CHAPTER V
THE CONCEPT OF CONFLICT
IN THE SELECT POEMS OF SELECT VICTORIAN POETS

The Victorian age inaugurated a “transition from the old, outworn doctrines and tradition of the past,” and a ushered in the progressive future (Mukherjee 2). The era found its orthodoxy battered by movements of thoughts, which made a kind of concerted effort to assail all honest minds with scepticism. There was the new Biblical criticism accompanied by a revolution in the study of geology. The age witnessed materialism and a spurt of scientific progress. Philosophical systems like Positivism, Empiricism, Utilitarianism, Rationalism, Liberalism and Marxism were the thoughts of the era. They led the generation to secularization, agnosticism, atheism and religious passivity. The ideals of democracy, materialism, scientific advancement and scepticism in religion confronted the writers of the day. They experienced a conflict between science and religion, and were conscious of unrest, paradox, and the religious doubts confronting their age (3). The fateful outcome of the conflict between science and religion was the rejection of God or indifferentism towards anything religious.

Mostly, the writers of the age revolted against the deification of material progress. The poets were perhaps the best interpreters of the age (Brett 18). They illustrated in their poems, the religious temper of their time, its faith, doubts and conflicts. The age these poets inherited was rather a fluid transitional one. Rosy Chamling writes; “It is an age when the old worn out feudal agrarian world was fast crumbling down on the one hand, at the same time this age also looked forward to the future. As
such the adumbrations of ‘modernism’ can be found in this age. The Janus-faced age was thus the site of severe conflicts — the prime among these was the clash between Science and Religion” (60). The attitudes and approaches they took to address the Victorian dilemma were contrasting. Emily Bronte’s approach was an affirmation of faith in the soul’s immortality based upon a belief in a personal God; Newman’s was a prayer of Christian obedience in sharp contrast to Swinburne’s rebelliousness. George Meredith invited the individual to bear his lot patiently and fulfil himself by being united with nature and not rebelling against it. As for Hopkins, he proposed a conviction that God’s wrath comes tempered with mercy, and that even in our destruction we are safe in the providence of God (Brett 19). Arthur Hugh Clough regretted the doubts and conflicts of the present and cast his longings for the certainty of the past (Chapman 275).

The dilemma of the age assaulted the poets very deeply and they responded to it diversely. The study here is an attempt to discover and analyse the elements of conflict in the poems of select Victorian poets; Alfred Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning and Matthew Arnold. The trio are considered as representatives of the ways the Victorian poets have confronted the doubt, angst and conflict of the age. Browning showed an optimistic outlook, which no catastrophes of creeds could shake. Tennyson arrived at a reasonable optimism and a compromise between science and religion. Arnold approached it in the way of a reasonable pessimist. He could not rid himself of his doubts. Some others attempted to construct an edifice based on the past ages. Others sought satisfaction in a refined hedonism. Some others went over to the side of science and turned agnostics, and still some others tried in panic to arrive at a compromise between the two conflicting forces of science and belief (“Tennyson”
http://neoenglishsystem.blogspot.com). They were in search of a new faith to answer their quest.

Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) as a poet and a man was a voice, the voice of an age and its people, expressing in exquisite melody of poetry their doubts and faith, their grief and triumphs (Long 457). He was the embodiment in his verse the best of England’s greatest poets; “the dreaminess of Spenser, the majesty of Milton, the natural simplicity of Wordsworth, the fantasy of Blake and Coleridge, the melody of Keats and Shelley, the narrative vigor of Scott and Byron” (Hudson 162-3). He lacked only the dramatic power of the Elizabethans. Tennyson was the most representative, though not the greatest poet of the Victorian era (Joseph 305). His “representativeness as a Victorian poet chiefly consists in the comprehensiveness of his poetic vision that encompasses the conflicting trends and voices of the age and upholds its dynamic polyphony” (Ahmed 16).

The temper of the age was influenced by the progress in science. Tennyson was conversant with the concepts of geology, astrology, and evolution, which contested and undermined the Biblical beliefs evoking crisis in faith. He was at once mystical and sceptical in his own temper, and so was peculiarly fitted to become the spokesperson of the doubts and unbelief and the quest for religious certainties of his age (Kalla 118). The crisis of faith had affected the contemporary thinking and tumbled many an edifice. However, Tennyson retained and sustained his faith in God while his fellow Victorians were groping in doubts. He was greatly affected by the crisis of faith, but not so strong as to turn him an agnostic. His attitude was one of compromise and he propounded a via media between materialistic science and dogmatic Christianity (Rickett 417).
According to Hugh Walker, "In Memoriam has been as a gospel to thousands of souls who have felt the movement of modern thought and yet been conscious of the need of religion" (302). The poem began as "an expression of a passionate, tormented grief" (Mayhead 232). Tennyson's poem "In Memoriam" is an elegy expressing his personal grief at the death of his friend Arthur Hallam. In it, he intensely grapples with the ultimate issue of human predicament. The poem is a poetic philosophy of life and death (Walker 381). It is Tennyson's attempt to reconcile science with religion. In this poem, Tennyson exhibits the resilience of faith in the face of uncertainty and unbelief (Chamling 63). In the opinion of Hugh Walker: "In Memoriam" contained something that appealed to all; to the man of science, who was pleased to find himself understood; to the man oppressed with doubts, who found many of his own difficulties powerfully and beautifully expressed by the poet; and to the orthodox believer, who was gratified by the final victory of faith (383).

