

# Arnold as a poet of the Victorian unrest

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Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Page \_\_\_\_\_

Tennyson is often called the representative poet of the Victorian age. "For more than sixty years", says Stopford Brooke, "he lived to the present life of England, as far as he was capable of comprehending and sympathising with its movements; and he inwove what he felt concerning it in to his poetry. That Tennyson's poetry was an epitome of his time, that it exhibited the society, the art, the philosophy, the religion of his day, was proved by the welcome which all classes gave it." Browning showed a remarkable fondness for the out of the way historical settings, particularly of the Italian Renaissance. Arnold though not a representative poet of his age, certainly reacted more violently than anybody else to the spiritual distress of his age. His letter to his mother is an eloquent commentary on his poetry.

"It might be fairly urged that I have less poetical sentiment than Tennyson, and less intellectual vigour 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."

Arnold felt that he was a crusader - a David among Goliaths. In a letter to Clough, he wrote: Reflect too, as I can not but do here more and more, in spite of all the nonsense some people talk, how deeply unpoetical the age and all one's surroundings are. Not unprofound, not ungrand, not unmoving; but unpoetical.

Again he wrote to Clough: "These are damned times - everything is against one - the height to which knowledge is come, the spread of luxury, our physical enervation, the absence of great natures, the unavoidable contact with millions of small ones, newspapers, cities, light profligate friends, moral desperadoes like Carlyle, our own selves and the sickening consciousness of our difficulties."

He turned to Clough again. "Only let us pray

all the time - God keep us both from aridity! Arid - that is what the times are."

He wrote to Clough again. "As for my poems they have weight, I think, but little or no charm... But woe was upon me if I analysed not my situation and wester, Rene and such like, none of them analyse the modern situation in its true blankness and barrenness and unpoetrylessness"

All these extracts of letters prove how Arnold was smothering in the Victorian age, so much extolled by most of his contemporaries. Material prosperity, the expansion of democracy, and the growth of science had hardly any appeal to him. He found life to be a veritable nightmare, which

"Hath really neither joy nor love nor light

Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;

And we are here as on darkling plain

Swept with confused, alarms of struggle and flights,

Where ignorant armies clash by night."

To him the contemporary life had no meaning or direction. Christianity also could hardly offer him any consolation. He, therefore could not help being a poet of sceptical reaction. He could not share with Tennyson his genial faith or the robust and buoyant optimism of Browning. The conflict between science and religion, between matter and spirit was rife, and Arnold had lost all his moorings. He complained:

"The Sea of faith

was once, too, at the full and round earth's shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled

But now I only hear

Its long, melancholy, withdrawing roar.

He could not cast his anchor anywhere. He found himself in a hostile, Godless, chaotic world.

Page \_\_\_\_\_

To Clough he wrote in his poem *To A Friend*:  
"Who prop, thou ask'st, in these bad days, my mind's?"

He answered the question himself that Homer, Sophocles and Epictetus could sustain him amidst the encircling gloom. More sensitive than any of his contemporaries, Arnold could not feel well at ease in "these... damned times". It was this feverish life and hectic excitement that he was taking infinite pains to recoil from. He felt and mirrored the malady of the age. In *The Buried Life*, he complained

"I feel a nameless o'er me roll.

His Philomela struck the characteristic note of his age.  
Eternal passion!

Eternal pain!

Like an infant he was crying in the night, crying for light. His intense intellectualism did not enable him to find rest anywhere. He thus represented the spirit of Victorian unrest. In his *Scholar Gipsy* he sought to have an outlet of his native melancholy. The Victorian age, for him, as for the Gipsy was full of "sick hurry" and "divided aims". The life of the Victorians had its "head o'er taxed, its palsied hearts".

In *The Memorial Verses*, the Victorian age is described as "the iron age". It was  
Europe's dying hour,  
of fitful dream and feverish power.

He looked below and found to his horror:

The lurid flow  
of terror and insane distress.

The stanzas from *the Grande Chartreuse* is a vivid account of Arnold's spiritual distress. Duffin says:

"He, (Arnold) feels that he is out of place, yet there he shares with the monks the world's mockery though, as he admits, it is his melancholy, not his scepticism that is condemned. With force he declares that the scorn of Byron, the Lonely wail of Shelley, the sad stern page of Obermann have left the world unredeemed. He says he can not fully accept the outlook of the times, which he exposes as materialistic and scientific and concludes the poem with an analogy of children living near an old-world abbey."

In his youth Arnold came in contact with a number of enlightened people who,

"Purged its faith, and trimm'd its fire  
Show'd me the high white star of truth,  
There bade me gaze, and there aspire."

Arnold tried, and yet failed to cling to the faith of the Casthusians. But nevertheless he felt more akin to them emotionally, although he had hardly any intellectual affinity with them.

"Wandering between two worlds, one dead,

The other powerless to be born

With nowhere yet to rest my head,

Like those on earth I wait forlorn.

Their faith, my tears, the world deride -

I came to shed them at their side."

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