THE FUNCTION OF CRITICISM AT THE PRESENT TIME

BY
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His Critical Works

Arnold had written some poetry before he turned to criticism. His criticism therefore is the criticism of a man who had personal experience of what he was writing about. He made his debut as a critic in the Preface to the Poems of 1853. In it he follows Dryden’s method of throwing light on his own performance and making critical observations suitable to the occasion. Four years later his appointment as the Professor of Poetry at Oxford provided him with just the opportunity he needed to develop his critical powers. Speaking from an honourable and advantageous platform\(^1\), that the Oxford chair was, he had a fair chance to be heard, too. It was in the lectures delivered here that he proved his worth as a critic. The more important of these lectures he published in book-form in two volumes, one entitled On Translating Homer and the other The Study of Celtic Literature. He also wrote for the literary journals, which served as a profitable and convenient intermediate stage between the lecture and the book\(^2\), for Ward’s Selections from the English Poets, and for other publications and selections. Of these miscellaneous writings, and the lectures he delivered apart from his Oxford assignment, he published a selection in the well-known Essays in Criticism in two series. These four books and the Preface of 1853 are the chief critical works of Arnold. His criticism in them all may be said to fall into two broad divisions: that on the art of poetry and that on the art of criticism. The former, generally speaking, is the earlier phase when the writing of poetry engaged his attention more than the question of teaching others how to judge it; and the latter the later phase when, the poet being more or less out, the critic was free to apply his mind to the problems of his craft.

\(^1\) *Essays in Criticism*, second series, ‘Wordsworth’ (Macmillan, p. 84).
\(^2\) Ibid., ‘The Study of Poetry’, p. 3.
\(^3\) Ibid., ‘Wordsworth’, p. 85.
On Criticism

(1) Creative and Critical Faculties

Arnold admits that the critical faculty is lower than the creative. For the exercise of creative power, whether in literature or in the other fields of life, ’is the highest function of man; it is proved to be so by man’s finding in it his true happiness’. But, so far as the writing of literature is concerned, creative power by itself is of little avail. There must also be an auspicious time for its full flowering. An auspicious time, according to Arnold, is one in which the materials, with which a writer works—’the best ideas on every matter which literature touches’—are not only readily available but current in the very air he breathes. It is these that he shapes into ’beautiful works’. It is not, truly, his business to discover new ideas, ’that is rather the business of the philosopher’. But unless he finds himself amidst them, he has nothing to work upon. Gray is a case in point: with all his poetical gifts, he produced but little poetry because ’he fell upon an age of prose’; ’a sort of spiritual east wind was at that time blowing; neither Butler nor Gray could flower’. With Taine therefore Arnold believes that ’for the creation of a master-work of literature two powers must concur, the power of the man and the power of the moment, and the man is not enough without the moment’. It is the happy coincidence of creative power with creative epochs that produces great works of literature.

But what if an epoch be not creative, not, that is to say, rich in ’the best ideas on every matter which literature touches’? ’In that case,’ says Arnold, ’it must wait till they are ready.’ To make this possible is the work of criticism, which is not

1’Essays in Criticism’, first series, The Function of Criticism at the Present Time, p. 4. The quotations that follow are from this essay unless otherwise stated.
2Ibid., second series, Gray, p. 54.
3Ibid., p. 56.
merely ‘judgement in literature’, but ‘a disinterested endea-

vour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought
in the world, and thus to establish a current of fresh and true
ideas’. Thus conceived, criticism is a threefold activity: it is,
in the first instance, personal culture—‘to learn the best that is
known and thought in the world’; in the next, a service to
society—to propagate the same; and lastly, a service to literature—
to establish a current of fresh and true ideas’. To discharge
the first two functions ‘knowledge, and ever fresh knowledge,
must be the critic’s great concern for himself’. It is by com-
municating it, and letting his own judgement pass along with
it—but insensibly, and in the second place,—that the critic
will generally do most good to his readers’. But since no one
literature can claim to impart the whole of such knowledge
singly, ‘every critic should try and possess one great literature,
at least, besides his own; and the more unlike his own, the
better’. This is his minimum equipment. To be true to his
vocation, he should aspire for even more—for ‘a knowledge of
Greek, Roman, and Eastern antiquity’, and of all European
literatures, looking upon himself but as a member of a
cultural confederation, ‘bound to a joint action and working
to a common result’.

This brings us to the third function of criticism, which
follows from its endeavour thus to promote literary culture or,
in Addison’s words, to bring ‘philosophy out of closets and
libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies,
at tea-tables and in coffee-houses’. By, in this way, making
the best ideas prevail, ‘it tends, at last, to make an intellectual
situation of which the creative power can profitably avail
itself....Presently these new ideas reach society, and there is
a stir and growth everywhere; out of this stir and growth come
the creative epochs of literature.’ This is illustrated in the
Greece of Pindar and Sophocles, and the England of Shakes-

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1I find a striking resemblance up to this point between Arnold’s critical pur-
pose and Addison’s.
THE VICTORIAN COMPROMISE

