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Europe's Philosophical Crisis in the Poetry of Arnold, Hardy, and Yeats

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Words from Rachel:

I wrote this essay for Professor Robert Archambeau's English Literature II class, in which I received my first formal introduction to Victorian literature and thought. At the beginning of the course, we were asked to describe our associations with each period to be studied and our expectations for the corresponding literature, and I soon discovered that the literature of the Victorian period contradicted most of my preconceptions. I was intrigued by the elegant and brutal antinomies of Victorian ideology and struck by the depth of consciousness in these works. Though the authors I analyzed here—Matthew Arnold, Thomas Hardy and William Butler Yeats—span nearly a century, this long time frame provided an opportunity to trace the breakdown of Europe's traditional religious-based value system and compare various reactions to the ensuing philosophical void. As is typical of my writing style, this essay attempts to synthesize numerous poems by each author and to address several relevant social issues. Despite the inherent dangers of simplifying philosophical concepts—particularly the complex mythology of Yeats—I tried to condense these ideas enough to provide a cohesive overview of this turbulent period. In addition to acknowledging the philosophical elements, I also came to appreciate Arnold for his subtle grace, Hardy for his petulance, and Yeats for his unique, disturbing imagery.

Europe's Philosophical Crisis in the Poetry of Arnold, Hardy, and Yeats

The years between the mid-nineteenth century and WWI were a period of tremendous social and philosophical upheaval in Western Europe, and the literary movements that emerged reflect the unique ideological challenges of this rapidly changing society. The literary theories of the later nineteenth century were reactions against both the Enlightenment of the previous century and the subsequent period of Romanticism. Literary realism, which emphasized realistic portrayals of the world and the common man, rejected Romanticism's idealization and misrepresentation of the world. Latitudinarianism, the primary religious movement of the nineteenth century, aligned itself with many aspects of the Enlightenment period, including the power of human reason and the shift of faith from traditional Christian dogma to scientific reason. But Latitudinarianism and realism did not share the optimism of the Enlightenment and Romantic periods. While the Romantics responded to the Enlightenment's undermining of

religion by finding truth, beauty, and hope in nature, these later movements were unable to find either convenient substitutes or adequate rational justification for human existence. World War I, an unprecedented event in human history, also had a considerable impact on the philosophies and works of many writers. Europe was considered at the crux of civilization, and England was one of the world's leading powers. With civilization seemingly at its highest point, the resulting global warfare had a devastating impact, bringing Europe to its knees physically, economically and psychologically. The mass destruction of WWI undermined Europe's sense of power and identity, and the assurance of a rational world of reasonable beings was utterly lost. These complex philosophical developments are explored in the literary works of Matthew Arnold, from the mid-1800s, the poems of Thomas Hardy at the turn of the century, and the poetry of William Butler Yeats, in the early 1920s. The periods in which Arnold, Hardy and Yeats were writing represented a break with the past, a period of confusion about the present and pessimistic predictions for the future. In their poetry, Matthew Arnold, Thomas Hardy and William Butler Yeats address the spiritual state of nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe in the wake of the Enlightenment and Romantic periods, attempt to define the ensuing philosophical crisis, and propose their bleak outlook for the future.

The primary philosophical concern for these authors was the perceived "end" of religion in society. Arnold, in his famous poem "Dover Beach," notes that the "Sea of Faith" which once covered the earth is now "Retreating, to the breath/ Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear/ And naked shingles of the world." This suggests that religion is receding from Europe and soon will touch only distant lands (and to imperial England, the world's "vast edges" also implies less-civilized peoples). Again in "Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse," Arnold argues that religion has no place in the modern world, saying to monks in a convent, "For the world cries your faith

