

## NATURE IN THE EARLY POEMS OF MATTHEW ARNOLD

By

OMNIA RIAD GINDY

The "dissolving agencies of the eighteenth century and the fiery storm of the French Revolution"<sup>1</sup> had destroyed, for Arnold, the basis of Europe's spiritual life. To him the grand business of "modern" poetry was to supply anew such a basis, to give a *moral* interpretation, from an independent point of view, of man and the world, and, therefore, it was that for him, as for Epictetus, the "concern how to live" became the best and master thing.<sup>2</sup> This concern lies behind, and accounts for, his seemingly inconsistent dealings with Nature. His attitude remained the same throughout, and it is best reflected in the relevant poems he himself put in the *Selections* of 1877, namely, *Quiet Work*, *Parting*, *Self-Dependence*, *Mortality*, *A Summer Night* and *Lines Written in Kensington Gardens*. These reveal a dualistic frame of mind in which two modes of perception co-exist without coming into conflict with each other. In the first place, he chose to see and represent nature as exempt from the bewildering and benumbing influences to which poor uprooted man was subjected; hence, as a healing power for

"The complaining millions of men  
(who) Darken in labour and pain".

(from *The Youth of Nature*)

In this Arnold was not altogether treading a solitary path. Wordsworth writing in 1800 saw with concern "the increasing accumulation of men in cities".<sup>3</sup> By the 1840's the modern industrial city, the

---

1. M. Arnold's *Poetical Works*, ed. C. B. Tinker & H. F. Lowry, London, O.U.P. 1950. Pp. 498-99, from Arnold's note on Senancour.

2. See Arnold's Preface to his edition of *Poems of Wordsworth* (Macmillan, London, 1947) Pp. xvi-vii.

3. *English Critical Essays : XIX Century*, World's Classics, P. 6.

creation and symbol of the liberal, machine-ridden society, was in full existence. In the new environment the loss of the sense of community, and the pain of doubting attending on the breakdown of traditional ways of thought combined to transform the romantic love of nature into the nostalgia for a lost world of peace and companionship, of quiet minds. As Mr. Houghton puts it, "The image had its basis in memory, for every Victorian in the city had either grown up in the country or in a town small enough for ready contact with the rural environment".<sup>1</sup> The nature poetry of the Victorians and their landscape painting in a sense were meant to counterbalance their loss of fellowship with nature. To Ruskin, architecture was, "as far as may be ... to tell us about Nature, to possess us with memories of her quietness".<sup>2</sup> This attitude was not mere escapism; or if it was, at least, it is escapism based on experience. The countryside was seen as a true spiritual retreat which could rescue men from the infection of urban life — its utilitarianism, its selfishness, its wear and tear on body and soul. Arnold's view of the therapeutic power of nature was delicate, instinctive and never blatantly didactic. In *Lines Written in Kensington Gardens*, a poem reminiscent of Wordsworth's *Reverie of Poor Susan* and Marvell's *The Garden*, amidst "men's impious uproar" and the "city's jar", Arnold perceives that "here is peace for ever new", that the universal values he sometimes deems dead still abide in the "Calm soul of all things", and repose and consolation ensue. He had not as yet been seriously caught up in the toils of the Machine of the Inspectorate, but the intellectual and spiritual atmosphere he matured in, the experience of living at Fox How, his wrecked passion for Marguerite had made him find in the grand still forms of the snowy mountains and in the stars of the firmament, a perpetual source of consolation and an ideal of tranquillity to which "this poor exaggerated sur-excited humanity"<sup>3</sup> could aspire. In the violence of parting with Marguerite, Arnold desires to be lifted up and made one with a great wild energy :

---

1. W. E. Houghton : *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870*. Yale University Press, 1957. Page 80.

2. *Selections from the Writings of John Ruskin* (n. d.) London, George Routledge & Sons. New York, E.P. Dutton & Co. Page 175.

3. Letter to Clough, 23 October 1850, in M. Arnold's *Letters to A. H. Clough*, ed. & introduced by H. F. Lowry, London, O.U.P., 1932. Page 116.

