

Matthew Arnold's Mind as
Revealed in his Poetry

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revealed in his poetry.



Master's Thesis

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May fifteenth, one thousand nine
hundred and two.

Alice Spaulding.

Matthew Arnold's Mind As Revealed in his Poetry

Outline.

Introduction:- The subjects Arnold cared for and those he cared nothing about. Meaning of the word "attitude" as here used.

I. Attitude to Nature.

A. He believed that Nature furnished balm for wounded hopes.

B. He loved the solitude which Nature gives.

C. He thought life to be nothing without communion with Nature.

II. Attitude to ordinary aims of men.

A. Scorn of worldly glory.

1. He yearned for peace of Death.

2. He contemplated Death calmly.

B. Pity for worldly humanity.

III. Attitude to crime and sin

A. Crime causes sorrow

B. Sin brings its own punishment.

IV. Attitude to theological dogma.

Conclusion.

Matthew Arnold's Mind as Revealed in his Poetry.

There are certain characteristics of the nature of Matthew Arnold which stand forth prominently in his poems, and which reveal his mind as clearly as though he had boldly announced his thoughts. Politics, court intrigues, usurpations of thrones and such other subjects he would leave to those who cared for them, while he would write of Nature and of ordinary life among men. We must form an opinion of his attitude to political questions from other sources than his poetry, for here we find no trace of such. Worldly honor was nothing to him and not worthy of attention. Thus when we consider his mind we must think of the attitude he held toward Nature, toward men in the ordinary pursuits of life, toward sin and passion and crime, and lastly his attitude toward God.

What do we mean by an "attitude"?

Do we mean a standing forth and a proclaiming what should and should not be done, a preaching or a sermonizing? No, that is not the thought when we speak of Matthew Arnold's attitude to life and all that life held, but it is a simple breathing out of the innermost thoughts of the heart. If in his poetry we find a certain didactic impulse to have existence in every form and in every verse, if we feel that in his poetry there is a lesson, which he would have had us learn without his making any effort to teach that lesson, then we learn it gladly, because it is taught with an attempt so slight, with a truth so perfect, and with a simplicity so sincere that we lose sight of the moralizing and realize only the fascination and irrefragable charm in the verses. The ethical tendency is present and may be found after a search, but it is not overbearing in its presence.

Matthew Arnold's mind as revealed in his poetry, - this means what he thought of Life and how he received its pleasures and its sorrows.

I.

Leslie Stephen has said, "nothing is less poetical than optimism" - and R. H. Hutton has added to this, "Unquestionably the most effective way in which the highest moral conceptions are impressed upon us, is by the delineation of something altogether mean and ignoble, as seen by the light of those conceptions."

From these opinions as a standard we would place Matthew Arnold high for he is seeking always the highest truth and the wisest and most successful conduct of life by means of ignoble ideas. With a positive sympathy he has come into direct contact with the common aspect

Note 1. In Contemporary Thought and Thinkers. R. H. Hutton Vol. 2. "Professor Shairp's 'Aspects of Poetry'" p. 162.

of life. With the highest and most unpassioned thoughts he has shown the misery and sorrow in life.

In his poetry we are intimate with Nature. We know Nature sad and Nature happy, Nature in all her moods. He lived for Nature and what joys Nature gave him. From Nature he drew inspiration for higher and nobler deeds and from Nature he learned to shun the petty trivialities. To man he does not go for sympathy and consolation but to Nature for the balm for every woe and sorrow which beset life. From her he learns all the lessons of life.

"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
Of labour that in lasting fruit outgrows
Far noisier schemes accomplish'd in repose.

Too great for haste, too high for rivalry,
Yes while on earth a thousand discords ring
Man's senseless uproar mingling with his toil
Still do thy quiet ministers move on
Their glorious tasks in silence perfecting
Still working, blaming still our vain turmoil
Labourers that shall not fail when man is gone".¹
This is a pleasing little idyl, full of an
appreciation of Nature, but oh how full of
melancholy! Was not the man who wrote
this of a different type than other men?
Did he not view life differently than others?
Did he not stand alone among men, loving
not the home and the fireside, but rather
joying in the intimacy with Nature? He
thirsted and longed for the perpetual
solace of natural beauty and of natural
surroundings instead of for human life.
In the very lines "Yes while on earth a
thousand discords ring

Still do thy quiet ministers move on," he has placed Nature over against humanity and has given to Nature the preference. Intercourse with humanity has given place to intercourse with Nature. He does not pretend to find the source of hope in Nature but only a relaxation from temporal distractions. Had Arnold been disappointed in some dear friend, and had he received from Nature the healing balm? We can not know; we only know that upon Nature he leaned.

