Matthew Arnold: Literary Criticism

Matthew Arnold was born on 24 December 1822 at Laleham, Middlesex, England. He was a poet, an advocate for civility and moderation, an educator, a cultural critic and also worked as an inspector of schools following the footsteps of his father Thomas Arnold (1795-1842) who was a religious leader, historian and headmaster of Rugby. Matthew Arnold is characterised as one of the Sage writers. Sage writers followed the ancient literature tradition in which the writer criticises and instructs the reader about contemporary social issues using philosophy, history, politics and economics. He excelled as a critic and polemicist. Although he was educated at Rugby and Oxford University, he was more interested in his social life than on his studies. He wrote poems from the 1840s to 1850s but it left him unsatisfied yet it expressed the self-doubt, intellectual unease and emotional hesitancy felt by the mid-century intellects. It was when Charles Darwin's theories of evolution was published and it created a skeptical inquiry into the historical status of the Bible. The principles of the Christian faith were at question. Arnold's books on poetry were The Strayed Reveller and other poems (1849) and Empedocles on Etna, and other poems (1852). As an inspector of schools, he had to travel extensively through England and whole of Europe between 1859 and 1865. He wrote three books on European (particularly French) systems of education. He retired in the year 1883. He views school as a crucial site for civilising the lower classes and he believed that in the coming years most of the country's powers would be in the hands of the lower class. In such a case educating the lower class was an important fact. Arnold identified himself as the "Liberal of the future" when he saw the hardships faced by the workers and their families.

In the year 1857, Arnold was named as the Professor for poetry at Oxford University. He held this position until 1869. His major works in prose are Essays in Criticism, First Series (1856), Essays in Criticism, Second Series (1888), Culture and Anarchy (1869). Literature and Dogma, his major work on religious criticism was published in the year 1873. He died on 15 April 1888 in Liverpool, England. Arnold coined the term 'touchstone method' in his essay Study of Poetry. In this work he says that at a point of time poetry will have to replace religion and "we will turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to sustain us and to console us". Therefore, there must know how to distinguish the best poems from the inferior ones. This is where he recommends the touchstone method. The touchstone method is a comparative method of criticism. A critic should compare a particular work with the passages taken from works of great masters of poetry. These passages should be used as touchstones to other poetry. Quoting a single line would be enough. If the work we have selected move us in the way these lines does then it is a great work of literature otherwise it is not. This method was introduced to overcome the shortcomings of personal and historical estimates of a poem. Here Arnold recommends the lines of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton as touchstones for testing 'the presence or absence high poetic quality'. Comparison and analysis are the two primary objects for criticising poets. According to Arnold Chaucer, Dryden, Pope, Shelley, fall short among the best because of the lack of "high seriousness". He chose passages from the works of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Milton because their works have the following qualities:

- · Possession of very high poetical quality
- · Characters of high quality
- · The substance and matter in the work is combined with style and manner and it has

the mark of high beauty, power and worth.

But these methods have its own limitations. Comparing a passage with another one is not enough for determining the quality of a work. Arnold himself has said that we must judge a poem by its ‘total impression’ and not by its fragments.

Culture and Anarchy is one of Arnold’s major work of criticism which was published in the year 1869. In the work he distinguishes culture, which he defines “the study of perfection” which makes the things better than they are, moved by the social and moral passion for doing or achieving good, with anarchy in reference to the then new democracy which emerged in England which lacked standard and a sense of direction. Arnold classified the society into three sections:

- · The Barbarians- the upper class with their lofty spirit, distinguished manners and serenity.
- · The Philistines- the middle class with a stronghold of religious non-conformity, with plenty of morals and energy but lacks sweetness and light.
- · The Populace- the lower class which Arnold describes ‘still raw and blind’

According to Matthew Arnold the Philistines were the most influential segment of the society. They were described as the key to culture. The strength of the Philistines made the nation strong, therefore it was essential to educate and humanize them. He viewed the idea of state not within the collective of a certain group of people or within a class of a society. In a state, men mustn’t be allowed to do or pursue whatever they like. There should not be a free will without any restrictions forced upon by the state. If not, it would bring the state closer to anarchy. For this a state was necessary to regulate things because a system of complete liberty and free will could not regulate itself. So, in this work he emphasises the importance of State and culture. In his books of religious criticism, like Literature and Dogma (1873), God and the Bible (1875), Last Essays on Church and Religion (1877) Arnold puts forth Anglican ‘modernism’. He considered religious writing to be constructive and conservative.