"Ye storm-winds of Autumn !  
Who rush by, ...

.....  
Ah ! with you let me go"

(from *Parting*)

but it is only to go where the deep stillness of the mountains and the icy torrents of Obermann are to soothe him and cure him of his confusion.<sup>1</sup> However, it is in *Quiet Work*, the very title of which epitomises what Arnold held nature to mean to man, that he expresses his views explicitly :

"One lesson. Nature, let me learn of thee,  
One lesson which in every wind is blown,  
One lesson of two duties kept at one  
Though the loud world proclaim their enmity—  
Of toil unsever'd from tranquillity !

.....  
Yes, while on earth a thousand discords ring,  
Man's fitful uproar mingling with his toil,  
Still do thy sleepless minsters move on ..."

The poem stood as the motto to the 1853 Volume of Arnold's poems and in the final arrangement of the collected poems it was the first one in the book. Therefore, "it is clear that (he) regarded it as of primary importance with respect to his poetry and to his philosophy of life".<sup>2</sup>

In that age of "discords" Arnold saw that only in active employment could men hope to retain their equilibrium. In 1848 he tells Clough, "If you mean to do nothing why not emigrate? Shake yourself... For God's sake don't mope, for from that no good can come".<sup>3</sup> Four

---

1. Cf. Letter to Clough Sept. 1849 (op. cit. P. 110). "I carry my aching head to the mountains and to my cousin the Bhunlis Alp."

2. Tinker, C. B., & Lowry, H. F., *The Poetry of Matthew Arnold . A Commentary*, London, O.U.P., 1940. Page 22.

3. Letter to Clough, (*Letters* Page 84) June/July 1848.

months later, he writes, "I desire you should have some occupation—I think it is desirable for everyone, very much so" "for the poor subjective, depth-hunter, Clough." <sup>1</sup> He himself found in the grinding work of the inspectorate a partial relief from the mental and spiritual discomforts he used to experience : "I am sometimes in bad spirits, but generally in better than I used to be". <sup>2</sup> Writing to a friend, he quotes, "Rien ne sauve dans cette vie-ci que l'occupation et le travail."<sup>3</sup> This same quotation with others stressing the need of work occurs several times in his Note-Books. But Arnold was no mere propagandist for the Victorian gospel of work. True, he had experienced in his own mental history the partial wisdom of Carlyle's injunction to close one's Byron and to open one's Goethe and that he had in 1851 to take on the arduous task of inspecting Dissenter's schools spread over a very wide area; but the field in which he chose his living was that of education, where he could be in touch with both the workings of the outside world and of the human mind. He had not betrayed his old desire to see his way to the "firm intelligible law of things and thus to get a basis for a less confused action and a more complete perfection than we have at present" <sup>4</sup>. This is the Apostle of Culture speaking, the one who condemned all mechanical action and mere doing that was divorced from a pursuit of inward perfection. The young poet of 1848 was no less a firm believer in Culture and no more indulgent of blind intense activity, directed to no formative end. What he admired in Nature was precisely its "Quiet Work" : it was quiet because the "firm intelligible law of things" seemed to find its fulfilment therein :

"Still do thy sleepless ministers move on,  
Their glorious tasks in silence perfecting,  
Still working, blaming still our vain turmoil".

(from *Quiet Work*)

- 
1. Letter to Clough (*Letters* Page 88) 12 August, 1848.
  2. Op. Cit. P. 122, 7 March, 1852.
  3. M. Arnold's *Letters*, collected and arranged by G. W. E. Russell, London, Macmillan, 1901. Page 260.
  4. M. Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, London, John Murray, 1949. Page 122.

