

## Matthew Arnold: An Iconoclast, the Great Gainsayer of English Criticism

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### Abstract

Criticism has power to make the best ideas prevail. Criticism can be of enormous service to future creative writers merely by performing its true business. "It is the business of criticism to know the best that is known and thought in the world, and in its turn by making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas." Criticism in this way tends to produce ultimately an intellectual and spiritual atmosphere by which creative genius can be happily inspired. It creates stir and growth which makes creation possible. That is why great creative epochs are preceded by great epochs of criticism. In order to be successful, criticism must be essentially the exercise of curiosity, in the best sense of that word. Curiosity is a fine quality, it is the desire to know the best. should not be taken as a term of disparagement. This paper focuses on the point that excellence of poetry lies both in matter and substance and its manner or style.

### 1. Introduction

Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), the greatest name among the Victorian critics, is a poet turned critic. He started his literary Career by writing poetry. It was only at the age of thirty-one, in 1833, that he published his first piece of criticism as a Preface to the Poems, 1853, and then for the rest of his life, for full thirty-five years, he hardly wrote anything but criticism.

His criticism easily fall into three phases or periods. To the first phase from 1853 to 1866, belong

1. The Preface to the Poems, 1853. The work is regarded as his critical manifesto. In it appear for the first time many of the views and principles which were elaborated in later works.
2. On Translating Homer, 1816. The work contains his views on the grand style.
3. Essay in Criticism, First Series, 1866. 4. On the Study of Celtic Literature, 1866.

The second phase of his carrer was a phase in which he was involved for more than a decade in the political, educational, social and religious controversies to the day. The chief works of this phase are :

1. Culture and Anarchy, 1869. 2. St. Paul and Protestantism, 1870. 3. Literature and Dogma, 1873. 4. God and the Bible, 1875.

Culture and Anarchy is the most valuable and significant work of this period. In this work he asserts the value of poetry as an anti-dote to the cultural anarchy of his age.

### 2. Discussion

In the third phase, Arnold retired from contemporary controversies to devote himself once again to his literary studies. During this phase, he published a

series of articles on a number of English poets which he later on collected and published as, *Essays in Criticism*, Second Series, 1888.

### 3. Socio-Ethical Criticism

Arnold's criticism may conveniently be divided into literary criticism, and Socio ethical criticism. The criticism of the second phase is socio ethical, and Culture and Anarchy is the most representative work of this period. It would seem that a socio-ethical work is out of place in a work on literary criticism. But it has been included here for a brief consideration, for it throws valuable light on Arnold's view of poetry, as a means of culture. Literary Criticism

Further, his literary criticism may in itself be divided into two categories—(a) theoretical criticism, or literary aesthetics, and (b) practical criticism. His theoretical criticism is contained largely in his Preface to the Poems, 1853, The Function of Criticism at the Present Time, standing at the head of the first series of his *Essays in Criticism*, and The Study of Poetry with which opens the second series of his *Essays in Criticism*. His practical criticism largely consists of his estimates of English and continental poets contained in both the series of *Essays in Criticism*.

### 4. Formative Influence

A number of influences operated upon Arnold from the earliest days and determined his views and attitudes. First, there was the influence of his father, Thomas Arnold, the famous headmaster of Rugby whose death the poet mourns in his elegy *Rugby Chapel*. Dr. Arnold was a man of powerful, dominating personality. A strict disciplinarian, he was a propagandist for the classical methods in education. Himself a great scholar, he inculcated in his son also a love of the great classics of antiquity. Arnold owes much of his knowledge of the Greek and Latin masters to his great father. His classicism was inspired by him, and it is to this fact that George Watson attributes the quality in his writing, the

incongruity between the head and the heart. He was an incurable romantic whose romanticism was pushed out by the classicism imposed upon him by a more powerful and dominating personality. This accounts for the wide gap that exists between his practice of poetry, and his theory of it.