The contemporaries of Tennyson regarded "In Memoriam" as a message of hope and a reassurance and rekindling of their otherwise fading faith in Christianity (Eliot 625).

The influence of the Bible upon the thought and feeling of Tennyson is delicately indicated "In Memoriam". The Prologue opens with a solemn invocation, "Strong Son of God, Immortal Love". Only someone who strongly believes that God is Love and Love is incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ could have written this (Dyke 245-6). The belief in the life beyond the grave and the meeting of friends and loved ones in the other world is strongly present in Tennyson's poetry:

Is faith as vague as all unsweet.

Eternal form shall still divide
Behold a man raised up by Christ!
The rest remaineth unreveal'd (Hill 224).

This makes us believe that Tennyson kept the faith in spite of the
doubts and unbelief prevalent in his age. In the face of the decadence of
faith and a personal loss, he solemnly declares; “That men may rise on
stepping-stones/Of their dead selves to higher things”. Therefore, there is
yet the possibility of a moral evolution (Ricks 67).

Despite the optimism expressed, Tennyson worried about God,
Nature and man; about science and its effect on belief; about the influence
of evolution; about life and its meaning (Daiches 1000). Tennyson had to
swing between faith and loss of faith. In the Prologue to the poem, he
refers to the doubt and crisis of faith:

Strong Son of God, immortal Love,
Whom we, that have not seen thy face,
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,
Believing where we cannot prove (Hill 205).

God is for Tennyson a perfect system, which cannot be fathomed, but whose existence is to be accepted in faith. If man tends to magnify his beam in darkness and consider it a universal illumination, it would be a mistake (Danzig 124). God alone is the supreme light that illumines our doubts and fears. In the macrocosm of God’s omnipotence and luminosity, man is only a microcosm:

Our little systems have their day:
They have their day and cease to be;
They are but broken lights of thee,
And thou, O Lord, are more then they (Hill 205-6).

T.S. Eliot terms “In Memoriam” a religious poem, but in quite a contrast as Tennyson’s contemporaries thought. He says; “It is not religious because of the quality of its faith, but because of the quality of its doubt. Its faith is a poor thing, but its doubt is a very intense experience. In Memoriam is a poem of despair, but of despair of a religious kind” (626). He had come to believe that the Christian faith would be victorious over the new ideas, but at the same time he entertained a fear that the prevalent scientific temper and positivist philosophy would dampen and cast a slur on the pure faith (Chapman 203). This fear runs through “In Memoriam”, and gets resolved only by an appeal to personal experience:

If e’er when faith had fall’n asleep,
I heard a voice, ‘Believe no more’
And I heard an ever-breaking shore
That tumbled in the God less deep;
A warmth within the breast would melt
The freezing reason’s colder part,
Tennyson is in no way a sceptic since for him doubt was precisely a doubt. The eighteenth-century rationalism and the nineteenth-century science brought about a kind of doubt. "In Memoriam" he writes:

Perplext in faith, but pure in deeds,
At last he beat his music out.
There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds (Hill 265).

There were moments when Tennyson's faith wavered and he was inclined to be pessimistic. He fought his doubts; he could not let his judgement be blinded. As he stood resolutely before the doubts that passed through his mind, he found a power to illumine him and dispelled all doubts. Ultimately he comes back with a reassertion of faith in God and
man ("Pessimism" http://neoenglishsystem.blogspot.com). In the Epilogue, Tennyson reiterates his thought and belief:

That God, which ever lives and loves,
One God, one law, one element,
And one far off divine event,
To which the whole creation moves (Hill 291).

"In Memoriam" is regarded as the archetypal poem of the mid-Victorian age. It gradually became impersonalised and became the pattern of any bereavement. It celebrates the common sorrows of his age, especially the sorrow of young death. The expressions 'widower', 'widow'd race', 'widow'd hour', refer to the same metaphor. It indicates the universal emotional of bereavement (Pitt 116-7). The poem brought solace to Queen Victoria, who considered it next to the Bible. This verse was a comfort to her at the loss of Albert:

Tears of the widower, when he sees
A late-lost form that sleep reveals,
And moves his doubtful arms, and feels
Her place is empty, fall like these (Hill 213).

