

## MATTHEW ARNOLD AS A CRITIC

### Introduction:

Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), the Victorian poet and critic, was 'the first modern critic' [1], and could be called 'the critic's critic', being a champion not only of great poetry, but of literary criticism itself. The purpose of literary criticism, in his view, was 'to know the best that is known and thought in the world, and by in its turn making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas', and he has influenced a whole school of critics including new critics such as T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, and Allen Tate. He was the founder of the sociological school of criticism, and through his touchstone method introduced scientific objectivity to critical evaluation by providing comparison and analysis as the two primary tools of criticism.

Arnold's evaluations of the Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, and Keats are landmarks in descriptive criticism, and as a poet-critic he occupies an eminent position in the rich galaxy of poet-critics of English literature.

T. S. Eliot praised Arnold's objective approach to critical evaluation, particularly his tools of comparison and analysis, and Allen Tate in his essay *Tension in Poetry* imitates Arnold's touchstone method to discover 'tension', or the proper balance between connotation and denotation, in poetry. These new critics have come a long way from the Romantic approach to poetry, and this change in attitude could be attributed to Arnold, who comes midway between the two schools.

### The social role of poetry and criticism:

To Arnold a critic is a social benefactor. In his view the creative artist, no matter how much of a genius, would cut a sorry figure without the critic to come to his aid. Before Arnold a literary critic cared only for the beauties and defects of works of art, but Arnold the critic chose to be the educator and guardian of public opinion and propagator of the best ideas.

Cultural and critical values seem to be synonymous for Arnold. Scott James, comparing him to Aristotle, says that where Aristotle analyses the work of art, Arnold analyses the role of the critic. The one gives us the principles which govern the making of a poem, the other the principles by which the best poems should be selected and made known. Aristotle's critic owes allegiance to the artist, but Arnold's critic has a duty to society.

To Arnold poetry itself was the criticism of life: 'The criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty', and in his seminal essay *The Study of Poetry* (1888) he says that poetry alone can be our sustenance and stay in an era where religious beliefs are fast losing their hold. He claims that poetry is superior to philosophy, science, and religion. Religion attaches its emotion to supposed facts, and the supposed facts are failing it, but poetry attaches its emotion to ideas and ideas are infallible. And science, in his view is incomplete without poetry. He endorses Wordsworth's view that 'poetry is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all

Science', adding 'What is a countenance without its expression?' and calls poetry 'the breath and finer spirit of knowledge'.

### **A moralist:**

As a critic Arnold is essentially a moralist, and has very definite ideas about what poetry should and should not be. A poetry of revolt against moral ideas, he says, is a poetry of revolt against life, and a poetry of indifference to moral ideas is a poetry of indifference to life.

Arnold even censored his own collection on moral grounds. He omitted the poem Empedocles on Etna from his volume of 1853, whereas he had included it in his collection of 1852. The reason he advances, in the Preface to his Poems of 1853 is not that the poem is too subjective, with its Hamlet-like introspection, or that it was a deviation from his classical ideals, but that the poem is too depressing in its subject matter, and would leave the reader hopeless and crushed. There is nothing in it in the way of hope or optimism, and such a poem could prove to be neither instructive nor of any delight to the reader.

Aristotle says that poetry is superior to History since it bears the stamp of high seriousness and truth. If truth and seriousness are wanting in the subject matter of a poem, so will the true poetic stamp of diction and movement be found wanting in its style and manner. Hence the two, the nobility of subject matter, and the superiority of style and manner, are proportional and cannot occur independently.

Arnold took up Aristotle's view, asserting that true greatness in poetry is given by the truth and seriousness of its subject matter, and by the high diction and movement in its style and manner, and although indebted to Joshua Reynolds for the expression 'grand style', Arnold gave it a new meaning when he used it in his lecture On Translating Homer (1861):

I think it will be found that that the grand style arises in poetry when a noble nature, poetically gifted, treats with simplicity or with a severity a serious subject.

According to Arnold, Homer is the best model of a simple grand style, while Milton is the best model of severe grand style. Dante, however, is an example of both.

Even Chaucer, in Arnold's view, in spite of his virtues such as benignity, largeness, and spontaneity, lacks seriousness. Burns too lacks sufficient seriousness, because he was hypocritical in that while he adopted a moral stance in some of his poems, in his private life he flouted morality.

### **Return to Classical values:**

Arnold believed that a modern writer should be aware that contemporary literature is built on the foundations of the past, and should contribute to the future by continuing a firm tradition. Quoting Goethe and Niebuhr in support of his view, he asserts that his age suffers from spiritual weakness because it thrives on self-interest and scientific materialism, and therefore cannot provide noble characters such as those found in Classical literature.

