

A Contrastive Review of Subjectivity: Tennyson and Arnold

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Abstract- This article makes an attempt to scrutinize the influence and motivation of Christianity upon the minds of the Victorians as to how they welcome or react the principles of their religion which they considered the only ultimate life-shaping creed in every sphere of their lives as well as those of mankind. The crisis started as there appeared tremendous contradiction between the scientific truth and their Biblical regulations and predictions. Faith, then, suffered a stone-hard blow. To them, failure of Christianity stood for the total collapse and meaninglessness of human life. Many lost their trust; some tried to restore it by rationalizing their frustration, but most of them turned nonchalant to religion, church and church authority, enthusiastically embracing tenets of humanism. The pain and anguish springing from the loss of faith resulted in the trends of the fluctuation between faith and misgiving, which was mirrored in most of the Victorians and their poems. Tennyson and Arnold were in the eerie of this whirlwind. General decay of faith in religion direly accounted for their melancholy and despondence. Reason rather than faith began to preoccupy their saddened minds. This article aims to record the personal pang, depression, inertia, agitation, and, at last, their consoling haven in their poems. Manifestation of subjective feelings especially of sadness was generally vented in lyricism which is superbly manipulated by both of them. The objective of this article is also to put forward some recommendations concerning how the poets could have got rid of these bleak sentiments of agnosticism, of swinging between doubt and faith, between science and religion.

Key Words: Faith, doubt, conflict, agnosticism, and philosophic reflections.

I. Introduction

Both Alfred Tennyson and Matthew Arnold intensely encountered depression and dreariness in the Victorian arena of literature. Still, they did not react in the similar way. In their lyrics, both of the poets focused subjectivity signifying individual unhappiness, suspicion and dissatisfaction. Although they contemplated on personal sorrows and grievances, the sources of such sentiments did not coalesce with each other. Even they responded to their challenges differently. Tennyson became too much shocked at Hallam's untimely death leading to his misgivings about divinity, though at length he could resuscitate his faith in God. On the other hand, Arnold deeply thought on declining belief in religion as well as the existentialistic world, and he resolved to seek for the solution in the poetry of 'high-seriousness' rather than religion, and turned disillusioned towards Christianity.

According to most of the critics, Tennyson's reputation soared very high over nearly all the Victorians:

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Whether or not Alfred Tennyson was the greatest of the Victorians poets, as affirmed by many critics today, there is no doubt that in his own lifetime he was the most popular of poets. (Abrams, 1993, p.1052)

Born in a small hamlet, Somersby, Lincolnshire, England, where his father, the Reverend Dr. George Tennyson, was the rector, Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) was the fourth of twelve children. Bright and talented as Alfred was, he possessed a fine build and masculine superb look from his early childhood. At the age of eleven, he attended a Grammar School in the nearby town of Louth, but on owing to certain unhappy memories, he returned home and studied under the close supervision of his learned father. He began to evince his talents from an early age; when he was fourteen, he wrote a drama in blank verse and an epic of six thousand lines. In 1827, a small volume entitled Poems by Two Brothers, incorporating works by Alfred and Charles Tennyson, as well as a few short verses by Frederick Tennyson, was published. Dr. Tennyson's health deteriorated and he took shelter in drink and opium. Bad days fell upon him; finally his father agreed to seek treatment to Paris. Two brothers, "Alfred and Charles, joined Frederick at trinity College, Cambridge" (Ebbatson, 1988, p. 2). Although family problems clouded Alfred's time at Cambridge, his life altered significantly at the acquaintance with Arthur Henry Hallam about whom Ebbatson states:

His life changed significantly in his second year, when he met Arthur Hallam. The son of a leading historian, and close friend of the young Gladstone, Hallam was widely regarded as a man of outstanding powers. He was an eloquent debater, and fervent lover of Italian art and thought. With Alfred, in 1829 Hallam joined the Apostles, an elite debating society at Cambridge" (Ebbatson, 1988, p. 2).

