**"The Buried Life" - Matthew Arnold**

Light flows our war of mocking words, and yet,  
Behold, with tears mine eyes are wet!  
I feel a nameless sadness o'er me roll.  
Yes, yes, we know that we can jest,  
We know, we know that we can smile!  
But there's a something in this breast,  
To which thy light words bring no rest,  
And thy gay smiles no anodyne.  
Give me thy hand, and hush awhile,  
And turn those limpid eyes on mine,  
And let me read there, love! thy inmost soul.  
  
Alas! is even love too weak  
To unlock the heart, and let it speak?  
Are even lovers powerless to reveal  
To one another what indeed they feel?  
I knew the mass of men conceal'd  
Their thoughts, for fear that if reveal'd  
They would by other men be met  
With blank indifference, or with blame reproved;  
I knew they lived and moved  
Trick'd in disguises, alien to the rest  
Of men, and alien to themselves--and yet  
The same heart beats in every human breast!  
  
But we, my love!--doth a like spell benumb  
Our hearts, our voices?--must we too be dumb?  
  
Ah! well for us, if even we,  
Even for a moment, can get free  
Our heart, and have our lips unchain'd;  
For that which seals them hath been deep-ordain'd!  
  
Fate, which foresaw  
How frivolous a baby man would be--  
By what distractions he would be possess'd,  
How he would pour himself in every strife,  
And well-nigh change his own identity--  
That it might keep from his capricious play  
His genuine self, and force him to obey  
Even in his own despite his being's law,  
Bade through the deep recesses of our breast  
The unregarded river of our life  
Pursue with indiscernible flow its way;  
And that we should not see  
The buried stream, and seem to be  
Eddying at large in blind uncertainty,  
Though driving on with it eternally.  
  
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;  
A longing to inquire  
Into the mystery of this heart which beats  
So wild, so deep in us--to know  
Whence our lives come and where they go.  
And many a man in his own breast then delves,  
But deep enough, alas! none ever mines.  
And we have been on many thousand lines,  
And we have shown, on each, spirit and power;  
But hardly have we, for one little hour,  
Been on our own line, have we been ourselves--  
Hardly had skill to utter one of all  
The nameless feelings that course through our breast,  
But they course on for ever unexpress'd.  
And long we try in vain to speak and act  
Our hidden self, and what we say and do  
Is eloquent, is well--but 't#is not true!  
And then we will no more be rack'd  
With inward striving, and demand  
Of all the thousand nothings of the hour  
Their stupefying power;  
Ah yes, and they benumb us at our call!  
Yet still, from time to time, vague and forlorn,  
From the soul's subterranean depth upborne  
As from an infinitely distant land,  
Come airs, and floating echoes, and convey  
A melancholy into all our day.  
Only--but this is rare--  
When a belov{'e}d hand is laid in ours,  
When, jaded with the rush and glare  
Of the interminable hours,  
Our eyes can in another's eyes read clear,  
When our world-deafen'd ear  
Is by the tones of a loved voice caress'd--  
A bolt is shot back somewhere in our breast,  
And a lost pulse of feeling stirs again.  
The eye sinks inward, and the heart lies plain,  
And what we mean, we say, and what we would, we know.  
A man becomes aware of his life's flow,  
And hears its winding murmur; and he sees  
The meadows where it glides, the sun, the breeze.  
  
And there arrives a lull in the hot race  
Wherein he doth for ever chase  
That flying and elusive shadow, rest.  
An air of coolness plays upon his face,  
And an unwonted calm pervades his breast.  
And then he thinks he knows  
The hills where his life rose,  
And the sea where it goes.

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The occasion for this poem is a conversation between the narrator, ostensibly Matthew Arnold himself, and a lover, which has aroused in him a complex set of feelings. The poem, cast in the form of a dramatic monologue with his silent lover as audience, explores those feelings in a ruminative and reflective way.

In stanza one, despite the bantering tone of their discussion, the poet finds himself moved to tears. This "nameless sadness" (line 3) will not be consoled by any smiles or exchange of words between them, but only by her hand in his, and her eyes, the windows to the soul, turned fully upon him so that he can "read" them.

In stanzas two and three, perhaps due to his inability to read what he wants in her eyes, the poet cries out in an anguished tone that, in the present age, even lovers seem unable to say to each other what they truly feel. He is well aware that the "mass of men"(16) do not share their true thoughts with one another for fear of being spurned or shamed. But this practice seems inconceivable to him in light of the fact that we are all human beings with human feelings, i.e. that "The same heart beats in every human breast!" (23). Must this sad circumstance be the same for the lovers, too?

In stanza four, somewhat ambiguously, the poet intones that our inability to be truthful about ourselves is "deep-ordain'd" (29), though who or what enforces this state of affairs remains unmentioned in Arnold's passive construction. He considers it a positive thing if the lovers can speak truly to each other "[e]ven for a moment" (27).

"Fate" is the first word in stanza five, a verse paragraph, and as such the poet seems to suggest that fate, in fact, "ordains" the movement of our lives, although it does so without our acknowledgement or perhaps even recognition. This complex stanza is difficult to summarize, as it reflects a classic pattern of hesitation and halting progression in Arnold's poetry particularly pronounced in this poem. In short, it seems to say that "fate" recognizes how immature, easily distracted, easily drawn into every conflict, and without firm character or identity human beings are. To protect the precious, genuine self from our caprices, fate consequently condemns this true self to an indiscernible place buried deep in our consciousness. And so we seem to wander aimlessly through the public (and even the private) events of our lives, but are nevertheless driven by this deep place of our true self, even without our knowledge. Arnold calls this "buried stream" (42) "the un-regarded river of our life" (39).