No poet of the age was more interested in science than Tennyson. He was acquainted with great scientific works of the time, like Lyell's *The Principles of Geology*, Chambers' *Vestiges of Creation*, and Von Baer's work on embryology (Pitt 102). Even before Darwin's theory of evolution hit the contemporary thought, his poem "In Memoriam" showed recurring references to the theory:

Eternal process moving on,
From state to state the spirit walks
And these are but the shattered stalks,
Or ruin’d chrysalis of one (Hill 251).

Tennyson showed that his optimistic philosophy is not against scientific theories, but complementary to them (Chamling 63). In fact, he did not see the Darwinian theory of evolution to be a threat to Orthodox religion, because it was concerned with the processes and not the First Cause, God (60). He sought to reconcile science with religion. Tennyson saw in the new theories of geology and evolution new vistas of thought. They suggested and demonstrated the presence of the divine purpose in the universe and the perfectibility of human nature (Brett 21). When he writes “In Memoriam”, “Move upward, working out the beast, / And the ape and tiger die” (Hill 280) he accepted the theory of evolution. But later, when the proponents of evolution denied the spirituality in man, he says:

Let him, the wiser man who springs
Hereafter, up from childhood shape
His action like the greater ape,
But I was born to other things (Hill 281).

He prefers to see man as "the herald of a higher race" (280), the summit of the evolutionary movement. Tennyson looked upon evolution as the ascent of man and not his descent (Brett 22). The idea of the possibility of moral evolution is also suggested:

That men may rise on stepping-stones
Of their dead selves to higher things (Hill 206).

Christopher Ricks comments that the phrase “their dead selves” recalls Tennyson’s earlier self, and those of his Cambridge friends, which could still be part of a moral evolution (110). Tennyson believed that man however degraded, despised has the capacity to regenerate.

“In Memoriam” we discover that there is a progress in Tennyson’s mind and belief. From the initial stunned grief, through gradual
compliance, he moved to a condition of peace and serenity in which passionate regret is replaced by the consciousness of union with the spirit ("Pessimism" http://neoenglishsystem.blogspot.com). He affirmed the existence of God, vindicated faith in the midst of despair, and questioned, "What profit lies in barren faith". The section of the poem stanzas 50-58 proclaim a God of Love and Justice, who grants free will and immortality to man. He believed in this God. The beauty of "In Memoriam" lies in its capacity to destroy any simple contrast between faith and doubt. The poem posits that, "even agnostics can have religious feelings and Tennyson is the devotional poet of agnosticism" (Robson 50).

The influence of the scientific quest is also evident in "Ulysses" which was written soon after Hallam’s death. The poem expresses the desire to move forward and brave the struggle of life. From a sense of loss, Tennyson hoped for “A bringer of new things” and his ultimate aim is “To follow knowledge like an sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.” The phrases, “cannot rest”, “drink life to the lees”, “hungry heart”, “newer world”, “untravelled world” are indicative of the age’s scientific quest for progress and the unbridled knowledge. Science never rests, never attained, and is never perfect. It follows the law of progress (Chamling 61). Yet, Tennyson’s Ulysses is also indicative of a resilient belief in God. Ulysses leaves Telemachus to “Meet adoration to my household gods” as he “follows knowledge like a sinking star”.

Tennyson was essentially a religious teacher imbued with the spirit of hope, love, faith, and reverence. He employed his poetry to express the religious spirit. His religion was clinging to a faith, which is beyond the forms of faith. According to A. G. George:

And this clinging to faith was not the result of any blindness of judgment, nor of nay passive, indolent and superficial kind
of optimism: it was the outcome of a process of painful inquiry and a hard spiritual struggle. The poet valiantly fought his doubts and gathered strength; he faced the specters of the mind and laid them low; and thus he came at length to find a stronger faith of his own (257).

In the Tennysonian world view, Love is an answer to the existential problem of death and sorrow; “Love gives value to sorrow” (Pitt 112). Tennyson says:

This truth came borne with bier and pall,
    I felt it, when I sorrowed most,
    'Tis better to have loved and lost,

    Than never to have loved at all - (Hill 253).

The emphasis on Love gives the poem a Christian flavour, for Love is an attribute and the name of God (Pitt 115). The faith of Tennyson was based on this imminent God who is both king and father and manifests himself in the universe as Will and Love. This God commends the brotherhood of man and the necessity of love, and favours the evolution of the human race into perfect love and righteousness (George, A. G. 257).

Tennyson was confronted with the age’s faith and gloom, hope and despair, spiritual unrest, political aspirations, scientific achievements, social problems, patriotic passions, religious questionings, philosophic perplexities and wistful longings. As a poet he was sensitive to all these, and holding tenaciously to the English tradition, he attempted to address the predicament of his age in a kind of via media method. He reconciled science and faith. He believed that in the divine scheme of things, the will of God was slowly working itself out through manifold, constant, and perpetual change. He supported a divine revolution (256). The spiritual stance of Tennyson is that it is hard to believe in God, but it would be
harder not to believe him. He believed God not from what nature shows him, but from what he sees in man (Chamling 64).

