



Mathew Arnold as a Critic of English Literature – With Special Reference to Functions of Poetry

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Abstract

Mathew Arnold is an important critic of English Literature. Before him, English criticism was in fog, and whatever criticism we find, is more based on personal notions than on any consistent methods. Dryden is regarded as the first critic of English, but his criticism is based on personal notion- sympathy and knowledge rather than on any formula. It is the reason that even in his age, the authority of Aristotle remained unquestioned. The romantic critics besides their rich criticism were more lost in their theory of imagination and love for metaphysics. It is in Arnold that English literature could have a critic of real nature, who laid down certain principles following which poetry could be criticized. Herbert Paul very pertinently remarks, “Mr. Arnold did not merely criticize books himself. He taught others how to criticize. He laid down principles; if he did not always keep the principles he laid down. Nobody, after reading “Essays in Criticism” has any excuse for not being a critic.”

Key Words: Mathew Arnold, Critic, Functions of Poetry

Introduction

The originality and importance of Mathew Arnold lies in the fact he laid down principles and brought criticism to stand on a solid ground. He did not claim or wish to probe to the “metaphysical depths” as Coleridge did because this could have obscured the lines of his criticism. He took the help of an empirical test, one which could be applied after long experience with beautiful poems and ideas. He advises critics to “give themselves great labor to draw out what in the abstract constitutes the characteristics 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”, because he thinks, “there can be no more useful things for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent and there 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”, and this principle should be borne in mind in making a real estimate of a poem.

Originality of Arnold as a critic

Matthew Arnold sees two dangers in the way of the real estimate – the historical estimate and the personal estimate and warns critics to shun them because their duty is to find out the real classic, and these two ‘estimates’ make them overrate a poet and the way therefore foil his project. The cloud of glory playing round a poet is a dangerous thing and it “blinds criticism by conventional admiration and renders the investigation of literary origin unacceptable”. And our personal affinities, likings and circumstances have great power to sway our estimate of his or that poet’s work.” The dangers can be shunned, Arnold thinks by learning to feel and enjoy the best work of the real classic and thus the difference between it and all lesser work can be appreciated. But if it is not enough, he adds that the high qualities lie both in the matter and style, and these have “a mark, an accent, of high beauty worth and power,” the substance and manner will possess in an eminent degree.

Criticism of His Method

Arnold himself has twisted his own judgment a bit. No doubt most of the lines that Arnold quotes in support of his theory are admirable. But when he himself quotes from Milton:

And courage never to submit or yield,
And what is else not to be overcome?

We find that these lines no doubt have ethical value, and strength, but in regard to the ‘style and manner’. They are simply flat with redundant phrases. Here Milton is morally exalted. It is due to the fact that Arnold is more concerned with his duty to the society- how to live – rather than with his duty to literature – how to appreciate. R. A. Scott James remarks, “Arnold’s powers of appreciation might be twisted by his preconceived schemes of moral excellence.” This line in Arnold’s artistic make-up from time to time conflicts with a purely disinterested judgment. We see the same bias in his dislike of “Scotch drink, Scotch religion and Scotch manners” and in his harsh treatment of Keats in regard to Fanny Browne. Mr.



Eliot remarks that “his creative and his critical writings are essentially the work of the same man. The same weakness, the same necessity for something, to depend upon, which make him an academic poet make him an academic critic.” And his dependence upon moral values have twisted his judgment. Without moral no poetry is great for him. He was apt to think of the greatness of poetry, as Eliot says, rather than of genuineness.

His method of comparing passage with passage is not a sufficient test for determining the values of a work as a whole. He himself insists upon the total impression. It is the whole impression that counts. Even in his famous distinction between the historic, the personal and real estimate, he has a bit underrated the significance of the ‘personal’. It is true that we may be easily carried away by “our personal affinities, likings and circumstances”, but in a piece of literature that means much to us personally, we may find the utmost that really in it. An alert reader must keep himself in rapport with the author and the subject. The reason why some criticism is good, says Eliot, is that the critic assumes in a way the personality of the author whom he criticizes and through his personality is able to speak with his own voice. Arnold himself could appreciate Wordsworth because he himself is like Wordsworth and made a personal estimate.

