Matthew Arnold’s The Scholar Gipsy

‘The Scholar Gipsy’ as a Pastoral Elegy

Matthew Arnold has been hailed as the greatest elegiac poet of the Victorian age. ‘The Scholar Gipsy’ is a monumental work on which Arnold’s fame substantially rests. It is also an impersonal elegy that laments the death of Faith in the age of materialism. The poet finds in his age only ‘sick hurry’ and ‘divided aims’. The people are “vague half believers of casual creeds.” A deep melancholy undertone can be discerned throughout the poem. Gerrod writes:

“If I had to define Arnold’s place in poetry, I should be disposed to say of him quite simply, that he is the greatest elegiac poet in our language.”

Milton’s ‘Lycidas’, Shelley’s ‘Adonais’ and Tennyson’s ‘In Memorium’ are undoubtedly great elegies. They are, however, personal elegies lamenting the death of individuals. But in the case of Matthew Arnold, the entire body of his poetry is elegiac – sometimes personal and sometimes impersonal. A great critic has remarked: “Nothing in Arnold’s verse is more arresting than its elegiac element.”

Like Arnold’s ‘Thyris’, ‘The Scholar Gipsy’ is a pastoral elegy, deeply steeped in classical lore. The poem, pastoral in setting, is based on an old legend, narrated by ‘Glanvill in Vanity of Dogmatising (1661)” of an “Oxford Scholar poor”, who tired of seeking preferment, joined the gypsies to learn their lore, roamed over the world with them, and still haunts the oxford countryside. The Scholar joined their hand, became one of them, and in course of time they revealed to him the treasures of their secret and mysterious knowledge and wisdom. The life of Scholar gipsy is an example of the pursuit of knowledge, wisdom, contentment and abstinence from material pursuits.

‘The Scholar gipsy’ is a pastoral elegy dealing with the life of the shepherds, their joys and sorrows, their simple life and love in the heart of nature. Theocritus, Bion, Moschus, Virgil initiated a pattern of verse known as pastoral poetry, and Arnold is one of their successors.
Nature in pastoral poetry is idealized and serves as a background of the human drama. The poet has, of course, introduced a shepherd in the poem, whom he dismisses at the earliest opportunity. But he himself is not shepherd. He is only a person in quest of the Scholar Gipsy. So, ‘The Scholar Gipsy’ is a pastoral poem but the spirit breathed into it, is typically Victorian – the spirit of unrest.

‘The Scholar Gipsy’ is an elegy, but does not lament the death of an individual unlike ‘Lycidas’, ‘Adonais’ and ‘In Memorium’. In ‘The Scholar Gipsy’ the poet laments the death of an age, of religious faith, of the treasured value of life. He observes at the past in a nostalgic haze. Faith is dying, people are between two worlds – one dead and other powerless to be born. There is feverish excitement everywhere. People are in the darkling plain:

“But fly our paths, our feverish contact fly:

For strong the infection of our mental strife.

Which, though it gives no bliss, yet spoils for rest,

And we should win thee from thy own fair life.”

The tone of the poem is elegiac; for “it is the natural tone of an agnostic”, says Hugh Walker; “who is no jubilant, but reflectful of the vanished faith – regretful of its beauty, and regretful of lost promise.

The most important feature of this elegy is that the poet does not lament the fate of the Oxford scholar. Instead, he laments the deceased modern life – its ‘sick hurry’ its ‘divided aim’, its heads o’eraxed, its palsied hearts’. In the words of Arnold:

“O born in days when wits were fresh and clear,

And life ran gaily as the sparkling Thames,

Before this strangled disease of modern life,

With its sick hurry, its divided aims,

Its heads o’eraxed, its palsied hearts was rife”

Thus, the tone of the poem has modern touch. In structure the poem is, undoubtedly pastoral, but the spirit breathed in it is typically Victorian – the spirit of unrest seeking spiritual illumination. According to many great critics, Arnold is an elegiac poet par excellence. Hugh Walker has also remarked:

“Nothing in Arnold’s verse is more arresting than its elegiac element.”