

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

By

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- 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 by citing some examples. For example he points out that he cannot imagine that D. Johnson continuing writing plays like, Irene, instead of writing 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 use his creative faculty in producing great critical work and not just in the creation of great works of literature and art.