In his essay The Function of Criticism at the Present Time, he tries to put forth a proposition about criticism and its importance at the present time. He says that the intellectuals in Europe in general, their main effort was to critically read all the branches of knowledge- theology, philosophy, history, art, science, etc. and by critically reading it they wanted to see the object as in itself it really is. But when it comes to England the intellectuals did not value criticism and as a result the language is impaired. Many scholars criticised Matthew Arnold for giving more importance to criticism and they also asserted the implicit supremacy of creative effort of the human spirit over its critical effort. In this essay he criticises Wordsworth, the Romantic poet who said “instead of criticising others work one must save their time in writing their own original composition it would be much employed and sooner or later he may find his own level. A false or malicious criticism may do much injury to the minds of others. A stupid invention either in prose or verse is quite harmless”. Wordsworth gave more importance to creative power and had a very low opinion about criticism and critical power. According to Arnold, Wordsworth was a great critic but he hasn’t left many works of criticism for the people and his criticism lacked clarity. Creative power - creative activity is one of the highest functions of a man. Men may have the ability to use and exercise this creative power in other activities other than producing a great piece of work in art or literature. This creative power can be utilised in well-being, in learning, and many may use it in criticising. If men are shut out from using their creative power in their

own ways they may be denied of true happiness. Exercising creative power only in art and literature may not be possible in all epochs and under all conditions. Through this Arnold answers Wordsworth who argued to use creative power in composing verse or prose. A literary work cannot present the thing as in itself it really is. For producing a real satisfactory work, one must have two powers:

- · The power of man- which means the writers capacity to produce a good literary work.
- · The power of the moment- which refers to the contemporary society and its situations.

The power of man and the power of the moment is only within the control of critical power. Only using this critical power, a poet can present the thing as in itself it really is. This helps in establishing an order of ideas and also helps to make the best ideas prevail. When these ideas reach the society, the truth is presented before the people in great works and this makes the society grow.

According to Arnold, before a poet writes a poem, he should know life and the world. But the life and the world in the contemporary modern time is very complex. So, before dealing with poetry, a poet should critically analyse the world and life. Otherwise, the work composed would be comparatively poor, barren and short lived as it fails to represent the world and life as it really is. Arnold says that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who was a German poet, playwright, novelist, scientist- greatest German literary figure was a great critic. He compares Goethe's works with Lord Byron's works. Byron was a leading figure of Romantic movement. Arnold says that Goethe's and Byron's works had great productive power but Byron's works did not have endurance. While Goethe's works were nourished by great critical effort and provided true materials for his works Byron's weren't. The main difference between Goethe and Byron was that Goethe knew the world and life and Byron did not. Arnold says that the work produced in the contemporary time was premature. The works lacked proper data and sufficient materials to work with. He criticises the English poetry published in the first half of the 19th century. Even though it has plenty of energy and creative force, it lacked the knowledge about the world, proper data and materials. He also criticises Byron and Shelley saying that Byron's works were empty as he did not try to know the world and life and Shelley's was incoherent. He once again criticises Wordsworth saying that he was a great poet, his thoughts were richer and he influenced many in a wider sense, but he should have collected many materials and data before composing poems and should have read more books, among them those of Goethe's. In this essay, he sites the examples of Pindar and Sophocles of Greece and Shakespeare of England and says that though they did not read many books, they lived in the current of ideas. They animated and nourished the creative power and tried to portray the society in their works and their works were permeated by fresh thoughts.

"Criticism enables oneself to try to know the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics and others, also to value knowledge and thought without the intrusion of any consideration". It means one should write a critical works without any bias towards someone or some political agendas. According to Arnold the English must open itself to the field of criticism. For this they should follow the rule of 'disinterestedness'. While writing a criticism a person should keep aloof from all the things and try to view things practically. He should have a free play of mind on all subjects which it touches. Attaching oneself to any political or practical considerations would affect one's criticism. According to him criticism has nothing to do with any kind of fondness or attachments. When we write a biased work of criticism, the meaning of the work is lost and the truth is hidden from the readers. It is the duty of

the critic to present the truth before the readers. A critic's job is to know the best and true knowledge and thought. Also, to create a current of true and fresh ideas. But in order to write a good critical work the critic has to work with inflexible honesty, due ability and create questions of practical consequences and application never fail to have due prominence given to them. That means a good critical work would be prominent in all the coming generations.