is now/But a dead time's exploded dream." The poem contains numerous images associating the world of the convent with death, and the sixth stanza alone contains the words "silent," "stone-carved," "icy," "ghostlike" and "deepening night," which together connote a tomb-like environment. Two stanzas later, Arnold is more direct in his death imagery, saying, "Each takes [communion], and then his visage wan/ Is buried in his cowl once more...And where they sleep, that wooden bed/ Which shall their coffin be, when dead!" In a later stanza Arnold compares the Christian faith to the mythological religion of ancient Greece, saying "Both were faiths, and both are gone." Beyond his harsh rejection of the monks' religion, Arnold seems to be expressing some degree of remorse that religious faith has "passed" from the world as he considers his own childhood innocence, claiming "rigorous teachers seized my youth/ And purged its faith, and trimmed its fire." While he fully accepts the rationalist, atheist message of his "teachers" or "masters of the mind" (the authors he had read), his word choices suggest that in his state of childish innocence it was perhaps natural for him to have some concept of faith, and this had to be painfully and unnaturally "seized," "purged," and "trimmed." Arnold draws attention to religion's inability to provide answers in the modern world but also reveals how difficult it is for society to adjust.

Hardy also rejected traditional religious views in his poems. The significantly titled "Hap" suggests his argument from this first word—it is chance or happenstance that rules our lives, not God. The speaker claims that "If but some vengeful god would call to me...and laugh: 'Thou suffering thing,/ Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,/ That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!'" then he would be able to accept and cope with existence, "Half-eased in that a Powerfuller than I/ Had willed and meted me the tears I shed." His use of the word "if" implies the presumed impossibility of this deity's existence, and "some" and the lowercase unspecific

“god” suggest his complete abandoning of the assurance of a single, benevolent deity. Hardy suggests that even a “vengeful” god would be preferable to no god, but concludes that a world ruled by chance alone is the unfortunate reality. The poet’s philosophy is slightly altered in the poem “The Convergence of the Twain,” however. In this poem about the destruction of the Titanic, Hardy references an external force that directs the world, calling it “The Immanent Will that stirs and urges everything” and later, the “Spinner of the Years.” In this poem, Hardy reveals his naturalistic concepts of determinism, though this revealing is closer to acknowledging the Fates of ancient Greek mythology (often called spinners of destiny) than accepting the existence of a god with an independent plan for the world. And finally in Hardy’s “Channel Firing,” curiously narrated by the dead in their graves, we see yet another perspective on the existence of God. This poem directly mentions the single God of Christianity, who “sent [the dead] under” in the previous centuries and speaks to them now to assure them that Judgment Day is not yet come. But this God is closer to the “vengeful god” of “Hap,” as He says “It will be warmer when/ I blow the trumpet (if indeed/ I ever do...)” This depicts an unreliable God who likely has the ability to help mankind but instead leaves them to their own evil natures, for God says: “The world is as it used to be:/ All nations striving strong to make/ Red war yet redder. Mad as hatters...” Thus Hardy seems to concede that even if God were to exist, he would either have to be against mankind or distinctly separate, for Hardy cannot accept that a benevolent God could be responsible for and aligned with such evil creatures as humans.

Yeats, though he addresses the issue of religion less directly, presents the most explicit portrayal of the resulting spiritual and philosophical “void” which plagued Europe for more than a century. In the opening lines of his most famous poem “The Second Coming,” Yeats writes:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

This passage reflects Yeats' philosophy about history as a series of cycles, creating the image of a circular spiral pattern. The loss of communication between the falcon and his master suggests the lost relationship between mankind and our supposed intelligent guiding force. But the most significant image expressed so hauntingly in this poem is that of the "center" being torn asunder as the gyre widens indefinitely. As the threads of religion and faith in a reasoned world are loosened, what "falls apart" is society and civilization itself. If there is no rational guiding force behind history, then the result is chaos. It is significant to note, though, that Yeats does not claim that the chaotic void has been the constant state of history, but that this is an emerging crisis that occurs only when a cycle of history is coming to a close.

