

(3) SUMMARY OF THE ESSAY

In this admirable essay Matthew Arnold attempts to answer two fundamental questions—What is Poetry, and what is its function in human society? Commencing with the latter enquiry, he develops the theme which is the critical work, namely, the paramount importance and high destiny of poetry. Everything else is changing, ephemeral; religions rise and fall, the truths embodied in Poetry are alone eternal. It is the 'breath and finer spirit of all knowledge'. Hence, when other helps fail, the spirit of our race will find here alone its consolation and stay. To the second question no direct reply is possible. Arnold contents himself by illustration, by means of typical quotations from the great poets of all time, Homer and Dante and Milton and Shakespeare, what true Poetry is. He concludes by warning the student against two common fallacies in criticism, the historical and the personal estimates. Turning to English poetry, he shows that it begins with Chaucer: but Chaucer, admirable though he is, has not the 'high-seriousness' which marks the classic poet. The eighteenth century was par excellence the Age of Prose: the only authentic voices in it were those of Gray and Burns.

The Value of Poetry

"The future of poetry," says Arnold, "is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay." He says that poetry is more lasting than any other human institution or accomplishment. Even religion will at one time or the other, fail. But poetry is man's immortal possession, or perennial source of joy, comfort and inspiration. