On Matthew Arnold

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Goldwin Smith says in *A History of England*, "The pride and delight in material things that characterized Victorian England was matched by the deep and profound consciousness of the importance of imponderable and moral absolutes in the life of man." [1]

Matthew Arnold was one of the important poets and influential critics of the Victorian Age. As a critic of literature and life, he was strongly opposed to the materialism of the times. His poetry was tinged with pessimism and doubt about the world and his own states of mind, yet, at the same time, he expressed what he saw and felt with beauty and power.

Arnold's literary career may be roughly divided into four periods: (1) the 1850's when he wrote most of his poetry; (2) the literary and social criticism of the 1860's; (3) the 1870's when his second set of essays on literary criticism appeared. In this paper, I will primarily discuss his literary criticism and poetry. Within these two areas we will find a harmony of ideas.

Let me first discuss Arnold's ideas on literature from his criticism. For him, literature was a great intellectual force which led to truth. Therefore, literature could not afford the luxury of hiding behind itself. It had to become "a criticism of life." The 19th century idea was that every race had to find itself in its own literature. Arnold wanted to go

1. Goldwin Smith, *A History of England*, 3rd ed., (New York, 1966), P.618

back to the 18th century idea of studying other cultures to improve as a man. He wanted to open new vistas for the British public — to introduce the philistines to Continental ideas.

Arnold seems to have an inclination for the use of labels in his writing. Most of these labels are very apt and useful in establishing a tangible definition for an intangible concept. *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time* is in Arnold's terms "disinterestedness" shown

> "By keeping aloof from what is called 'the practical view of things'; by resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches. By steadily refusing to lend itself to any of those ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas, which plenty of people will be sure to attach to them, which perhaps ought often to be attached to them, which in this country at any rate are certain to be attached to them quite sufficiently, but which criticism has really nothing to do with." [2]

But yet, Arnold has an ever-present impulse to categorize and instruct. His critical judgement of works is based on their relevance to apparent social needs. The critic must also have "ardent zeal for seeing things as they are." Ideally, his detachment and zeal should be two sides of one coin. As a critic, he must see the whole truth without any bias, but in seeing the whole truth, he sees what the public needs and can make a judgement as to which ideas he will place in the foreground.

This missionary spirit of his has saved him from the ivory tower of the critic who hands down decisions based on a purely personal analysis of selected facts which he has seen fit to present.

2. Charles Frederick Harrold and William D. Templeman, ed., *English Prose of the Victorian Era* (New York, 1966), P. 1058

> "The grand work of literary genius is a work of synthesis and exposition, not of analysis and discovery; its gift lies in the faculty of being happily inspired by a certain intellectual and spiritual atmosphere, by a certain order of ideas, when it finds itself in them; of dealing divinely with these ideas, presenting them in the most effective and attractive combinations — making beautiful works of them, in short." [3]

In other words, it is the duty of the critic to organize perceptions into patterns in the best way possible, and nothing more. This in itself does imply a judgement as to which facts to present first.

In *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold defines "Sweetness and Light" as the "perfection of human nature." [4] The term "Seetness and Light" was first used by Jonathan Swift in "A Full and True Account of the Battle Fought last Friday Between the Ancient and the Modern Books in St. James's Library." The Ancients, represented by the Bee, sum up their superiority over the Moderns, represented by the Spider, in these terms:

> "The Difference is that, instead of Dirt and Poison, we have rather chosen to fill our Hives with Honey and Wax, thus furnishing Mankind with the two Noblest of Things, which are Sweetness and Light." [5]

The Spider takes the thread out of himself, makes the web. It represents a self-centered idea. But the Bee flies from one flower to another picking up honey from several ones, and distibutes the honey:

3. Harrold and Templeman, ed., *English Prose of the Victorian Era*, P. 1052
4. *Ibid.*, P. 1149
5. Philip Pinkus, ed., *Jonathan Swift: A Selection of His Works* (New York, 1965), P. 460

Sweetness and Light. This represents the idea of "disinterestedness." And, this explanation will naturally lead to the definition of Hebraism and Hellenism which Arnold frequently discusses in his critical works. The Spider represents the Hebraism which is self-centered and requires the obligation to one fixed idea. The Bee represents the Hellenism whose highest idea is to see things as they are, that is, "disinterestedness."

In pursuing Arnold's "Sweetness and Light," men are pursuing culture. This is done in two ways. The first is through curiosity into the best which has been written, said, thought, and done throughout human history combined with a "disinterestedness" in the picking and choosing of these ideas. The second step in pursuing culture is a sense of social obligation.

