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Mathew Arnold (1822-1888) enjoys the twin distinction of being one of the finest English poets and a critic. In a literary career spanning almost five decades he wrote prolific poetry and huge tomes of critical work. He belongs to the distinguished poetic pantheon of the Victorian triumvir along with Lord Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning and enjoys a formidable reputation as a critic who greatly influenced T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis in the twentieth century.

Balancing Religion and Tradition:

During his time development in the sciences was rapidly corroding belief in Christianity, yet it was difficult to completely reject the Christian tenets. This caused deep conflict between traditionally held beliefs and the march of the new, scientific ideas. Arnold lived through that period of time in the history of England when great uncertainty prevailed in the minds of people. But in these conflicting times, Arnold, while he acknowledged the inadequacy of the old world order, deeply espoused the religious humanism enshrined in Christianity and placed firm belief in culture and tradition. Mathew Arnold was born on December 24, 1822 in Laleham near London to a schoolmaster reverently called 'Doctor' Thomas Arnold and Mary Penrose Arnold, an Anglican clergyman's daughter. They had nine children, of whom Arnold was the second born. In the year 1828 the family moved to Rugby where Arnold's father became the schoolmaster of Rugby School. Dr. Arnold was an educationist, a strict disciplinarian and a man of varied interests who was extensively read in history, politics, religion and ethics. He exercised definite influence on Arnold especially in his ideas of educational reforms and moral seriousness.

Young Mathew Arnold was tutored at home but his father sent him to a formal school in Laleham in 1831 on account of his disinterest in school curriculum. He was however, recalled from there in 1832 because of his acute loneliness and again received private tutorship at home. Meanwhile the family acquired a summer home in the Lake District of England around this time which brought young Arnold into close personal contact with the poets William Wordsworth and Robert Southey and thus fostered an early interest in poetry. From 1837-1841 Arnold was enrolled in Rugby School where he came under direct supervision of his father. Here he also came in contact with Arthur Hugh Clough (1819-1861), a serious scholar and a poet and their friendship lasted a long time. Clough's social ideas were to greatly influence Arnold, specially those concerning the paucity of serious poets in England and it being an 'unpoetical' society. At Rugby Arnold wrote a number of poems, won a prize for a long

poem, 'Alaric at Rome' in 1840. Arnold's biographers note that he was a slack, laid back student, and as a reaction to his father's moral sententiousness, took to hunting, fishing and non-academic activities. He, however, won a scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford in 1841.

At the University his casual approach to studies continued, which might have dismayed his father who was totally governed by the Victorian ethic of work and duty. His father died in 1942, Arnold felt the loss keenly and turned to Clough for friendship. At Oxford, John Henry Newman and the social thought of Thomas Carlyle influenced him. In 1843, Arnold won the prestigious Newdigate Prize for his poem 'Cromwell' and realised that his vocation lay in writing poetry. He wrote poems which resulted in his first volume of poems, *The Strayed Reveller & Other Poems* in 1849. Arnold completed his Master's in 1844, taught at Rugby for a year and won a fellowship to Oriel College, Oxford, in 1846. Here he read widely in literature, history and philosophy. In 1847 he moved to London to become a private secretary to Lord Lansdowne, Lord President of the Council, a position that brought him into acquaintance with the world of power and politics. In 1851 he was appointed Inspector of Schools which involved travelling all over England, inspecting student performance and addressing parental grievances. Arnold relieved the tedium of his work by turning to writing poetry and prose. He brought out his second volume of poetry in 1852, *Empedocles on Etna & Other Poems* and in 1853 the revised set of these poems as *Poems: A New Edition*. His essay, *Study of Poetry* 1851 and Preface to 'Poems', 1853 contain some of his most seminal critical ideas and in words of Arnold's contemporary, George Saintsbury, the Preface was his 'first critical manifesto'. In 1851 he married Frances Lucy, daughter of Sir William Wightman, Justice of Queen's Bench and the Arnolds had six children.

Arnold's Contribution:

Arnold is one of the finest writers of prose in the canon of English literature. His prose is highly

stylized, energetic, dignified and solemn. He enjoys the same position in the pantheon of Victorian English critics as Carlyle, Ruskin and John Stuart Mill. Arnold was elected Professor of Poetry in Oxford in 1857 and re-elected in 1862. He wrote *Essays in Criticism, First Series* in 1865 and his major work in social criticism, *Culture and Anarchy* came out in 1869. From 1883-1886 he traveled to America and Canada delivering lectures on poetry and education. In 1883, he was accorded great honour and prestige by being elected Foreign Honorary Member of the prestigious American Academy of Arts & Sciences. He retired from school inspectorship in 1886. His *Essays in Criticism, Second Series* was published in 1888. He died suddenly of a heart attack on April 15, 1888.

