

**MR. MATTHEW
ARNOLD AS CRITIC
AND POET**

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Mr. Matthew Arnold as Critic and Poet by James W. Alsop

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JAMES W. ALSOP

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(READ BEFORE THE LIVERPOOL PHILOMATHIC SOCIETY,

30th JANUARY, 1878).

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MR. MATTHEW ARNOLD AS CRITIC AND POET.

ENGLISH Literature has never been famous in the department of criticism, and the union in one writer of marked power both in criticism and in original creation has been rare indeed. That there is nothing incongruous in such a union is proved by the Literature of Germany, where, in men like Goethe and Lessing, we see how critical activity of a high order has run with even steps by the side of original creation, has helped it and been helped by it. Yet the great poets of England have seldom been critics, and our critics have still more rarely been distinguished as poets. Dr. Johnson, the only great critic whom England produced in the eighteenth century—a period of intellectual rest, and therefore favourable to the exercise of critical energy—was nothing more than a critic. Dryden and Wordsworth, though both endowed with fine perception and discrimination, seldom cared to exercise their undoubted powers. Coleridge, poet, theologian, and social reformer as well as critic, allowed his subtle critical faculty to be pressed into the background by more absorbing occupations.

So far as I know, Mr. Matthew Arnold is as yet the only English writer of note who has not merely possessed, but habitually and successfully exercised, and preferred to exercise, both kinds of intellectual power. Dean Stanley calls him the first living English critic. Mr. Swinburne, attracted perhaps by the qualities in which his own verse, with all its beauties, is most deficient, places him in the very highest rank of intellectual poets, higher in some respects than

Wordsworth. But it must not be supposed that Mr. Arnold draws a hard and fast line between these two lines of activity. He is not a critic one day and a poet the next; he is always both. In nearly all his works we find both powers united, yet helping, not thwarting, one another. He reminds us of such a man as Francesco Francia, of Bologna, now famous only as a painter, but who in his own day was almost equally celebrated as a worker in gold. Mr. Eastlake tells us that it was Francia's practice to sign his pictures with the word "Goldsmith" after his name, while he engraved "Painter" upon his golden crucifixes. Not less clearly does Mr. Arnold in his poetry shew that he is a critic, while in his criticism he stamps himself poet.

But it will naturally be asked:—Though Mr. Arnold may be both critic and poet, is he both in an equal degree? May not one faculty predominate over the other, so as to give a bent to his whole work, whatever form it may assume? Certainly it is the ordinary notion that Mr. Arnold is mainly a critic, though Mr. Swinburne appears to hold the opposite opinion. It seems to me, however, that the two powers are, as nearly as possible, equal, and that this equality results from a certain balance of apparently opposite and inconsistent tendencies very characteristic of Mr. Arnold's mind, and constantly shewing itself in one form or another in his works.

Mr. Arnold's chief critical efforts are his "Essays in Criticism," originally contributed to *Reviews*, and first collected in 1865, and his Oxford Lectures "On the Study of Celtic Literature," published in 1867. Before 1865 he had published in prose a Preface to a volume of his poems, an Introduction to his tragedy of "Merope," his Oxford Lectures on translating Homer, and several works on Education. The Introduction to "Merope," and the Lectures on Homer, well deserve perusal, but both are perhaps inferior in general interest to the remarkable Preface to his *Poems*, which

contains Mr. Arnold's theory of dramatic and epic poetry, interesting not only in itself, but also for the light it throws upon the author's own poems.

Since the publication of the Lectures on Celtic Literature, Mr. Arnold's prose works have all had a more or less controversial tendency. In "Culture and Anarchy," published in 1869, he expounded at length his views upon culture, which had been already indicated in his Essays, but the greater part of the book consists of replies to the various objections made by persons of opposite views. "Friendship's Garland," published in 1871, is still more controversial, though written in a lighter vein.

Mr. Arnold had in the meantime ventured into the arena of controversial theology by publishing "St. Paul and Protestantism" in 1870; and from that time until 1877 his writings were chiefly upon religious subjects. "Literature and Dogma," "God and the Bible," and the "Last Essays on Church and Religion," followed one another in quick succession, and from their originality and boldness excited a good deal of interest. It does not fall within the scope of this paper to discuss Mr. Arnold's merits and demerits as a theologian. One may, however, be permitted to regret that the *odium theologicum* has, in so great a measure, prevented due appreciation of the masterly and delicate criticism, from a purely literary point of view, which, in "Literature and Dogma," is brought to bear upon the Bible, and which it must surely be a gain to possess, whether we believe that an ordinary literary standard is or is not the only one properly applicable.

