

A. Background

- 1701 to 1830 - Battle of tastes between the Neo-Classical ~~school~~ school of the 18th cen. & the Romantic school of the early 19th cen.

- around the 1830s and onwards, - when the old rules were dead (i.e. Neo-classical) with no new ones to take their place, that a new set/group of critics arose, anxious to define "the function of criticism at the present time" → (title of M. Arnold's essay).

- changes that occurred during the Victorian Age:

- 1). Rise of democracy & the progress of science.
- 2) Due to the Reform Act of 1832, power was transformed from the upper to the middle classes, which in turn led to new trends in literature and criticism.
- 3). introduction of free education + establishment of new universities = larger reading public & potentially

a greater number of writers.

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4). Science changed men's lives.

a) by revolutionising industry, science increased the comforts of life; &

b) by challenging the biblical version of creation in seven days, it shook people's faith in religion (Darwin's theory of evolution).

c) an indirect corollary/result of the changes science effected in the industrial system — was the hardships to the working class in factories & workshops → steam, smoke, din, drudgery & poverty became daily experiences.

- This was an age of contrasts:

- authority co-existed with freedom

- wealth with want

- faith with doubt

- culture with 'Philistinism' ('lack of culture')

- This was also an age of compromise — with Queen Victoria as the head of the state, with her desire to see everything in its place, the need for order was paramount.

Impact of the Changed Conditions (3) on Literature

- science & democracy brought writers, poets and critics — closer to the common man.
- They made it their mission to make the good prevail in their writings for "hard times" in which men struggled blindly, not knowing "how with the soul it fares".
- Tennyson sought this mission in orderly existence
 - Browning in spiritual development
 - Arnold in 'sweetness & light',
 - Carlyle in devotion to duty,
 - Ruskin in righteous living.
 - Pater in the cult of the beautiful

Thus these critics, each one of them, was a preacher. — because the poor were sweating in the mills, the rich wasting in luxury, faith in merciful God rudely shaken by the unmerciful biologists, and the common man clamouring for more rights.

Victorian writers could possibly not shut their eyes to such blatant facts. ∴ Victorian lit.

As literature addressed itself to society, so did criticism. It was the duty of critics, & criticism, to bring the best that was thought and written to the people's notice.

But what was the measure of excellence in the Victorian Age?

The Victorian spirit of compromise & order made its criticism be not as rigid as the neo-classicists nor so flexible as the Romantics. Victorian criticism went for standards which, without being binding, might be found to be generally acceptable.

Matthew Arnold
(1822-1888)

- Besides being a celebrated critic, Arnold was also a poet of some merit. His criticism therefore is the criticism of a man who had personal experience of what he was writing about.

Arnold made his debut as a critic in (5) Preface to the Poems of 1853. Like Dryden, Arnold too shed light on his own performance and made critical observations suitable/necessary to the occasion.

In 1857, he was appointed as the Professor of Poetry at Oxford. This gave him the opportunity to develop his critical powers. Here, he had the chance to be heard as well. As a lecturer he proved his worth as a critic. He published his more important lectures in book form in two volumes:

On Translating Homer, & The Study of Celtic Literature. He also wrote for literary journals, and Ward's Selections from English Poets, and Essays on Criticism.

The 4 books & the Preface of 1853 are his chief critical works.

Arnold's criticism falls into two broad divisions:

-a) on the art of poetry:

his earlier phase, when writing poetry engaged his attention more than the question of teaching others how to judge it;

-b) on the art of criticism

his latter phase, when his being a critic was his major occupation & his mind was free to apply his mind to the problems of his craft.

ON CRITICISM

(1) Creative and Critical Faculties

creative power
critical power
function of crit.
defn.
disinterested

⇒ Arnold agrees that critical faculty is lower than ^{the} creative, since the exercise of creative power "is the highest function of man; it is proved to be so by man's finding in it his true happiness" ("The Function of Criticism at the Present Time").

However, in literature (or the in the writing of literature), by itself creative power has little avail. There must be a proper/auspicious time for its flowering as well. According to Arnold, a proper/auspicious time is one in which the materials, with which writer works, are both readily available and current in the air (valid). It is these available and current ideas that he shapes into 'beautiful works'.

It is NOT his business to discover new ideas (which is in fact the ~~at~~ business of the philosopher), but unless he finds himself amidst them (new ideas), he has nothing to work upon.

Arnold, therefore, believes that 'for the creation of a master-work of literature two powers must concur, the power of man and the power of the moment, and the man is not enough without the moment.' It is the coincidence of the creative power with the creative epochs/age that produces great works of literature.

When an epoch is not creative, it must wait till they (the best ideas on every matter which literature touches) are ready. And to make them ready is the work/task of criticism. According to Matthew Arnold,

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criticism is not merely "judgement in literature," but "a distinterested .
endeavour to learn and propogate the best
that is known and thought in the world, and
thus to establish a current of fresh and
true ideas." Thus, criticism is a
threefold activity :-

A) PERSONAL CULTURE:

"to learn the best that
is known and thought in the
world";

B) a SERVICE TO SOCIETY:

"to propogate the same
(the best that is known and
thought in the world); &

C) a SERVICE TO LITERATURE:

"to establish a current of
fresh and true ideas".

The concern of the critic must be
to discharge the first two functions i.e.,
'knowledge, and ever fresh knowledge'.

The critic will do the most good to his readers when he communicates this knowledge and lets "his own judgement pass along with it." Moreover, since no one literature can impart the whole such knowledge by itself, "every critic should try and possess one great literature, at least, besides his own; and the more unlike his own, the better."