There is ever present in his poetry an isolation, a loneliness in which he revels and which he wishes no one to share with him. It is as if he stood on a prairie, with no human being within reach, and then called out these words of his:-

"Blow ye winds! lift me with you!
I come to the wild,
Fold closely, O, Nature,
Thine arms round thy child!"

To thee only God -granted
A heart ever new -

To -all always open -

To -all always true. " "

When Arnold sinks into the depths of this despair he does not stop to question the cause, no he goes on and on getting ever deeper in the dark chasm of gloom. He finds no mark of health and happiness but always pain and penance and reflection. He dwells on disappointed hopes and passions. It is small wonder that life for him held nothing when he viewed it from this standpoint. How painfully he makes us feel the emptiness, the nothingness of life when he says,
"What is the course of the life
Of mortal men on the earth?
Most men eddy about

Here and there - eat and drink,
Chatter and love and hate,
Gather and squander, are raised
aloft, - art hurled in the dust,
Striving blindly, achieving
nothing; and then they die -
Perish - and no one asks
Who or what they have been,
More than he asks what waves,
In the moonlit solitudes mild
Of the midmost Ocean, have swell'd,
Formed for a moment, and gone " " ^{2.}

We can only think from these lines
that to him life was "an empty dream"^{2.}
a whirlpool of doubt and sorrow, where
men for a few short days were lifted to
the top wave of pleasure, and then later
drawn down, down into the abyss of
despair. What scorn we feel that he
had for the temporal pleasures of

Note 1. Page 8. Rugby Chapel.

Note 2. " " From - Psalm of Life

eating and drinking, of talking and loving! Did life hold anything in store for him? Why did he feel that the pleasures of other people were sorrows for him? For him the joys of the world counted for nought; happiness did not touch him; pleasure found no place in his life. To him these things seemed for but a moment, and man seemed but as one wave in the midst of countless waves of the ocean. Why did he not rather feel that he was one man in the world of human beings who must get the most from this life, and that he must strive with them for the attainment of happiness? He would not have had him deviate one iota from his path of religion and morality, but could he not have been a better man, and have given more happiness by enjoying with others the pleasures of the world? And yet, after all, we

would not have him otherwise. His very gloom is charming for its sincerity. He lived in a perpetual melancholy, not sad at times, to brighten up and throw away gloom and mystery and send out joyous poetry made happier by the contrast with the depth from which it had sprung, but in a deep lonely melancholy which needed only some slight stimulus to send forth verses which marked him as one having little faith in the world, full of disappointed hope and ambition. We never feel the happy joy in mere living, the sweetness of life and love, the gladness in the song of the birds, the cheer and loveliness of the dewy morning which are ever present in Wordsworth, but we feel the exact opposite in the sad poetry of Matthew Arnold. His admiration for Wordsworth was of the highest class. He placed his poetry on the

highest pinnacle of success. He says of his poetry, "Taking the roll of our own chief poetical names, besides Shakspeare and Milton, from the age of Elizabeth downwards I think it is certain that Wordsworth's name deserves to stand and will finally stand above them all. He seems to me to have left a body of poetical work superior in power, in interest, in the qualities which give enduring freshness, to that which any of the others has left." Later he has added to this, "Not only is Wordsworth eminent by reason of the goodness of his best work, but he is eminent also by reason of the great body of good work which he has left us. He is one of the chief glories of English Poetry: and by nothing is England so glorious as by her poetry." This shows the depth of his admiration for Wordsworth,

Note 1, Page 11. Arnold's Essay on Wordsworth.

and makes us wonder the more why his poetry was of so different a nature. Perhaps he would not write the same kind or perhaps he could not - we can not tell. From the essay we would say, that, had he been able to do so he would have, but from the study of his poetry we would rather say that he wished to give to the world a style of verse distinctly different from what had gone before. The difference was in the two men, Arnold sad, and Wordsworth happy. To Arnold happiness seemed to come from nothing worthy, sorrow and seriousness were necessary to make life what it should be. We can not say that Arnold loses in this comparison. Is not Wordsworth made all the more lovely and is not our appreciation of Arnold increased when we turn from those verses of pleasure to those where we feel the sorrow that we really know exists in the world, where ^{we realize} ~~we~~ realize

that Life is not all sunshine and
that, - "Life is real, Life is earnest
And the grave is not its goal.

