

THE SCHOLAR GIPSY

By Adrian Rogers

*“...But when the fields are still,
And tired men and dogs all gone to rest,
And only the white sheep are sometimes seen
Cross and re-cross the strips of moon-blached green
Come, shepherd, and again begin the quest!”*

Perhaps the hardest parts of any poem to write are the beginning, and ending. If you fudge the opening you've lost readers straight away, and if you begin well but allow the ending to be an anti-climax you leave them disappointed, and less than willing to appreciate an otherwise good poem. I've quoted from the opening of *The Scholar Gipsy*, both because he is the principal theme of this essay, and because this verse is a good opening. It doesn't startle, but the rhyming scheme and imagery are good enough to hold the attention until the last line, 'Come, shepherd, and again begin the quest', pricks ones curiosity with a promise of things to come.

But *The Scholar Gipsy*, as a poetic theme is really about two of Matthew Arnold's poems sharing much of their subject matter. The other poem in question is *Thyrsis*, and between them these lyrical, beautiful monodies share four characters, *The Scholar Gipsy*, the Poet, his close friend Arthur Hugh Clough, and the Elm Tree, which Arnold calls in *Thyrsis*, 'The signal-elm, that looks on Ilsley Downs.' But the characters symbolize meanings hidden between the lines. The Poet and his friend represent the philosophical spirit in search of ultimate truth while still being bound by the conventions of society. *The Scholar Gipsy*, on the other hand is the complete pilgrim who has broken free from

society in order to pursue this quest, while the Elm Tree stands for truth itself. Another quote, from The Scholar Gipsy, will locate the ‘quest’ in time and place.

*“...And air-swept lindens yield
Their scent...
And bower me from the August sun with shade;
And the eye travels down to Oxford’s towers.”*

So, it’s set within, and in the countryside surrounding Oxford, the old mediaeval University City that even today retains most of its atmospheric charm. And reading these two poems one can still see the daytime changing colours of sun on old stone, or towers and spires rising above the deep, shimmering green of trees and grass lands viewed from the light sparked waters of the river. But Arnold soon introduces us to The Scholar Gipsy, and his revelation of the real meanings veiled within his poems.

*“...The story of the Oxford scholar poor,
Of pregnant parts and quick inventive brain,
Who, tired of knocking at preferment’s door,
One summer morn forsook
His friends, and went to learn the gipsy-lore...”*

I suggest the poet is implying much more than appears on the printed page. If both poems are really about the search for ‘truth’, then notice that, ‘...tired of knocking at preferment’s door...’ he leaves Oxford for good. Now what does that say about universities, and the search for ‘truth’? I have written ‘truth’ thus to highlight what I believe to be the Poet’s point, that though universities ought to set a high value on the search for ‘truth’, their real priorities are usually quite otherwise. And if that was true in Arnold’s day, how much more so is it today? But what is meant by ‘truth’? Living in a post-modern age of relative values, we are constantly reminded that what is true for you

is not necessarily so for me, that truths are relative to time, place, or circumstance, and that what was true for us earlier in our lives is not necessarily so today. But obviously no thinking person would forsake society for a merely relative value. So the Poet must be referring to 'truth' as an absolute, for what else would be worthy of pursuit?

What Arnold seems to be hinting is that over and above the relative truths surrounding our lives, there exists 'truth' as a pure quality, that there is an archetypal 'truth', of which all lesser truths are but partial images. If you read right through *The Scholar Gipsy* that point is made repeatedly as the poem evolves towards its last stanzas, not very optimistically though, for it appears the Poet is not at all sure he will find 'truth'. However, there is a difference between pessimism and despair. As he says in *Thyrsis*, '...Despair I will not, while I yet descry/Neath the mild canopy of English air/That lonely tree against the western sky.' So the quest goes on, as we turn to the second of Arnold's 'Scholar' poems.

The third character Arthur Hugh Clough, who plays no part in *The Scholar Gipsy*, is central to its companion, where he is remembered (because he has died prior to its composition) as *Thyrsis*, with the poem serving as his immortalizing memorial. He too is searching for 'truth'.

*"A fugitive and gracious light he seeks,
Shy to illumine; and I seek it too..."*

A critic might claim *Thyrsis* is less consistently inspired than *Scholar*, that there are passages where the Poet appears to be marking time. Yet it contains some of the most beautiful writing in the English language. Pick up a copy of Arnold's poetry from a library and read it through, preferably aloud, perhaps with a likeminded friend. I guarantee you'll not be content with one read but come back to it. Time will not wear it out, for though *Thyrsis* has passed on Arnold is speaking to, as well as about him,

evoking an undying spiritual essence. As an example of beautiful versifying, try this for an evocation of summer flowers. Obviously there's nothing local to Australia, but those named have all been imported, and are grown in various parts of the country.

*“...Soon will the musk carnations break and swell,
Soon shall we have gold-dusted snapdragon,
Sweet-William with his homely cottage smell,
And stocks in fragrant blow;
Roses that down the alleys shine afar,
And open, jasmine muffled lattices...”*

Yet it is the Elm Tree, standing tall as a symbol of absolute 'truth' that brings about a satisfactory conclusion, demonstrating just how good an ending Arnold can create, and in so doing bind both poems together as an indissoluble whole. I have always felt uneasy with the conclusion of *The Scholar Gipsy*, not on account of the quality of its verse, which maintains a high standard throughout, but because it seems to me that the poem, after having said so much stops rather abruptly. Arnold, one might speculate was subconsciously aware of this, and *Thyrsis* was not merely a memorial to a friend, but a necessity to complete his evocation of this great quest for 'truth'. I can make a musical comparison here, with Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*. *The Scholar Gipsy* is in two distinct halves, and feels unfinished. Schubert's great *Symphony* is correspondingly in two beautiful and powerful movements, yet unfinished.

I will conclude by quoting from the last verse of *Thyrsis*. The Poet has obviously been re-visiting those haunts in and around Oxford he and his friend had known so well, and that I too have known since childhood. Any of you who have visited this City, of which the mediaeval university is its heart and soul, may recall some of those locations named in the poems. But over and above reminiscences of time and place, may the Poet's message inspire us to see this quest as a reality worthy of our striving, truly a light on the hill, a

pursuit that can confer immeasurable rewards, whatever the world may think or say to the contrary.

*'...Why faintest thou? I wandered till I died.
Roam on! The light we sought is shining still.
Dost thou ask proof? Our tree yet crowns the hill,
Our scholar travels yet the loved hill side.'*

(Originally published in The Write Angle QLD Australia. ed. 41 Nov. 2012)

Bio:

Adrian Rogers was brought up in England, but trained as a music teacher and began his career as such in Ireland. He, along with the family, migrated to Australia in 1985, and he began writing in 1989 during a period of ill health. Since retiring from teaching he has devoted himself to writing, with poetry, short stories, and articles in numerous Australian literary journals and anthologies, including contributions to the Indo-Australian Anthology 'Vibrant Voices' published by Authorspress. He has two collections of his poetry in print, along with five fantasy novels, published by Double-Dragon in Canada, and two novels published by Mountain Mist in Australia.