

Mythological and Non- Fictional Elements in Matthew Arnold's Poetry

Marwan M. Abdi

Department of English,
College of Languages
University of Duhok, Kurdistan Region, Iraq

Abstract

Like many of the Victorian thinkers, Matthew Arnold as a Christian humanist, endeavored to highlight the ailments of the Late Victorian Communities which were afflicted with the Aches of Modernity. He infuses many romantic and modern elements into his works to communicate his universal message in the most effective manner. His poems represent heroic characters who are populating two different worlds; one Mythical and the other Real. However, these two realms always construct one platform for a uniform population and this makes Arnold's stories more universalized and turns them into an epic struggle between good and evil for saving 'Humane Values'. This paper studies some of his poems which represent the above mentioned, themes and techniques.

Keywords: Modernism, Mythology, Humanism, Civilization, Hybrid, Universal, Apocalyptic.

Matthew Arnold's role as a social critic began in 1861 with the publication of *The Popular Education of France*; however, the writer's poetry before and after the publication of that text and its preface, later titled "Democracy," conveys many of the same themes later present in his cultural commentary and it is quite fair to consider Arnold's works as an example of sophisticated and constructive social critique. In *Culture and Anarchy* Arnold highlights some of these perspectives where he condemns his era's putting high value on "wealth as a precious end in itself," and fetishism of "machinery," he advocates a societal return to the age-old task of perfecting the spirit (65). Being labeled as a so-called Christian humanist, Arnold mainly pointed his criticism towards the followers of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill and their Ideology, i.e., utilitarianism and Liberal and reformist movements. Disturbed and troubled by the social and political chaos, and by the inability of the church authorities and the government to deal with the ever growing confusion and unrest Arnold endeavored to describe an objective center of authority that all, regardless of religious, ethnicity or social background, could follow.

Arnold's prose style, with its romantic backdrop is simple, repetitive and effective. It reflects his critical thoughts on the virtues and the moral codes of the Age of Reason and so he did not aim at a poetic interpretation of the world, rather, "its task was to create a plain, clear, straightforward, efficient prose" (*Essays in Criticism: Second Series* 65). His poetry thus takes over the responsibility of conveying themes that are inexpressible in his delicate prose and it pursues the same agenda through, poetic techniques such as Conceits, Imagery or the invocation of mythology. Many of his poems create 'mythological' landscapes which contain 'real world people' and places. Such portrayal represents Arnold's modern England and modern world as an arena of a cosmic struggle upon which rests the destiny of human civilization. In Arnold's sophisticated artistic vision, heroic figures appear as the saviors of human virtue and only their leadership and struggle for saving far-seeing cultural icons can eradicate the tide of the modern evil's triumph.

One can easily interpret this warning and enlightening message as the outcome of Arnold's fatalism, or as a distrust of mankind that might pervade his thought. However, while he alludes to the catastrophic situations and raises the possibility of collapse of all humane values and relates this catastrophe to the modern man's moral failure, he poses a solution that is; a return to a 'more human' mode of existence which would be less spoiled by corruption, industrialism and maddening ideologies. This view is clearly expressed in his *Culture and Anarchy*, when he contrasts the Victorian Britain with that of Queen Elizabeth. He sheds light on the Elizabethan era's "splendid spiritual effort...when our coal, and our industrial operations depending on coal, were very little developed" (64-65). Arnold's antagonism toward "faith in machinery," and the related concern with returning to a pre-industrialized milieu, surface frequently in his verse as well (63). The speaker of "The Buried Life," is a good example who resonates this theme and gives voice to the breakdown of the values and an absence of social norms and values of city life:

But often, in the world's most crowded streets,
But often, in the din of strife,
There rises an unspeakable desire
After the knowledge of our buried life;

A thirst to spend our fire and restless force
In tracking out our true, original course (45-50).

As the passage suggests "The Buried Life" is a lamentation and so-called elegy for a humanity is lost and wondering to find its way in a chaotic modern context. The same sense of alienation from 'true values' is described in «Dover Beach». After connecting the waves of the sea to Sophocles' "turbid ebb and flow / Of human misery," Arnold who is presumably the speaker, remembers "The Sea of Faith," that "Was once, too, at the full," but now it is empty and one can only hear the wind's horrifying roar and the "...naked shingles of the world" (17-18, 63).

