‘The Scholar Gypsy’: a pastoral elegy
by Matthew Arnold
B.A. I (Hons)
‘THE SCHOLAR GYPSY’: MATTHEW ARNOLD

- Title of the poem: The Scholar Gypsy
- Name of the poet: Matthew Arnold
- Age of Poetry: Victorian Age
- Type of poetry: Pastoral Elegy
- Class: B.A. I (English Honours)
- Paper: II
WHAT IS AN ELEGY

- Elegy - derived from the Greek word *elegos* - means a funeral song
- essentially refers to a ‘poetic’ meditation on the death of an individual or upon death itself.
- formal or pastoral elegy - dates from Theocritus - characterised by certain conventions:
  - the background of nature with the agents like shepherd or shepherdess
  - begins with an invocation to the Muse.
  - Protests against the very idea of death
  - Gives reasons for not accepting the death
  - Reconciles with idea of death - accepts the facts
The Scholar Gipsy does not begin with an invocation to the Muse.
It employs other generic imperatives such as the pastoral background
The poem begins:

“Go, for they call you, shepherd, from the hill;
Go, shepherd, and untie the wattled cotes;
No longer leave thy wistful flock unfed,

But when the fields are still,

Come, shepherd, and again begin the quest.”
The introduction of the ‘shepherd’ in the background of nature (hill, fields, etc.) is a confirmation to a ‘deviation’ from the pastoral convention.

Instead of taking in the guise of a shepherd, the speaker shows his intimacy with a shepherd.

This intimacy is manifest in the dramatic agility with which he asks him to respond to the ‘call’ from the ‘hill’ and then invites him to come and ‘again begin the quest’.
the richly evoked pastoral background sets in the romantic atmosphere of the poem - evident in the deliberate suppression of the identity of the people in the hill

also implies a ‘criticism’ of the present state of affairs - ‘untie the wattled cots’, ‘No longer leave thy wistful flock unfed’

This blending of romanticism and realism is the ‘informing spirit’ of the poem - it is manifest everywhere
“O born in days when wits were fresh and clear,  
And life ran gaily as the sparkling Thames,  
Before this strange disease of modern life,  
With its sick hurry, its divided aims,  
Its heads o’er taxed, its palsied hearts, was rife  

Fly hence, our contact fear!  
Still fly, plunge deeper in the bowering wood!  
Averse, as Dido did with gesture stern  
From her false friend’s approach in Hades turn  
Wave us away and keep thy solitude.”
ELABORATION....

- the ‘gaily running life’ of the past is contrasted with the life of ‘sick hurry’ with Keatsean sensuousness.
- This makes the poem an overt criticism of the Victorian life - ‘this strange disease of modern life’, ’tis palsied heart’
- Through the classical allusion to Dido the speaker advises the Scholar Gipsy - it also ‘communicates’ his bitter contempt for the deteriorated Victorian life - ring of escapism.
- This note of escapism vibrates with the music of contrast of present and past - remains echoing till the end of the poem.
the speaker gives up the ‘quest’
this giving up is not the conventional reconciliation resulting from the speaker’s realisation that death is a blessed reunion with God or Nature.
The reasons are obvious:
- the speaker denies the mortality of the Scholar Gipsy - no, no, thou hast not felt the lapse of hours’
- also refuses to accept life as it is - rather conveys a strong sense of hatred for the worldly affairs of his time.
Arnold’s poem occasioned by the quest for the Scholar gipsy, dead long ago
steeped in pastoral atmosphere
makes ‘deviations’ from the pastoral conventions.
To quote Oliver Elton:
“elegy and lyric fade off into the form itself of no little range and variety, which I have called associative poetry, where the ethical and reflective element easily overpower the elegiac, and which circles round a place, or a person, or both.”
Thus, what is loss to the convention is a gain to the breadth of vision secured by what Arnold himself has described as a “fusion of sentiment and intellect to the main trends of the modern world.”
Thank You!

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