

Review Article

A Radiant Light: An Introduction to Matthew Arnold

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OVERVIEW

Arnold was as he said himself, “a liberal of the Future” – a future which has not yet arrived. He lived through a period of radical change – the Victorian age, and spoke more wisely of continuing problems than our fashionable prophets of moral and social revolution or their reactionary opponents. His eminence is due not only to his literary criticism, but also to his standing as a poet and general critic of English society and civilization. Both in England and the United States- especially in academic circles, his influence continues to be felt in a sizeable section of literary intellectuals. Arnold might be called as Douglas Bush says, “an individual mixture of 18th century rationality, Romantic idealism, Victorian skepticism and modern existentialism...”¹ (Bush, Matthew Arnold)

Matthew Arnold, the eldest son but second child of Dr. Thomas Arnold was born on Christmas Eve, 1822 in Laleham. The youth of Arnold was spent under the shadow of a man so notable, so strong, so decided, so representative as Thomas Arnold. His father was the famous headmaster of Rugby. He taught Matthew Latin while he was quite young. At the age of thirteen, Matthew was admitted to Winchester school. He spent only one year there and then was transferred to Rugby, where he remained until 1841.

In 1841, Matthew entered Balliol College, Oxford, as a classical scholar. During the holidays, he used to wander about the Oxford countryside with his friends. He could not be a serious student and that's why he got second class. It was a bitter disappointment for him. He, however, redeemed his second class by a fellowship at Oriel College. In 1847, he was appointed private secretary to Lord Lansdowne, the influential Whig Statesman.

During his continental holiday in 1846-47, Arnold seems to have met a girl, her identity is unknown, but in his volume of poems published in 1849, he gave her the name Marguerite. There seems to have been a love affair but

the actual facts are not known. From Arnold's poems, it is clear that he was attracted towards that lady for her blue eyes, for her 'unconquered joy'. Subsequently, Matthew fell in love with Miss Wightman, daughter of a judge, Sir William Wightman. But Sir William refused his consent to the marriage due to his meager income. Then with the help of Lord Lansdowne, Arnold was appointed an inspector of schools. The marriage took place in 1851, Matthew Arnold and his wife led a happy life.

As an inspector of schools, Matthew found his work both interesting and tedious. He made numerous reports on English and foreign schools. In 1857, he was elected professor of poetry at Oxford. He was honored twice by Rugby Prize in 1840 and Newdigate Prize in 1843. His first volume of poems appeared in 1849 under the title *The Strayed Reveller, and Other Poems* by A. The second volume of his poems, *Empedocles on Etna, and Other poems* by A appeared in 1852 but was withdrawn on account of Arnold's dissatisfaction. He republished it at the suggestion of Robert Browning. Then appeared his third volume under Matthew's own name. This volume had a preface presenting Matthew's views on some of the principal objects and functions of Poetry. The Scholar Gipsy and Sohrab and Rustum are the examples of his considered work.

Then appeared *Poems* by Matthew Arnold, Second Series. This volume has more poems from the earlier volumes and only two new poems, *Balder Dead* and *Separation*. In 1858, *Merope A Tragedy* was published. In 1861 his lectures *On Translating Homer* were published, to be followed in 1862 by *Last Words on Translating Homer*.

Arnold's poetic work is exquisite, but it has a limited range. Among these the important poems are *The Strayed Reveller*, *The Forsaken Merman*, *Mycerinus*, *To a Gipsy Child*, *Resignation*, *To a Friend* and *Shakespeare*. The second volume contains *Switzerland*, *Faded Leaves*, “*A Summer Night*” “*Memorial Verses*” etc. *Empedocles* and *Merope* are his most ambitious efforts to represent

situations after the manner of the ancients; the first, on his own confession, an unsatisfying achievement; the latter, in the opinion of the majority of his admirers, a graceful, but somewhat ineffectual, academic exercise.

Throughout his life, Matthew Arnold steadfastly adhered to certain very definite ideals of poetic art and to a singularly melancholy philosophy of life. His works are predominantly Greek in inspiration both in matter and style. He was much influenced by three Greek masters Homer, Epictetus and Sophocles. He was also a great admirer of Wordsworth and Goethe. Like Goethe 'he laid his finger on the place, and said thou ailest here and here' Arnold describes the spiritual pangs of his age and suggests nature's healing and refreshing effects.

Poetry, according to Arnold, is an application of ideas to life. Arnold always remained conscious of the noble function of poetry. In his essay on Wordsworth he wrote, "a poetry of revolt against moral ideas is a poetry of revolt against life, a poetry of indifference towards moral ideas is a poetry of indifference towards life." ("Study of Poetry", - Essays in Criticism, II). Poetry has immense possibility. Poetry is not the idle songs of an empty day. He believes that poetry and science are complementary. Poetry is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science. He further suggests that science and religion have a limited appeal, while poetry appeals as much to emotion and imagination as to the intellect. He firmly believes "when science will fail, when religion will fail, poetry will come to man's rescue" ("Study of Poetry" -in Essays in Criticism II series).