It is unfortunate, however, that Mr. Arnold's later theological and controversial works have thrust into the background the "Essays in Criticism," and "The Study of Celtic Literature," which are almost free from personal controversy, and are among the most thoughtful, and at the same

time most delightful, books of our generation. It is the more unfortunate, because the works by which Mr. Arnold is chiefly known are apt to give an imperfect, even an incorrect, view of his character. One often hears Mr. Arnold's criticism described as superfine and arbitrary; he is called half contemptuously, the Apostle of Culture, and it is supposed that by culture he means little more than a selfish dilettantism, that he withdraws himself, and seeks to make others withdraw themselves, from the serious business of life and the living questions of politics and social improvement, and that he would have his disciples bury themselves in a study, where they may read Bishop Wilson, or Sainte-Beuve, and carp at their neighbours, neither striving nor crying, but quietly waiting until in some unexplained way the Time-Spirit has brought those neighbours to their own exalted level. Now I think that to any fair-minded person who had read a considerable portion of Mr. Arnold's works, this idea of his position would appear ludicrous. But if one had read nothing but such a book as "Friendship's Garland," and that perhaps from a hostile standpoint, one might form some such conclusion without being open to the charge of exceptional stupidity. There is, no doubt, great charm of style about Mr. Arnold's controversial works, as about everything else that he has written; no one can, with such refined and polished satire, laugh down narrowness, selfishness, vanity, commonplace. But a sustained tone of satire is fatal to that perfect fairness which is the critic's first duty, and is sure to grate upon us before long, unless our author's opinions are adopted bodily as we read them.

Few writers, indeed, are at their best in controversy, especially personal controversy. We see men of unusually open minds, like Bentham, Macaulay, and Charles Kingsley, now and then losing all sense of fairness in the desire to demolish an opponent. Even a controversialist who stops

short of these extreme lengths, does not usually express his own weighed and deliberate opinions; he dwells upon the weakness rather than the strength of the opinions attacked, though he may feel their strength too. His missiles acquire momentum, striking with a force not due merely to their intrinsic weight. And when he is using satire, it is too much to expect that, in the interests of truth, he will spoil all artistic effect by introducing those qualifications and exceptions which truth always demands.

For these reasons, I think that, in order to form a just opinion of Mr. Arnold as a critic, one must turn to the "Essays in Criticism," and "The Study of Celtic Literature." The style of both books is that of all Mr. Arnold's prose writings; it is simple, unaffected, clear, bright, animated; at times we are charmed by playful humour or subtle irony; yet there are also passages of deep pathos; while often rises to the surface the broad stream of earnest, but restrained enthusiasm which runs beneath even the lightest passages, and which is as far as possible removed from the cynicism with which Mr. Arnold is sometimes credited. This emotional vein distinguishes Mr. Arnold from the great French critics, Sainte-Beuve and Chateaubriand, with whom he has been compared, and who surpass him in brilliancy; and this same quality proves his intellectual kinship with the great living masters of English prose, Dr. Newman and Mr. Ruskin, who, perhaps, more than any writers whom this country has hitherto produced, deserve the epithet of "classic."

The "Essays in Criticism" are ten in number, and cover a considerable range of subjects, chiefly literary. Their scope is indicated in the first of them, on "The Functions of Criticism at the Present Time," and as this is, in fact, the key to most of Mr. Arnold's critical work, it may not be out of place if I briefly state his position as nearly as possible in his own words.

Mr. Arnold defines criticism as the endeavour in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is. Criticism continually tends to make the best ideas prevail, ideas which, if not absolutely true, are yet true in comparison with those which they displace. It is, therefore, a work of analysis and discovery. Creative activity, on the other hand, is a work of synthesis and exposition. Its materials are ideas, the best ideas current at the time; these it presents in the most attractive and effective combinations, out of them it forms a work of art. Without ideas, creative activity can do little; and although critical activity is of a lower order, it may at certain times be the only activity possible, and may furnish the other with materials, thus making an intellectual situation by which genius can profit.

Applying this to our own country and our own century, Mr. Arnold points out that the stir of ideas in the period of the French Revolution, which might have been expected to give the necessary materials for a great creative epoch, failed to do so, owing to the political, practical character by which that Revolution was distinguished from the purely intellectual and spiritual movements of the age of Pericles and the age of Shakespere. It tried too much to enforce ideas, and so far as the rest of the world, especially England, was concerned, it produced an exactly opposite result; it hardened men's hearts against ideas. It produced a period of concentration, rather than of expansion. But now, Mr. Arnold maintains, an epoch of expansion is gradually coming on; it began first in Germany and France, at length it is extending to England; the long peace, the sense of security from foreign invasion, the spread of education, even the increase in material prosperity, are all tending to make us open to ideas and to give us an interest in them. What we want now, therefore, is sound criticism, such as will find out and make