Arnold has failed to see beauty in minor poetry. It is not necessary that all hills must be Alps. It is due to the fact that for Arnold, as Eliot remarks, “poetry meant a particular selection and order of poets. It meant as for anyone else the poetry that he liked that he re-read.” He liked poetry laden with moral values and it is the reason that he was conscious of what or him poetry was for, that he could not altogether see it for what it is. A critic must separate the man from himself and Arnold failed to do so, because his was not that type of intellectual suffering which is necessary for looking ahead for the new stage of experiences. But he had rendered a great service in separating poetry from charlatanism and giving some standard of criticism howsoever unsatisfying they may be to modern critics.

Functions of Poetry according to Arnold

Arnold’s views about poetry are elaborately stated in his ‘Study of Poetry’. He is confident that poetry has a great pleasure and has to play a very dignified role in the life of mankind. “It is in poetry where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on will find an





ever surer and surer stay. It is capable of higher uses, interpreting life to us, consoling us and sustaining us i.e. it will replace religion. Poetry with such a destiny, must of the highest kind.”

Poetry as a Criticism of Life

For Arnold poetry is not meant to delight, it is meant to provide food to soul. He defines poetry “as a criticism of life under the condition fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty.” For Arnold ‘criticism of life’ means the noble and profound application of ideas to life and the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty as truth and seriousness to substance and matter, and felicity and perfection of diction and manner. Arnold believes that poetry does not present life as it is. The poet rather adds something of his own from his noble nature to it and this something contributes to his criticism of life. Poetry makes men moral, better and nobler, but it does so not through direct teaching, or by appealing by reason like science, but by appealing to the soul of man. The poet gives in him poetry what he really and seriously believes in; he speaks from the depths of his soul. The real greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life – to the question: how to live. Thus poetry interprets to us the ways of facing the odds of life and the method of surviving such a crisis. It interprets in two ways – it interprets by expressing with magical felicity the physiognomy and movement of the outer world, and it interprets by expressing with inspired convictions, the ideas and the laws of the inward world of man’s moral and spiritual nature. In other words, poetry is interpretative by having natural music in it and by having moral profundity.

Thus for Arnold poetry has a great role to play. In fact he makes the moral purpose of poetry as the integral function. He says, “a poetry of revolt against moral ideas is a poetry of revolt-against life; a poetry of indifference towards moral ideas in a poetry of indifference towards life”. By treating moral ideas, he does not call upon composing didactic poems that “bring us but a very little way in a poetry.” Since moral ideas are really main part of our life, therefore, a poetry that has to console and sustain man has to base on moral ideas. The question – how to live itself is a moral idea and it is the question which more interests every man and with which in some way or the other, he is perpetually occupied:





*Nor love thy life, nor hate; but what thou liv'st,
Live well, how long or short permit to heav'n.*

In these lines, Milton utters a moral idea. When Shakespeare says that:

*We are such stuff as dreams are made on,
And our little life is rounded with a sleep.*

He utters a moral idea. Poetry therefore to utter such moral convictions must be of highest order. It ought to be excellent both in matter as well as in manner. It must have universal truth and high seriousness for matter and the natural felicity of a superior order that blends harmoniously with the matter.

Conclusion

The greatest poets and philosophers of all ages have believed that the ethical view of life is the essential view of life and Arnold also believed the same. It had become all the more important in his own age when materialism had dominated the life of people, and when religious values were crushed due to the development of science. Arnold knew the melody of his age and therefore, protested vigorously against it. He wanted to renew the permanent ethical values of life and reconstruct art on its time basis. He believed that poetry embodied in ethical values will save man from meeting disasters resulting into hollowness of life. Therefore, he insisted on the union of the best subjects and the highest expression in poetry. Only such poetry could achieve its ultimate end!

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