In the poems quoted above, the speaker draws the critical readers' attention toward the shocking and real image of the contemporary world while he infuses mythological rhetoric to this artistically crafted image. Roland Barthes sheds light on the usage of the 'first-person inclusive' in "The Buried Life", and describes it as "that ambiguous myth of the human community," a collection of people with fundamentally harmonious characters who share the same struggle "against the alienating forces of modernity (Barthes 196). This technique which is predominant in Arnold's works in various ways is an important part of the poet's strategy for mythmaking. Constructing one platform for a uniform population makes his stories more universalized and turns them into an epic struggle between good and evil for saving 'Humane Values'.

In the same manner, "Dover Beach," which is a dramatic monologue invokes an apocalyptic setting, i.e., the modern world community, whose moral values and history are subject to the same destructive natural forces that perpetuate in the ebb and flow. This recalls the strong images of the 'anthropomorphism of nature', i.e., the attribution of human characteristics to some humans which is found in world mythology. Here one can notice that Arnold adds to the "Wordsworthian nearness to Nature, the solemn sadness of those who look on her with the consciousness that her secret is still unread" (Clodd, 259). In its final stanza which invokes a Wordsworthian atmosphere, the poet gets engaged in a comprehensive definition of the Arnoldian mythic drama: "And we are here as on a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash by night" (35-38). These anthropomorphism and poetic representations of the human experience are highly colored with an imagery of mythological landscapes which is a so-called Arnoldian technique; Here the speaker locates a universal and generalized "we" which represents the mankind upon a confusing and chaotic cosmos whereon "clash" invisible, "ignorant armies". This could possibly refer to the ideological dangers of the "Barbarians, Philistines, and Populace" described in *Culture and Anarchy*.

The shadowy forces and the dark area at the end of "Dover Beach" are the outcome of Arnold's tendency towards transforming the catastrophic modern world into a hybrid realm which embraces both the mythical and reality-bound elements. When Arnold deals with a traditional subject belonging only to the classical realm of myths, Arnold inserts aspects from his own perspective into the narrative. "The Strayed Reveller" includes several notable instances of

this endeavor in which Arnold arranges as a dialogue between three Homeric characters. Here he begins to establish his setting firmly on the Hellenistic period; the characters' description and their speech suggests that the interactions is set in a classical setting ("Leaned up against the column there, / Props thy soft cheek"), various gods and archaic religious ceremonies come up in conversation ("In the town, round the temple, / Iacchus' white fane"), and throughout all poem the use of an archaic language ("Hast thou then lured hither, / Wonderful Goddess, by thy art") pervades the scene (9-10, 37-38, 76-77). The consequent introductions of "the Indian / Drifting, knife in hand," and "the Scythian / On the wide steppe, unharnessing / His wheeled house at noon," intensifies a strictly classicalist reading of the text (151-152, 162-164). This juxtaposition and the coincidence of these apparently nonfictional ethnicities with "Nymphs," "Centaur," and "Gods" which surround them, transfers those real life categories, on some level, to a substance with shared mythological features.

While "The Strayed Reveller" promotes Arnold's mythical and poetic worldview by juxtaposing mythological elements with others from the unwritten world, many of his other poems, equally intermingle myth with reality to achieve similar results without heavy allusion to specific myths. "Resignation" and "Stanzas in Memory of the Author of `Obermann'" demonstrate a technique through which Arnold mythologizes nonliterary categories and personages by casting them as the central and integral components of the world's historical representation. In his poem, "Resignation," Arnold describes a number of real ethnic groups as forces of nature, which have become significant due to their coexistence with 'Old World' landmarks. First group are the Muslim pilgrims "bound for Mecca," and their heading toward the city described as if they are following an avian migration route. He goes on to include: "warriors... / ...who watched the miles / Of dust which wreathed their struggling files / Down Lydian mountains"; "The Goth, bound Rome-wards"; and "the Hun, crouched on his saddle" (3, 4-7, 9, 9-10). Arnold concertizes each class of characters through treating the totality of any group's members as participants in the same stereotypical historical activities, thus inserting them into the background of a mythological painting.