Robert Browning (1812-1889) was undoubtedly one of those who consider the poet as a teacher and much of his poetry is concerned directly with the questions of religion and the deeper meanings of life. The basis of his philosophy is the confident and aggressive optimism (Joseph 314). As an optimist he was a moralist and a religious teacher, an uncompromising opponent of scientific materialism ("Robert Browning," http://www.risnaristiana.co.cc/). J. Hillis Miller compares Browning to "a huge sea - massive, limitless, profound, but, at the same time, shapeless, fluid, and capricious" (81). In the opinion of George Santayana, Browning is a prophet and a bearer of glad tidings, giving men the feeling and the meaning of existence (486).

Victorian Age was a turning point in English literature. The age witnessed the influence of Classicism, Italian Renaissance, British Renaissance, Individualism, Socialism, Utilitarianism, Neo-Classicism, Romanticism, Modernism and Scepticism, which brought about a lot of confusion and conflict. There were "the conflicts between art and life, art and morality, content and form, man and woman, classic education and progressive education, flesh and spirit, body and soul and what not" ("Robert Browning," http://www.risnaristiana.co.cc/). However, Browning remained unaffected by all these confusion and conflicts. He was an optimist to the core and he showed it in his poems. His was a very consistent optimistic philosophy of life. His poetry has immense variety, but his constant philosophical view of human destiny gives unity to it. He did not challenge the old dogmas, and held on to the conventional view of God, the immortality of the soul, and the Christian belief in incarnation. He developed a poetry that was innovative in form and style, with subjects
ranging from “murder, hatred, and decadence, to heroism and romance” (Hawlin 1). He was a romantic and a puritan who worked against the materialism of the Victorian age in his own way (Chesterton, The Victorian 27).

Browning firmly believed in a loving God and preached Him to be in control of the universe. He projected a God who is transcendent and immanent at the same time. The transcendent God is “self-sufficient perfection of a pure being”, and the “immanent God exists in creation” (Miller 110). Browning perceived a gap between creation and God and in that gap stands the poet. The poet is to be concerned about God to whom he is accountable. The poet is the spy of God. He is commissioned by God to go through the world and report its nature to Him (112-113). God is an essence pervading all things “in a thousand distinct forms, and delighting in the multitudinous variety of his creation” (Miller 92).

In an age when the minds of men were assailed by doubt, Browning speaks the strongest words of hope and faith in “Rabbi Ben Ezra”:

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be.
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in His hand
Who saith “A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all nor be afraid”

(Loucks 246-7).

The poem is essentially optimistic for “The best is yet to be.” “Rabbi Ben Ezra” is an invitation to trust in God and not to be afraid of anything. The speaker has grown wise through his years and so he tells his audience that they should not be concerned with anything because “Our times are in
His hand" and anything that happens to them, it is the will of God and God has his reasons. In “Rabbi Ben Ezra”, God is acknowledged as the Creator; “But I need, now as then, / Thee, God, who moldest men.” The Rabbi’s petition; “Maker, remake, complete – I trust what thou shalt do!” is a complete surrender to God the Creator. The reference to the “Potter’s wheel” has a Biblical reference to Jeremiah 18:3-6. God as the potter shapes human beings. As the clay is the potter’s hand so are we in God’s hand. There is also an allusion to Isaiah 29:16; “Is the potter no better than the clay? Can something that was made say of its maker, ‘He did not make me’? Or a pot say of the potter, ‘He is a fool’?” In a situation of flux, doubt and uncertainty, what stand certain is God and the soul; “Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure.” The Rabbi condemns the aesthetic negation of the flesh, and asserts the necessity and moral usefulness of the flesh and the soul:

Let us not always say,

“Spite of this flesh today
I strove, made head, gained ground upon the whole!”

As the bird wings and sings,

Let us cry ‘All good things
Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now, than flesh helps soul
(Loucks, 248).

In “Pippa Passes”, Pippa’s sings that we are only “God’s puppets, best and worst.” This highlights God’s power over his creation and our dependence on Him. The idea of God’s immanence is also proved by Pippa’s song:

If now, as formerly he trod
Paradise, his presence fills
Our earth, each only as God wills
Are we; there is no last nor first (Loucks 22).