Pericles was a prominent and influential Greek statesman, which are two of the most glorious ages in poetry. With not much help from books they produced great works because in them 'the poet lived in a current of ideas in the highest degree animating and nourishing to the creative power; (and) society, was in the fullest measure, permeated by fresh thought, intelligent and alive.' Where an epoch lacks such 'nationally diffused life and thought', it is, according to Arnold, the critic's duty to provide its equivalent by propagating the best that is known and thought in the world. Such an atmosphere was formed for Goethe by 'the many-sided learning and the long and widely combined critical effort of Germany' when 'there was no national glow of life and thought there as in the Athens of Pericles or the England of Elizabeth.' It is true that it takes a long, long time for criticism to bring such an atmosphere about, and generations of critics die before it comes to happen; but this is the only way to create a favourable climate for the growth of literature. In this sense criticism is as joyfully creative as literature. In epochs of barrenness it alone is literature, no other creation being possible.

The word 'disinterested' in Arnold's definition of criticism still remains to be examined. There is little doubt that it is not used in our sense of the term: in the sense of being rewarding in itself, as some schools believe literary activity to be. For, as we have seen, criticism for Arnold is the handmaid of culture—personal, social, and literary. It has 'interests' beyond itself. In this sense it is not disinterested. But there were other interests that attached to it in Arnold's day, from which he wanted it to be free. These were generally political and religious, or otherwise practical. 'Our organs of criticism,' he says, 'are organs of men and parties having practical ends to serve, and with them those practical ends are the first thing and the play of mind the second; so much play of mind as is compatible with the prosecution of those practical ends is all that is wanted.' A Whig organ considered a literary work
from the Whig point of view, a Tory organ from the Tory
point of view, a sectarian organ from the sectarian point of
view. This hindered 'a free disinterested play of mind':
which alone is criticism, and which alone enables the critic
to 'dwell upon what is excellent in itself, and the absolute
beauty and fitness of things'. Unless therefore a critic dis-
abused his mind of all such considerations, he could not dis-
charge his duty truly, which is 'to see the object as in itself it
really is'.

(2) The Touchstone Method

Arnold also considers the question of the judgement of
literature, which is a time-honoured function of criticism.
Here, in spite of his classical leanings, he lays down no hard
and fast rule, contenting himself with a test of his own, ulti-
mately borrowed from Longinus and first suggested in England
by Addison, with whom Arnold has many things in common.

Explaining how a sound literary taste can be cultivated,
Addison says: 'If a man would know whether he is possessed
of this faculty, I would have him read over the celebrated
works of antiquity, which have stood the test of many different
ages and countries, or those works among the moderns which
have the sanction of the politer part of our contemporaries.
If upon the perusal of such writings he does not find himself
delighted in an extraordinary manner or if, upon reading the
admired passages in such authors, he finds a coldness and
indifference in his thoughts, he ought to conclude not (as is too
usual among tasteless readers) that the author wants those
perfections which have been admired in him but that he him-
self wants the faculty of discovering them.' Longinus had
applied the same test to the determination of sublimity in
literature. 'In general,' he said, 'those examples of subli-
mity which always please and please all are truly beautiful
and sublime. For, men, who differ in their habits, and have

\[\text{Spectator, 409. Also quoted in the chapter on Addison.}\]
different tastes, pursuits and aspirations, and are of different ages, hold the same view about the same writings, then this unanimous verdict of such discordant judges, gives irresistible authority to their favourable verdict. Arnold adopts a modified form of this test to determine the worth of a work of literature. ‘Indeed,’ he says, ‘there can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, than to have always in one’s mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry. Of course we are not to require this other poetry to resemble them; it may be very dissimilar. But if we have any tact we shall find them, when we have lodged them well in our minds, an infallible touchstone for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality, and also the degree of this quality, in all other poetry which we may place beside them.’ Then taking a few widely different passages from Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton, he points out how they impress alike by their poetical quality. So they all ‘belong to the class of the truly excellent’. ‘Critics,’ he concludes, ‘give themselves great labour to draw out what in the abstract constitutes the characters of a high quality of poetry. It is much better simply to have recourse to concrete examples;—to take specimens of poetry of the high, the very highest quality, and to say: The characters of a high quality of poetry are what is expressed there. They are far better recognised by being felt in the verse of the master, than by being perused in the prose of the critic.’ Arnold is unable to suggest any concrete criterion by which these ‘characters of a high quality of poetry’ may be determined; he considers ‘tact’ or taste a sure enough guide. But he has no doubt whatever that they are found both in the matter and substance of the poetry, and

1Also quoted in the chapter on Longinus.
2Essays in Criticism, second series, The Study of Poetry, p. 10. The quotations that follow are from this essay unless otherwise stated.
in its manner and style’. In poetry of the highest excellence matter and substance possess ‘truth and seriousness’ ‘in an eminent degree’. By it is meant, as Aristotle said, ‘a higher truth and a higher seriousness’ than is found in history. The poet gives not the bare facts of life as a detached observer but a criticism of his own, born of ‘absolute sincerity’ or a sincere conviction of its rightness. The manner and style derive their force from the matter and substance. They are characterised by a diction (choice of words) and movement of their own in keeping with their weighty matter and substance. ‘The two superiorities are closely related, and are in steadfast proportion one to the other. So far as high poetic truth and seriousness are wanting to a poet’s matter and substance, so far also will a high poetic stamp of diction and movement be wanting to his style and manner’, and vice versa.

