CHAPTER - IV

ARNOLD'S AMBIGUOUS ATTITUDE
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Arnold's criticism of the romantic poetry (for all his greatness as a critic) leaves one with a sense of disappointment. He, no doubt admired Wordsworth, Byron, and Keats. But one is not sure, whether he liked them for their purely romantic qualities.

As George Watson observes, 'Arnold, a poet in the tradition of Keats, seeks in his prose to extricate himself from a romanticism he both loves and despises'.

The question whether Arnold himself was a romantic or not is a much discussed subject as there are varied opinions about it. E.K. Brown, emphatically calls Arnold a romantic while Ludwig Lewisohn denies it and George H. Ford avers that he was something of a romantic.

According to Arnold's estimate, the chief poetical names from the age of Elizabeth downwards, includes Shakespeare, Milton, Spenser, Dryden, Pope, Gray, Coleridge, Scott, Campbell Moore, Byron, Shelley, Keats and Wordsworth. The significant omissions are found to be Marlowe Jonson, Donne, Marvell, Herbert, Vaughan and Blake. Milton and the
Romantics, constitute the living tradition of English poets who determined his attitude towards English poets. It is against such a background as this that Arnold stands both as a romantic and an anti-romantic. Arnold was both 'Cartographer and a product of this vision of the landscape'.

Arnold's position is very ambiguous and he is at once the continuator as well as a severe critic of Romanticism. A detailed examination of the split is called for, the split between his distinctive attraction and yearning towards the Romantics as 'the unassailed masters of a great poetic tradition and his conviction that it was a tradition insufficient to meet the needs of the modern world'. His literary objectives and accomplishments may be studied more critically, to define precisely the way he failed to grasp the sensibilities of a set of great poets to whom he was in great debt.

To what extent he was a romantic and in what respects his idea of poetry diverged from Romantic aesthetics, are the questions which clearly define the ambivalent attitude of Arnold, which in turn explains his limited understanding of the Romantic poets. We must try to account for the ambiva-
lence in Arnold's attitude to the Romantics, in terms of the difference in his sensibility as a poet and his values as a critic.

He failed to apprehend the spiritual sources of Romanticism and its great 'depth and catholicity and in his critical writings, proposed a view of poetry and of its role in the economy of the human spirit, 'which undermined its power and authority'. A failure in his own poetry, made him turn to critical formulations, which explained, that failure, but failed to offer any basis for the future of poetry. Arnold's firm belief that poetry 'can fill the spiritual void felt by a faithless age', the language of which must be simple, direct, plain and even must not lose itself in parts and episodes, and ornamental work ... but must press forward to whole, also justifies his distrust, of romantic sensibility. It is as a consequence of this belief that Arnold rejected his own poetry as well as that of the romantics and elisabethans.

He did not succeed in establishing rapport with Nature as Wordsworth had done, though "The Scholar Gipsy" and "Thyysis", are replete with memorable descriptions of Nature and her moods. His critical writings also show a
total lack of faith in the faculty of imagination. Further, Arnold never displayed 'a deep yearning for the infinite which has been held to be an essential characteristic of Romanticism. He also did not believe in a 'spiritual system of correspondence between Nature and the mind of man'.

He never possessed the powerful expansive ego of the romantics - the egotistical sublime of a Wordsworth or Milton which accounts for his dislike and disparagement of certain aspects of romanticism. His 'circumscribed taste' shut him from a considerable body of poetic works, which would have certainly helped him to reinstate and reinforce the social utility of poetry.

His critical power and the range of his judgement has been immeasurably narrowed as a result of his restriction of the emotional range of poetry to the sublime, solemn, melancholy, and pathetic.

Most important of all the handicaps is Arnold's inability to appreciate the romantic doctrine of human knowledge and poetry as set forth by the Romantics.

Arnold in his essay on The Function of Criticism at the Present time stated that the 'English poetry of the first
quarter of the 19th century with plenty of energy, with plenty of creative force did not know enough'. The essay bears testimony to Arnold's contention that the Romantics were chiefly held for the failings which marred the achievement of his contemporaries. He felt that the Romantics failed to solve the problem of making an adequate home for the spirit in the modern world, in spite of the magnitude of their talents and efforts.

