Matthew Arnold’s The Function of Criticism at the Present Time—A Critical Reading

By

Uma Biswas

Matthew Arnold begins the essay by recalling the fact that there was a great need for and importance of criticism in English Literature. However the general opinion was that the creative effort of the human spirit is far superior to the critical effort. Even Wordsworth, whom Arnold admired, spoke disparagingly of criticism and said that the critic could not have a sensitivity fine enough to appreciate the finer influences of genuine poetry. According to Wordsworth, the time spent on writing a critique was better spent on original compositions. It is because a false or malicious critique would do much harm but an original composition however dull it might be, would do no harm.

Arnold finds this argument unsustainable. According to him, if a person is genuinely interested in criticism then he shall not spend time in the field of creative effort for which he has no aptitude. He agrees to the view that critical activity may be a lower faculty than creative activity. He also concurs that malicious criticism is harmful. But he does not agree that it is better to give time to inferior creative work than to criticism. He substantiates his point y citing some examples. For example he points out that he cannot imagine that D. Johnson continuing writing plays like, Irene, instead of writhing Lives of the Poets or Wordsworth producing inferior poems such as his Ecclesiastical Sonnets instead of writing the admirable Preface to Lyrical Ballads. Arnold expresses his satisfaction that Goethe, one of the greatest poets, wrote a good deal of criticism. Hence one may us his creative faculty in producing great critical work and not just in the creation of great works of literature and art.
However, the exercise of creative faculty for the production of great works of art and literature is not possible in all epochs and all times. Elaborating on this, Arnold says that the creative artist works with certain elements and certain materials. In case of literature this material is in form of ideas. If there is a lack in this material, then creative work is not possible. There may be a period when there is lack of this current of fresh and new ideas. However these ideas are not discovered by the literary artists but it is the business of the philosopher. The literary artist’s work is synthesis and exposition. “The rand work of literary genius is a work of synthesis and exposition, not of analysis and discovery.” He is inspired by a certain intellectual and spiritual atmosphere by a certain order of ideas and deals with these divinely and presents them in the most effective and attractive combinations. From these observations, Arnold makes a very important statement. He says that for the creation of a great piece of literature, two factors must combine—the power of the man and the power of the moment.

Creative activity is possible only when there is a fresh current of ideas and a suitable intellectual environment. It is the function of criticism to create such an atmosphere and such a current of ideas. The critic in all branches of knowledge— theology, philosophy, history, art, science—should see the object as it is in itself, or as it really is. A critic by acquiring a wide knowledge, not merely of literature, but also of other subjects can create an intellectual environment in which a creative artist can flourish. Criticism can establish a current of ideas and out of these new ideas creative epochs would emerge. In Arnold’s opinion, criticism can prepare the ground for the effort of creativity to be successful.

Arnold is of the opinion that a poet needs to have great knowledge of the world and of human life if he has to produce a work of significance and this requires a great deal of
critical effort. Although it is possible to acquire these knowledge from books, Arnold suggests that it can be best acquired from the current of the ideas as they exist in the intellectual atmosphere. As an example, Arnold points out the outburst of activity in England during Shakespeare’s time and in Greece during Pindar’s time. In both these ages, the society was saturated with fresh and new ideas and this intellectual atmosphere was congenial for the production of great creative works. This atmosphere can be cultivated by men of culture and free thought. And it was because of the existence of such men, that Goethe’s works have so enduring qualities whereas Byron’s does not, although both had immense productive power. In other words, Goethe’s productive power was nourished by great critical effort.

Arnold points out that in England, the burst of creative activity in literature during the first quarter of the 19th century was somewhat premature. It had proceeded without proper data or material to work with. There was no national growth and stir of intellect, nor there was the culture and force of learning and criticism as there had been in the Germany of Goethe. There was in the first quarter of the 19th century England, a dearth of the current of fresh ideas which are necessary for a successful creative effort. As a result, English poetry of this period had plenty of energy and plenty of creative force but did not have enough knowledge to reinforce it. In other words, it lacked the critical effort. There was no current of the best ideas, the very material of poetry. It is what, according to Arnold, “makes Byron so empty of matter, Shelley so incoherent, Wordsworth even, profound as he is, yet so wanting in completeness and variety.” Hence due to the dearth of a current of fresh ideas, there is a lack of thorough interpretation of life in the poetry of this period.