> "Culture looks beyond machinery, culture hates hatred; culture has one great passion, the passion for sweetness and light. It has one even yet greater! — the passion for making them prevail!" [6]

If a man, in pursuing culture, discovers the truth, he is obligated to share that knowledge with his fellow man. It is desire to elevate his mind, not by missionary preaching, but by setting up ideals and making the truth accessible. The most persuasive spokesman for culture, according to Arnold, is literature.

In Arnold's criticism we may find three critical practices: a concern with fresh ideas, a discrimination between what is excellent and what is less good, and the outlining of the difficulty that the critic faces when he must see the "thing itself." The job of the critic is an important one. For a creative epoch, the power of the man and the moment must concur. The critic brings culture which is "the best that is known and thought,"

6. Harrold and Templeman, ed., *English Prose of the Victorian Era*, P. 1149

and with this, produces a "current of fresh and true ideas." He is, therefore, more than a judge. He is an important factor in the ushering in of a creative age.

Before going on to Arnold, the poet, let us look at the accomplishments and the shortcomings of Arnold, the critic. Arnold, the critic, disavowed the immutable principles of man and the moral sbsolutes of life. If anything, he was an Agnostic in all of his beliefs. For the immutable principles which Arnold disposed of, he substituted intellectual mobility. To him, genuine art was exploratory and sincere, but not dogmatic. His intellectual mobility was only an appearance, though. His style is in imitation of Newman. He tries to combine the unassuming and the striking. His sentences are conversational by beginning many of them with "But," "Or," "Still," and "Again." He deliberately repeats words and often whole phrases. Appositives add information and work towards definitions by creating sharp outlines. Arnold has a high and spirited intellectualism and alertness which helps him to persuade the reader. The enemy is dullness and his remedy is wit. By all of this, Arnold tries to establish fixities in the readers' minds which seem to be the opposite of his intellectual mobility.

> "The method is the reverse of dogmatic; it is suggestive and insinuating. Arnold knows what he wishes the reader to believe; he proposes, if possible, to alter the reader's habits of mind so that he will become open to conviction, so that, to use a phrase from 'The Function of Criticism,' where Arnold is describing the state of Victorian England, he may begin to wear a cloak more loosely; and he proposes, moreover, to suggest to the reader what main ideas, if his frame of mind is really receptive, he should welcome, develop, and adopt." [7]

7. E.K.Brown, *Matthew Arnold: A Study in Conflict*(Chicago, 1948), P.97

Arnold wrote most of his poetry before his literary criticism. He gave up the field because he felt miserably inadequate at it. Arnold had an opinion that the poetry must give a joy to the reader. But, in his day, it was creating the continuous mental distress and very morbid. He seemed to be haunted by a lack of faith in the materialistic world of the 19th century. Early in his career, there is evidence of a crisis in faith where he shed his Christian dogma and took up the study of the philosophers with the hope of finding a philosophical faith to replace his lost religious faith. Religious doubts and questionings were not uncommon in the 1830's and 40's — the decade of the Oxford Movement, the Reform Bill, and the secularization of British life. He relates this crisis in "Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse:"

> For religious teachers seized my youth,
> And purged its faith, and trimm'd its fire,
> Show'd me the high, white star of Truth,
> There bade me gaze, and there aspire. [8]

Arnold studied the philosophers of "idealism" — Descartes, Kant, Coleridge, Shelling, and Berkely. Arnold did not, as many of the young searchers of the age did, turn to the materialistic philosophy which became popular after Darwin and of which Huxley was the spokesman.

> "The primacy of Mind in Reality — the basic tenet of idealism through the ages — became a dominant, if not consciously expressed, strain in Arnold's thinking, and it is this which constitutes the fundamental difference between him and a philosopher such as Huxley, as well as between him and empirically minded thinkers

8. Matthew Arnold, *Poems*, Vol. 2, (New York, 1883), P. 278

such as Mill and Herbert Spencer." [9]

His early poems met with little approval outside of his friends. The character of his verse was harsh and unmelodic and the outlook on the universe was bleak. This is what we might expect from a young poet who has lost his faith. We may find loneliness, resignation, isolation, and loss of love (in his Marguerite poems). His poems have a definite theme and thought structure, even though there is an unevenness and uncertainty in the style.