Critics have demarcated three stages in the career of Arnold as a prose writer: early literary criticism from 1853, Preface to 1865 *Essays in Criticism, First Series*; middle period roughly 1860-1875 when he wrote on social, political and religious issues; and a final return to literary criticism marking his writings on Wordsworth and Byron culminating in *Essays in Criticism, Second Series*, 1888.

Culture and Criticism:

Arnold places great emphasis on the importance of art and culture in human life and looks upon art as a civilizing force in society. He values the critical faculty over the creative and assigns a significant role to the critic. The critic is an educator and teacher of morals whose duty it is to make the best in literature available to the reader so as to refine his taste. These ideas of Arnold are chiefly found in his prose works *Preface*, *The Study of Poetry*, *The Function of Criticism at The Present Time* and *Culture and Anarchy*. Arnold envisaged a didactic and moral role for the poet in society. Taking his cue from Aristotle he says that the idea behind any art or representation is to give pleasure and the reader takes pleasure because all knowledge is agreeable to us but what is demanded of poetry is not just that it should 'interest' the reader, but it should also 'inspire and rejoice the reader'.ⁱ

Arnold's Preface to 'Poems' 1853 , although very different from Wordsworth 's Preface to the Lyrical Ballads in the enunciation of poetic tenets , is also akin to it in that they are both an exercise in educating the reader in the manner of receiving and appreciating the poems in their respective collections. The Preface does not just talk about his poetical practice but is an observation on what mental approach is required in his present day England. A large part of the Preface deals with why Arnold dropped his poem ' Empedocles on Etna' from the 1853 collection and there is a lesson for the reader there - it is excluded because it is too subjective and negative and in no way does it offer any good to society. As a moral and social critic, wanting to infuse vigour and spirit into society, he felt that it was a negative poem and would have a dampening effect on the citizens. It lacks what he calls 'action'. Its prolonged suffering finds no vent in action and is one 'in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done.' ⁱⁱ This lack of action in his own poem is something that Arnold decried, because for him poetry should have the power to fortify and rejuvenate the individual and give him moral strength to 'hope' or to 'resist' , in short 'do' something for the reader and by extension for the society in which he lives. The essay marks his classicist stance when he stresses the importance and primacy of action, 'human action', which he found abundant in classical literature for these human actions appeal directly to human affections and satisfy “those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race , and are independent of time.” ⁱⁱⁱ They are eternal and have an excellent capacity to excite humanity's passions and that is the function of literature “To the elementary part of our nature, to our passions, that which is great and passionate is eternally interesting; and interesting solely in proportion to its greatness and to its passion .”^{iv}

Arnold proceeds to draw series of contrasts between the majesty, grandeur and the grand style of the ancients before whom the present day literature of his time pales in comparison. The characters that embody this excellent action, such as Achilles, Prometheus, Clytemnestra, Dido of the classics have capacity to move the reader more than a contemporary Childe Harold, Hermann and Dorothea , The

Excursion, because in the former case the action is greater, the personages nobler and the situations more intense. According to Arnold, the Greeks offered an excellent example of drama in which grand style and grand action is economically expressed to produce a grand effect on the spectator. This was lacking in the England of his time. Arnold extols how the weight and virtue of the past produces a grandiose effect on the spectator, an effect highly desired by the Greek critic for its citizenry and eminently supplied by the Greek poet - " how stroke upon stroke, the drama proceeded: the light deepened upon the group; more and more it revealed itself to the riveted gaze of the spectator: until at last, when the final words were spoken, it stood before him in broad sunlight, a model of immortal beauty."v The ancients were the best models of instruction for the individual writer for their profundity and these writers in turn produce profound moral effect on the reader. Their choice of subject, their accurate construction, their noble simplicity and the calm pathos create a profound moral impression which is worthy of emulation so as to produce similar moral effect on the present , contemporary audience.

The Function of Criticism:

In a seminal essay that encompasses his critical evaluation of the social function of a critic, 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time', written in 1864 , the initial essay in the First Series of *Essays in Criticism*, Arnold extols the critical value of the 'dissemination of ideas and the propagation of the best that is known and thought in the world' and the onus of acquainting humanity with this rests solely on the shoulders of the critic. The essay begins with lauding the proliferation of critical faculty on the European continent especially France and Germany while England has insisted on according superiority to the creative faculty over the critical.

Arnold argues that the end result of all creative effort is said to afford true happiness to humanity but this true happiness can also be achieved through the effort of learning and the effort of criticism.