Arnold says that some people might point out that there was plenty of stir and activity in the sphere of intellect in the early 19th century brought about by the French
Revolution. But Arnold points out that the French Revolution took on a political and practical character and did not for long remain a purely intellectual movement. The Renaissance and Reformation were purely intellectual and spiritual movements and thus were productive of the current of great ideas which could benefit the literature created in that period. No such benefits could come out of the French Revolution for this was a movement of political and practical nature. The result of the Revolution in France was to create an epoch of concentration in England. England withdrew into herself, away from any foreign ideas, fearing that a similar revolution might come about in England.

Arnold then goes on to speak about the essential qualities of criticism. Criticism, says Arnold, should follow the path of disinterestedness. Only then it would prove to be useful. Criticism must be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches. It should reject any ulterior or political or practical considerations which might make it biased. Real criticism, Arnold says, is the “free play of the mind on all subjects in order to know the best that is known and thought in this world, without any political considerations.” Criticism should know what is best in the thought and knowledge in the world and make it known to others and in this way, create a current of new and fresh ideas and this should be done with inflexible honesty and ability.

Talking about the contemporary scenario, Arnold finds that the disinterested search for knowledge and the bringing about a current of ideas was lacking in the contemporary criticism. Practical considerations weighed heavily and guided the criticism. Arnold says-“Our organs of criticism 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 second: so much play of mind as is compatible with the prosecution of this practical end is all that is wanted.” However the pitiable state of English criticism
does not make Arnold lose his hope. He finds it reassuring that an era of penance following the bloody revolution had made England more receptive to ideas from outside. The epoch of concentration was giving way to an epoch of expansion. Further the advancement in science and technology had given the Englishmen more leisure time for the free play of the mind without taking into account the practical considerations.

➢ According to Arnold, criticism in England had not kept itself to the purely intellectual field because its self satisfaction and complacency is retarding and vulgarising. Real criticism would have the ability to lead away from self-satisfaction towards perfection by making his mind dwell upon what is excellent in itself. As instances of self-satisfaction, which would prove very harmful for the people and nation, Arnold quotes the speeches of two members of Parliament, Adderley and Roebuck. Arnold disapproves strongly of such complacency because while these speakers made hollow and baseless claims for superiority, reports were there in the newspapers regarding child murders caused due to extreme poverty. Arnold is of the opinion that the critics should have brought together the radically contrasting aspects of the contemporary times to shake man out of their complacency. Only then can the human spirit take a step forward towards perfection. Criticism thus had a great function—to bring the best ideas and knowledge of the world to everybody and take man towards perfection by making him realise the absolutely beautiful and perfect and thus conscious of his own imperfections. Criticism should therefore enlarge the horizon of man both mentally and spiritually.

➢ Defining criticism as “a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in this world, and thus to establish a current of fresh and true ideas”, Arnold then goes on to enumerate the qualities and duties of an ideal critic.
Arnold says that the duty of the critic is (a) to learn and understand, (b) to hand on the ideas to others to convert the world, and (c) to prepare suitable atmosphere for further creative genius and writing. In the broadest term, the function of Arnold’s critic is to promote ‘culture’, more specifically that part of culture which depends upon knowledge of letters. Thus, essentially, the critic must propagate noble ideas, he must repeatedly stress them, for only then he can make them prevail.

According to Arnold, the critic should not only be a scholar, a well-read man, a propagandist, a culturist, but also should be impartial, detached and disinterested. Criticism should keep himself free from personal, ulterior, political, economic considerations. The critic’s judgement should never be swayed by any kind of prejudices. It must shun provincialism which may take the forms of excess, ignorance or pathos, and endeavour to be “in the contact with the main stream of human life.” The critic must be disinterested in the sense that he should pursue only the ends of cultural perfection, and should remain uninfluenced by the coarser appeals of the Philistine.

Matthew Arnold as a Literary Critic—A Critical Estimate.

Matthew Arnold, the greatest of the Victorian critics, has been both eulogised and condemned by scholars. T.S. Eliot criticised him and called him a propagandist, a salesman, a clever advertiser, rather than a great critic. He finds him lacking in the power of connected reasoning at any length and says that “his flights are short flights or circular flights.” F.R. Leavis accuses him of “high pamphleteering”. Prof. Garrod, who otherwise, is an admirer of Arnold, feels that Arnold became a critic only by accident and names him “the vendor of Frenchified disinterestedness.”
Arnold’s limitations as a critic can be summarised as following—

1. He is incapable of sustained reasoning and often contradicts himself. Thus first he lays down the tests of total impression for judging the worth of a poet, but soon after contradicts himself and prescribes the well known, Touchstone Method.

