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Matthew Arnold: “The Study of Poetry”

Arnold is one of the foremost critics of the 19th century. In his writings he critiqued and commented extensively on cultural and social issues, religion and education. He was the first critic to pose questions within the context of the modern industrial society. He was a humanist for whom man in the industrial society was condemned to a mechanized existence with a fractured spiritual and moral sensibility. He criticized the narrow mercantile concerns of the 19th century bourgeois and their obsession with utilitarianism and reason. He rejected the growing scientific temper and positivism of the age. The central concern for Arnold was the problem of living fulfilled lives in an industrial society. In his criticism he attempts to move from the exteriority of bourgeois existence to an interiority of the self. It is in line with this that criticism, culture and poetry become modes of interiority in order to nullify the exteriority of bourgeois existence. It must be noted that this essay is not directed at the professional men of letters but rather the general middle-class reader with an interest in poetry.

Conflict between Science and Religion

“The Study of Poetry,” written as General Introduction to *The English Poets*, edited by T. H. Ward, is one of the most influential texts of literary humanism. This essay contains some of his best-known pronouncements about poetry and poets. It is preeminently an essay about judgment and evaluation. It insists on the social and cultural functions of literature, its ability to civilize and to cultivate morality, as well as assist providing bulwark against the mechanistic excesses of modern civilization. In the essay, Arnold claims an elevated status for poetry over science, religion, theology and philosophy. He postulates that the fields of science, religion, philosophy and politics are awash with Charlatanism. These ideologies deliberately obfuscate facts and create confu-

sion between that which is good and desirable and that which is fake and harmful. Religion fails to address fundamental questions facing man since its status has been threatened by science which in turn falsely presents itself as the new arbiter of knowledge. Moreover, as he points out in the essay, religion places meanings on facts which are being proved to be incorrect and false. In contrast to this poetry rests meaning in ideas and these are infallible. Philosophy is incapable of providing moral and spiritual sustenance to man since it is itself grappling with entrenched and unresolved questions and problems. In view of this fact, according to the critic, only poetry is in a position to offer any kind of spiritual and emotional succor to man. Poetry is also, according to him, the only viable method of interpreting life. To interact with poetry it is imperative that the reader views the poetic object as it really is by avoiding the historical and personal fallacies. By rejecting an abstract system and foregrounding his touchstone method Arnold challenges the reader to accept his critical taste and judgment. His assumption is that reasonable people, without absolute standards, can agree on the quality not only of a poet's artistry but of his 'criticism of life'. To his credit, Arnold's surviving notebooks, filled with short quotations from the classics, suggest that he really practiced the method he advocated. In this essay Arnold is concerned with ranking English poets and deciding as to which ones may be singled out as being truly classic. In this endeavor some of his statements were controversial when first stated. In today's age of shifting canons these are proving to be extremely controversial.

The Importance of Poetry or Poetry as a Spiritual Force

The critic apprises his readers of the fact that if poetry were to play such a central role in the lives of men, then it is imperative that it be of a "higher order of excellence." This means that not only should poetry maintain a higher standard but also that it be judged by more stringent parameters than any other field of study. Therefore the distinctions of 'excellent and inferior,' 'sound

and unsound,' and true and untrue' gain significance in the case of poetry, considering the fact that it has a "higher destiny." According to Arnold it is necessary to hold poetry to such higher standards since in the increasingly mechanized world it will prove to be the only source of succor and peace to man. It is only poetry that gives a criticism of life; however the value and credibility of such a criticism is in direct proportion to the degree with which poem approaches the ideals of truth and beauty. Arnold's humanism implied that he imparted to poetry the power to sustain and delight man in the dreary confines of modern existence. It is for this reason that he was insistent in the creation of "the best" poetry. He further elaborates that it is because poetry sustains man in times of troubles that he should be extremely critical and conscious of what he is reading. Reading is not passive exercise but rather a collaborative endeavor. Since the act of reading poetry influences the mind and the spirit, Arnold insists that the reader be constantly aware of what he is reading and judge as to whether it is for his benefit or not. He insists that every act of reading poetry should give a sense of the excellent and a sense of joy. If one feels these while reading poem then it is the true estimate of the worth of the text being read. He goes on to suggest that it is only a careful reading of poetry that allows us to identify the caliber of poets and to identify them as good or bad. It is only after this has been done that the reader can choose to accept or reject the artist and this work. The study of poetry is an exercise, he says in the essay, that requires consistent scrutiny: the reader should be able to identify when a work falls short in terms of language or meaning and give it the correct rating. It is only when the reader does this that he will be in a position to identify good poetry and enjoy it. Thus "negative criticism" in the study of poetry is essential to identify good literature and enjoy it. In fact he stresses the fact that merely knowledge of the efforts made by the artist in creating the work, or information regarding its weaknesses; or knowledge of the biographical details of the poet are meaningless if they do not

assist in raising the level of enjoyment when the reader interacts with the poem. This is another drawback of historical fallacy; the student becomes so obsessed with historical details that he uses sight of the text itself.