He urged modern poets to look to the ancients and their great characters and themes for guidance and inspiration. Classical literature, in his view, possess pathos, moral profundity and noble simplicity, while modern themes, arising from an age of spiritual weakness, are suitable for only comic and lighter kinds of poetry, and don't possess the loftiness to support epic or heroic poetry.

Arnold turns his back on the prevailing Romantic view of poetry and seeks to revive the Classical values of objectivity, urbanity, and architectonics. He denounces the Romantics for ignoring the Classical writers for the sake of novelty, and for their allusive (Arnold uses the word 'suggestive') writing which defies easy comprehension.

### **Preface to Poems of 1853:**

In the preface to his Poems (1853) Arnold asserts the importance of architectonics; ('that power of execution, which creates, forms, and constitutes') in poetry - the necessity of achieving unity by subordinating the parts to the whole, and the expression of ideas to the depiction of human action, and condemns poems which exist for the sake of single lines or passages, stray metaphors, images, and fancy expressions. Scattered images and happy turns of phrase, in his view, can only provide partial effects, and not contribute to unity. He also, continuing his anti-Romantic theme, urges, modern poets to shun allusiveness and not fall into the temptation of subjectivity.

He says that even the imitation of Shakespeare is risky for a young writer, who should imitate only his excellences, and avoid his attractive accessories, tricks of style, such as quibble, conceit, circumlocution and allusiveness, which will lead him astray.

Arnold commends Shakespeare's use of great plots from the past. He had what Goethe called the architectonic quality, that is his expression was matched to the action (or the subject). But at the same time Arnold quotes Hallam to show that Shakespeare's style was complex even where the press of action demanded simplicity and directness, and hence his style could not be taken as a model by young writers. Elsewhere he says that Shakespeare's 'expression tends to become a little sensuous and simple, too much intellectualised'.

Shakespeare's excellences are 1) The architectonic quality of his style; the harmony between action and expression. 2) His reliance on the ancients for his themes. 3) Accurate construction of action. 4) His strong conception of action and accurate portrayal of his subject matter. 5) His intense feeling for the subjects he dramatises.

His attractive accessories (or tricks of style) which a young writer should handle carefully are 1) His fondness for quibble, fancy, conceit. 2) His excessive use of imagery. 3) Circumlocution, even where the press of action demands directness. 4) His lack of simplicity (according to Hallam and Guizot). 5) His allusiveness.

As an example of the danger of imitating Shakespeare he gives Keats's imitation of Shakespeare in his *Isabella or the Pot of Basil*. Keats uses felicitous phrases and single happy turns of phrase, yet the action is handled vaguely and so the poem does not have unity. By way of contrast, he says the Italian writer

Boccaccio handled the same theme successfully in his Decameron, because he rightly subordinated expression to action. Hence Boccaccio's poem is a poetic success where Keats's is a failure.

Arnold also wants the modern writer to take models from the past because they depict human actions which touch on 'the great primary human affections: to those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time'. Characters such as Agamemnon, Dido, Aeneas, Orestes, Merope, Alcmeon, and Clytemnestra, leave a permanent impression on our minds. Compare 'The Iliad' or 'The Aeneid' with 'The Childe Harold' or 'The Excursion' and you see the difference.

A modern writer might complain that ancient subjects pose problems with regard to ancient culture, customs, manners, dress and so on which are not familiar to contemporary readers. But Arnold is of the view that a writer should not concern himself with the externals, but with the 'inward man'. The inward man is the same irrespective of clime or time.

### **The Function of Criticism:**

It is in his *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time* (1864) that Arnold says that criticism should be a 'dissemination of ideas, a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world'. He says that when evaluating a work the aim is 'to see the object as in itself it really is'. Psychological, historical and sociological background are irrelevant, and to dwell on such aspects is mere dilettantism. This stance was very influential with later critics.

Arnold also believed that in his quest for the best a critic should not confine himself to the literature of his own country, but should draw substantially on foreign literature and ideas, because the propagation of ideas should be an objective endeavour.

### **The Study of Poetry:**

In *The Study of Poetry*, (1888) which opens his *Essays in Criticism: Second series*, in support of his plea for nobility in poetry, Arnold recalls Sainte-Beuve's reply to Napoleon, when latter said that charlatanism is found in everything. Sainte-Beuve replied that charlatanism might be found everywhere else, but not in the field of poetry, because in poetry the distinction between sound and unsound, or only half-sound, truth and untruth, or only half-truth, between the excellent and the inferior, is of paramount importance.