Arnold was a forerunner for Yeats' vision of history as cyclic, for in "Dover Beach" Arnold emphasizes the movement of the waves, "Begin, and cease, and then again begin," to compare the cyclical movement of the waves to cyclical human suffering as the "turbid ebb and flow/ Of human misery." Arnold has an equally dark view of mankind and the fate of his civilization, claiming that "the world, which seems/ To lie before us like a land of dreams...Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,/ Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain." If there is no grand plan behind the universe and our lives, then Arnold concludes there are no positive absolute values in the world like joy, love, or peace. Whereas the Romantics filled this spiritual void with the beauty and permanence of the natural world, Hardy and Arnold rejected this substitute. Arnold openly critiques the Romantic poets in his poem "Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse." He addresses Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, for both had a major impact on their societies, but felt that both were long dead and that their philosophical solutions had not carried over to the next generation:

For what availed it, all the noise
And outcry of the former men?—
Say, have their sons achieved more joys,
Say, is life lighter now than then?
The sufferers died, they left their pain—
The pangs which tortured them remain.

Though the Romantic poets may have faced the same challenge to find meaning in the world after the Enlightenment, the alternatives they proposed—isolation in nature, strong emotion, idealism, rebellion and individual assertion—have not solved the problem but only provided temporary distractions. Arnold rejected the Romantic poets and Romantic solution because he felt it was no longer practical, no longer applicable, no longer possible to delude ourselves with idealism. Arnold was one of the first English poets to espouse such extreme pessimism in poems set in his contemporary society. In his open admission that the world lacks all abstract values and purpose, we see Arnold's first attempts to rationalize the spiritual and philosophical void.

The crisis illustrated by Yeats and the pessimism of Arnold are equally present in the works of Hardy. In Hardy's poem "The Darkling Thrush," the speaker describes the current state of the world: "spectre-gray," "Winter's dregs," "desolate," "bleak" and "gloom." The third stanza describes Europe's spiritual landscape at the turn of the century:

The land's sharp features seemed to be
The Century's corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
The wind his death-lament.
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
Was shrunken hard and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
Seemed fervourless as I.

Into this desperate, deathly scene, a symbol of Romanticism, a cheerful thrush, offers a song "Of joy illimited." Yet Hardy instantly condemns the option of finding hope and beauty in nature, for the bird (symbol of the Romantic solution) is depicted as "aged...frail, gaunt, and small./ In

blast-beruffled plume.” The idealistic optimism of the Romantics is weak and dying, unable to stand up to the “blasts” of the later nineteenth century. To Hardy, the contemporary world is dark, desperate, and declining. The solutions of the past hold no comfort or purpose in the present, and Hardy proposes no alternative solutions to remedy Europe’s crisis.

The bleak perspectives of Hardy and Yeats must also be considered within the context of the First World War. In this war, mankind became, perhaps for the first time, aware of our potential ability to destroy ourselves, which seemed to eliminate the possibility of a reasoned universe, let alone a world guided by a benevolent God. For Hardy and Yeats, the war reshaped their perspectives on mankind and the limitations of civilization. Hardy was writing at the dawn of the war, and poems like “Channel Firing” reveal the author’s severe sense of foreboding about Europe’s future. The preparations for war are so powerful and terrifying that they wake the dead, who respond, “We thought it was the Judgment-day... Till God called, “No;/ It’s gunnery practice out at sea.” Hardy’s use of this association implies that his predictions for the coming war are hardly optimistic, and history proved that Hardy’s apprehension was justified. He links the coming war to the eternal violent tendencies of mankind, saying, “The world is as it used to be:/ All nations striving strong to make/ Red war yet redder,” and the vibrations of this preparation for violence are felt “As far inland as Stourton Tower, and Camelot, and starlit Stonehenge,” which as it travels inland, travels back in time to previous eras of glory and eventual violent falls. Hardy considers the impending war the inevitable result of man’s violent nature, but forecasts that this could be the event to destroy his civilization.