Dust thou art - to dust returnest
Was not spoken of the soul"

He does not tell us to be sad and mel-
ancholy and he never tells us to laugh,
and be merry and spread contagious
joy. For other people he was not an
advocate of either doctrine, of gloom or
of joy, but for himself he was a strong
advocate of reflection.

II.

In his poems "Requiescat" and
"Youth and Calm" we see his yearning for
stillness and seclusion. The former is a
tender lament and the author's wish that
he might find the repose that another
has found. The lines are pathetic

"Strew on her, roses, roses

And never a spray of yew!

In quiet she reposes,

Ah! would that I did too." "

He would ask only that roses be strewn on her coffin and that she be left to her rest. He would not have us mourn for her we know from other lines in his poetry².

For why should we weep for one who has attained peace? Then after the poet has expressed his thought on her peace comes the almost inarticulate breathing of a wish. He does not speak the thought aloud; he breathes it out,

"Ah! would that I did too."

So also in Resignation has the element of Death entered.

"Nay and since death which wipes out Man,

Note 1. Page 14. Requiescat

Note 2 " " Lines from "Youth and Calm"

"'Tis death! and peace indeed is here;
And ease from shame and rest from fear"

Finds him with many an unsolved flaw,
With much unknown and much untried,
Wonder not dead and thirst not dried,
Still gazing on the ever full
Eternal mundane spectacle -
This world in which we draw our breath
In some sense Fausta outlasts Death"¹.
To know this world was a temporary
dwelling-place where, set down by
Providence he was to draw his breath, to
subsist. There is in the poem, nothing
of sullenness, of defiance, but only a
weariness of life and a desire for
peace and rest. He does not see the
sorrows and troubles of life and then
thrust them aside as unworthy of
his notice. No, he sees them and draws
toward them, brooding and pining and
taking away from the happy joy of
the present by making himself

Note 1. Page 15 Resignation

melancholy over inevitable sorrows. He has not the proud faith and hope that overcomes melancholy. He bears this despondency with pathetic stoicism we admit. The spirit of the martyr is present in him, but it is the spirit of the melancholy martyr and not of one who would lay down his life and be glad in the sacrifice. He would be glad to make that sacrifice because making it would take him away from this world of sin and strife.

We see his calm contemplation of death in his portrayal of the death scene in "The Church of Brown". The subject is not new and ^{is} one we can easily imagine. A young husband having left his bride for a few hours to make a hunting trip, on the journey receives a wound from which he instantly dies. He is brought home and

laid at the feet of the wife. There is nothing new in it we would say and yet there is a certain individuality which raises the poem above the commonplace. And that individuality lies in the very pitilessness with which the tale is told, lies in the plain straight-forward manner of bringing out the death scene. Could Arnold have witnessed this death with the calm with which he tells the story of it he must truly have been a wonderful character. And we believe that he could have done so because death to him had not the terror and sorrow which it has for most people. To him death was leaving life, life filled with toils and perplexities. The memoirs for Etienne Rivert de Senancour¹.

Note 1. Page 17. Senancour was a French author born in 1770. He had little fame but his "Obermann" made favorable impression on Arnold. Pessimistic he was. He died 1846

has reached the summit in the delineation of dejection and longing for death. "Obermann" was the one poem which had gained any name for Senancour. The poem was a foreshadowing of the French Revolution full of passages of melancholy eloquence. In the poem which Arnold has written in memoriam are the words -

" Too fast we live, too much are tried
Too harassed to attain
Wordsworth's sweet calm or Goethe's wide
And luminous view to gain.
And then we turn, thou sadder sage
To thee! We feel thy spell!
The hopeless tangle of our age,
Thou too hast scanned it well.
To thee we come then! clouds are roll'd
Where thou, O seer! art set;
Thy realm of thought is drear and cold
The world is colder yet."