For Arnold there is no place for charlatanism in poetry. To him poetry is the criticism of life, governed by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty. It is in the criticism of life that the spirit of our race will find its stay and consolation. The extent to which the spirit of mankind finds its stay and consolation is proportional to the power of a poem's criticism of life, and the power of the criticism of life is in direct proportion to the extent to which the poem is genuine and free from charlatanism.

In *The Study of Poetry* he also cautions the critic that in forming a genuine and disinterested estimate of the poet under consideration he should not be influenced by historical or personal judgements, historical judgements being fallacious because we regard ancient poets with excessive veneration, and

personal judgements being fallacious when we are biased towards a contemporary poet. If a poet is a 'dubious classic, let us sift him; if he is a false classic, let us explode him. But if he is a real classic, if his work belongs to the class of the very best . . . enjoy his work'.

As examples of erroneous judgements he says that the 17th century court tragedies of the French were spoken of with exaggerated praise, until Pellisson reproached them for want of the true poetic stamp, and another critic, Charles d' Hricault, said that 17th century French poetry had received undue and undeserving veneration. Arnold says the critics seem to substitute 'a halo for physiognomy and a statue in the place where there was once a man. They give us a human personage no larger than God seated amidst his perfect work, like Jupiter on Olympus.'

He also condemns the French critic Vitet, who had eloquent words of praise for the epic poem *Chanson de Roland* by Turolus, (which was sung by a jester, Taillefer, in William the Conqueror's army), saying that it was superior to Homer's *Iliad*. Arnold's view is that this poem can never be compared to Homer's work, and that we only have to compare the description of dying Roland to Helen's words about her wounded brothers Pollux and Castor and its inferiority will be clearly revealed.

### **The Study of Poetry: a shift in position - the touchstone method:**

Arnold's criticism of Vitet above illustrates his 'touchstone method'; his theory that in order to judge a poet's work properly, a critic should compare it to passages taken from works of great masters of poetry, and that these passages should be applied as touchstones to other poetry. Even a single line or selected quotation will serve the purpose.

From this we see that he has shifted his position from that expressed in the preface to his *Poems* of 1853. In *The Study of Poetry* he no longer uses the acid test of action and architectonics. He became an advocate of 'touchstones'. 'Short passages even single lines,' he said, 'will serve our turn quite sufficiently'.

Some of Arnold's touchstone passages are: Helen's words about her wounded brother, Zeus addressing the horses of Peleus, suppliant Achilles' words to Priam, and from Dante; Ugolino's brave words, and Beatrice's loving words to Virgil.

From non-Classical writers he selects from *Henry IV Part II* (III, i), Henry's expostulation with sleep - 'Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast . . . '. From *Hamlet* (V, ii) 'Absent thee from felicity awhile . . . '. From Milton's *Paradise Lost* Book 1, 'Care sat on his faded cheek . . . ', and 'What is else not to be overcome . . . '.

### **The Study of Poetry: on Chaucer:**

The French Romance poetry of the 13th century *langue d'oc* and *langue d'oïl* was extremely popular in Europe and Italy, but soon lost its popularity and now it is important only in terms of historical study. But Chaucer, who was nourished by the romance poetry of the French, and influenced by the Italian Royal rhyme stanza, still holds enduring fascination. There is an excellence of style and subject in his poetry, which is the quality the French poetry lacks. Dryden says of Chaucer's Prologue 'Here is God's plenty!' and that 'he is a perpetual fountain of good sense'. There is largeness, benignity, freedom and

spontaneity in Chaucer's writings. 'He is the well of English undefiled'. He has divine fluidity of movement, divine liquidness of diction. He has created an epoch and founded a tradition.

Some say that the fluidity of Chaucer's verse is due to licence in the use of the language, a liberty which Burns enjoyed much later. But Arnold says that the excellence of Chaucer's poetry is due to his sheer poetic talent. This liberty in the use of language was enjoyed by many poets, but we do not find the same kind of fluidity in others. Only in Shakespeare and Keats do we find the same kind of fluidity, though they wrote without the same liberty in the use of language.

Arnold praises Chaucer's excellent style and manner, but says that Chaucer cannot be called a classic since, unlike Homer, Virgil and Shakespeare, his poetry does not have the high poetic seriousness which Aristotle regards as a mark of its superiority over the other arts.

### **The Study of Poetry: on the age of Dryden and Pope:**

The age of Dryden is regarded as superior to that of the others for 'sweetness of poetry'. Arnold asks whether Dryden and Pope, poets of great merit, are truly the poetical classics of the 18th century. He says Dryden's post-script to the readers in his translation of The Aeneid reveals the fact that in prose writing he is even better than Milton and Chapman.