In stanza six, the poem explores how, at times, weary of the demands of everyday life, we experience an "unspeakable desire" (45) to know our genuine self, here identified with the "heart which beats/So wild" (52-53) and with a continuity of self-a sense of our origins and of our future possibilities. Still, while this desire stimulates self-reflection, it is never "deep enough" to get to the core self. So much remains unexpressed because of our lack of skill to "utter one of all/The nameless feelings that course through/our breast" (61-63), and finally we give up in frustration, seeking the numbing power of busyness and distraction to silence the pain of our failure. Our ever-present "melancholy" (76) comes from the hints of what we have long buried that come to us as "floating echoes" (75) but can never be given a genuine, graspable form.

Stanza seven illustrates that in very rare moments-perhaps like the one the poet is experiencing with his beloved-the eyes can genuinely become the windows to the soul. The agent of these moments is the beloved's hand touching ours, her eyes meeting ours, her voice greeting our ears. The result: "A bolt is shot back somewhere in our breast" (84). The outcome is true feeling, true self-reflection and self-knowledge, and an ability to utter (outer) the self in language.

In stanza eight, in this moment of true communication with his beloved, there is rest, calm, and at least "he thinks" (96) that he has true knowledge of the purpose of his life, from its beginning to its end.

"The Buried Life" is an excellent example of a particular set of geographic images that pervade much of Arnold's work and come to carry symbolic content. The primary metaphor of this poem is of life, including human consciousness of it, as a buried stream or river that has an origin in the "hills" and descends from them across a plain to the sea. The "hills" for Arnold are more than a place of origin, but often a typically Romantic place of the sublime, the unfathomable or spiritual or metaphysical, depending upon his context. They are at a defined remove from the plain, the "flat" place where the majority of the world lives, a place of "din of strife" (46) that deafens us and so prevents us from hearing of and listening to the sounds of our own heart's desires. The sea is a place of inevitable dissolution where the "one" becomes so intermingled with the "many" that no recognizable individual is left. In a poem like "Dover Beach," it becomes Arnold's perfect metaphor for loss and disintegration, and expresses his growing agnosticism about a benevolent guide in the universe or the survival of the soul after death.

This poem is controlled by the evolving metaphor of the authentic self as a buried river which, only in moments of connection with a beloved, can we either know for ourselves or find the language to express to ourselves or to others. There is a subtle contrast between the thinking and feeling selves--between head and heart-in the poem that is a central Victorian tension especially prominent in Arnold's work. There is also recognition of unconscious dimensions to the self whose repression or loss are very damaging to human beings-at least as Arnold generalizes from his own situation.

The only senses missing in this poem are taste-the tongue waits primarily for words to form and speech to be available-and smell. The other three senses are prominent in their repetition: the eye to meet the eye of the beloved, the hand to touch her hand, the skin to feel the river's emotional "breeze," the ear to hear more profoundly than their jesting conversation. Despite its premise, the underlying restlessness and melancholy of the speaker is at odds with the pose that frames the poem: a still moment in which the lover takes the hand of his beloved and looks deeply into her eyes.

The poet's distinction between sense and perception is significant: the lover must not only be aware of the dissonance between what appears and what is real for him, but he must also perceive a way to penetrate that appearance and discover the reality of his situation so that he can make it real in language. This latter effort is central to Arnold's thematic issues as a writer: how to find a language to mediate the thinking and feeling selves-how to finally throw off the benumbing cognitive burden of his life as a Victorian sage in order to speak the heart with a truth he can feel as comfortable and adequate. It is a tension he never resolved, and one that led him eventually to give up poetry altogether.

As is obvious to any reader, this is an intensely self-conscious poem written in an intensely self-conscious age by an intensely self-conscious man. It is essentially a dramatic monologue in which the claim to wish to read his beloved's "inmost soul" is completely subsumed by his ruminating efforts to find and express his own. The rest-including any pretense of a dialogue between the two or of a simple reply on her part-is silence.

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 A poem of great frustration and sadness, “The Buried Life” yearns for an openness which the poet fears that he will never achieve. Saddened by his own inability to express his deepest, truest self, he turns to his beloved, thinking that in her “limpid” eyes he can find true communion with another soul. He knows that people fear to reveal themselves, suspecting that they will be ignored or, worse, criticized for what they expose of themselves. Yet, his counterargument is that all human beings contain essentially the same feelings and thus should be able to bare their souls more freely than they do.

It has been pointed out that there may be a slight confusion in the poem, perhaps explained by the poet’s shifting use of metaphor. On the one hand, lines 38-40 and 55-56 suggest that the river of life is subterranean and only rarely accessible. On the other hand, the river of life in lines 43-44 is treated as a surface flow interrupted or broken by eddies, emanations of a “genuine self” referred to in line 36. Evidently, Arnold is identifying the discrepancy between the self who thinks that he is determining his fate, who thinks he can “well-nigh change his own identity” (line 34), and the self who seems to pursue life with “blind uncertainty” (line 43) while actually “driving on with it [the buried life] eternally.”

Thus, the poem raises but does not resolve disturbing questions about fate and free will. Human beings clearly deceive themselves—that much is clear from the fourth stanza—yet the poet just as clearly entertains the possibility that the lovers, and indeed all human beings, at least have the capacity to see truly and to understand the ultimate reasons for their actions.

Although the poem does not settle the “fate versus free will” conundrum, its use of metaphor does suppose that, as in nature where all rivers have their source, so in human nature all lives have their origin, which a man can glimpse, who “thinks he knows/ The hills where his life rose,/ And the sea where it goes.” The ending is tentative because it refers to what the man “thinks he knows,” yet it is positively rendered in the simple declarative rhymes of the last words, mimicking the “unwonted calm,” of the knowledge that the speaker has acquired.

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