On his return from Spain in 1831, Tennyson had to leave the university without obtaining his degree, because of his father's death. Later, the poet stayed quiet with his family members at Somersby where he spent his time working on his poems and engaging in various outdoor sports and activities. His close, bosom friend, Hallam for the first time visited Somersby at Christmas in 1829, and he soon fell in love with one of his sisters, Emily Tennyson, and was engaged with her. Many of Tennyson's finest pieces of poems including "The Lady of Shallot," "The Palace of Art," "The Lotos-Eaters," "Oenone," and "A Dream of Fair Women" appeared in 1832. While Hallam, towards the middle of 1833, was making a tour in Europe, he was taken ill in Vienna and died of apoplexy on 15 September; thus the shock of this tragic loss aggrieved and agonized Tennyson immensely:

The death of Hallam, the religious uncertainties that he had himself experienced, together with his own extensive study

of writings by geologists, astronomers and biologists, led him to confront many of the religious issues that bewildered his and later generations. The result was "In Memoriam" (1950), a long elegy written over a period of seventeen years embodying the poet's reflections on our relation to God and to nature (Abrams, 1993, p. 1050).

Retiring absolutely from all usual proceedings, he passed his time in grief and musing. The poet profoundly pondered over the reminiscence of and affection for his deceased friend, Hallam, and on such predicaments as the nature of God and the immortality of the soul. Tennyson's long-retaining anguish and grief on the death of his beloved friend occasioned his poignant elegies and lyrics collectively constituting one of the greatest nostalgic works in English literature, "In Memoriam."

He dearly loved Emily Shellwood, but he could not marry her, for his financial resources were so limited. Tennyson finally published "In Memoriam" and married his beloved whom he loved for long 14 years. The death of Wordsworth in the same year paved the way for his acceptance of the post of Poet Laureate. The remainder of Tennyson's life was far more stable, his popularity increased and he became widely regarded as the poetic voice of his age.

Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), born to Dr. Thomas Arnold, a clergyman, who was "a leader of the liberal or Broad Church" (Abrams, 1993, p.1344), was a poet, essayist, critic and a social reformer. Born and brought up in Laleham, a village in the valley of the river, Thames, his poetry was profoundly stirred by its quiet and tranquil atmosphere:

That his childhood was spent in the vicinity of a river seems appropriate, for clear flowing streams were later to appear in his poems as symbols of serenity. (Abrams, 1993, p.1344)

At the age of six, he got admitted into Rugby School, where his father had become headmaster. Preoccupied with moral and social issues corresponding to his father's, he was a bit callous to religion:

That he was permanently influenced by his father is evident in his poems and in his writings on religion and politics, like many sons of clergymen, he made a determined effort in his youth to be different. (Abrams, 1993, p. 1344)

Being tutored by his uncle, Rev. John Buckland in his small village, the Arnolds moved to a holiday home, Fox How, in the Lake District in 1834, where William Wordsworth was their neighbour and close friend. Following a short stay at Winchester College, Arnold returned to Rugby School. His literary career set off from the very family milieu. He used to compose verses for the *Fox How Magazine* co-produced with his brother Tom for the family's enjoyment. He frequently used to win school prizes for English essay writing, and Latin and English poetry. In 1841, he obtained a scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford. During his residence at Oxford, he had steadfast friendship with Arthur Hugh Clough, another Rugby old boy who had been one of his father's devotees. Matthew Arnold was regular at John Henry Newman's sermons at St. Mary's although he was not involved in the Oxford Movement. His graduation was achieved in 1844. Next year, he was elected Fellow of Oriel College, Oxford. He was fortunate in getting married with Frances Lucy, the daughter of Sir William Wightman,

Justice of the Queen's Bench. A little bit exhausted with the duties of an inspector, Arnold often described his profession as drudgery for which he had the opportunity to travel constantly and across much of England. The frequent theme in his verses was "how is a full and enjoyable life to be lived in a modern industrial society?" (Abrams, 1993, p.1344) In 1853, he published *Poems: A New Edition*, excluding *Empedocles on Etna*, but appending novel poems, *Sohrab and Rustum* and *The Scholar Gipsy*. Arnold's career reached the zenith as he was glorified and venerated to be a Professor of Poetry at Oxford in 1857. In 1865, Arnold published *Essays in Criticism: First Series*. *Essays in Criticism: Second Series* would not appear until November 1888, shortly after his untimely death. In 1866, he published *Thyrsis*, his elegy to Clough, who had died in 1861. *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold's major work in social criticism was published in 1869. *Literature and Dogma*, Arnold's foremost work in religious criticism was published in 1873. Arnold, in 1883 and 1884, visited the United States and Canada, delivering lectures on education, democracy and Ralph Waldo Emerson. He was honoured with a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1883. He retired from school inspection in 1886, and made another tour to America. All on a sudden, to the utter shock of his admirers home and abroad, Arnold breathed his last in 1888 of heart failure. He is overwhelmingly deemed as the third great Victorian poet, along with Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning.