Nonetheless, Arnold accepts the fact that it is fairly easy to be carried away by the historical reputations of poets and works as well as by personal affinities and likings in the act of reading poetry. He calls these two distractions or fallacies, the historical and personal fallacy respectively. Historical fallacies occur when the reader is swept away by the reputation of the artist or by the role of the poem or poet in the historical development of a nation's literature, or a genre or type of poetry. Poems are markers in the artistic development of individuals. Interestingly this occurs primarily with classical poets. Thus it is probable and possible that critics and readers give greater significance to works than they actually deserve. In the case of historical fallacy these exaggerations aren't very important since they generally do not impact the general public. Moreover, these exaggerations are done by literary men, whose judgments and words could lose meaning and validity if they continue to lavish excessive praise on clearly mediocre works and artists. A negative impact of historical fallacy is that it posits false models as ideals that need to be emulated and followed. Since these poets and their work are given exaggerated importance it gives the impression that withdrawing the artist and his creation from the immediate social milieu doesn't do any violence to either the text or the artist. As an example of historical fallacy Arnold mentions *Chanson de Roland*, a 12th century romance. He agrees that while the work has verve and freshness, it is primarily of linguistic importance in tracing the growth and development of the romance. It lacks simplicity and greatness, the markers of great poetry. Therefore, according to Arnold, the critic M. Vitet is incorrect when he labels it an epic. He also mentions the French obsession with the court-poetry of the 17th century as an example of historical fallacy. Pellison

has already dismissed any claims this poetry may have to greatness by underlying its lack of poetic verve. Nonetheless the student of French literary history diligently studies them as models of perfect classical poetry. This detailed study and the philological groundwork should ideally assist in the enjoyment of the poem; instead, paradoxically the student gets bogged down by the details he has amassed that he is distracted from actually enjoying the best works of poetry. Ironically philological groundwork raises the probability of over-rating the value of an artistic work.

Historica/Personal Fallacy

Personal fallacy is based on a flawed personal estimation of a poet or his work originating either in personal liking or circumstance. Personal fallacy generally occurs with contemporary or modern poets.

Arnold postulated the touchstone method as a means of avoiding the historical and personal fallacies. It is difficult to articulate as to what constitutes great poetry; however it is easy to identify great poetry. Therefore, instead of referring to a critic who would then give abstract ideas about what constituted 'good' poetry, he suggested that it would be more useful if the reader kept before him some lines and expressions by the greatest poets of the English language while reading poetry. Then all that he had to do was compare the poem he was reading with these references and judge for him as to how useful he found them. This method would work because the reader knows when he is in the presence of great literature since it evokes a strong response from him. Arnold insisted that it was irrelevant whether the lines used as touchstone and the poem being read was of the same type and genre. According to him the selected lines by poets like Shakespeare, Milton, Dante and Homer would serve to judge not only the character of poetic quality but also the degree of the quality. Poetic worth resides in the matter and substance of the poem

and also in the manner and style in which this matter is communicated. It follows that a high degree of matter and substance can only be communicated in an appropriately high degree of manner and style. Thus the two necessarily accompany each other. Arnold drew on Aristotle's comparison between poetry and history where the ancient critic found poetry to be superior in both truth and seriousness; Arnold postulated that the high degree of matter and substance in poem existed because it had a high degree of truth and seriousness. Similarly, the manner and style of a poem resided in its style, diction and movement.

The Touchstone Method

Arnold compares the French poetry of the 12th and 13th centuries with Chaucer's work to prove this point. The 12th and the 13th centuries were the time of indisputable French hegemony European language and literature. During this time French poetry comprised of the *langue d'oïl* and *langue d'oc*. The former is the poetry of northern France; modern French has evolved from it. The latter is the language of the troubadours of southern France. It was this language that influenced Italian literature, the first literature of modern Europe. However major French poetry that dominated Europe in the 12th and 13th centuries was in *langue d'oïl*. Although love-poetry originated in England in the 12th century, nonetheless it was deeply influenced by the love-poetry written in *langue d'oïl*. During most of the Middle Ages it was the latter which enjoyed hegemony in Europe; but is unsurprisingly not read much now. It was the arrival of Chaucer on the scene in the 14th century that reversed the situation. His use of words, rhyme, meter and stanza formation completely overshadowed French poetry. The substance of his poetry is undeniably superior to those of the French poets; he has a large, simple and kind view of human life and observes the world from a truly humanistic viewpoint. Moreover poetry reveals a large, free and sound representation of things. In style and manner also his work is superior to the French; there is a