In "Empedocles on Etna" we can see the "central philosophical import as an expression of the young Arnold's mind." [10] The theme is man versus nature or the mind against an alien, unfeeling, apparently uncomprehending universe. There are also subthemes which can be seen in the minor characters of Pausanias—man's acceptance of the conventional society—and Callicles—a man in the world's youth when the world offered a haven of refuge.

Empedocles is in a manhating mood. This is a world he did not make and does not understand.

> The Gods laugh in their sleeve
> To watch man doubt and fear,
> Who knows what to believe
> Since he sees nothing clear,
> And dares stamp nothing false where he finds nothing sure. [11]

and

9. Albert J. Lubell, "Matthew Arnold: Between Two Worlds," *Modern Language Quarterly*, XXII (September, 1961), P. 252
10. Ibid., P. 252
11. Arnold, *Poems*, Vol. 2, P. 91

Thou hast no right to bliss,
No title from the gods to welfare and repose; [12]

Finally he ends his speech with

Because thou must not dream, thou need'st not then despair! [13]

Empedocles has lost the power of joy found in nature. He lacks the calm, cheerful, disinterestedness and objectivity of the human condition which Arnold is later to discuss in his *Function of Criticism.* He is too ravaged by thought and conflict to penetrate into life. He can only see nature's indifference and even projects his melancholy on the stars. His thoughts do not seem to be those of other men and he therefore cannot live with them. His own weakness, he finds, does not lessen the universe. His world of thought will no longer do.

Empedocles belonged to the past, but was contaminated by the new age and surrendered to despair. He did not rebuild his life on a firm basis of ethics. He is the disinterested man who has been destroyed by the world. The mind, and not the world, is what is important to Empedocles.

But mind, but thought,
If these have been the master part of us —
Where will they find their parent element?
What will receive them, who will call them home?
But we shall still be in them, and they in us,
And we shall be the strangers of the world,
And they will be our lords, as they are now; [14]

12. Arnold, *Poems*, Vol. 2, P. 94
13. *Ibid.*, P. 108
14. *Ibid.*, P. 128

In this stanza on the afterlife, Arnold implies to us that life itself is a test of the fidelity in the world to the inner life. The deep-seated inner self is a means of unity with the world. In this poem, Arnold "affirms the joy which is to be found in the understanding of nature, and celebrates its power to guide and sustain the rational man." [15]
By jumping into the crater of the volcano, Empedocles becomes a martyr to the tyranny of thought.

"The Scholar Gypsy" also belongs to the past and can roam through the escapist world of thought. The only prerequisite for continuing in this fashion is the steering clear of any contact with the 19th century world of scepticism and despair. "The gypsy has an essentially undergraduate wisdom, an 'eternal immaturity' — and this distinguishes him from the dons, whose greater knowledge has made it hard for them to retain 'wisdom'." [16] In confronting the joyful illusion of an earlier age and the melancholy realism of the 19th century, the gypsy has become the disinterested man for whom Arnold has so much admiration.

The contrasts in the Poem — the past with the present, thought with feeling, constriction with freedom, age with youth, nature with the modern man — present a sensory awareness of the outside world. The gypsy has left the world of intellectualism just in time and Arnold warns him of the dangers of contact with the present age:

> O born in days when wits were fresh and clear,
> And life ran gaily as the sparkling Thames;
> Before this sthrange disease of modern life,
> With its sick hurry, its divided aims,

15. Robert G. Stange, *Matthew Arnold: The Poet as Humanist*, (New Jersey, 1967), P. 157

16. A. E. Dyson, "The Last Enchantment," *The Review of English Studies*, VIII (August, 1957), P. 257

Its heads o'ertaxed, its palsied hearts, was rife —
Fly hence, our contact fear! [17]

He must fly, as the trader from Tyre at the end of the poem, while he is still able to sustain his disinterested curiosity in the "new and fresh ideas" of the "best of the world." In the present, time will not allow Arnold the pleasure of the giving up of life as the gypsy did.

Arnold's landscapes tend to objectify the journey of man through the world. Arnold describes scenes from the "sea of life" to the "mountain of truth." This seems to be an attempt to objectify universals through realism. One of Arnold's poems which is typically filled with imagery is "Dover Beach." It moves from lightness to darkness which is parallel with the move from faith to disillusion. This could also be a move from the literal to the metaphorical, from small abstractions to larger ones, or from the past to the present. Arnold builds a series of dualisms or contrasts in each of the four stanzas. Each of the stanzas is in two parts — from the calm sea to the grating roar of the water on the pebbles, from the past to the present, from the Sea of Faith to the melancholy of the present, from the land of dreams to the darkling plain. This is an example of Arnold's systematic thinking. He brings together two developed lines of thinking which tends to produce some ambiguity. He does this also in his prose work as in his discussions of disinterestedness and sweetness and light.

