

WHAT IS YOUR CREED?

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LIFE offers many problems and equally as many ways of solving them. This world seems quite unintelligible at times, and we wonder what it all means. What we believe, or what our creed, is often a question of doubt. I am not promising any solutions here. Merely should I like to offer a casual glance at the views of life held by some of the British poets from the time of Wordsworth. These men dedicated their lives to a study of the poetic, artistic, emotional, and philosophic phases of life.

Wordsworth, in *London*, in 1802, laments that the wealthiest men are considered the best men, that people measure worth in gold. Their lives are dedicated to rapine, avarice, and expense. They do not find worth in books, nature, and innocence. "Plain living and high thinking are no more," he says.

In other poems, Wordsworth bids us feed the soul with high objects and enduring things. We are out of tune with nature, and witness her beauties as a matter of course. We neglect our powers in the rush of getting and spending. Wordsworth solves his own problems in turning to the beauty of secluded scenes, and storing his memory with pictures that will be of comfort to him always. He finds nature uplifting and sublime. In her he hears the call of humanity.

In considering what nature was to him in his youth, he feels that a glory has passed from her. "The child is best philosopher," says he. New from Heaven, he has not learned to grasp the pleasures Earth offers, and thereby, forget his heavenly home. The intimate, passionate love of nature passes with youth, but suffering with humanity gives new interpretation to her appeals.

Though many of Wordsworth's poems picture scenes of solitude with nature, we must not assume that he would prefer the quiet of

nature to the turbulent call of humanity. In the splendid poem, *Elegiac Stanzas*, he says:

“Farewell, farewell the heart that lives alone,
Housed in a dream at distance from the Kind!
Such happiness wherever it be known
Is to be pitied; for 'tis surely blind.”

Wordsworth does not see in death, a barrier. In the pathetic little poem, *We Are Seven*, he shows the belief of a simple, little country child that the two in the church-yard are still in the family circle:

“‘How many are you, then,’ said I,
‘If they two are in Heaven?’
Quick was the little Maid’s reply,
‘Oh Master! we are seven.’”

Wordsworth does not believe that we should live in preparation for the next life, but rather, that we find our all in this life.

“Not in Utopia, subterranean fields,
Or some sequestered island, Heaven knows where!
But in the very world, which is the world
Of all of us—the place where in the end
We find our happiness, or not at all!”

It seems to me *a propos* at this time to consider Coleridge’s views of nature in comparison with those held by Wordsworth. Coleridge does not hear the “still, sad music of humanity,” nor, yet, find quiet peace and comfort in his clouds and winds. Rather does his spirit see human liberty in their freedom. He thinks of France, at that time, bursting her chains, only to wear heavier ones, falsely engraved with the name of Freedom. In despair, he feels that true liberty is only to be found on sea cliffs, or in the winds and waves. Nor is there comfort for his turbulent spirit in the calm of nature. He *sees* the beauties of nature, but cannot *feel* them as does Wordsworth. Coleridge believes only when the soul sends sweet thoughts, can nature be of comfort to us.

“I may not hope from outward forms to win
The passion and the life whose fountains are within.”

Byron is one who will not acknowledge obeisance to any power outside himself. I have been unable to find anything in his writings that would suggest his believing God neither omnipotent nor benevolent, although I think Browning is crediting him with such a belief in *Caliban Upon Setebos*. In Byron's *Manfred*, the discussion between Manfred and the Abbot throw some light on this subject. Manfred persistingly refuses to beg forgiveness from a Power to whom he feels he owes nothing. He says:

"The mind which is immortal makes itself
Requital for its good or evil thoughts—
Is its own origin of ill and end
And its own place and time: its innate sense."

In crediting man for what he is and does, Byron makes no allowances. He lacks in the sympathy found in the nature-loving Wordsworth. At least, so it seems in comparing the poems of each poet on Napoleon Buonaparte. Byron sees naught to pity in the conquered Napoleon. Wordsworth sees that the fault lies with the age, and therefore, finds it in his heart to grieve for the man. "What knowledge could he have for governing?" he asks. We train our governors in the knowledge of battles, and neglect to teach them to be wise and good. We do not offer them books, leisure, and perfect freedom, accompanied by "every-day talks" with the "every-day man." Thus Wordsworth reasons, understanding, and can find it in his heart to pity.