The second powerful influence on him was that of the age in which he lived and created. Disgusted with the degenerate and decadent romanticism of the day, its mammon worship and false money values, its cultural anarchy, its historicism, its Provincialism, its Philistinism, he is critical of it and seeks to bring about a cultural revolution. In his literary criticism he represents the classical resistance to romanticism. "In his criticism we are face to face once again with authority." He is an iconoclast, "the great gainsayer of English criticism, the most inconsistent and professional of non-conformists." Defiance of his age' is a powerful under current running through his works ; his criticism cannot be understood without an understanding of the age.

Thirdly, Matthew Arnold was a widely read man, both in the ancients and the moderns, and quite naturally, his reading influenced him profoundly. Love for the classics of ancient Greece and Rome was inculcated in him by his father, and he drank deep at the fountain of Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, Aristotle and many others. During the College days, he was regarded as the best scholar of the classics. It is Greek thought which governs his theory of poetry and theory of criticism. His classicism is seen in his respect for authority, in his passion for order and 'sanity', and his condemnation of romantic individuality and subjectivity. His stress on 'action' is akin to Aristotle's stress on 'Fable' or plot. His mission was to Hellenise English thought, English literature, and literary criticism. His admiration for the Greek Masters, his passion for Greek literature and criticism, and Greek way of life is reflected in all his works.

Fourthly, to the influence of the Ancient was added that of the moderns. The German poet Goethe, and French critics Tuine and Sainte-Beuve were the most

powerful influences. He shared Goethe's admiration for the Greeks, as well as his Catholicism and largeness of spirit. Arnold rates Goethe very high and pays him glowing tributes in his Memorial Verses. It is the critical method of Sainte-Beuve which appealed to him, and which, in the main, he made his own. Arnold regarded him as the first of living critics'; it was from him that he learnt the value of "disinterestedness" for a critic, as well as the theory that in order to understand a work, one must first understand its author. He "idolised Sainte-Beuve" and his influence was profound and far-reaching. His biographical-critical method is Arnold's own. Similarly, from Taine he learnt that a work of art is the product of certain social forces which must be understood for a right understanding and appreciation of the work itself. Taine's emphasis on the race, the milieu, and the moment, is echoed by Arnold when he writes : "For a literary masterpiece, two powers must concur, the power of the man, and the power of the moment, and the man is not enough without the moment." Another continental influence on him was that of the German Jewish poet Heinrich Heine ; from him Arnold borrows the word Philistine to indicate the vulgarisation of the English middle class. Indeed, Arnold's criticism is largely continental in orientation. There are few Arnoldian terms that do not have a continental origin ; there are few ideas of his which may not be traced to some French-or German--source.

As Wimsatt and Brooks point out his continental orientation is nowhere seen to better advantage than in his plea for an English Academy on the model of the French Academy.

Fifthly, despite all these manifold sources of influence and inspiration, Arnold might not have turned a critic, if a favourable opportunity in the form of his appointment in 1857 to the Professorship of Poetry at the Oxford University had not presented itself. As George Saintsbury points out, this provided him with the vantage ground of authority from which he could speak with the certainty of being heard. The appointment gave him prestige and authority, it gave him financial stability, and the leisure to devote

himself exclusively to literary activity. Though he also contributed to the various journals and periodicals, the bulk of his literary criticism consists of lectures which he delivered at Oxford in the course of years.

As the both the Series of Essays in Criticism are his most important works of literary criticism, we would now examine them in some detail

We give below brief synopsis of The Study of Poetry which develops his theory of poetry, and of The Function of Criticism in the Present Age as being the most coherent expositions of his literary theories.

### 5. The Study of Poetry : Brief Synopsis

The future of poetry is immense All our creeds and religions have been shaken. They have grown too much tied down to facts. But for poetry the idea is everything. The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry.

We should study poetry more and more, for poetry is capable of higher uses. We have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, and to sustain us. Without poetry science will remain incomplete and much that passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.

Poetry can fulfil its high function, only if we keep a high standard for it. No Charlatanism should be allowed to enter poetry. Arnold then defines poetry as, "a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for that criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty." Arnold does not explain what these laws are.

Only the best poetry is capable of performing its task. Only that poetry which is the criticism of life can be our support and stay, when other helps fail us. So it is important that readers should learn to choose the best. In choosing the best, the readers are warned against two kinds of fallacious judgments ; the historic estimate and the personal estimate. The readers should learn to value it as it really is in itself. The historic estimate is likely to affect our judgment when we are dealing with ancient poets, the personal

estimate when we are dealing with our contemporary poets.