In looking at the poem we find a progression in a conversational tone from ordinary observations to elevated meditation. At one time the Sea of Faith proved all the answers. It was a beautiful world then, but now, like the sea, it is sad and retreating.

The poet stands at the window watching the scene below. It is a

17. M. H. Abrams, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. 2, (New York, 1962), P. 1037

lovely, calm night. The waves quietly beat against the cliffs of Dover, and across the straights the glimmering lights of the French coast can be seen. There is one sound, however, that destroys the tranquility of the scene for the poet. It is the grating sound of the pebbles on the beach, as they are flung onto the shore, drawn back by the waves, and flung on the beach again in a never ending cycle. To the poet this grating roar symbolizes the suffering which has always been part of man's landscape:

> Begin, and Cease, and then again begin,
> With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
> The eternal note of sadness in. [18]

The poet recalls that the great Greek dramatic poet Sophocles heard this same sound long ago on the Aegean sea (*Antigone*, lines 583ff.), and the sound suggested the "turbid ebb and flow/ Of humanity misery" to him then just as it now suggests to Arnold. But the ebbing of the tide brings to mind something more to Arnold today. It reminds him that "The Sea of Faith," specifically Christianity but more generally any belief in a supreme Being or Beings, is also retreating after having once encircled the earth. In this modern world where the only constancy is suffering, with no succor to be found in religion, the only hope is love. In the last stanza the poet tells his beloved that they must be true to one another, for the world which looks so beautiful before them knows no joy, nor love, nor peace:

> And we are here as on a darkling plain
> Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
> where ignorant armies clash by night. [19]

18. Ahrams, ed., *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. 2 (New York, 1962), P. 1039
19. *Ibid.*, PP. 1039—40

Arnold pictures modern life as a battle-field where night is approaching, and man does not know whether he should continue the fight to survive or free from the world. The last line sounds the most frightning of all. Arnold seems to be telling us here that man is not even a knowing agent in this battle but rather part of a huge multitude whose destines are not controlled by themselves. However, there seems to de some overtone of "sweetness and light" in this poem. The poem does not have that despair of "Empedocles" nor the warning of destruction of "The Scholar Gypsy." The poet seems to insist that we are here now and must make the best of the situation. It has an acceptance of the situation and a willingness to draw together the knowledge which will make the world, if not better, at least worth living. "Arnold's landscape thus proposes a quest which is completely analogous to the programme of life drawn up later in the essays." [20]

In later years, Arnold is to define the power of poetry in *Maurice de Guerin.*

> "The grand power of poetry is its interpretative power; by which I mean, not a power of drawing out in black and white an explanation of the mystery of the universe, but a power of so dealing with things as to awaken in us a wonderfully full, new, and intimate sense of them, and of our relations with them." [21]

This Arnold does. His poetry was written mainly before his critical works. In 1853, he had a major change in his way of thinking. Until that point, his writing was melancholy and depressed. In the 1853 edition of his poems, he states in the preface tha the pleasure of poetry is in the

20. Alan H. Roper, "The Moral Landscape of Arnold's Poetry," *PMLA*, LXXVII (March, 1962), P.292

21. Abrams, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol.2, P.1085

Joy which it brings to the readers. But this Joy is a higher Joy — a state of mind which leads to a sublime feeling. It is what you have when you are at peace with yourself, in control of your neuroses, and not repressing anything. It is the job of the poet to keep reminding the reader of this Joy.

Because of this change in thinking, "Empedocles" was left out of the 1867 edition of poems. Out of the moral struggle in his first years of poetry writing, Arnold developed his concepts of the disinterested man, "sweetness and light," culture, and literature.

Arnold's interest in poetry was primarily intellectual. His works summarize much of the Victorian spirit in their revolt against materialism and search for absolutes. His poetry sets down the ideas and calls forth the interior life of man. His prose tries to instruct his fellow man in the ways of truth. Roper says, "If the poetry, then, is a record of Arnold's attempts to be a monarch, to rule himself, the prose offers us his essay at brotherhood, at helping his fellows to rise. Paradoxically, Arnold is more agreeable when he is trying to be a king, and more kingly when he is trying to be a brother." [22]

22. Roper, "The Moral Landscape of Arnold's Poetry," *PMLA*, LXXVII, (March, 1962), P.289

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