In the grave of Etienne Rivet de

Suaneour were inscribed these words
"Éternité deviens mon asile!" It is
small wonder that Arnold admired
this man and that he should have
written a memorial for him. Could
Arnold himself have chosen what would
be placed on his own tombstone, it is
not difficult to imagine that he
would have chosen those very words.
Two melancholy men - they sympathized
with and understood each other. The
verses that Arnold wrote in memorial
complete the thought written on the
tombstone of Suaneour. Thus we
see the attitude that Arnold felt
toward the ordinary affairs of life.
Where others enjoyed life and would
have done anything in their power
to prolong that life, he longed for
death with its peace and calm.
The world and its worldly inhabitants
held for him no charm. He pitied

those who cared for this world only and who could not look with a calm and steady pleasure at what death would bring. His hope in the future after death, was not the hope and the happiness which a deep and earnest Christian feels when he thinks of the Creator he will meet in the other Kingdom, but it was the wish for something different, it was the hope that personal loss would be then made up and worldly sorrow would be then at an end.

III.

In the narrative poems we find an element that has not been even so much as hinted at in the sonnets and early poems. Here for the first time we meet sin and passion. Nor is this passion utterly condemned, rather is it covered over and made sad and pitiful. We do not find sin laid out

baldest form, crude and repulsive which finds expression in deeds that repel, but we find it down deep in the very soul of the individual, where by some inadvertently committed act, it now lies mingled with the sorrow which the wrong deed has caused. A typical tale of sin and fierce passion is "Tristan and Isolt." We would call it typical in that the sin is as great as can be but non-typical in that it reaps its reward in sorrow for the wrong-doer only. The story of two wronged women, of the love and devotion of the man for one of these women, and the results of these loves, these are the events of the poem, given to show the ship-wreck of three lives from the unhappy and unfortunate passions of two individuals. The scene of the poem is beautiful, where one woman kneels at the bedside of

her dying lover while the true wife and mother weeps alone in another room. But the scene shows the crime in its minutest part. In picturing this meeting Arnold puts us face to face with the guilty ones and then leaves us to pity or despise as we will. And pity we must for despise we can not. Arnold's contempt for sin could not have been entirely realized by himself because he has not inspired us with contempt. Sin is not made attractive, it is not ennobled, it is not even made pleasing, so we can not think that he would have yielded his sanction to a wrong deed, but it is such that we turn from it feeling that the wrong-doers have received their (own) punishment in their own sorrow. Arnold makes us realize that to sin is to bring upon ourselves a lasting grief.

From *Fustrane* and *Iscult Arnold* goes to another poem of sin and crime, *Sohrab and Rostum*, and here again he makes us pity instead of blame the one who is wrong. This is a pathetic Oriental tale made even sadder than the last by portraying youth and wretchedness. What is more sad than the combination of young manhood and despair? The proud wicked Rostum kills his own son, yet we pity him and do not censure. We weep for his sorrow instead of scorn him for his crime. The Doric plainness, almost roughness, with which the tale is told holds our attention, as

Note 1. Page 23. Rostum was a Persian warrior who had gained great renown for boldness and whom no one dared meet in single combat. He was the father of Sohrab whom he had left at birth believing to be a girl. In disguise, Sohrab, ambitious for fame, now meets Rostum but receives a fatal blow. Rostum learns secrets

much as the substance of the poem. How could Arnold have written a poem like this with so little feeling and with so much straight forwardness? Because ambition, sin, and crime did not reach him, because he stood above and beyond their reach and looked on them with eyes and a heart which took no part in them other than to perceive. But of sympathy with the world he did not understand its temptations and its dangers and not understanding he could not pity. All unconsciously he has drawn upon our sympathy in his verses showing sin and crime and passion, unconsciously he has raised in us the spirit of pity and compassion. We can readily imagine that he would have stood up and boldly censured any wrong, that he would have given no place in his heart to pity at the downfall of a human being. It is the