There is a robust optimism and an invincible will, reflected in all the poetry of Browning. His boundless energy, his cheerful courage, his faith in life and in the development that waits beyond the portals of death, gives a strange vitality to his poetry. His firm belief in the immortality of the soul forms the basis of his generous optimism (“Poets of the Early Victorian Period,” http://neoenglishsystem.blogspot.com). Pippa sings and beautifully expresses the belief of Browning:

\begin{quote}
\textit{The year’s at the spring,} \\
\textit{And day’s at the morn;} \\
\textit{Morning’s at seven;} \\
\textit{The hill side’s dew pearled;} \\
\textit{The lark’s on the wing;} \\
\textit{The snails on the thorn,} \\
\textit{God’s in his heaven—} \\
\textit{All’s right with the world} (Loucks 28).
\end{quote}

Browning believes that God is guiding creation. God watches over the world and embraces it with his divine love. Men are in the hands of God, be thy conscious or unconscious of it. In his hands is order and beauty of life. Kenneth L. Knickerbocker commenting on the above lines says; “These lines are without question – dramatic, but Browning, I think, would accept them as expressing his basic view of man’s relation with the universe” (qtd. in Kapoor and Goodman 50).

There are three distinct aspects of Browning; the passionate singer of love, the curious investigator of the devious by-ways of human experience, and the bold fighter and staunch believer in the imperishable greatness of the human soul (Rickett 434). He found in love the supreme purpose and meaning of life (Long 480). His faith is based strongly in trust.
and love, and believed that human love is the reflection of the divine love, and reveals God’s existence (Chapman 202). God is love and in this love, the human race partakes. Love is a God-like quality; a transcendent value unbounded by an age, space or time. Browning offers love as a panacea to the ills of the age brought about by materialism (Kapoor and Goodman 51). In “Evelyn Hope”, the lover does not despair as he derives consolation from the optimistic faith that God “creates the love to reward the love”. True love is sure to be rewarded in the life after, if not in this life.

Browning believed that life on earth is predominantly good (Singh 84), and human beings were created for happiness (Joseph 314). Life for Browning was intensely good. He believed that life in this world is worth living because both life and the world are the expressions of Divine Love. The world is beautiful as God created it out of the fullness of His love (Chew, and Richard 1399). David in “Saul” is keenly alive to the pleasure of living and sings:

How good is man’s life, the mere living! how fit to employ
All the heart and the soul and the senses for ever in joy

(Loucks 193).

Although he harps upon the goodness of life, he is not blind to the evil prevalent in life. He knows that human life is a mixture of good and evil, of love and the ugliness, of despair and hopefulness, but he derives hope from this very imperfection of life. Browning sings of the delight of life, but has his eyes on the delights of the life after, for he believes in the immortality of the soul. His message is the triumph of the individual will over all obstacles; the self is not subordinate but supreme. His invincible will and staunch optimism made him a poet who spoke the strongest word of faith to an age of doubt. His energy, cheerful courage, faith in life on
Browning tenaciously upholds faith in a God who loves. The principle of love is a force that sustained his tardy optimism. His faith is secure and the honest doubts that pop up occasionally were shattered. He nurtured deep faith in humanity and a deeper faith in God. Nothing could challenge his optimistic philosophy of life, of love and his belief in the soul’s immortality and the pleasure of life to come. He says in “The Last Ride Together”, “Earth being so good, would heaven seem less”; an exclamation of one who has his thoughts in heaven. In his poetry, Browning speaks on behalf of God, the message of hope, love and faith, to the multitudes who are lost in the spiritual wilderness of the nineteenth century Victorian England (Subba 87). Browning left to a “waverer, faithless, pessimistic, analysis-tormented world” a noble legacy of optimism and tenacity of faith (Brooke 11). G. K. Chesterton remarks that the optimism of Browning is founded on the fact that he is passionately interested and in love with life. According to him, even if the heavens had fallen and the waters turned to blood, Browning would still be interested in existence because he is a happy man (495). His poetry, as a whole, is like the effect of the sunrise flooding the sky with joy.

Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), in his poetry represents most of the conflicts of the age - between spontaneity and discipline, emotion and reason, faith and scepticism. He represents his age most profoundly. He found his age passing through a period of immense religious and social disintegration of values (Syangbo 78). The extension of reason in all aspects of human life was “leading men to democracy in politics, science in education, criticism in religion, realism in literature” (Bowyer, and John 477). England was moving from an agrarian economy to an industrial one.
There was religious conflict and tension. Scientific learning burgeoned and Charles Darwin published his *Origin of Species* (1859) giving rise to the conflict between science and religion and created a chasm between God and Nature and proved to be a great dissolver of faith (Syangbo 79). Arnold experienced this conflict most agonisingly and turned pessimistic, more so because he attempted to "intellectualize the visions of the imaginative life" (George 25).