Just as the laxity in religious matters during the Restoration period was a direct outcome of the strict discipline of the Puritans, in the same way in order to control the dangerous sway of imagination found in the poetry of the Metaphysicals, to counteract 'the dangerous prevalence of imagination', the poets of the 18th century introduced certain regulations. The restrictions that were imposed on the poets were uniformity, regularity, precision, and balance. These restrictions curbed the growth of poetry, and encouraged the growth of prose.

Hence we can regard Dryden as the glorious founder, and Pope as the splendid high priest, of the age of prose and reason, our indispensable 18th century. Their poetry was that of the builders of an age of prose and reason. Arnold says that Pope and Dryden are not poet classics, but the 'prose classics' of the 18th century.

As for poetry, he considers Gray to be the only classic of the 18th century. Gray constantly studied and enjoyed Greek poetry and thus inherited their poetic point of view and their application of poetry to life. But he is the 'scantiest, frailest classic' since his output was small.

### **The Study of Poetry: on Burns:**

Although Burns lived close to the 19th century his poetry breathes the spirit of 18th Century life. Burns is most at home in his native language. His poems deal with Scottish dress, Scottish manner, and Scottish religion. This Scottish world is not a beautiful one, and it is an advantage if a poet deals with a beautiful world. But Burns shines whenever he triumphs over his sordid, repulsive and dull world with his poetry.

Perhaps we find the true Burns only in his bacchanalian poetry, though occasionally his bacchanalian attitude was affected. For example in his Holy Fair, the lines 'Leeze me on drink! it gies us mair/ Than either school or college', may represent the bacchanalian attitude, but they are not truly bacchanalian in spirit. There is something insincere about it, smacking of bravado.

When Burns moralises in some of his poems it also sounds insincere, coming from a man who disregarded morality in actual life. And sometimes his pathos is intolerable, as in Auld Lang Syne.

We see the real Burns (wherein he is unsurpassable) in lines such as, 'To make a happy fire-side clime/ to weans and wife/ That's the true pathos and sublime/ Of human life' (Ae Fond Kiss). Here we see the genius of Burns.

But, like Chaucer, Burns lacks high poetic seriousness, though his poems have poetic truth in diction and movement. Sometimes his poems are profound and heart-rending, such as in the lines, 'Had we never loved sae kindly/ had we never loved sae blindly/ never met or never parted/ we had ne'er been broken-hearted'.

Also like Chaucer, Burns possesses largeness, benignity, freedom and spontaneity. But instead of Chaucer's fluidity, we find in Burns a springing bounding energy. Chaucer's benignity deepens in Burns into a sense of sympathy for both human as well as non-human things, but Chaucer's world is richer and fairer than that of Burns.

Sometimes Burns's poetic genius is unmatched by anyone. He is even better than Goethe at times and he is unrivalled by anyone except Shakespeare. He has written excellent poems such as Tam O'Shanter, Whistle and I'll come to you my Lad, and Auld Lang Syne.

When we compare Shelley's 'Pinnacled dim in the of intense inane' (Prometheus Unbound III, iv) with Burns's, 'They flatter, she says, to deceive me' (Tam Glen), the latter is salutary.

### **Arnold on Shakespeare:**

Praising Shakespeare, Arnold says 'In England there needs a miracle of genius like Shakespeare's to produce a balance of mind'. This is not bardolatory, but praise tempered by a critical sense. In a letter he writes. 'I keep saying Shakespeare, you are as obscure as life is'.

In his sonnet On Shakespeare he says; 'Others abide our question. Thou are free./ We ask and ask - Thou smilest and art still,/ Out-topping knowledge'.

### **Arnold's limitations:**

For all his championing of disinterestedness, Arnold was unable to practise disinterestedness in all his essays. In his essay on Shelley particularly he displayed a lamentable lack of disinterestedness. Shelley's moral views were too much for the Victorian Arnold. In his essay on Keats too Arnold failed to be disinterested. The sentimental letters of Keats to Fanny Brawne were too much for him.

Arnold sometimes became a satirist, and as a satirical critic saw things too quickly, too summarily. In spite of their charm, the essays are characterised by egotism and, as Tilotson says, 'the attention is directed, not on his object but on himself and his objects together'.