Turning our thoughts again to this theory of the omnipotence or benevolence of God, we find a poet who accepts neither theory, but rather with deep founded faith in God leads us into intellectual discourses on this life and the one to come. This man is the comforting poet, Browning. Throughout his *Andrea Del Sarto* is expressed the belief that we are in God's hands, that all is as God overrules, and that God is just. In *Rabbi Ben Ezra* there is a calm trust in God's plans. An appealing comfort, outgrowing from faith, is expressed in the words:

"All I could never be,
All, men ignored in me
This, I was worth to God"—

In *Saul*, he says, "I have lived, seen God's hand through a lifetime,

and all was for the best." He speaks of the submission of "man's nothing-perfect to God's all-complete." He believes that by obedience in spirit he climbs to God's feet. The *love in man's nature* must measure only a small part of the all-love which is God. That there is an all-powerful and benevolent God, Browning seems never to doubt. Equally sure is he of an after-life. Speaking of the dead Evelyn Hope, he says, "God creates the love to reward the love." He believes that he and she will love in a future life. The disappointed painter, Andrea Del Sarto, is convinced of other chances in Heaven. But, Browning is not one who would sacrifice life on this earth to the attainment of a future life. In *Time's Revenge*, he says:

"There may be heaven ; there must be hell ;
Meantime there is our earth here"—

Rabbi Ben Ezra well tells of the beauty there is to be found in life, with age as a crowning glory.

Keats does not try to solve life's problems for us. He has but one god, which to him is all in all, and that god is beauty. He sees beauty in melancholy, even. I think we shall find the consideration of his views on melancholy comforting. He offers us a method of procedure, when a melancholy spell is on us. He tells us not to wish to die, nor to choose sullen companions to be with us in our gloom. Rather seek the rose, the rainbow, that which is beautiful. Melancholy and joy are akin, and only those who have drunk with joy to the last drops see true melancholy. Such people know "the sadness of her might." In reading Keat's, *Ode on Melancholy*, we somehow feel that we would be deprived of something worth while, if we were never to experience a depression of spirits. And, we recall that our last spell of the "blues" was really aching pleasure. Keats died before he had reached the years of thoughtfulness, or, perhaps, he would have added solutions to life's problems equal to the most intellectual which poets have offered us. Personally, I am enthusiastically satisfied in the one panacea he offers:

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

Shelley and Arnold both seem to miss the same things in life, though they differ in their manner of solving life's problems. Shelley, in dejection, claims that life offers him "neither fame, power, love,

leisure, or content in meditation," while Arnold, in his *Dover Beach*, says that life only *seems* to lie before us like a land of dreams, that it really has "no joy, nor love, nor light, nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain." Shelly does not seek to solve the problems life offers. He merely looks for some comfort in nature and solitude. He is ever seeking the ideal which is not to be found on earth. Enamoured of ideal loveliness, the poet pursues his vision throughout the universe, vainly longing for some mortal realization of his love. Arnold believes it one's duty to persistently make the effort to solve life's problems of just what this world is, man's relation to it and God, and God's relation to all. Arnold doubts, however, the possibility of finding the answer to "these obstinate questionings." In *Dover Beach*, he hears an eternal note of sadness in the sound of the waves tossing pebbles against the rocks, and he likens the sound to the ebb and flow of human misery. He says that his "sea of faith" was once at full tide, but now he hears only the long withdrawing roar. In *Self-Dependence*, Arnold tells how he was weary of asking what he is, and what he ought to be. He turns to nature, and calls on the sea and stars to calm him, asking how his soul may become vast like them. The answer they give is:

"Would'st thou be as these are?
Live as they."

They are not distracted by things around them, nor ever demanding love, amusement, and understanding from the outside. They use all their powers toward fulfilling their own tasks. And so the lesson this poem has to teach us is:

"Resolve to be thyself; and know that he,
Who finds himself loses his misery!"

But he finds that nature cannot give complete comfort, for there are some things which she cannot understand. "Ah, child!" she cries, "That strife divine—Whence was it, for it is not mine?"