It was in this atmosphere of turmoil that Arnold found himself. He had learned simple and devout faith in revealed religion in his home, but at college he was exposed to a world of doubt and fierce religious questionings. He learned to face these doubts honestly and reverently but deep within was the conflict of the heart and head. While his heart prompted him to affirm the faith of his fathers, his head demanded proof and scientific exactness (Long 545). In *The Study of Poetry*, he asserts; "More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us" (Joshi 46). He turns to poetry to give vent to his despair and made poetry his religion. However, he "had no beliefs to put into poetry so much as a belief in Poetry itself" (Davis 67).

Arnold was distressed by the unfaith, disintegration, complexity and melancholy of his times, and he longed for primitive faith, wholeness, simplicity, and happiness ("Poets of the Early Victorian Period", http://neoenglishsystem.blogspot.com). He was perplexed with the general loss of faith, the loss of certitude in intellectual convictions and looked upon the social consequences of the loss of faith with melancholy and resignation (George, A. G. 261). Hence, his poetry is characterised by a note of melancholy and scepticism, which resulted from the loss of a creed.
The depth of the complexity and despair felt by him can be gauged from his letter to Clough in 1849:

My dearest Clough, these are damned times—everything is against one—the height to which knowledge is come, he spread of luxury, our physical enervation, the absence of great natures, the unavoidable contact with millions of small ones, newspapers, cities, ... our own selves, and the sickening consciousness of our difficulties (qtd. in Scott 6).

Arnold felt that he was breathing in a kind of a spiritual vacuum. He was in a predicament, standing on a crossroad of belief and unbelief, religion and science. He has lost his moorings, and confused which way to turn. In “Stanzas From the Grande Chartreuse”, he demonstrates the vacillating situation of his age as well as his:

Wandering between two worlds, one dead
The other powerless to be born,
With nowhere yet to rest my head,
Like these, on earth I wait forlorn.
Their faith, my tears, the world deride;
I come to shed them at their side (Chambers 91).

The dead world is the “world of orthodox beliefs and certainties,” and the one not yet born is “the world of scientific truths and demythologized religion” (Allott 5). It is a state of helplessness, indecisiveness, and fluctuation.

Although the note of melancholy and scepticism is present in most of his poems, the focus of our study here will be concentrated only on “The Scholar Gypsy”, “Thyrsis”, and “Dover Beach”. F. W. Watt writes; “The moods of loss and regret, melancholy and stoical endurance, find
their directest expression in such poems as “To Marguerite (Yes! In the sea of life enisled), ‘Dover Beach’, ‘The Scholar Gypsy’, and ‘Thyrsis”’ (24). “The Scholar Gipsy” is a pastoral poem, in twenty-five ten-line stanzas, based on a legend recounted by Joseph Glanvill in The Vanity of Dogmatizing (1661). Matthew Arnold supplies the essential elements of the legend in lines 31 through 56 of the poem. A.G. George says; “The Scholar Gipsy is the quintessential expression of Arnold’s analysis of the crisis of his times” (261). Arnold felt that good poetry animates, but “The Scholar Gipsy” at its best “awakens a pleasing melancholy” (Watt 25). The poem speaks of the “strange disease of modern life” affecting men:

With its sick hurry, its divided aims,

Its heads o’ertax’d, its palsied hearts, was rife (Chambers 86).

The poem is a critique of the era’s distracted immersion into the active life, where business and work are the most focused absorptions of people’s lives. To Arnold, the active life is a distraction from the contemplative life, where one should reflect on their inner self through a quest of learning and experiencing the world’s natural beauty and wonder, to better this ideal sweetness and light, and find “the spark of heaven”. The Scholar-Gipsy is in pursuit of a deeper wisdom because he finds the dry, rationalistic intellectualism of the Victorian unsatisfying.

“The Scholar Gipsy” represents the Victorian predicament: the rejection by the mind what the heart desire. It is essentially a poem of unbelief (Faverty 195). The Victorian decadent religious situation is manifested in these lines:

Thou waitest for the spark from heaven! and we,
    Light half-believers of our casual creeds
    Who never deeply felt, nor clearly will’d,
    Whose insight never has borne fruit in deeds,
Whose vague resolves never have been fulfill'd;
For whom each year we see
Breeds new beginnings, disappointments new;
Who hesitate and falter life away,
And lose to-morrow the ground won to-day –
Ah! do not we, wanderer! Await it too (Chambers 85).

The lines quoted above manifest the faith of the Victorians that is waned beyond recognition. They do not have like the Scholar-Gipsy, "one aim, one business, one desire". They are groping uncertain, unwilling to make deep assent to religion. They have no honesty of conviction and are only "half-believers" with "casual creeds", "sans unity of purpose, sans a sense of direction" (Ahmed 13). They are people who "never deeply felt, nor clearly will'd". The Victorians are wasting their energy in materialism and scepticism. Unlike the Scholar-Gipsy, they are not "Free from the sick fatigue, the languid doubt". The Victorians have "much been baffled" and "fluctuate idly". They wait for "the spark from heaven" as the Scholar-Gipsy does, but without hope.