Arnold's animosity towards the Romantics was presented in his preface to 1853 volume of poems. His preface, as D.J. James calls it, "is a counterstatement to what he knew was the greatest single statement of the nature of poetry which came from his romantic predecessors." He says that "those who practise Commerce with the ancients and suffer from them a steady and composing influence, do not talk of their mission, or of interpreting their age, nor of the coming poet; all this they know, is the mere delirium of vanity." His sole complaint against the Romantics was that Keats and others lacked form, the architectonic quality


which he had learnt to expect from his study of the Greeks.

His defiance of the Romantic tradition is found as early as 1848. His case against the romantic spirit was fully manifest in his letter to Arthur Hugh Clough:

"What a brute you were to tell me to read Keats's letters .... what harm he has done in English poetry. As Browning is a man with a moderate gift passionately desiring movement and fulness, and obtaining but a confused multitudinousness, so Keats, with a very high gift is yet also consumed by this desire; and cannot produce the truly living and moving as his conscience keeps telling him. They will not be patient, neither understand that they must begin with an idea of the world in order not to be prevailed over by the world's multitudinousness or if they cannot get that, at least with isolated ideas."  

He harps on the same point in another letter to Clough in 1852.

"Keats and Shelley were on a false track when they set themselves to reproduce the exuberance of expression, the

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charm, the richness of images, the felicity of the Elizabethan poets.⁵

These hints as found in his letters to Clough reveal the classical spirit he imbibed and they also reflect his firm faith in the ancients as the only sure guidance and the 'only solid footing'. According to him (at this stage) the really valuable poems are those that are 'particular, precise, and firm' concerned with human action, which most powerfully appeal to the great primary affections; to those elementary feelings which subsist primarily in the race. Holding up the ancients as the true models, he urges upon the contemporary poets to follow the ancients and he stresses the importance of the choice of a subject; the necessity of accurate construction and the subordinate character of expression. It is however difficult to sympathise with Arnold's concern for the classical, as he treats it as if it were a symbol for the inviolable. D.G.James is right when he says "the hunger for the classical in the modern spirit is a useless form of escape from its own nature and destiny and this is what is in Arnold's 'preface'.⁶

⁵Ibid., p. 124.

It is true that Arnold, 'a poet whose formative years covered a transition from the Romantic to the Victorian age', was to a large extent in the Romantic tradition. As Douglas Bush remarks Arnold's espousal of classical objectivity was in fact an endeavour to escape from himself and the wearing conflicts analysed not only in "Empedocles" but in his short reflecting poems - what is paradoxical about Arnold is that even in his praise of classical art there is romantic spirit, discernible i.e. he appears to be romantic about the classic.

This tone rings aloud, in his preface to Metope. He believes firmly that the power of true beauty of consummate form, though submerged, survives, while speaking about "a wide though, an ill inferred curiosity" on the subject of Greek art.

In this nostalgic yearning for Greece, there is a definite romantic element. Hence, the usefulness of classicism as an antidote to Romanticism seems limited. A look at the concluding lines of Sohrab and Rustum reveals that they are not derivative from Aristotle, Sophocles or any other classical authority, but are pure Arnold:

Orus, forgetting the highest speed he had
In his high mountain - cradle in Pamere
Aoil'd circuitous wanderer - till at last
The long'd-for dash of waves is heard, and wide
His luminous home of waters opens, bright
And tranquil, from whose floor the new-bathed stars
Emerge and shine upon the Aral sea

D.G. James speaks of the romantic spirit of Arnold,
when he says about the lines quoted above, "What could be
less classical than that?"

Though he started his career as a critic with an anti-
romantic stance, his heart was, truly speaking, with the
Romantics. He only objected to their wild disorder, while
he occasionally betrays streaks of romanticism in his dis-
content with life, his basic melancholy spirit. "Then we
have the essential Arnold, the elegist". In poems such as
"The Scholar gipsy", "Thyrsis", "Rugby Chapel", "The Buried
life," "A summer night", "Dover Beach" — there is a single
theme running as an undercurrent, and that is Arnold himself,
a spirit which can see no clear source of certitude or au-
thority and can find no way."

In Dover Beach he writes about 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

7Ibid., p. 62.
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain,

Probably, it is this dissipation that forced Arnold to turn away from his inherited romantic sensibility and vision, to classicism with a more confident and mocking air, and thus busily 'preoccupied with finding a modern equivalent'. 