticism submit to realism, his unruly longings to his sense of things as they unalterably are. Lionel Trilling referred to the constant success Arnold had with the theme of control and self-pity. The modes of loss and regret, melancholy and endurance, find their expression in most of his representative poems.

Naturally, he had always been in search of joy, the grounds of which were true to life, true to Nature and true to human beings. He was in search of spiritual peace. It was, therefore, natural that he developed deep interest in Indian scriptures, particularly in the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Like Arjuna the protagonists of his poems are in a fix what to do or not but figures like Thomas Arnold, his father, appear on the scene for the illumination to the wandering souls and lead them to the city of God.

In Arnold's poetry the inhabitants are not the ordinary people. They are the persons of values, morals and norms. They are the helpers of society as they are busy in their heroic deeds. Arnold saw these values in his father, Thomas Arnold whom he includes among the inhabitants of the past. He sees his father and other such figures:

... tempered with fire,
Fervent, heroic, and good,
Helpers and friends of mankind.
Servants of God! - or sons
Shall I not call you?

Arnold shows that his father possessed the rare quality of emotional and mental equilibrium, irrespective of adverse situation and never left his path, though beset with unshakable miseries:

If, in the paths of the world,
Stones might have wounded thy feet,
Toil or dejection have tried
Thy spirit, of that we saw
Nothing to us thou wast still
Cheerful, helpful and firm!
Therefore, to thee it was given
Many to save with thyself;

And, at the end of thy day,
O faithful shepherd! to come,
Bringing thy sheep in thy hand.

Arnold's concept of ideal man as illustrated in *Rugby Chapel* and in some other poems, unmistakably recalls to mind the perfect man of the *Bhagavad-Gita* as the harmonious embodiments of all the virtues. An ideal man, according to the *Bhagavad-Gita*, is one who is active as well as thoughtful, who is devoted and at the same time detached and who is illuminated and makes others illuminated. Arnold's father Dr. Thomas Arnold was in his own way a great man. He had extraordinary force of character and strength of will. He was absolutely single minded and selflessly devoted to his duty. Addressing to his father who stands for noble spirit and self illumination and a beacon of hope for the rest spirits he says that

... in such hour of need
Of your fainting, dispirited race,
Ye, like angels, appear,
Radiant with ardor divine.
Beacons of hope, ye appear!
Languor is not in your heart,
Weakness is not in your word,
Weariness not on your brow.
Ye alight in our van! at your voice,
Panic, despair, flee away....
On, to the City of God.

Arnold, like Carlyle and Tennyson, feels that the Victorian age presents a spectacle of wasteland in which helpless human beings are struggling hard to discover a ray of light which may help them to attain goal. He is apprehensive of the future of mankind. Arnold feels that in such an age only an enlightened man of the type of his father with spiritual aspirations, self-illumination, selfless dedication and moral commitment, could salvage the suffering humanity:

Prompt, unwearied, as here!
Still thou upraise with zeal
The humble good from the ground,
Sternly represses the bad.
Still, like a trumpet, dost rouse
Those who with half-open eyes

Tread the border-land dim
'Twixt vice and virtue; reviv'st,
Succourest; - this was thy work,
This was thy life upon earth.

The father of Arnold is delineated as a unique combination of the above modes of life. Arnold portrays his father virtually as a prophet, one of the rare "souls tempered with fire" who inwardly commune with the higher father's innermost mind"; he depicts him with a succession of life-going image - giver of light, "mighty Oak", "faithful shepherd", through the world's rocky wilderness; such men are themselves, fathers to ordinary mankind, included among "The Lord's Messenger".

Arnold finds dutiful Indian sages very near to God. They can attain deliverance by their devotion to God. They also serve mankind without expecting any reward. The inhabitants of the past were engaged in their duties sincerely. They performed their duties without getting in it and unregretful of return and consequences. In his poem "The Lord's Messengers" Arnold gives a clear distinction between ignorant people who perish in the course of life and the enlightened souls who attain salvation. His favorite characters are enlightened souls who perform their duty in accordance with the wishes of God. They are self-illuminated and hence they are able to reach back to the creator:

Hardly, hardly shall one
Come, with countenance bright,
At the close of day, from the plain;
His master's errand well done,
Safe through the smoke of the fight,
Back to his Master again.