substance of "Lohrat and Rustum", of "Balder Dead", of "The Sick King in Bokhara" that elicits our sympathy and not any pity or kind word from the poet in extenuation of the crime. What a contrast these poems form to that of which Arnold spoke in his "Essay on Poetry". There he says, "constantly in reading poetry a sense for the best, the really excellent, and of the strength and joy to be drawn from it should be present in our minds and govern our estimate of what we read." What do we find here in his poems of "strength and joy"? Nothing, absolutely nothing. How far down in the scale would Arnold's poetry have been had others judged as he judged! Had others said that "strength and joy" should be present Matthew Arnold would not stand today as a poet of high rank. But Arnold also in this essay makes frequent

reference to the "high seriousness," which is a requisite of poetry that shall live. In this characteristic he excels. He is filled with the "high seriousness" of life. Sin and passion were not attributes of his character and accordingly he looked on them with a proud contempt. Had those weaknesses which he shows so plainly in his poetry found a place in his nature he would have had more sympathy with them, and would perhaps not have exposed them so cruelly plainly. Without blaming them openly he yet does not pity. He is, as a man looking at something from the outside, in which he has no personal interest.

IV.

No estimate of the mind of Matthew Arnold would be complete, if there were left out a study of the attitude he held toward religious dogmas.

Brought up in a Christian home,

surrounded by all the influences which a stern good father could gather, Matthew Arnold early formed a strong character. His father, Samuel Arnold, died when Matthew was twenty years old, leaving the son to hold the religious views which the father had held or to form new beliefs of his own. Instead of following in the footsteps of the father, Matthew separated himself from the old family creed and tried to strengthen his new convictions by earnest writing and active working. While Arnold was at Oxford the great Tractarian movement was exciting the world, and he himself soon felt the influence of the questioning spirit which arose from it. From that time on his inner life was one of strife, until when an old man, he finally let go the unrest and settled into a hopeless melancholy man. A Catholic in belief he was yet broad enough to give

due deference to any other creed which was pointed out to him. Some one has said, "After all the best known work of Matthew Arnold, and in most respects the most memorable is that section of his poetry which expresses the weariness and religious disquiet of the times. It is here the deepest breathings of his heart are heard. He is a spirit loosed upon the sunless seas of doubt, and ever wearily scanning the grey horizon for a desired but undiscovered haven. He is full of an incommunicable grief, and in the effort to express what he suffers he reaches an intensity of utterance which we find nowhere else in his poetry. A pervading sadness and despair are its most memorable features. There breathe throughout the sadness of failure, the distress of faithlessness. Occasionally it is a deeper note than regret which is struck; it is the iron chord

of a militant, yet despairing pessimism. This expresses well what his poetry on religious questions is. Yet in spite of the regret and pessimism which is expressed there is a quiet pleasure and help to be obtained from most of his sonnets which touch theological dogma. "The Divinity", "Immortality", "Monica's Last Prayer", "The Good Shepherd with the Kid", "East London" and "The Better Part" are all of a distinctly religious nature. In the poem "The Better Part" Arnold censures those, who, believing not the creeds of Orthodox Christianity say -

"Christ some one says 'was human as we are,
No judge eyes us from heaven our sin
to scold."

We live no more when we have done our span"
Arnold answers them by saying,

"..... why not rather say -

That man no second life? Pitch this one high!

More strictly than the inward judge obey!

Was Christ a man like us? Ah, let us try

If we then too can be such men as he!"

There is sadness and pathos in the lines which close this quotation, "Ah let us try,

If we then too can be such men as he!"

What faith he would have had, had it been possible! What a power for good

in the world, he might have been, had

he possessed the deep faith and hope

that he would have liked. He realizes

that help for a good moral life is not

to be found in the self, but from the

soul must help come. Over and over he

reverts to this theme, "There were no succour here,

The aids to noble life are all within"

There is a troubled uncertain element

in all his religious principles.

"Yet still from time to time, vague and forlorn

From the soul's subterranean depth upborne

As from an infinitely distant land.

Come airs and floating echoes, and convey
A melancholy into all our day"¹.