Arnold makes clear his disapproval of the vagaries of some of the Romantic poets. Perhaps he would have agreed with Goethe, who saw Romanticism as disease and Classicism as health. But Arnold occasionally looked at things with jaundiced eyes, and he overlooked the positive features of Romanticism which posterity will not willingly let die, such as its humanitarianism, love of nature, love of childhood, a sense of mysticism, faith in man with all his imperfections, and faith in man's unconquerable mind.

Arnold's inordinate love of classicism made him blind to the beauty of lyricism. He ignored the importance of lyrical poems, which are subjective and which express the sentiments and the personality of the poet. Judged by Arnold's standards, a large number of poets both ancient and modern are dismissed because they sang with 'Profuse strains of unpremeditated art'.

It was also unfair of Arnold to compare the classical works in which figure the classical quartet, namely Achilles, Prometheus, Clytemnestra and Dido with Heamann and Dorothea, Childe Harold, Jocelyn, and 'The Excursion'. Even the strongest advocates of Arnold would agree that it is not always profitable for poets to draw upon the past. Literature expresses the zeitgeist, the spirit of the contemporary age. Writers must choose subjects from the world of their own experience. What is ancient Greece to many of us? Historians and archaeologists are familiar with it, but the common readers delight justifiably in modern themes. To be in the company of Achilles, Prometheus, Clytemnestra and Dido is not always a pleasant experience. What a reader wants is variety, which classical mythology with all its tradition and richness cannot provide. An excessive fondness for Greek and Latin classics produces a literary diet without variety, while modern poetry and drama have branched out in innumerable directions.

As we have seen, as a classicist Arnold upheld the supreme importance of the architectonic faculty, then later shifted his ground. In the lectures *On Translating Homer*, *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, and *The Study of Poetry*, he himself tested the greatness of poetry by single lines. Arnold the classicist presumably realised towards the end of his life that classicism was not the last word in literature.

Arnold's lack of historic sense was another major failing. While he spoke authoritatively on his own century, he was sometimes groping in the dark in his assessment of earlier centuries. He used to speak at times as if ex cathedra, and this pontifical solemnity vitiated his criticism.

As we have seen, later critics praise Arnold, but it is only a qualified praise. Oliver Elton calls him a 'bad great critic'. T. S. Eliot said that Arnold is a 'Propagandist and not a creator of ideas'. According to Walter Raleigh, Arnold's method is like that of a man who took a brick to the market to give the buyers an impression of the building.



### **Arnold's legacy:**

In spite of his faults, Arnold's position as an eminent critic is secure. Douglas Bush says that the breadth and depth of Arnold's influence cannot be measured or even guessed at because, from his own time onward, so much of his thought and outlook became part of the general educated consciousness. He was one of those critics who, as Eliot said, arrive from time to time to set the literary house in order. Eliot named Dryden, Johnson and Arnold as some of the greatest critics of the English language.

Arnold united active independent insight with the authority of the humanistic tradition. He carried on, in his more sophisticated way, the Renaissance humanistic faith in good letters as the teachers of wisdom, and in the virtue of great literature, and above all, great poetry. He saw poetry as a supremely illuminating, animating, and fortifying aid in the difficult endeavour to become or remain fully human.

Arnold's method of criticism is comparative. Steeped in classical poetry, and thoroughly acquainted with continental literature, he compares English literature to French and German literature, adopting the disinterested approach he had learned from Sainte-Beuve.

Arnold's objective approach to criticism and his view that historical and biographical study are unnecessary was very influential on the new criticism. His emphasis on the importance of tradition also influenced F. R. Leavis, and T. S. Eliot.

Eliot is also indebted to Arnold for his classicism, and for his objective approach which paved the way for Eliot to say that poetry is not an expression of personality but an escape from personality, because it is not an expression of emotions but an escape from emotions.

Although Arnold disapproved of the Romantics' approach to poetry, their propensity for allusiveness and symbolism, he also shows his appreciation the Romantics in his *Essays in Criticism*. He praises Wordsworth thus: 'Nature herself took the pen out of his hand and wrote with a bare, sheer penetrating power'. Arnold also valued poetry for its strong ideas, which he found to be the chief merit of Wordsworth's poetry. About Shelley he says that Shelley is 'A beautiful but ineffectual angel beating in a void his luminous wings in vain'.

In an age when cheap literature caters to the taste of the common man, one might fear that the classics will fade into insignificance. But Arnold is sure that the currency and the supremacy of the classics will be preserved in the modern age, not because of conscious effort on the part of the readers, but because of the human instinct of self-preservation.

In the present day with the literary tradition over-burdened with imagery, myth, symbol and abstract jargon, it is refreshing to come back to Arnold and his like to encounter central questions about literature and life as they are perceived by a mature and civilised mind.