Arnold confronted with the malady of the age, proposes that the solution is to "fly our paths, our feverish contact fly"; "fly our greetings, fly our speech and smile". He believed that only seclusion from the sordid materialism and maddening scepticism and seeking of truth can bring relief, rest and hope to the despairing soul.

"Thyrsis", written to commemorate the death of his friend Arthur Hugh Clough is closely linked to "The Scholar Gipsy", in form and tone. David Daiches comments; "The theme is really Arnold himself, his doubts and problems and introspective melancholy, developed in an elegiac context and (as so often in Arnold) in association with aspects of the
English landscape which are most appropriate to the contemplative mood” (1014). The poem is concerned primarily with the quest of truth.

The poet confronts the “storms that rage”; storms of religious controversy, storms of doubts and scepticism. The path to truth seems long now and the poet’s mind is clouded with doubt and frustration. The only solution is “to shun peopled society and dedicate to the quest of truth” (Syangbo 81). With the loss of faith despair sets in. The “happy, country tone” will lose its simplicity and charm and it will soon be replaced with the “stormy note/ Of contention-tost, of men who groan”. The heartaches and despair in the face of the loss of faith can only be cured by nature and so the poet in “Thyrsis” says:

And long with men of care thou couldst not stay,
And soon thy foot resumed its wandering way,
Left human haunt, and on alone till night (Chambers 108-9).

The realisation of the death of religion, the yearning for the spiritual rebirth, and the quest for truth is strongly presented in the poem:

A fugitive and gracious light he seeks,
Shy to illumine; and I seek it too (Chambers 108).

The Victorians have sacrificed truth on the altar of materialism. Arnold is of the firm belief that materialism cannot in anyway lead to truth and religion:

This does not come with houses or with gold,
With place, with honour, and a flattering crew;
‘Tis not in the world’s market bought and sold
(Chambers 108).

The pursuit of truth is tedious and few appreciate and follow. The seeker must be tenacious, because despite all odds, truth remains. The poet steps in with a note of hope; “Despair I will not”. The elm tree at Oxford
stands as a symbol of truth that is constant. The poem concludes in a note of optimism:

*Why faintest thou? I wander’d till I died.*

*Roam on! The light we sought is shining still.*

*Dost thou ask proof? Our tree yet crowns the hill,*

*Our Scholar travels yet the loved hill-side* (Chambers 109).

Another short poem that embraces a great and deep range of significance is “Dover Beach” which is considered a classic for its subtle, restrained style and compelling expression of spiritual malaise of an age. J. D. Jump opines; “As elsewhere, Arnold discloses his melancholy preoccupation with the thought of the inevitable decline of religious faith; and he expresses the belief that in a successful love-relationship he may realize values to which ‘the world’ is hostile” (317). Arnold “bemoans the loss of faith and the birth of a new ugly world” (Syangbo 82) of materialism and scepticism; a world of progress with little of ethics. The poem opens with lines suggestive of serenity, poise, and stability which Arnold desires for himself but is unable to possess:

The sea is calm tonight.

The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; - on the French coast the light
Gleams, and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay

(Chambers 110).

But soon the tumult and noise of the sea is introduced to presents the upheavals of the time affected by the spiritual uncertainties, bitterness, and paralysis. The waves bringing the pebbles and drawing them back produce the “grating roar”. Then the poet says that the waves:

With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in (Chambers 110).

The "note of sadness" is due to the "human misery" which Sophocles had witnessed. The poet witnesses melancholically the Victorian misery of the loss of faith. The material progress, science and discovery, newfound knowledge had not improved the human lot. On the contrary, they ushered in spiritual anxiety and bewilderment (Syangbo 82). Therefore, the poet laments the loss of faith as he refers to the crumbling of the religious edifice:

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd;
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world (Chambers 110).

In the conflict between science and religion, the Victorians have given credibility to science at the expense of religion. Darwinism brought in religious scepticism and faith no longer mattered. Agnosticism backed by materialism was the creed of the day. However the loss of faith has left the society naked. The retreating Sea of Faith takes with it the moral and spiritual basis for "joy" and "love" and "peace." With religion washed away the Victorian society stood naked, debased, dissipated. This leads the poet to attempt finding solution in the lovers' affection; "Ah, love, let us be true/To one another!" The world may no longer offer the comfort of "joy" and "certitude" and "help for pain," but the lovers can create their own interpersonal world where such pleasures presumably exist (Vere, http://www.associatedcontent.com).
The last stanza offers a bleak view of the world with "neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain". It also advances a recurrent Arnoldian view that most human beings survive through the deluded dream of a beautiful world (Syangbo 82). The poem ends in a note of pessimism and disillusionment:

And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night (Chambers 111).