Matthew Arnold in his essay praises Edmund Burke's works. Edmund Burke is an Anglo-Irish statesman and a philosopher. He is also a writer, politician, and a journalist. Arnold says that Burke would be a great example for the English intellects. Even though he was a politician his thoughts weren't influenced by any political ideology. His ideas are prominent through all the generations. In his works he gave justification or he justified his ideas and thoughts. He lived in a world of ideas which influenced him to produce such great works. He did not portray the wold of catchwords and party habits in his works but presented a critical view about the world. Politics didn't influence his thoughts but his thoughts influenced the then political ideas. Arnold says that Burke was able to produce such excellent works because he had critically analysed the world and life. He has collected all the data and materials. Also, he has read many books that could be reflected in his thoughts and works. Matthew Arnold defines the function of criticism as:

"Criticism must maintain its independence of practical spirit and its aims. It must express dissatisfaction with well meant efforts and with impoverishing efforts too. It must not hurry., but maintain its patience and should know how to wait, and know how to attach to things and how to withdraw from them".

By this Arnold intends to say that a judgement should not be made in a haste, it should be a slow and composed process. The critic should not attach himself to anything and there should be free flow of ideas. Arnold says that a great work is nothing but a work of synthesis and exposition, and not analysis and discourse. Synthesis is to accumulate number of things like data, materials, information etc. exposition on the other hand is to present something useful for the society not just mere books. He also says that the word 'critic' has a positive meaning. The duty of a critic is to bring out great things about a book or a piece of art. He also says that French Revolution, with its writers like Rousseau and Voltaire, was more powerful than the English Revolution of Charles. However, the English Revolution is though less successful than the French Revolution yet it is better than French Revolution "appeals to an order of ideas which are universal, certain permanent". French Revolution ignored the intellectual sphere and rushed into the political sphere, thus losing its universal appeal. French Revolution was followed by "Epoch of Concentration" (period of single-mindedness) which could not last long and was followed by "Epoch of Expansion" (period of creative ideas). The works written on the French Revolution for example the works of Edmund Burke are though great and well appreciated yet they aren't biased as they don't combine politics with thought.

In this essay, Matthew Arnold instead of stating the function of criticism at the present time he focuses on the methods of criticism- how one should criticise a particular work. He wrote this work for the Victorian and Modern periods. He defends literature against its enemies who emphasises on money making, science, and commercial prosperity. It led them to regard a work of literature as a mere pleasant pastime. Arnold is known as the finest critics in England and his works are even studied at universities. Unlike Wordsworth, Arnold's criticism is precise and the idea that he is trying to express is communicated more effectively. In this essay we can see that he mostly criticises the Romantic poets. The Romantic poets followed the idea of 'spontaneous over flow of ideas' while Arnold focuses more on reality that on the unrealistic world created by

the Romantic poets. He stresses on the point that one should know the life and world and then write a literary work whether it is in prose or verse. It is because the truth will not be brought in front of the readers and the work won't have the capability to surpass its time. He vehemently criticises Wordsworth for criticising the art of criticism. He gave equal importance to the creative power and the critical power of the human nature. Arnold says that only through a good critical power a good piece of literature could be composed. He defines criticism as "the disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world". The word 'disinterestedness is given more prominence because it is a key factor of a critical work. It is crucial for a critic to maintain an aloofness towards everything, without having any influence of any material or thought on him. Only then he will be able to write a good critical work. Otherwise the work would be barren and poor. Also, it would be a short-lived affair. He admires Goethe for his works because in his works we can see that he has ample of knowledge and it is because he has read many books and referred to many materials. For a true basis for creative power is to find the right materials and data or else the work would be unreliable. The duty of a critic is to present the truth before the readers. He has to bring out the best and the worst in a particular work. This he should do without any bias. Only through a good criticism the actual value of a work could be presented. Matthew Arnold says that a good critic may face several criticisms from others, but this should not bother him or stop him from writing further critical works. The criticism involves flexibility and openness to new experiences and curiosity. He also insists the free play of mind which the poststructuralist theorists would define it far more radically and subversively. A good literary critic is a person of culture embarked on a steady, steadfast inquiry into self and society. He also believed that his arguments would make "a good many people uncomfortable".

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