His poetry does not show a strong, clear conviction of truth or even a strong faith. It is the poetry of a man who has no faith but who would have it if he could. Arnold was tormented with conflicting views, with doubts and false creeds. "He can see how much greater the Christian Church was than the Roman world it subdued; but to him it is greater, not through the truth of its belief but through that vast capacity of belief which enabled it to accept what was not true, - in short to feign a truth higher than the naked facts."² It does not seem fair to Arnold to credit all of Mr. Hutton's remark and yet it is fair to say that the belief of the Christian Church

Note 1. Page 31. From - "The Buried Life"

Note 2. " " R. W. Hutton in "Literary Essays"
P. 353

was not to him the true belief and the true doctrine. There are some reasons why we might think that he had not an atom of christian belief, that he was as deep an infidel as one could be. In the poem, "The Sick King in Bokhara" any christian tendency gives way entirely. This poem is actually pagan. The old vizier will grant nothing to the King who broods over the fate of the man whom he is powerless to save. The vizier mocks at the sympathy the King has for the condemned man. But if Arnold is wrong in his spiritual belief, his poetry is nevertheless filled with a peculiar charm. If he can not be accepted as an authority on religious matters he can yet be read with an interest that many poets can not equal. Sceptical, unbelieving in Christ - as revealed to man, doubting yet hoping, with a little faith and with a profound

wish that he had more Matthew Arnold stands as a type of man who knows not where he stands in religious questions. Confident at one moment and wavering the next he gives us no very clear idea of any belief. Yet that was the way he felt; that was his attitude.

This has been revealed clearly in Matthew Arnold's poetry the attitude which his mind held toward the various phases of life. As was said earlier some questions he cared nothing for, but for others he cared and he wrote - always in one certain vein. If in one word his style could be summed up to reveal his nature and his character, that one word would be "melancholy". That one word describes his writing and it describes his disposition. Joyous spontaneity finds no place in his poetry. If ever spontaneous thought breaks forth, it is not in joyous verse

on some happy subject, but it is in lines of gloom and despair over some unhappy theme.

He throws no glamour over trouble but rather brings it out in its fullest and darkest form. He is helpless on the waves of despair and resigned to the gloom which enshrouds him. That he hated sham and pretension it is easy to believe for no matter how despondent he felt, no matter how gloomy the subject to be depicted, no matter how cruel the death, or how terrible the sin and crime each was shown in its true light. There was no attempt to do anything except to be natural always.

We will not criticise him for his sombre interpretation of life. He wrote of it as he must have felt it and lived it and even inherited it. For he himself says in one of his long poems,

"Our fathers water'd with their tears,
This sea of time whereon we sail"
Life to him had not brought joy and
sunshine but their very opposite. In
his little poem "Despondency" he speaks
of his own life as he speaks of it in
no other poem.

"The thoughts that rain their steady glow
Like stars on Life's cold sea,
Which others know, or say they know,
They never shone for me.
Thoughts light like gleams my spirit's sky,
But they will not remain,
They light me once, they hurry by;
And never come again."

His nature was not one that would
reach out and strive for other thoughts,
even though some few had lighted
him for a moment and then passed
by. No he would brood and grow
despondent over those which were
irrevocably gone. Yet for all this

Note 1. Page 35. The Grand Chartreuse.

wretchedness he had the one comfort in Nature. His joy and comfort in Nature was supreme. Vicissitudes and lacerated hearts could be cured by Nature. There is something of the terrible in this sorrow, something of the majestic which has a tendency to uplift and purify the mind and enlarge the sympathy.

His moral principles he never thrusts upon one. He was didactic in an unconscious manner, and never intrusively so. He resigned himself and others to the Fate of the future when he said in the closing lines of "Resignation"

"Enough we live! And if a life,
With large results so little rife,
Though bearable, seem hardly worth
This pomp of worlds, this pain of birth;
Yet, Fausta, the mute turf we tread,
The solemn hills around us spread,
This stream which falls incessantly,
The strange-scrawld rocks, the lonely sky,

If I might lend their life a voice,
Seem to bear rather than rejoice.
And even could the intemperate prayer
Man iterates, while these forbear.
For movement, for an ampler sphere,
Pierce Fate's impetrable ear;
Not milder is the general lot
Because our spirits have forgot,
In action's dizzying eddy whirl'd,
The something that infects the world."

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