This is the critic's minimum qualification, or equipment. Furthermore, to be true to his vocation, the critic 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. The critic is thus "bound to a joint action and working to a common result."

The third function of criticism, a service to literature, follows from its endeavour to discharge knowledge to promote literary culture. This means to bring "philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and in coffee-houses", in ~~word~~ Addison's words. This way the best ideas prevail making an 'intellectual situation' wherein the creative power can avail itself.

New ideas can thus reach society, there is stir and growth everywhere resulting in the creative epochs of literature.

This was seen in the Greece of Pindar and Sophocles, & the England of Shakespeare, both of these were the most glorious ages of poetry.

It was during these ages when great works of literature were produced with not much help from books. It rather it was these works themselves which led to their own greatness. In them "the poet lived a current of ideas in the highest degree animating and nourishing to the creative power," and these societies were in the "fullest measure, permeated by fresh thought, intelligent and alive."

And when an epoch lacks such a nourishment, then it is, according to Arnold, the duty of the critic to provide its equivalent by propagating the best that is known and thought in the world.

Though it will take a long, long time for criticism to bring about such an atmosphere, but it is the only way to create a favourable climate

for the growth of literature.

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Hence, in this sense, criticism is as creative as literature. In epochs of barrenness criticism alone is literature.

⇒ "DISINTERESTED" - the word, as used by Arnold, is not used in our sense of the term. Criticism for Arnold is the handmaid of culture - personal, social & literary. Criticism, thus, has 'interests' beyond itself. In this sense, it is not disinterested. But in Arnold's day, there were other interests that attached to it from which he wanted it to be free. These were mostly political and religious, or otherwise practical. [A conservative/^{Right} majority/govt./allies consider a literary work from ~~at~~ the conservative/Right point of view, vice versa is case of the liberal/Left allies.] These political and/or religious interests thus in turn hindered a

" a free disinterested play of mind "

 which alone is criticism, and which alone

 enables/allows the critic to "dwell

upon what is excellent in itself, and

 the absolute beauty and fitness of

 things." Therefore, unless a critic

 removes his mind from all such

 interests/considerations, he cannot

 discharge/perform his duty truly, which

 is "to see the objects as in itself it

really is."

(2) The TOUCHSTONE Method

Arnold does consider the notion of the judgement of literature, which is a traditional (time-honoured) function of criticism. In spite of his classical leanings, Arnold refrains from laying down any hard and fast rules for judging works of literature. Rather, he contents himself with a ~~test~~ / method of his own, borrowed from Longinus and Addison (who had introduced it in England).

Arnold adopted a modified form of Longinus' test (of sublimity in literature — works which "always please and please all are truly beautiful and sublime") to determine the worth of work of literature.

In his essay "The Study of Poetry," Arnold states the poetry which "belongs to the class of the truly

excellent, and can therefore do us most good" are the "lines and expressions of the great masters" always present in one's mind. And it is these which can be applied "as a TOUCHSTONE to other poetry." The other poetry need not resemble the ones by the masters; they may be very dissimilar. However, when these (others) are lodged in our minds, we shall find them as a "touchstone for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality, and also the degree of this quality in all other poetry which may place beside them." Therefore, different passages from Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton, — all impress alike by their poetical quality. Hence, they all "belong to the class of the truly excellent."

Arnold also believes that it is better to have concrete examples of excellence and high poetic quality than to draw out abstractly the constituting characters of a high quality of poetry.

It is better to simply have "specimens of the high, the very highest quality, and to say: The characters of a high quality of poetry are what is expressed there".

The high quality is "far better recognised by being felt in the verse of the master, than by being pursued in the prose of the critic".

Interestingly, Arnold does not suggest any concrete criterion by ~~the~~ which these 'characters of a high quality of poetry' may be determined; he considers 'tact' or taste a sure enough guide. He, however, has doubt that these characters are

found "in the matter and substance of the poetry, and in its manner and style". In the truly excellent poetry, the matter and substance possess "truth and seriousness" "in an eminent degree", than is found in history. As observed by Aristotle, the poet, unlike the historian, does not give the bare facts of life as detached observer but he gives a criticism of his own, born of 'absolute sincerity'!

Furthermore, the manner and style of truly excellent poetry derive their force from its matter and substance. They are characterized by diction - choice of words.

Also, high poetic truth and seriousness are closely related and proportional to the poet's matter and substance, akin to poetic diction and style and manner. The Touchstone method is hence an

(3) FALSE STANDARDS OF JUDGEMENT

While the Touchstone method is an "infallible" test of greatness in poetry as stated by Arnold, there were two other tests applied in his day which he considers fallacious - the PERSONAL Estimate and the HISTORIC estimate.

By the Personal estimate, Arnold meant an intrusion of the critic's own likes and dislikes in his judgement of literature. In his essay, "The Study of Poetry" Arnold stated, "Our personal affinities, likings, and circumstances 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". A real estimate of poetry

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arises above personal predilections and prejudices.

The historic estimate lays more emphasis on the circumstances in which the author wrote, like, 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. Such an estimate would again "make it (the work) of more importance as poetry than in itself it really is."

A critic may overrate a work in proportion to the pains/efforts he took to collect all this information. Hence, the time that should be accorded to the author (or the work), to the appreciation of the best in him, is spent on what is relatively less important. Hence, despite Dr. Johnson's given values to it, the historic estimate is misleading.