To Arnold, then, the appearances of nature "could provide a consoling power for man and could stand as a mute criticism of human activity".<sup>1</sup> but in no way did he ever exalt nature at the expense of man. The nature-versus-man situation which Arnold created in his poems was always a temporary hypothesis postulated in order to redirect man to the primary law of his being. There is no essential contradiction between *To an Independent Preacher* and *Morality*, on the one hand, and *Self-Dependence* and *A Summer Night*, on the other. The three last mentioned poems always formed a group whenever they were republished, the order of *Morality* and *Self-Dependence* sometimes being reversed. The poems figure both in the Collected Edition of the poems and in the Selections. They follow from the poet's reflections on man's fate in face of "Progress" and "Revolutions", and in *Self-Dependence*,

"Weary of myself, and sick of asking  
What I am, and what I ought to be",

he returns to address the stars, the "labourers" of *Quiet work*,

"Ye who from my childhood up have calm'd me,  
Calm me, ah, compose me to the end !"

In contemplating the vastness of the heavens Arnold hopes to find release from that sense of constriction implied in the last lines of *Revolutions* :

"One day, thou say'st, there will at last appear  
The word, the order, which God meant should be.  
— Ah ! we shall know *that* well when it comes near;  
The band will quit man's heart, he will breathe free."

To the poet's desire for self-expansion comes the "air-born" answer

"Wouldst thou be as these are ? Live as they.  
Unaffrighted by the silence round them,  
Undistracted by the sights they see,...

---

1. W. A. Jamison, *Arnold and the Romantics*, Rosenkilde & Bagger, Copenhagen, 1958. Page 2.

... self-poised they live, nor pine with noting  
All the fever of some differing soul.

...  
In their own tasks all their powers pouring,  
These attain the mighty life you see”!

The poet, instead of being merged into the Universe, is sent back to actuality, and the “word, the order which God meant should be” is

“Resolve to be thyself; and know that he,  
Who finds himself, loses his misery”.

(from *Self-Dependence*)

Nature is there to suggest moral values to man, but the laws which govern her are separate and distinct from those which govern human life. Religious impulses being a “mystery”, man has to rely upon self-control or conduct in the ordering of his life; however, once he perseveres in that “strife divine” in his “struggling, task’ d morality”, a moral nature relinquishes her assumed superiority and, in a sense, even directs man to the Creator :

“... that severe, that earnest air,  
I saw, I felt it once — but where ?

...  
“Twas when the heavenly house I trod,  
And lay upon the breast of God”.

(from *Morality*)

To “rest” in nature is to deny one’s humanity, to betray one’s higher and spiritual self :

“Know, man hath all which Nature hath, but more,  
And in that more lie all his hopes of good”.

Yet, even when

“Man must begin ... where Nature ends;  
when Nature and man can never be fast friends”.

(from *In Harmony with Nature*)

Arnold does not hesitate to praise Nature for its strength and coolness — that would not confuse the issue for him. To confuse the Independent Preacher, who should have known better than to cry up nature as a complete guide for human conduct and whose Nonconformity seems to have exasperated him, Arnold brings in the nature of contemporary science, “red in tooth and claw”. The desire to find in nature the same spiritual qualities as those of the human soul is “unworthy of a man full-grown”. Man and nature subscribe to different orders of being :

“To its own impulse every creature stirs;  
Live by thy light, and earth will live by hers !”

( from *Religious Isolation* )

In *A Summer Night* his recurring worry over the fate of man having cast him from the heights he attained in *Morality*, Arnold finds himself faced with a prospect of two alternatives in neither of which could man attain self-fulfilment. He is loath to be “by passion quite possess’d” or “quite benumb’d by the world’s sway”. In his restlessness and misery, the clear, pure heavens, who remain “A world above man’s head”, perform their function and “let him see

“How boundless might his soul’s horizons be”.

that between the fates of “Madman or slave”

“How fair a lot to fill  
Is left to each man still ! ”

The close following of this conclusion by *The Buried Life* cannot but be significant.

In *The Youth of Nature* and *The Youth of Man*, occasioned by the poet’s visit to Rydal and Grassmere and by the recent publication of *The Prelude*, Arnold becomes preoccupied with the Berkeleyan as to whether nature lives in itself or in the eye of the beholder. Nature asserts her objective life and triumphantly sings of her immortal

“Loveliness, magic, and grace”.