Readers should insist on the real estimate, which means a recognition and discovery of the highest qualities which produce the best poetry. It should be a real classic and not a false classic. A true classic is one which belongs to the class of the very best, and such poetry we must "feel and enjoy as deeply as we can."

It is not necessary to lay down what in the abstract constitute the features of a high quality of poetry. It is much better to study concrete examples, to take specimens of poetry of the high, the very highest quality, and to say: the features of the highest poetry are what we find here. Short passages and single lines from Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, and others may be memorised and applied as a touchstone to test the worth of the poems we want to read. This other poetry must not be required to resemble them; but if the touchstone quotations are used with tact, they will enable the reader to detect the presence or absence of the highest poetic quality

However, in order to satisfy those who insist that some criteria of excellence should be laid down, Arnold points out that excellence of poetry lies both in its matter or substance and in its manner or style. But matter and style must have the accent of, "high beauty, worth and power". But Arnold does not define what this mark or accent is. He says we would ourselves feel it, for it is the mark or accent of all high poetry.

If the matter of a poet has truth and high seriousness, the manner and diction would also acquire the accent of superiority. The two are vitally connected together.

Arnold then undertakes a brief review of English poetry from Chaucer to Burns in order to apply practically the general principles laid down above and so to demonstrate their truth. The substance of Chaucer's poetry-his view of things and his criticism of life-has largeness, freedom, shrewdness, benignity. He surveys the world from a truly human point of

view. But his poetry is wanting in high seriousness. His language, no doubt, causes difficulty, but this difficulty can be easily overcome. Chaucer will be read more and more with the passing of time. But he is not a classic, his poetry lacks the accent of a real classic. This can be easily verified through a comparison of a passage from Chaucer with one from Dante, the first poetic classic of Christendom. This is so because he has truth of substance but not 'high seriousness'.

Shakespeare and Milton are our great poetical classics, but Dryden and Pope are not poetical classics. "Dryden was the puissant and glorious founder, and Pope was the splendid high priest of the age of prose and reason, of our excellent and indispensable 18th century." but their is not the verse of men whose criticism of life has a high seriousness, or even without that high seriousness, has poetic largeness, freedom, insight, benignity. Their application of ideas to life is not poetic application. They are not classics of English poetry; they are classics of English prose.

The most singular and unique poet of the age of Pope and Dryden is Gray. Gray is a poetic Classic, but he is the scantiest of classics. He lived in the company of the great classics of Greece, and he caught their manner, and their view of life. His work is slighter and less perfect than it would have been, had he lived in a congenial age.

Elsewhere, Arnold tells us that the difference between genuine poetry and the poetry of Dryden, Pope, and other poets of their school, is briefly this : "their poetry is conceived and composed in their wits, genuine poetry is conceived and composed in the soul." Gray's poetry was so composed.

Next, coming to Burns, Arnold points out that his real merit is to be found in his Scotch poems. In his poetry, we do find the application of ideas to life, and also that his application is a powerful one, made by a man of vigorous understanding and master of language. He also has truth of substance. Burns is by far the greater force than Chaucer, though he has less

charm. But we do not find in Burns that accent of high seriousness which is born of absolute sincerity, and which characterises the poetry of the great classics. The poetry of Burns has truth of matter and truth of manner, but not the accent of the poetic virtue of the highest masters.

Even in the case of Burns, one is likely to be misguided by the personal estimate. This danger is even greater in the case of Byron, Shelley and Wordsworth. Estimates of their poetry are likely, not only to be personal, but also, "personal with passion". So Arnold does not take them up for consideration.

Having illustrated, practically, his touchstone method, Arnold expresses the view that good literature will never lose its currency. There might be some vulgarisation and cheapening of literary values, as a result of the increase in numbers of the common sort of readers, but the currency of good literature is ensured by, "the instinct of self-preservation in humanity". So strong is Arnold's faith in the value of poetry of the highest kind.