(3) False Standards of Judgement

The above, according to Arnold, is an ‘infallible’ test of greatness in poetry. There were two other tests applied in his day which he considers fallacious: the personal estimate and the historic estimate. By the former he meant an intrusion of the critic’s own likes and dislikes in his judgement of literature. ‘Our personal affinities, likings, and circumstances,’ he says, ‘have great power to sway our estimate of this or that poet’s work, and to make us attach more importance to it as poetry than in itself it really possesses.’ Much of Burns’s Scotch poetry is, in this way, praised by Scotchmen for its treatment of ‘Scotch drink, Scotch religion, and Scotch manners’. ‘But this world of Scotch drink, Scotch religion, and Scotch manners,’ he says again, ‘is against a poet, not for him, when it is not a partial countryman who reads him; for in itself it is not a beautiful world, and no one can deny that it is of advantage to a poet to deal with a beautiful world.’ A real estimate of poetry rises above personal predilections and prejudices.
The historic estimate lays more emphasis on the circumstances in which the author wrote—the state of life and literature in his day, his opportunities and limitations, the labour needed by the work, and so on—than on the work itself. This may again ‘make it of more importance as poetry than in itself it really is’. Or, the critic may be led to overrate it in proportion to the pains he has taken to collect all this information. And, what is more, the time which should be given to the author, to the enjoyment of the best in him, is spent on what is relatively less important. So the historic estimate is also misleading, despite the value attached to it by Dr. Johnson.

In this connection it is worthy of note that Arnold had no such fear of the life of an author as a factor in his work. He constantly presses it in service in his own criticism of authors, and most of all in the essay on Shelley\(^1\), which is all biography. In this he follows Taine and Sainte-Beuve, the latter more than the former.

The Value of his Criticism

Arnold is an overpraised critic. T. S. Eliot does not consider him a critic at all, although he admits that he might have become one, had he not occupied himself ‘in attacking the uncritical\(^2\)’. Neither in his observations on poetry nor in those on the critical art can he be said to say anything of his own. In the former, as we have seen, he does no more than remind his age of the precepts of Aristotle and Longinus that would serve as a wholesome check on its excesses. Even the phrase ‘criticism of life’, by which he is so well known, is a restatement of the Aristotelian proposition that it is the actions of men, and not merely their thoughts or speech, that constitute great poetry. As only the latter two passed for poetry in his day, he reasserted the old truth in his own way. The phrase,
no doubt, occurred to him later but its germ can be seen in the Preface of 1853 in his emphasis on action as the subject of poetry and joy as its object. It is the presence of these two elements in it—the actions of men calculated to give joy—that makes it a ‘criticism of life’ or the poet’s version of life. Mere thought makes it an illusion and mere expression an empty vessel.

In some of his observations on the critical art also he tows the classical line. His ‘touchstone method’, as has been seen, is but a modified version of Longinus’s test of poetic greatness. But while Longinus applied it to the whole work, Arnold suggests a comparison of passages only. On Arnold’s own grounds, would the comparison be not more dependable if it were, on the same lines, between two whole works instead of their detached passages?

His distrust of the historical method of criticism is not also understandable. If, as he says, a creative epoch is essential to a creative work, does that epoch not become a factor in that work? He himself says further that ‘for the creation of a master-work of literature two powers must concur, the power of the man and the power of the moment, and the man is not enough without the moment’. When such, then, is the importance of the moment or the poet’s times, how can a knowledge of them be irrelevant to the critic’s function? Arnold himself accounts for the greatness of Pindar, Sophocles, and Shakespeare by the animating times in which they lived. Gray’s lack of productivity is, similarly, accounted for historically. It is surprising, too, that while the critic of a barren epoch is to foster such times, the critic who is to consider what is produced then should have nothing to do with them.

Arnold is also an ‘interested’ critic like those he condemns. As their ‘interests’ in literature were religious and political, his were cultural and social. He expected both the poet and the critic to make the best prevail. There is therefore a strong moral bias in his critical utterances. But judged his-
torically, he rendered a great service to criticism. He rescued it from the disorganised state into which it had fallen by stressing the need of system in critical judgement. This he found in those rules of the ancients which had stood the test of time: those, for instance, which laid down joy as the object of poetry, action and not merely thought as its subject, or the subordinate relation in which form stood to content. To this end he urged the necessity of comparative criticism of literatures with an acknowledged masterpiece as the model. He also waged a relentless battle against the intrusion of personal, religious, or political considerations in the judgement of authors and works. Lastly, he raised criticism to a higher level than was ever thought of by making it the care-taker of literature in epochs unfavourable to its growth. But more than one critic has been struck by the incongruity between Arnold, the more or less romantic poet, and Arnold, the more or less classical critic. The explanation offered is the classical tradition of his father, Dr Arnold of Rugby, who was also his teacher. ‘The strong son’, as in the poet’s *Sohrab and Rustum* ‘was slain by the mightier