According to Arnold, poetry is a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty. Arnold actually means by criticism is that poetry is not a photographic picture of life. It presents an ideal life, which one should seek to realize. Poetry follows the principles of poetic truth and poetic beauty. By poetic truth Arnold means moral truth and high seriousness. In other words, poetry must be rich in matter. By poetic beauty Arnold means expression. Arnold further suggests that matter and expression, form and content should go hand in hand and in this way, poetry becomes a source of consolation and delight.

To Arnold, a poetical representation is required not only to amuse but also to provide inspiration and pleasure. A poetical representation must, 'convey a charm and infuse delight'. A poetical work is a representation from which man can derive enjoyment. From the most tragic circumstance, represented in a work of art, the feeling of enjoyment may still result. In fact, the more tragic the situation, the deeper becomes the enjoyment.

There is a strain of ambivalence in Arnold's poetry, Classicism and Romanticism are found in equal proportions. Douglas Bush Says,

"Arnold may be described as a mixture of Hardy and Keats. His romantic instincts, his desire for feeling, though half suppressed, break through the austere or prosaic surface and flower in images from nature and the simple worlds of classical and Biblical antiquity..."² (Bush Matthew Arnold)

Indeed, as a poet, Arnold can be ranked amongst the first four or five of his times, as a literary critic he can hardly be given any but the first place.

Arnold's main significance as a critic lies in his constant emphasis on the dignity of the intellectual and seriousness and give to their thinking a cosmopolitan range, his application of classical criteria, and above all his courageous attempt in an increasingly hostile environment to restore the traditional value of literature are highly laudable. Through him English criticism which had degenerated into mediocrity after Hazlitt and Coleridge get a new lease of life.

Arnold's literary work divides itself into three periods which we may call the poetical, the critical, and the practical. His poetical work met with little favour, and gradually he practically abandoned poetry in favour of critical writing. Arnold set his career as a critic with The Preface of 1853. Apart from The Preface his main critical works include his lectures On Translating Homer (1861), On the Study of a Celtic Literature (1867), and the two series of Essays in Criticism (1865 and 1888).

The work which elevated Arnold to the front rank of living critics was the two series of Essays in Criticism. The first book, which came out in 1865, deals primarily with the nature of criticism, the second which is a Study of Poetry expounds his critical method of appraising literature by means of test, passages of proved excellence – a 'touchstone' theory that tries to see the whole through its part taken as a representative sample. The book contains essays on Byron, Shelley, Wordsworth and Milton.

Arnold's fundamental idea of criticism appeals to us enormously. The business of criticism, he says, is neither to find fault nor to display the critics' own learning, it is simply to know "the best that is known and thought in the world, and by in its turn making this is known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas. "Function of Criticism" Arnold appeals for disinterested exercise of curiosity in criticism. In his search for the best, the critic is required to be equipped with the knowledge of foreign literature as well. Arnold was the first English critic to talk in terms of a

European confederation. Distinguished as his achievement is in offering a reasonably sensitive evaluation of particular works and particular authors, it is probably less important than his achievement as a spokesman for criticism itself, as a champion of literary culture. The Function of Criticism at the Present Time is both the classical apologia for the role which Arnold himself sustained with such effect and the classical statement of the liberal principles which ideally should guide the performance of all intellectuals who feel concerned about the health and quality of social life around them. In his Essays, Arnold airs his theory of poetry as "criticism of life" and as "an application of ideas to life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty." On the whole, Essays in Criticism provides evidence of critical brilliance and excellence, hard to be matched in any other. Later, like Ruskin, he turned to practical questions, and his "Friendship's Garland" (1871) was intended to satirize and perhaps reform the great middle class of England whom he called the 'Philistines'. "Matthew Arnold" to quote Hume Walker,

"Inherited the teacher's instinct and he was profoundly influenced by his sense of what his country needed. To be useful to England was always one of his greatest ambitions; and he knew that the way to be useful was to supply that where in England was deficient."³

Then comes Arnold's Culture and Anarchy, which shows his strong criticism of smugness, philistinism and materialism of the England of his times. The work is an expression of a shrewd and intuitive intelligence reacting to the conditions of the age. After this work, followed four books on religious subjects –

St. Paul and Protestantism (1870) Literature and Dogma (1873), God and Bible (1875) and Last Essays on Church and Religion (1877). The Discourses in America (1830) completes the list of his important works. Thus, Arnold was known first as a poet, then as a literary critic, next as a social critic, then as a religious controversialist and finally as a figure encompassing perhaps all these roles, the expert detector of human ills and the apostle of culture. Compton Rickett observes; "There were no more liberal minded, clear-sighted educational reformers in the Victorian era than he and Thomas Henry Huxley".⁴

There is a tendency among critics to discuss Arnold's literary criticism in isolation from his social criticism and vice-versa. Exclusive attention has been focused either on his social criticism or on his literary criticism. No proper linkage between these two aspects of Arnold's criticism is discernible in the work done so far by critics on Arnold's critical writings except by Lionel Trilling and Raymond

Williams though they have also not thrown sufficient light on the inter-linkage that exists between these two aspects. For Arnold, criticism is the disinterested endeavor in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, and science to see the object as in itself it really is. Literature is just one sphere of critical activity. The most important aspects of his criticism is the central emphasis he places on culture both in his criticism of society and literature. Culture is another name for perfection and literature is one of the means to embody this perfection. The central premise of Arnold's criticism is his conception of culture which is so clearly and persuasively defined in his essay, Sweetness and Light.