Subjectivity lies palpable in Tennyson's most of his poems. Although he is preoccupied with varying feelings, principally he communicates his own sorrows, misgivings and conviction. In his poems individual sentiments and music coalesce together. As a matter of fact, he was born with a gift for music. During his early childhood, he used to exclaim on windy nights: "I hear a voice that's speaking in the wind." (Burton, 1954, p. 11) Even a swift reading of his poetry will expose an obvious ability to evidence every kind of clamour in nature, "from the roaring of the North Sea breakers to the murmur of the bees in the Somersby flowers." (Burton, 1954, p. 11) However, the most enthralling sound was that of the human speech. Spellbound by the beauty of the spoken word, he seems to have gain expertise upon the verbal sound, and not reading his poetry loudly is approximately a self-denial like reading a "sonata of Beethoven without playing it" (Burton, 1954, p. 11). Some of Tennyson's poems may be archetypal of personal emotions in his poetry.

"In Memoriam" (1850) reflects in every line the moral and religious conflict of the century. Cazamian utters contextually "the thoughts therein (in the poem) expressed are deep enough to make the conflict not so much one of a particular epoch, as of all time: they voice universal emotions" (Cazamian, 1965, p. 1166). This poem concerns the death of his friend, Arthur Henry Hallam who during his lifetime occupied much of the poet's heart. As a result, it traces how the poet got over his intense personal sorrows. Hallam's death is deemed as the demise of the humankind. The conviction he arrives at after encountering his disappointment and misgiving is his belief in a god of love and immortality. As he gets reminiscent of Hallam, moods of stunned and bewildered sorrows render him passionate:

A hand that can be clasped no more-
Behold me, for I cannot sleep,

And like a guilty thing I creep
At earliest morning to the door. (Hill, 1999, 5-8, p. 210)

Nonetheless, the private soreness dwindles into fretful conjecture pertaining to the vagueness of death and the optimism of immortality:

I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,
And gather dust and chaff, and call
To what I feel is Lord of all,
And faintly thrust the larger hope. (*In Memoriam*, 17-20, p. 1104)

Through states of doubt, despair, and anguished questions, The poem bit by bit goes upwards to a stiff, dismayed faith and stops in a full hymnal music that nurtures trust and strength:

O living will that shallot endure,
When all that seems shall suffer shocks,
Rise from the spiritual rock,
Flow through our deeds and make them pure. (*In Memoriam*, 1-4, p. 1105)

Indeed, this poem stamps Tennyson's uncertainty, as Abrams mentions that "the death of Hallam, the religious uncertainties that he had himself experienced, together with his own extensive study of writings by geologists, astronomers, and biologists, led him to confront many of the religious issues." (Abrams, 1993, p. 1055) The poet's qualm as regards the immortality of soul results from the scientific discovery of fossils demonstrating the extinction of countless species in the history:

So careful of the type ? but no
From scarp'd cliff and quarried stone
She cries, 'A thousand types are gone:
I care for nothing, all shall go. (*In Memoriam*, 1-4, p. 1131)

In this regard, T. S. Eliot precisely comments: "the poem, he wrote, is remarkable not because of the quality of its faith but because of the quality of its doubt." (Abrams, 1993, p. 1055) The lines from "In Memoriam" (1850) obviously give expression to individual anxiety.

Personal feelings and emotions are also vented in a small musical poem, "Break, Break, Break" (1842) that depicts the poet's passionate psychic twinge. It is an elegy covering the precipitate death of his friend, Arthur Henry Hallam. The poet stares at the elegance of waves that breaks against the shore, at the young fisherman blissfully shouting with his sister at play, and at the grand ship sailing to the port for rest, but these sights leave the poet's spirit grief-stricken. He seems collapsed to make an outburst of the thoughts and feelings which flash across his consciousness. He feels painfully nostalgic of the beauty and grace of the time when the poet's friend remained alive:

But the tender grace of a day that is dead
Will never come back to me. ("Break, Break, Break", 15-16, p. 1071)

Therefore, the attributes of subjectivity stand poised and prominent in this poem.

