

## Arnold's Classicism

“Who prop, thou ask'st, in these bad days, my friend?”

[**To a Friend:** Matthew Arnold]

With this question that concerns the whole life of Arnold, extremely sensitive to his age – an age of hurry, change, alarm, surprise, he starts, in a dramatic way, the sonnet **To a Friend**. And the rest of the sonnet provides us with the answer that his mental props in the ‘bad age’ in which he found his lot was cast, were the great figures of ancient Greece – Homer, ‘the clearest soul'd of men’, Sophocles, ‘the even-balanced’ and Epictetus, ‘the halting slave’, the first two being the poets and the last a moralist. Indeed, the Greek poets and moralists exercised a deep influence on Arnold's mind and colored his thoughts and style. He chose Greek subjects for poetic composition and rendered them with that sincerity, lucidity, clarity and simplicity, which the Greeks adored in their art.

“It is time for us to Hellenize for we have Hebraized too much” observed Arnold whose bent of mind was in favor of the Greeks rather than the Romantics of his century. His classicism comes out more in the execution of his poems than in their conception. The Greeks believed in cultivating the quality of lucidity, clarity, simplicity and directness. They discarded exuberance, richness and decorative expression. They subordinated the parts to the whole. Arnold cultivated these Greek qualities in his poetry. Arnold's poems are distinguished by clarity, simplicity, and the restrained emotion of his classic models. For his ideal of form, Arnold turned usually to the literature of Greece, abjuring romantic willfulness and vagueness in favor of classical lucidity and restraint. When he worked more deliberately in the Greek spirit and manner his style was often cold and dry. Reticence not rapture, economy not exuberance, harmony not hilarity, definiteness not dreaminess, lucidity not lavishness are the Hellenic traits of Arnold's poetry.

“Sohrab and Rustum” is the finest specimen of Arnold's Homeric manner. It is indeed a marvelously close reproduction of the classic style. The simple flow of the narrative, the reticence from personal reflection, the skilful repetition of sonorous names remind the reader at every turn of the poet's ancient model. The subject is one of those terrible situations which require delicate and refined handling. It strikes a note so high that it is with difficulty sustained. There is not a word too much, but from first to last the story is told with true Homeric simplicity.

“Balder Dead” is a fine specimen of Arnold's mastery of metre after Homeric manner. But the fault of his blank verse is the monotony of cadence. Arnold sacrifices variety to the rigid metrical principles of his masters. Like them he refused to divide his lines in the middle—with the inevitable result that his movements are fettered.

Arnold following his Greek masters nourished the notion that real great poetry is impersonal. This resulted in separation of emotion or personal colouring of imagination from the themes of his poetry. Thus in “Dover Beach” he faithfully voices the Victorian loss of faith, its restlessness and disappearing of public values. In “The Scholar Gipsy” he laments the decay of a generation. But one cannot say, he has achieved the height of

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perfection in separating personal elements from the themes of poetry; personal elements unconsciously creep into the poems. Thus, the theme of "The Scholar Gipsy", ostensibly about an Oxford student, is really Arnold himself, his doubts and problems, and introspective melancholy.

Elegiac poetry is most congenial to Arnold's mind. His elegies like "The Scholar Gipsy" and "Thyrsis" are modeled after classical manner. Both the poems are written in the Theocritan pastoral convention but the tone and emotional colouring are very Arnoldian. Moreover, the name "Thyrsis" is borrowed from Virgil's "Eclogues" and Theocritus "Idylls".

The long-simile, the simile of the Tyrian trader, with which Arnold ends "The Scholar Gipsy" is organic and devised after the classical manner. In "Dover Beach" the image of the ignorant armies clashing by night is, significantly an echo of Thucydides' description, in Book-VII of his "History of the Peloponnesian War", of the last disastrous battle between Athenians and Spartans in Sicily, fought at night in darkness and confusion and marking virtually the end of Athenian chances.

Arnold's poetry deals with human actions, not passions, in an impersonal and objective manner. In the preface to the poems of 1853 Arnold insists poet must seek their inspiration in the past, for action is the only theme of poetry, and it is in the past alone that action is found.

Arnold's poetry is the poetry of a scholar and a critic. He had learned from the Greeks that to be good a poem must have a good subject, must be beautiful not in patches but as a whole, orderly, lucid and sane. He disliked, though he had felt its charm, the insubstantiality of Shelly, Tennyson's jewellery and the eccentricity and obscurity of Browning.

Arnold's poetry is essentially the poetry of a refined, high-bred gentlemen. He never assumes the airs and affectations which are the vulgarities of poets. His artistic finish is, in fact, the graceful ease of a taste which is naturally pure but it has been sedulously cultivated. He never attempts to hide the barrenness of his thought by the luxuriance of his rhymes, or veils his nakedness in the involutions of studied obscurity. He never affects a false intensity of expression, or strains unnaturally after far-fetched epithets, and consequently his lines show no trace of spasmodic weakness. His muse is transparently honest, he nowhere pretends to express more than he feels, or strives at more than he can fully accomplish. Too dignified to be pretensions, too proud to be assuming, he neither apes profundity nor seeks to create an impression by startling phrases. He says what he has to say clearly and decisively, without any false show of wordallbing. He is careful to subordinate his details to the whole; with praiseworthy self-restraint he keeps his picturesque passages within bounds, and even when he describes a garden, allots no inordinate space to the colouring of his flowers. It would be difficult in all his poetry to find a single ornament which has been pinned on merely as a spangle. He never paints for painting's sake, but uses similes and metaphors to help forward the central idea of his poem. His work is characterized by self-control and reticence, and his strong, decided,

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telling strokes bring out the exact point which most materially assists the development of his thought or of his narrative.

Arnold is visibly restraint in his use of language. He is always careful in his diction; he does not bewilder with the false gaudiness of perpetual metaphor, or dazzle with the unnatural sparkle of constant antithesis. Every epithet has its meaning, and many are so felicitously chosen that they are in their application condensed pictures. Arnold is not rapid, exuberant or profuse, but stately, measured, self-restrained. His aim is unity of impression, sustained power, simplicity of effect.

Arnold's classical poetry has given us such embodiments of the Hellenic style as English literature had never before possessed. Behind the pagan lore and Hebrew elevation of "Lycidas" or "Samson Agonistes" speaks the voice of Milton and it is the immanence of his strong soul that gives to both their depth of harmony. So, too, through the classic paintings of "Hyperion" or "Ulysses", glows the youthful exuberance of Keats or the warm richness of Tennyson's picturesque mind. But Arnold without Milton's strength, Keats's gorgeous imagination, or Tennyson's pictorial fire, has succeeded, where they have relatively failed- in embodying the pure classic spirit in a statuesque form, almost entirely uncoloured by modern feeling. But he achieved this imitative success by the felicity of his artistic taste, and not by the ardour of his poetic soul.