But Arnold's poetry is chiefly critical of life. In all his deepest poems, in Thyrsis, Resignation, A Southern Night, Arnold presents the restless energy of his time. Arnold was extremely sensitive to the ideas of his age. The glorification of England as manifest in the Great Exhibition in 1851 had no appeal to him. The luminous world around him was a waste land, sprawling in all its hideousness. It was an 'unreal city', according to T.S. Eliot; and 'a city of dreadful night', for Thomson. To Arnold, every man was crippled and incomplete, groping in the night, crying for light. That is why his poetry is a plangent threnody.

The dictatorship of materialism and arid intellect had no charm for Arnold. He found, like his Empedocles, that men were nothing but 'naked, eternal, restless mind'. The genial faith of Tennyson, and the robust optimism of Browning were, in a sense, creeds of dogmatism. Arnold had neither genial faith nor optimism. During his time England had, a superficial glitter. But, for him, it was 'darkling plain' as he said in Dover Beach. Arnold was deeply distressed to note the loss of faith in contemporary England. The traditional values were fast dying. He wrote in Self Dependence.

Resolve to be thyself, and know that he

What finds himself loses him misery.

Yet he could not resolve his doubts and moral self-questionings. The facile optimism and moral self-complacency of his contemporaries could not buoy him up. His bleeding heart is laid bare to his sister: "To make a habitual war on depression and low spirits, which in one's early youth one is apt to indulge and be somewhat interested in, is one of the things one learns as one gets older. They are noxious alike to body and mind, and already partake of the nature of death." (Quoted from Douglas Bush –Arnold, A survey).

Arnold did not share Shelley's optimistic belief that the

regeneration of mankind was not far behind, "If winter comes, can spring be far behind"? nor did he share Bacon's conviction that man was slowly but steadily gaining dominion over Matter and Nature. Man cannot be free from sick fatigue and languid doubt, which are the legacy of materialism. Arnold seems to be an anachronism in his age. He could not rejoice at the material prosperity and industrial expansion during his times. He was writing elegies when everybody else was buoyed up with optimism. His poetry is a vehement protest against Romanticism, which was thus the rage of the day.

Among the Victorians, Arnold was regarded as a modern poet; for he was much ahead of the age. While the Victorians, in general, said everything with dogmatic certainty and pontifical solemnity, Arnold broke into the Victorian stronghold with a skeptical lifting of the eyebrows and an ironical grin. In a letter to his mother Arnold wrote in 1867:

"My poems represent, on the whole, the main movement of mind of the last quarter of a century.... It might be fairly urged that I have less poetical sentiment than Tennyson, and less intellectual vigour and abundance than Browning; yet because I have perhaps more of a fusion of the two than either of them; and have more regularly applied that fusion to the main line of modern development; I am likely enough to my turn, as they have had their's."

Arnold was regarded as a reformer, a legislator. He had salutary things to say, but he said them provocatively. He was a modern because he was an intellectual poet in age of romanticism and emotional exuberance. No poet of modern time, perhaps no English poet of any time, appeals so directly and exclusively to the cultivated taste of the educated classes. Instead of giving way to the unbridled imagination, he was a profound thinker.

Arnold is much ahead of his contemporaries, because he was the first who emphasized that criticism must be essentially the exercise of a freely ranging, open minded curiosity. Criticism, in his considered opinion, must not lend itself to 'ulterior, practical considerations.' While all his contemporaries were rejoicing at material prosperity, Arnold found ugliness, sordidness, soullessness, crudity, vulgarity, violence, and blundering", brought in the wake of the industrial revolution. With his rare vision, he sought to elevate his countrymen from the slough of philistinism, degeneration, and self-complacency. The Victorians by and large pinned their faith in machine and self-complacency, and Arnold was never tired of condemning them.

Arnold is modern for several other reasons as well.

Arnold made some experiments with Metre in a quite few of his poems, e.g. *The Strayed Reveller* and *Rugby Chapel*, he sought to revive classicism in form and content, in his themes and expression. As a true classicist, he avoided all kinds of subjectivity, in poetical themes and expression, which he described as 'allegory of the mind'. He maintained that allegory instantly involves one in the unnecessary and the unnecessary is necessarily un-poetical. As a master of English prose, Arnold was meticulous in his poetical expressions as well. He critically revised his prose and verse before publication. He had classical restraint as well as romantic grace. Clarity, lucidity and brevity are the characteristics of Arnold's style. He had grace and elegance in his style. He would never have the slightest approach to levity. He always aimed at nobility of thought and expression. All the poems of Arnold are equally beautiful in expression. It would be not exaggeration to say that most of his poems deserve to be anthologized as much for the nobility of sentiment as for the classical beauty of phrase and expression.

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