Unlike Tennyson, the spring of Arnold's sadness is a bit different. Arnold keenly observed the Christian middleclass society upon which religion had little or no influence. Consequently Christianity lost its former appeal to the suffering of humanity. This was basically the cause of his bleak mood. Later on, he bitterly criticized the middleclass:

He records his despair in a universe (middleclass society) in which humanity's role seemed as incongruous as it was later to seem to Thomas Hardy. (Abrams, 1993, p. 1346)

Fade up with Christianity, he thought poetry superior to religion and predicted, in "The Study of Poetry", that poetry of 'high seriousness' would take the place of religion:

Our religion has materialized itself in the fact, in the supposed fact: it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything. (Alexander, 2014, p. 187)

Therefore, poetry was the essential source of his spiritual power. He looked at the world around him, saw everywhere a ceaseless change taking place, and was sad. The religious uncertainty, that kept Tennyson lonely, turned Arnold musing cheerlessly on the meaning of life. Thus, his personal, modern sentiments of discontent and loss are emphasized in his poems. In a true and logical observation, Cazamian attempts to sum up Arnold's pang and agony: "the true note of Arnold's temperament is sadness: a pensive melancholy, essentially Romantic in origin, which gains sterner tones from the more definite anxieties of the century." (Cazamian, 1996, p. 1189) With Arnold there is a feeling of wound, the loss of that cheerful temper which is so much unique to Clough and which emanates from his faith. The vague Christianity of Arnold, the moral pantheism to which all his philosophical reflection tends, seems to have left in his inner self an emptiness, a scar which is revealed only in his poetry. In "Dover Beach" (1867) this religious grief is noticeable.

"Dover Beach" (1867), which is typical of almost all poems of Arnold, is concerned with his agonizing, individual unhappiness originating from the loss of conviction in religion. Matthew Arnold often makes use of "the image of the ocean to symbolize the sadness. In Dover Beach, he describes the 'melancholy long withdrawing roar' of the Sea of the Faith" (Zeleny, 1988, p. 743). With reference to the source of Arnold's dejected humor, Leon Gottfried says: "Brought up in a Christian tradition in which joy and salvation were contingent upon certitude of faith, the loss of certitude meant equally the loss of joy" (Gottfried, 1963, p. 23). The world goes insipid and unappealing to him:

For the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain; (Peltason, 1994, p. 102, l. 30-34)

To Christians, Christianity, as a religion, covers the whole of life. So, when one thinks oneself detached from it, everything sounds meaningless. That is why Ernest Renan vividly expressed Arnold's being forlorn and deserted: "I was terribly lost. The universe produced upon me the impression of a cold and arid desert. For the moment that Christianity was not the truth, all the rest appeared to me

indifferent, frivolous, barely worthy of interest” (Gottfried, 1963, p. 23). Despondent and forsaken, the poet “sees himself as a fish out of water as well” (Gottfried, 1963, p. 23). Hence, the aforesaid remark transparently professes the true plight of Arnold’s mind.

II. Conclusion

Like almost all other Victorians, Tennyson and Arnold were brimmed with melancholy and gloom, though their modes were unlike. Both of them put stress on subjectivity resulting from personal sorrows, doubt and frustration. Although they reflect on personal feelings, the origins of the sensations and their reactions were quite dissimilar. Tennyson's sadness that gushed out of Hallam's death changed into doubt, but eventually he could revive his trust in God. Arnold pondered over decaying faith in religion as well as the meaninglessness of this world without getting rid of agnosticism. If the two disillusioned Victorians along with others concerned had made a vigorous comparative study of the major religions of the world- Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam- they might have derived the ultimate truth about divinity that could have bestowed peace and tranquility of mind here, and solution of salvation hereafter. In this regard, “**The Choice**” written by Ahmed Didat, and other books on comparative theology by Dr. Zakir Naik, Shree Shree Rabi Sankar, Abul Hossain Vattachrjay may precisely be consulted.

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