The lines refer to "a state of spiritual darkness, obscurantism, as well as a process of a gloomy transition towards that state, a gradual withdrawal of spiritual illumination in the regime of a despotic intellect" (Ahmed 15). The poet is keenly aware of the terrible confusion caused by the conflict between science and faith, between advancing materialism and retreating Christianity. As the light of faith is no more, the Victorians are groping in the dark, ignorant of their identity, their situation, their cause and their master. The scientific advancement, materialism, new philosophies of life has given rise to agnosticism, atheism, religious doubts, and religious passivity.

The poetry of Matthew Arnold has the qualities of sincerity, dignity, and restraint (Bowyer, and John 479). True to his concept of poetry "as a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty" (522), his poetry is the criticism of life in the Victorian age. He was "a wistful wisdom, between doubt and faith" and the poet "of the profoundest hesitations and inmost misgivings of his age" (Drinkwater 247). Arnold’s poetry is a voice of a spirit almost crushed under the burden of life. The materialistic spirit of the age, which brought in religious decadence and unbelief, forced him to despair and resignation.
The early poems of Arnold were "the poignant though stoical expression of a baffled mind, a melancholy heart, and a despairing soul. It shows us what it was like to live on the "darkling plain" of the embattled nineteenth-century" (Watt 18). However, he was never content to be the poet of indecision and despair. He was concerned with morality, duty and work (17). In his later poems like "The Last Word", "Obermann Once More", and "Rugby Chapel", there is the call to the ideal of action and social commitment – the ideal of charity that goes beyond individualism, the secular and romantic (18).

D. G. James would speak of two Arnolds. The first Arnold was moulded by his father to "promote culture, education, democracy, liberalism; unremitting in the performance of his duty, dealing hardly with himself, the public servant." The second was the poet Arnold, "secret, fugitive, lonely and inviolable" (106). The Arnold of the prose was devoted to science and liberalism; and the poet was full of perplexities and despair. He had chosen poetry to express his grief and hopelessness (107), for he believed that "Poetry is the only voice that can be used to suffer in silence" (Davis 67).

Tennyson, Browning and Arnold stand as representative poets of the Victorian Age. They were poets who touched their age in a number of ways. They came from different backgrounds and lived life in varied way; but they all confronted the same human predicament of doubts, agnosticism and the loss of faith. They had to grapple with the complex issues of religion and spirituality. However, they developed different modes and levels of responses unique of each one. Arnold and Browning present a polarised attitudes and visions of life to the changing reality. Arnold assumed a pessimistic outlook, a despair and resignation. Browning manifested an unwavering optimism based on a robust
spirituality. Tennyson showed a Janus faced attitude of compromise. He was able "to amalgamate within his poetic consciousness the conflicting voices and attitudes of the age" (Ahmed 19).

Robert Browning was made of a sterner stuff. He and Tennyson stand in contrast, but a contrast that make them complementary, and this done in a paradoxical manner. According to R. L. Brett, "Tennyson, who was a Christian, demonstrates in his poetry that religious faith must always be accompanied by doubt, while Browning, who was not an orthodox Christian, maintains that doubt itself necessitates faith" (21). Browning is always shown as the super-optimist (Chapman 198), who showed optimism as a tolerance of a strong man, the evils and sicknesses of his society. Tennyson showed "a weary resignation, a sad acceptance that things must be as they are", a kind of a weak and insecure personality (199). Furthermore in the opinion of Raymond Chapman:

Neither Tennyson nor Browning wrote much religious poetry in the narrow sense, but they kept within the bounds of orthodoxy while being aware of the storms that were shaking it. Tennyson tended to seek escape from the shortcomings of modern religion into a fancied age of faith. Browning also became impatient with many of the outer signs of religion, perhaps from dislike of their narrowness and unaesthetic quality as much as from problems of belief. It was he who showed the better historical perspective, ready to satirize what is amiss in any age without condemning the whole (201)

However diverse the modus operandi they have chosen to address the conflict of science and religion, the common platform they had opted was poetry. In fact, in the face of the paralysis of religious doubt, Arnold made poetry his religion. He found in the pastoral elegy an appropriate
mode to express his deepening angst. Browning on the other hand chose
the dramatic monologues to deal with his religious beliefs. He believed
that faith being the commitment of the individual, the dramatic
monologues presents characters that are often in moment of crisis, as to
how they would succeed or fail such commitment (Brett 24). Tennyson
employed both the elegy and dramatic monologue for his purposes.
Browning searched in the Renaissance figures a mouthpiece for his beliefs;
Tennyson often looked up to the Greek mythology; and Arnold found
inspiration in the British landscape, especially around Oxford. In the
‘darkling plains’ of the Victorian crisis of faith, Robert Browning with all
his optimism saw hope, Matthew Arnold encountered despair and Alfred
Lord Tennyson sought compromise.


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