liquidity of diction and a fluidity of movement in his verse that is absent in the French works. This tradition of fluidity continued in the works of Shakespeare, Milton, Spenser and Keats. It would not be amiss therefore, to suggest that, Chaucer is the ‘father of our splendid English poetry’ and that real poetry begins with him. Chaucer is a towering figure in the history of the growth and development of poetry; he overwhelms the poetic output from the time the love-poetry of the French up to the Elizabethan era. Despite this Arnold does not acknowledge Chaucer as a real classicist. Unlike Dante, whom Arnold recognizes as a classic poet, Chaucer lacks seriousness which Aristotle mentions as a marker of good poetry. Thus the touchstone method reveals that even though Chaucer is a great poet, he does not rank among the greatest classic poets of the English language.

According to Arnold the criticism and analysis of poetry of this period makes it difficult to look beyond the historical estimation of the worth and value of poetry produced during this time. The 18th century considered that it had produced greater works of poetic merit, and had introduced more innovations and developments in poetry than had been produced in any other time ever. The impact of this self-praise was such that right up to Arnold’s time it was the poetry of Dryden, Addison, Pope and Johnson that were seen as good verse. Using the touchstone method Arnold questions the veracity of the claim that the 18th century poets are classic. He argues that the years following the Restoration are characterized by a rejection of the Puritan ethic. This, “negatively” for Arnold, took the form of a rejection of the spiritual life of the period. The new age required a prose that regularity, precision and uniformity. While the writers of the time attempted to achieve these in their writings, the spirit of poetry was sadly neglected and suppressed. Their verse also heralds the advent of the age of prose and reason. However it does not render a poetic criticism life. In fact Arnold takes pains to point out that their work lacks the seriousness,

style and manner of 'high poetry.' Thus while the writers of the age wrote great prose they were middling versifiers; and cannot be labelled classic.

Among the poets of the time, Arnold finds Gray to be a frail classic; he emulated the conventions and modes of the classical poets from the ancient world. His ideas never emerge from his own consciousness but are competently aped. With Burns, a poet of the late 18th century, Arnold reveals the dangers posed by personal fallacy in assigning poetic worth. According to Arnold it is in his poems of aspects of Scottish life that Burns reveals his true self. Arnold suggests that this familiarity with the Scottish world goes against the poet when the reader is not a compatriot. The critic mentions that though Burns' poetry reveals the poet's triumph over the harsh Scottish landscape, his poetry does not come out favorable when analyzed through the touchstone method. For Arnold, Burns is the best example of personal fallacy leading to a misleading assessment of poetic worth. He considers Burns' poems insufficiently bacchanalian since they lack the sincerity of this type of poetry. He finds bravado reflected in Burns' poetry which makes them insincere and unsound to him. Arnold acknowledges that while there is an "application of ideas to life" in his poetry these are not as per the laws of poetic truth and beauty. His work reveals that he has exemplary command over language; however it lacks the "high seriousness" which is a sign of complete sincerity. According to Arnold in contrast to Dante, Burns preaches in his poems; his articulations do not emerge from the deepest recesses of his soul and are therefore superficial. In Arnold's assessment Burns' poetry is primarily ironic; his work may reveal truth of manner and matter, nevertheless he lacks the poetic virtue of the classical poets.

Arnold concludes his essay by comparing Chaucer and Burns. While both poets reveal a huge width of vision in term of human life and the world, the feeling of freedom in Chaucer's works has been transformed into a "fiery, reckless energy." Similarly, Chaucer's benign state of exist-

ence finds itself morphed into an overwhelming sense of pathos over both human and non-human nature. Arnold finds great force and energy in Burns without the charm of Chaucer's poetry.

The essay despite claims towards absolute markers of poetic worth refuses to engage with any formal qualities of 'good' poetry. Arnold seems to be suggesting that if the content of a poem is sufficiently "serious," it will automatically find expression in a serious form. This is his primary objection with Burns' poetry; it is not serious enough. Arnold also refuses to place the poet and the poem within its historical context. This is deliberately done so as to maintain the idea that art is ameliorative.

Arnold effectively dismisses the claims of the French critic he cites regarding the canonization of certain works as classics, a process which forecloses further investigation into the origins, influences, the immediate circumstances and possible motivations of the work. His reliance on some ineffable literary sensibility which somehow knows how to judge could be considered a form of obscurantism, since it is an appeal to experience and to make judgments on the basis of a sensibility which resists articulation.

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