Moreover, he goes on to argue that creativity is not possible at all epochs and under all conditions and that immense labour is vainly spent in attempting creative production when the same labour can be spent on critically preparing the ground for it. Creative production involves materials and elements with which it works. In the specific case of literature the element with which the creative power works are ideas, ideas that are current at the time. Producing a literary work involves synthesis, exposition, and being inspired by a certain intellectual and spiritual atmosphere, by a certain order of ideas, dealing with these divine ideas, presenting them in the most effective and attractive combinations and making beautiful works with them. But Arnold goes on to lament that great creative epochs in literature are rare because in order that a masterwork of literature be produced, two powers have to concur- the power of the man and the power of the moment and the man with all his creative faculty is not enough without the moment. The elements with which he endeavors to produce creative work are not in his control and here he stresses that they are more in control of the critical power.

Arnold creates a strong case for how criticism creates the right atmosphere for creation and paves the way for creative production. Cultural and critical values seem synonymous for Arnold. It is only within the power of the critic to acquaint the creative faculty with the best ideas that are available in the world. And he arrives at the best ideas because of his 'disinterestedness'- his ability "to see the object as in itself it really is"^{vi} in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art and science. It tends to establish an intellectual situation of which the creative power can profit itself. It tends to establish an order of ideas to make the best ideas prevail. And then these ideas are like cogs that move the wheel of society and because of the truth they embody (a truth he qualifies if not absolute is at least in comparison more true than what it displace) there is growth and stir everywhere in the society. And finally out of this stir and growth emerges the creative epochs of literature. Thus, Arnold propagates the role of the critic as a social benefactor.

Arnold provides an example of how critical and creative faculties conjoin to provide great literature by drawing up the difference between Goethe and Byron. For Arnold literature is an

experiment in life and the march of the genius and that of society should go hand in hand - the poet must have a full comprehension of life and the world before dealing with them in poetry and because life and the world is extremely complex in the modern times of Arnold , for the poet to produce something of great quality and substance, he has to put great critical effort behind it. And this is where Arnold finds Byron's poetry deficient while Goethe's poetry is nourished by a great critical effort providing true materials for it. Goethe, Arnold asserts , knew life and the world, a foremost critical and cultural requirement for the poet's thorough understanding of his subject. This thought of Arnold's greatly influenced T.S. Eliot in the 20th century who almost echoes the former when he writes about how a poet has to constantly assimilate the various social and cultural ideas prevalent in the society. Eliot too, like Arnold, was a proponent of classicism, championed order and control and advocated an active engagement with the past and showed his discomfort with romanticism. Though in some areas he begged to differ from Arnold, for both the poet-critics the primary aim of criticism was to correct and refine the 'taste' of the society.

Arnold then goes on to lament that lack of reading contributes to paucity of ideas and asserts that this refined 'taste' is acquired through an imperative need to 'know' enough and 'read' adequately, a quality he imperiously declares missing in the Romantics, in Wordsworth himself, 'who cared little for books'. Anticipating criticism that the ancients and Shakespeare were not well read enough, Arnold defends his argument thus: “...but in the Greece of Pindar and Sophocles, in the England of Shakespeare, the poet lived in a current of ideas in the highest degree animating and nourishing to the creative power; society was, in the fullest measure, permeated by fresh thought, intelligent and alive;...”^{vii} And when this throbbing and vibrant condition does not exist in society, books and reading enable men to construct a semblance of it in the mind. It is this dynamic culture of reading , knowledge and education which provides a means of preparation for such great creative epochs. Thus literary creation is a product of a society where ideas have ripened and matured over a course of time. An important difference he makes here is that of the “epoch of expansion” as opposed to the “epoch of

concentration”^{viii} which he found in 18th century philosopher Burke who had plenty of thoughts and ideas and imbued politics with ideas. One of the reasons for the failure of the French Revolution , according to Arnold, is that it rushed furiously into the political sphere quitting the intellectual sphere of thoughts and ideas.

Arnold goes on to lament the overly practical and pragmatic characteristic of Englishmen ,ideas which will soon become a full blown criticism of utilitarian values in his subsequent writings. He rues his fellow country men's distrust of ideas - they value what is political and practical so much that ideas become objects of dislike for them and thinkers become 'miscreants'. He stresses an individual's need for 'curiosity', that free play of the mind on all subjects that is so essential to pull a nation out of inanition for it is this that defines the high and fine quality of man's nature and propels him “to know the best that is known and thought in the world”^{ix}. According to Arnold real criticism entails the exercise and exertion of this probing curiosity which strictly obeys an instinct to know the best and to value knowledge and thought as they approach this best. This endeavor to know the best that is known and thought in the world will ultimately create a current of true and fresh ideas which is conducive to a society.