## 6. The Function of Criticism at the Present Time

Criticism is certainly lower in rank to creation. But the creation of great works of art is not always equally possible. The elements with which the creative power works are ideas, but the best and noble ideas may not always be current. That is why creative epochs in literature are so rare. For great creation, "the power of the man and the power of the moment must concur", but the power of the moment may not be always available.

Even the tremendous natural power of the romantics was partially crippled by the lack in the English society of the nineteenth century, of a vigorous intellectual life such as had 'nourished certain other poets. "This makes Byron so empty of matter, Shelley so incoherent, Wordsworth even, profound as he is, yet so wanting in completeness and variety." This deficiency is one which literary criticism alone can help to remedy.

Criticism must also be disinterested. It must keep aloof from, "the practical view of things". It must refuse to lend itself to ulterior, political, and practical considerations. While the practical man tends to see an object only in so far as it seems likely to aid or impede his designs, the critic must try to view it more detachedly, to see it, "as in itself it really is". In England, criticism is being stifled by such practical considerations.

It is the function of criticism to keep men from self-satisfaction which is retarding and vulgarising. It must lead men to perfection. But in England, criticism is not fulfilling this spiritual function because it has grown too controversial and too practical.

Criticism, thus conceived, is to be directed not only upon works of art but also upon life in general. The habit of dispassionate appraisal fostered by strictly literary criticism can be of the widest social utility.

But a critic who is disinterested and who tries to see the thing as it really is in itself, is very likely to be misunderstood. In England, where "practice is everything, a free play of the mind is nothing," such misunderstanding is almost inevitable. But the critic must pursue his course with the greatest sincerity, and thus convince even the practical man of his sincerity.

A critic must resist the temptation to indulge in false estimates. Even if a work has some practical utility the critic must not recommend it unless it has genuine worth. He must be perpetually dissatisfied with those works which fall short of a high and perfect ideal. He must beware of Philistinism.

Strictly, literary criticism should be the exercise of disinterested curiosity, the desire to learn and propagate the best. "Judging is often spoken of as the critic's one business, and so in some sense it is: but the judgment that, almost insensibly, forms itself in a fair and clear mind, along with fresh knowledge, is the valuable one," and thus knowledge, and more knowledge must be the critic's concern. When

deliberate judgment is called for, "the great safeguard is never to let oneself become abstract, always to retain an intimate and lively consciousness of the truth of what one is seeing." The moment this consciousness fails, the critic may be sure that there is something wrong.

In his search for, "the best that is known and thought in the world," the English critic will quite naturally need to dwell much on foreign literature. He must know literatures other than his own. What is needed is a criticism which regards Europe, was being, for intellectual and spiritual purposes, one great confederation, bound to a joint action and working for a common result, and whose members have, for their proper outfit, a knowledge of Greek, Roman and Eastern antiquity, and of one another." Such a European ideal was Goethe's ; in our own age it has been that of T.S. Eliot.

As for the standards, by which the best that has been known and thought is recognised, they are embodied in the works of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe and others. In England, however, their existence is commonly ignored and from this results the contemporary vulgarisation and cheapening of literary values, Philistinism, as Arnold calls it.

Criticism may not be creative, but criticism of such a high order approaches very near to creation. Criticism which is sincere, simple and ardent gives a joyful sense of creative activity.

## 7. Conclusion

To conclude with the words of Saintsbury : "His services, therefore, to English criticism, whether as a "preceptist" or as an actual craftsman, cannot possibly be over-estimated. In the first respect he was, if not the absolute reformer, the leader in reform, the solvenly and disorganised condition into which Romantic criticism had fallen. In the second, the things which he had not, as well as those which he had, combined to give him a place among the very first." He had not the sublime and ever new-inspired inconsistency of Dryden. He had not the robustness

of Johnson, the supreme critical "reason" of Coleridge ; scarcely the exquisite, if fitful, appreciation of Lamb, or the full-blooded and passionate appreciation of Hazlitt. But he had an exacter knowledge than Dryden's ; the fineness of his judgment shows finer beside Johnson's bluntness ; he could not wool-gather like Coleridge ; his range was far wider than Lamb's; his scholarship and his delicacy alike were superior to those of Hazlitt,

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