Arnold has classified human society in three categories. In the first category Arnold has included those men who do nothing fruitful over this earth. In the second type of men he has included those who want to do something to carve a place for themselves. But they are self-oriented. And after their death they hardly leave anything for being remembered. In the last category he has included the ideal and selfless men. These people are the guides and helpers of mankind. These are the great men of the world and work for the welfare of humanity and illumination for the wandering souls on the globe. All the time they are ready to make any sacrifice for the sake of others. They are patterns of virtue and lead mankind out of chaos. Arnold believes that these great men are deputed by God to help the wavering race of mankind. As a matter of fact, they are the incarnations of God over this earth. People follow their

examples when they are dead. Dr. Thomas Arnold, Clough, Sohrab, Rustum, Obermann, Wordsworth, Goethe, Carlyle and others have been shown by Arnold as embodiments of great virtues and self-illumination.

In *Memorial Verses* (1850), Arnold eulogizes the services of Goethe, Byron and Wordsworth:

We stand today by Wordsworth's tomb,
When Byron's eyes were shut in death,
We bow'd our head and held our breath.
He taught us little; but our soul
Had felt him like the thunder's roll,
With shivering heart, the strife, we saw
Of passion with eternal law;
And yet with reverential awe
We watch'd the fount of fiery life
Which served for that Titanic strife.

Arnold thinks that these great persons draw inspiration from God for the service of mankind. The world without them would have been reduced to a wasteland inhabited by savage and barbarous people. Whatever standards are set by these great souls, others follow them. This alone brings peace and prosperity on this earth:

Ah! since dark days still bring to light
Man's prudence and man's fiery might,
Time may restore us in his course
Goethe's sage mind and Byron's force;
But where will Europe's latter hour
Again, find Wordsworth's healing power?
Others will teach us how to dare,
And against fear our breast to steel;
Others will strengthen us to bear –
But who, ah! who, will make us feel?
The cloud of mortal destiny,
Others will front it fearlessly –
But who, like him, will put it by?

His view of an ideal man seems to have based on the teachings of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. It lays down that in the hour of need God sends his agents to work with the ordinary and common people to salvage them. *The Bhagavad-Gita* in Chapter XIV identifies three types of persons in the world, with well-marked characteristics. In fact, Arnold is infused and impressed with the teachings of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. So infused with the *Karma* philosophy, he foresees a better world in future. This world can be seen in “The Buried Life” (1852):

But often, in the world’s most crowded streets,
But often, in the din of strife
There rises an unspeakable desire
After the knowledge of our buried life;

Characteristically the buried life resembles death. Because death is the end of life, it is a gate to enter into a new life. This is the reason that in spite of loss of faith in society, the poet does not lose his heart but finds a hope in one way or the other. He finds consolation, a heaven of rest and peace in true love. He holds that man has within himself an urge for perfection. He is not alone, but is co-operating with some ultimate force outside himself without being always conscious of it. It is in his soul that he finds God’s image and likeness. The poems of Matthew Arnold demonstrate this fact. As a student of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, and of the works of some eminent thinkers, like Carlyle, he developed a great faith in God. He echoes the *Bhagavad-Gita* when he imagines the soul as a spark of the Divine Light that pervades the universe and is sure to return after death to the eternal source of light; or as a spark of fire destined to return to the eternal flame. God is the inner guide to human being.

Suffice to say *Rugby Chapel* is a meditation on the course of human life. Humanity has been classified on the basis of moral earnestness and spiritual achievement. The description of the way in which the first class of people waste their lives, has a graphic beauty. They live in the moment, taking things as they come, and wholly absorbed in the sheer routine business of life. It provides Arnold’s lapse into self-doubt of the divided Victorian people who had been once with the moral values dear to his dead father. But after the death of his father, he feels sad and isolated because he has lost religious conviction that he can no longer devote his talent to the service of humanity as in the days of his dead father. He craves for his father to be alive in the modern society.

In a nutshell, the present study, pregnant with the ideas of illumination based on the study of the *Bhagwati* , unveils and unmask the concept and theory of self

illumination in the protagonists of Arnold who are self motivated, selflessly motivating and illuminating and guiding the wandering humanity in particular as lord star or pole star does to the wandering ships in the ocean in general. Like Arnold I wish to have the incarnation of such souls like Dr Arnold in the present era of sick hurry and divided aims, when head over taxed and palsied heart to cure and heal our heart.

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