(from *The Youth of Nature*)

In *The Youth of Man*

“Murmur of living,  
Stir of existence,  
Soul of the world”

are invoked as a revitalising force to the “dying spirit of youth”. However, in both poems there is the underlying feeling that it is because of man’s weakness that nature has her hour of triumph :

“Yourself and your fellows ye know not; and me,  
The mateless, the one, will ye know ?”  
(from *The Youth of Nature*)

It is the faded ignoble lives of the disillusioned aged couple, led “within the walls of an ever narrowing world”<sup>1</sup> that bring out by contrast the eternal freshness and youth of nature. The last lines of *The Youth of Man* — lines of dubious poetic value — make the point clear :

“Sink, O Youth, in thy soul !  
Yearn to the greatness of Nature;  
Rally the good in the depths of thyself !”

One of the reasons why the solitary Empedocles plunges into the crater of Mount Etna is his desperate wish to acquire vitality and self-expansion by uniting himself with the elements, but in Act II of *Empedocles on Etna* Arnold has ceased to identify himself with his protagonist. It is in the Stoic address to Pausanias in Act I Scene I that Arnold sums up his considered, dualistic attitude to nature. A Spinozistic, neutral nature fulfils its own laws regardless of man<sup>2</sup>; nevertheless, this fact need not deter man from picturing in it any moral or spiritual values which may conduce to his happiness. On the one hand,

“Nature, with equal mind,  
Sees all her sons at play,

---

1. From *The Youth of Man*,

2. Cf. *Essays* (London, O.U.P. 1936) by Matthew Arnold : “Marcus Aurelius”, Page 239, where Arnold objects to the idea that “the whole course of the universe has a providential reference to man’s welfare”.

Sees man control the wind,  
The wind sweep man away;

Allows the proudly-riding and the foundering bark",

on the other

"Is it so small a thing  
To have enjoy'd the sun ?"<sup>1</sup>

It is on the light of this double-sided attitude that one is to take Nature's words :

"Loveliness, magic, and grace,  
They are here ! they are set in the world,  
They abide; and the finest of souls,  
Hath not been thrill'd by them all,  
Nor the dullest been dead to them quite".

(from *The Youth of Nature*)

To conclude from these lines that Arnold clings to the belief that moral values are objective in nature "because he needs an extrapersonal ethical reliance"<sup>2</sup> is misleading. In keeping with his view, natural scenes or landscapes in Arnold's poetry generally appear exactly as they would to an extremely observant neutral looker-on.

Arnold was not at heart a true Wordsworthian poet of nature. For him any line of thought or set of beliefs ceased to be valid once its vital relationship to the problem of living could no longer be perceived. He realised, for instance, that rationalism and scientific investigation had created an unfathomable gulf between the romantic and early Wordsworthian concepts of nature and the analytic, utilitarian climate of mid-nineteenth century thought. Hence he felt quite justified in dismissing Wordsworth's philosophy as an illusion, "a tissue of elevated but

---

1. *Empedocles on Erta*, Act I Scene ii, lines 257-261; lines 397-8.

2. H. N. Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry, 1630-1880*. New York, Columbia University Press. 1937. Page 489.

abstract verbiage, alien to the very nature of poetry"<sup>1</sup>. Arnold was generous in his praise of Wordsworth after the latter's death, but in *Stanzas in Memory of the Author of 'Obermann'*, written in 1849, he does not fight shy of pointing out that "in this our troubled day" the secluded Wordsworth attained to see his way only by averting his eyes from "half of human fate". To the believer in humanism, to one who held that "the spectacle of a writer striving evidently to get breast to breast with reality is always full of instruction and invigoration"<sup>2</sup>, this was a grave shortcoming.

---

1. From Arnold's Preface to *Poems of Wordsworth*, Page xix.

2. *Letters to ... Clough*, Page 86, 20 July, 1848.