In order for the true critical spirit to prevail upon society, Arnold says that the critic should display complete 'disinterestedness', which can be attained by being detached from practice, by following the law of its own nature and which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches and by preventing the ideas from acquiring any ulterior, political, practical considerations. Arnold then goes on to provide the key definition of criticism : “a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world”^x. The sole critical endeavour and purpose of the critic is simply to know the best that is known and thought in the world and he would be adding invaluable service to society by acquainting it with these 'best' ideas so as to create a current of true and fresh ideas. In recommending this altruistic, pure and selfless criticism, untainted by any practical considerations, Arnold is almost equating criticism with spirituality. In the essay, he goes on to rue

about how the current criticism is marred by practical and political considerations prevailing upon the times and advocates a distilled and ethereal critical approach which would keep humanity free from vulgar and excessive self-satisfaction. It would also make the mind dwell instead upon what is excellent in itself and on the absolute beauty and fitness of things.

Criticism as a Civilizing Force:

Arnold's ideas on civilization and barbarianism are best articulated in his prose work 'Culture and Anarchy' published in 1869. The essay is a vituperative indictment of material culture and a culmination of Arnold's lifelong critique of material affluence. In this essay, Arnold recommends a single minded pursuit of culture and this culture can be cultivated by an intense focus on 'curiosity'. According to Arnold, neither religion nor principles of utilitarianism have succeeded in fostering true culture, for religion is narrow and only brings about moral improvement and utilitarianism only improves material condition. It is only the determined pursuit of culture that brings about beauty and intelligence, what Arnold famously describes as "sweetness and light"^{xi}. It is culture alone which has complete perfection and is free from all narrowness.

Arnold goes on to decry the culture of intense individualism, a failing of the English society for which he prescribes the pursuit of culture. It is the English enslavement to machinery which has led to whittling away of refinement. It is the Englishman's bondage to machinery, his penchant for 'doing what he likes' that has enervated him. Arnold has greatest contempt for the uneducated middle class, the Philistines who, steeped in egocentricity and self-promotion have failed to appreciate truth, beauty and intelligence. The Englishman and English politics have given excessive centrality to the idea of "personal liberty"^{xii} whereby the Englishman has a feeling of entitlement to the right of happiness and here, Arnold fears that he is in danger of drifting towards anarchy. The English society, that is constituted of the supercilious English aristocracy that brooks no power over itself and the middle class

on the other hand with its maxim of every man for himself, is in danger of veering towards anarchy. Therefore, to combat such capitalist and anarchic approach to life, Arnold recommends a pursuit of culture that brings about sweetness and light, a pursuit that was perfected by the Greeks and which thus produced complete human perfection in those times. This essay is also known for the distinction that Arnold draws between the above mentioned Greek attainment of perfection or Hellenism and Hebraism or the strict obedience, rigid self-conquest and adherence to a strict code of conduct in life. The Greek ideal of Hellenism is free from religious or moral bias and shows a critical ability to see things clearly and objectively just as their art is a perfect example of complete fidelity to nature and a delicate discrimination of what this best nature is. They are great exponents of humanity's bent for sweetness and light and should be emulated by the Englishmen in order to nurture cultural and aesthetic ideals in the society.

Summing Up: Arnold as a Conservative Modernist

We can see that to resolve the spiritual dilemma, the collision between the old world order and the rising tide of nineteenth century materialism, industrialisation and capitalism, Arnold looks at the salvaging power of culture and posits his faith in it. He anticipates a world where culture will serve as a bulwark against a fast pervading philistinism. It can be countered only by a highly evolved sense of cultural sensitivity and awareness. The charge leveled against Arnold by critics is that his view of culture as a social panacea entails an untenable Romantic subjectivism and a highly arbitrary and subjective standard of measuring the worth of poetry, art and culture. While on the other hand, critics like Douglas Sterner extol Arnold's worldview to highlight how culture is a true source of enlightenment and if the quest for culture is prompted by the moral fervour of doing good, there cannot be a better motto for an evolving society.

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- i “Preface to 'Poems'”,1853 in *Selections from Matthew Arnold*, Ed. V.S. Seturaman, Madras:Macmillan India Ltd.,1980 rpt.1986, p.2. Subsequent references to Arnold's works will be cited from this edition.
- ii Ibid. p.3
- iii Ibid.p.4
- iv Ibid.p.5
- v Ibid.p.8
- vi “The Function of Criticis mAt the Present Time”,, p.23
- vii Ibid.p29
- viii Ibid. p37
- ix Ibid.
- x Ibid.p57
- xi Extract fromArnold's *Culture and Anarchy* published in *Prose Selections of Background Readings for BA English(Hons)1st Year*, Ed. R.K.Kapoor & V.Rai, Doaba Publications:Delhi,1999,rpt.2000,p.74..Subsequent references to the Essay will be cited from this edition.
- xii Ibid