Arnold finds in nature an inspiration, "A world above man's head, to let him see how boundless might his soul's horizon be." We cannot always, however, labor under the light of inspiration. It comes in its own mysterious way after which we must carry out its divine bidding in darkness. Such is, I believe, this life of ideals and routine. The recurrent conception of the ideal serves to en-

lighten what would otherwise be the dark world of slaves. Of the same thought is the following quotation from the *Rubiyat*:

“Then to the rolling Heaven, itself, I cried,
Asking, ‘What lamp had Destiny to guide
Her little Children stumbling in the Dark?’
And—‘A blind Understanding!’ Heaven replied.”

Arnold's views on immortality are expressed in a poem called, *Immortality*. He bids us not to cast down our burdens here, in favor of ease in a life to come. He questions whether the immortals would welcome the failures of this world. Nor, can we put off toiling until we reach the next world, saying,

“‘Then shall I begin.’
‘No, No! the energy of life may be
Kept on after the grave, but not begun.’”

Only he, who has unceasingly struggled and won his battles here, will pass on to eternal life.

Arnold, in his lesson of *Self-Dependence* does not mean for us to attain the goal through selfishness. He espouses the idea of service to others in the beautiful poem about his father. *Rugby Chapel* immortalizes those men who are the real leaders, the shepherds of the world.

Tennyson, like Browning, has all faith, but, unlike Browning, does not seek to convince through intellectual argument. He is the blind optimist. The Lady of Shalott saw always softened shadows of real life. As soon as she saw life, as it really is, she no longer could exist. And so, I draw the moral that when the idealist faces the facts, his ideals are shattered. I do not know if Tennyson meant that such a conclusion be drawn from his poem, however. Although *The Higher Pantheism* is not lacking in the usual beauty of Tennyson's poems, I feel its optimism to be aggressive, rather than convincing. It seems to me to be of the same spirit as

“Pish!
He's a good fellow, and 'twill all be well.”

One thing is certain, and that is that Tennyson does not sympathize with attaining one's ideal through solitude. *The Lady of Shalott*

and *The Palace of Art* both prove the fallacy of such a theory. In the latter poem, he recommends life in a glen with other humans, and teaches that we should share what we have of beauty with others. His soul, starving after three years alone in the palace of art, and beauty, and just the lovely things of life, cries:

“‘Make me a cottage in the vale,’ she said,
 ‘Where I may mourn and pray,
 Yet pull not down my palace towers, that are
 So lightly, beautifully built;
 Perchance I may return with others there
 When I have purged my guilt.’”

William Morris was never forgetful of the serious issues of life. He protested against the commercialism of modern industry, and wanted sweeping social and industrial reforms. In *The Voice of Toil* he appeals to the laboring man:

“Let dead hearts tarry and trade and marry,
 And trembling nurse their dreams of mirth,
 While we the living our lives are giving
 To bring the new world to birth.

“Come, shoulder to shoulder, ere earth grows older!
 The cause spreads over land and sea;
 Now the world shaketh, and fear awaketh,
 And joy at last for thee and me.”

In the year 1915, the world lost a very great poet, one who idealized whate'er he touched. Stephen Phillips saw beauty in human passion. He did not think grief should be avoided. We may cherish his idealization of grief. “I have but wept on the pages of a book,” says his Francesca in that emotional tragedy, *Paolo and Francesca*. And whene'er we are inclined to think little of this human lot of ours, pray let us reread *Marpessa*. A few lines are quoted here:

“And most I remember of all human things,
 My mother; often as a child I pressed
 My face against her cheek, and felt her tears;
 Even as she smiled on me her eyes would fill.

Until my own grew ignorantly wet;
 And I in silence wondered at sorrow.
 When I remember this, how shall I know
 That I myself may not, by sorrow taught,
 Accept the perfect stillness of the ground."

* * *

"Yet, I being human, human sorrows miss.
 The half of music, I have heard men say,
 Is to have grieved.

* * *

". . . I would scorn
 To elude the heaviness and take the joy,
 For pain came with the sap, pangs with the bloom:
 This is the sting, the wonder."

And so our thoughts may ramble on amid such scattered and casual reading, finally to arrive again at the question, *What is your creed?* Some say what, does not matter so long as you believe it. And others like our delightful Bobbie, remind us,

"And Oh! be sure to fear the Lord alway,
 And mind your duty, duly, morn and night;
 Lest in temptation's path ye gang astray,
 Implore His counsel and assisting might:
 They never sought in vain that sought the Lord aright."