Yeats, writing at the end of WWI, not only confirms Hardy’s predictions of the devastation of the war but also claims that history is coming to the terrifying end of its present cycle. In his poem “The Second Coming,” Yeats describes the present state of Europe, ravaged

by war, as “the blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/ The ceremony of innocence is drowned.” Europe has reached a turning point, its innocence is lost, and all that is left is violence and destruction. Yeats claims that the world is on the verge of a new period, the “Second Coming,” though what he describes is hardly the messianic age of peace associated by western Christianity with the Second Coming of Christ. While Hardy’s forecasts were bleak, Yeats presents a horrifying picture of the creature that will lead this new era:

...somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs...
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

The creature Yeats describes is a threatening, ancient, heartless “beast,” and as a sphinx, a riddle to modern man. The beast, which perhaps represents the mechanic, blind violence of the war itself, is going to bring the “twenty centuries” since the life of Christ into the next cycle of history, though this will likely be a traumatic shift, as it means the destruction of all progress of Western civilization. The war, as well as previous violent rebellions in his homeland, shaped Yeats’ understanding of human nature and contributed significantly to his grim forecasts for the future.

Arnold, even fifty years before the war, believed the old world was coming to a painful close and a new period of history would soon begin. His poem “Dover Beach” ends with the lines “And we are here as on a darkling plain/ Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight/ Where ignorant armies clash by night.” Though Arnold could have no premonition of the global warfare of the next century, he was already confronted with the danger of senseless violence,

which could potentially bring an end to his society. And like Hardy and Yeats, Arnold had a pessimistic view of the future, for the unknown always sparks fear. In the poem “Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse,” Arnold describes the problems of this transitional period, characterized as being stuck between two worlds. While escaping from the modern world to visit a medieval monastery, the speaker says:

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.

After rejecting the philosophies and theologies which formerly constructed Europe’s worldview, Arnold and his contemporaries were left with a world void of meaning and comprehension, and though they hoped something new would arrive to restore this meaning, they were powerless to induce its “birth.” Several stanzas later, Arnold writes:

Years hence, perhaps, may dawn an age,
More fortunate, alas! than we, . . .
. . . Sons of the world, oh, speed those years;
But, while we wait, allow our tears!

Arnold believed that his civilization had been irrevocably altered by the intellectual and philosophical crisis of the nineteenth century, but as history must always progress into the unknown, he maintained more optimism than Hardy or Yeats that a period of relative stability could eventually develop.

Despite the overwhelming pessimism of the period, Arnold and Yeats attempted to propose alternative sources for meaning in the modern world. In Arnold’s poem “Dover Beach,” the narrator observes the violence and misery of the world, and declares to his lover, “Ah, love, let us be true/ To one another!” for there is nothing else in the world on which to rely. Arnold suggests that because no abstract, eternal values exist, the individual must create meaning

through personal contact and relationships with other individuals. This option, however likely to suffice as the sole meaning we can create in our lives, is nevertheless Arnold's preliminary attempt to rectify this crisis. As one critic notes, in Arnold's poetry he "provides a record of a sick individual in a sick society," and it is only in his later prose that he truly takes on the role of "healer' in a sick society" (Arnold, 1473).

In contrast to Arnold's hope in personal relationships, Yeats suggests that meaning can be created in individual commitment to a social or political cause. In his poems "September 1913" and "Easter 1916," Yeats addresses the political struggles in Ireland, his homeland, and urges his audience to live up to the heroic legacy of Ireland's past by fighting valiantly for the nationalist cause. In the latter poem, written after a nationalist uprising was violently crushed by the British, Yeats honors the individuals who fought and died for the cause, claiming that their lives are essentially validated by this single act of heroism. Though he questions the violent means and the permanence of the victory—"Was it needless death after all?"—Yeats concludes that a "terrible beauty is born" as a result of the incident. While "terrible beauty" seems a paradox, Yeats accurately depicts the disturbing reality of a society where even personally created values are indelibly entwined with violence and self-destruction.

Despite these faint glimmers of hope, the overwhelming sentiments in the poetry of Arnold, Hardy, and Yeats are distrust of the past, cynicism about the present and grim foreshadowing of the world's unknown future. These authors used poetry as a vehicle to define and explore possibilities for coping with the philosophical crises facing Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and their work provides an important record of the intellectual and psychological impact of major social and political events of the period. While (fortunately) Arnold was more accurate than Hardy or Yeats in his predictions of the future of

Western civilization, some aspects of the philosophical crisis continue to pervade contemporary society, and the ideas of all three authors remain relevant today

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