2. There is a certain want of logic and method in Arnold’s criticism. He is not a scientific critic and is often vague in stating his points.

3. He frowns upon mere literary criticism. He mixes literary criticism with socio-ethical considerations and regards it as an instrument of culture.

4. To some extent Arnold does seem to be a propagandist. As Wimsatt and Brooks point out, “very simply, very characteristically, and repetitiously, Arnold spent his career in hammering the thesis that poetry is a criticism of life. All his practical criticism is but an illusion of this view.”

5. Arnold’s criticism lacks in originality. Practically all of his critical concepts are borrowed. In the emphasis on ‘action’ and ‘high seriousness’, he merely echoes Aristotle; his concept of ‘grand style’ is exactly the same thing as ‘the sublime’, of Longinus and his biographical method is the method of the French Saint-Beauve. As George Watson says, “he plagiarises too heavily.”

6. Arnold might be earned but his learning is neither exact nor precise. He does not collect his data painstakingly and his illustrations of touchstone method are all misquotations. Similarly, his biographical data are often inaccurate.

7. One of the fallacies in Arnold’s criticism is his self contradiction. For instance, Arnold is in favour of biographical criticism and is also conscious of the importance of “the moment” and yet he is against the historical method of criticism.

8. Arnold advocates ‘disinterestedness’, but ties the critic to certain socio-ethical interests. He would like him to rise above ‘personal’ and ‘practical’ interests, but he
wants him to establish a current of great and noble ideas and thus promote culture.
But ideally ‘disinterestedness’ means that the critic should have no interests except aesthetic appreciation.

9. Arnold speaks of moral effects of poetry, of its ‘high seriousness’, but never of its ‘aesthetic pleasure’ which a poet must impart, and which is the true test of its excellence. His standards of judgement are not literary.

10. Arnold’s literary criticism is vitiated by his moral, classical and continental prejudices. He is sympathetic only to the classical, he rates the continental poets higher than the great English poets, and the moral test which he applies often makes him neglect the literary qualities of a poet.

Matthew Arnold’s merits as a literary critic.

Arnold’s faults are glaring, but more important are his merits and achievements. He is the most imposing figure in Victorian criticism. Scott-James observes, “For half a century, Arnold’s position in this country was comparable with that of the venerable Greek, in respect of the wide influence he exercised, the mark he impressed upon criticism, and the blind faith with which he was trusted by his votaries.” Another critic praises him because his criticism is more “compellingly alive”, more thought provoking than that of any other critic of his age. Herbert Paul goes to the extent of saying that Arnold did not merely criticise books, he taught others to criticise books.

Judged historically, Arnold rendered a great service to criticism. He rescued it from the disorganised state in which it had fallen by stressing the need of system in critical judgement. He also tried to free criticism from intrusion of personal, religious and political considerations in the judgement of authors and works. In certain respects, as shown by Scott-
James, Arnold is superior to Aristotle. Aristotle knew none but the classics of Greece, the only literary models available to him, whilst Arnold, having the literature of many nations and ages before him, was limited only, of his own choice, to, “the best that is known and thought in the world.” Further, Arnold repudiated the idea that the critic should be an “abstract lawgiver”. Above all, “Aristotle shows us the critic in relation to art. Arnold shows us the critic in relation to the public. Aristotle dissects a work of art, Arnold dissects a critic.” The one gives us the principles which govern the making of a poem: the other, the principles by which the best poems should be selected and made known. Aristotle’s critic owes allegiance to the Artist, but Arnold’s critic has a duty to society.

To conclude, in the words of Saintsbury, “His services, therefore, to English Criticism, whether as a “receptist” or as an actual craftsman cannot possibly be overestimated. In the first respect he was, if not the absolute reformer, the leader in reform, of the slovenly and disorganised condition into which Romantic criticism had fallen. In the second, the things which he had not, as well as those which he had, combined to give him a place among the very first. He had not the sublime and ever new-inspired inconsistency of Dryden. He had not the robustness of Johnson, the supreme critical “reason” of Coleridge; scarcely the exquisite, fitful, appreciation of Lamb, or the full blooded and passionate appreciation of Hazlitt. But he had an exacter knowledge than Dryden; the fitness of his judgement seems finer beside Johnson’s bluntness; he could not wool-gather like Coleridge; his range was far wider than Lamb’s; his scholarship and his delicacy alike was superior to those of Hazlitt.”