In "Stanzas in Memory of the Author of `Obermann'" Arnold employs this method to the task of identifying individual characters as mythical champions. In that poem, Arnold instead of naming Etienne Pivert de Senacour, the author of Obermann, names and elevates two other of his intellectual idols. Out of the great "swarms of men" who populate Arnold's Victorian world, only two "have reigned / In this our troubled day" (176, 45-46). These "spirits," Wordsworth and Goethe, are described like the gods who have claimed a place at Olympus' court, and possess an immense power which is beyond the grip of the terrestrial mortals: they have the ability "to see their way" through the blinding ideological chaos which has been obscuring the landscape (45, 48). Within the context of this "troubled world," sobbing with the "ground-tone / Of human agony," and too deceived with immoral ideas to recognize Obermann's "strain," the few champions who are the right-thinking cultural leaders, and casted as savories of humanity, gloriously are named as the "Children of the Second Birth" (35-36, 40, 143). To what mystifying event can the speaker of the poem be referring with that cryptic phrase? Likely something related to how Joseph Campbell defines the process of rebirth in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*: "Within the soul, within the body social, there must be

— if we are to experience a long survival — a continuous 'recurrence of birth' (Campbell 11-12). Arnold's cultural saviors who undergo a second, spiritual birth, fulfill the world-restoring role of "The World Navel," Campbell's term describing sites, or persons, "through which the energies of eternity break into time" (Campbell 32). Together with the untold heroes from the virtuous past, Senacour, Goethe, and Wordsworth go beyond the limits and surpass all lesser men, no matter their status or station: "Christian and pagan, king and slave, / Soldier and anchorite, / Distinctions we esteem so grave, / Are nothing in their sight" (85, 149- 152). Nonetheless, while they are like spiritual kings who have "reigned," they also possess heroic flaws:

But Wordsworth's eyes avert their ken
From half of human fate;
And Goethe's course few sons of men
May think to emulate (53-56)

By contrast, the so-called vagabond in "The Scholar-Gipsy" is essentially a flawless hero, who embodies all the moral codes and virtues which are required to restore the world to a balance. In the poem, the speaker tries his best and puts much effort to study various geographic regions of Britain's rural and natural countryside, and finally he interweaves his treasured character into that landscape. Since the wandering scholar has disappeared from the view of his classmates at Oxford, and as he mentioned to be merely a character from an "oft-read tale" one can place him in the category of mythology (32). And yet, after retelling how, in the story, "the lost Scholar was long seen to stray" throughout the land, Arnold's speaker beseeches the Scholar to "Emerge, and resting on the moonlit pales / Freshen they flowers as in former years," evoking the conception of a landscape pressed between two worlds (53, 217-218). The Scholar, whose perpetual wandering marks him as immanent within the fabric of nature, exemplifies perhaps the chief virtue of the Arnoldian hero: "Thou hadst *one* aim, *one* business, *one* desire"; his mind is pure, unsullied by the conflicting ideologies that, in Arnold's time, intrude into one's vision of the absolute truth (152).

Conclusion

In much of his poetry, Arnold professes hints at his belief in moral absolutes. The world is a fundamentally simple place from the perspective of the speakers of his poems, but it is being chaotic and complicated by aches of modernism and various misguided notions about progress and morality. Armstrong names him as the poet of "cultural displacement, the refugee fleeing the 'infection' of fatigue, doubt and 'mental strife', but always between two worlds, like Margaret or Senancour's Obermann." (202). As a part of his project of restoring historical balance through persuading nations to a return to pastoral values, Arnold praises those scholars and poets who heroically perceive and portray these true values, as individual artists, like Goethe, Wordsworth, and himself, play a significant role in the unfolding of the cultural drama. The construction of a hybrid world, containing both mythical and real elements, enables the writer to give superhuman qualities to these figures to emerge as saviors. The poet's critical vision thus becomes universal through mythologizing the real inhabitants of the world. Arnold's envisioning

of his society's dilemma, along with the retreating solution which he offers are, optimistic in nature. E.D.H. Johnson explains Arnold's sensibility as a matter of his turning for "inspiration": "to the great humanistic idea which asserts that man is the measure of all possibilities" (Johnson 147). Johnson's argument shows that the Arnoldian sensibility, while at a surface level could be interpreted as pessimistic and despairing, actually puts forward a bright future which can be filled with the potential for goodness and human's greatness.



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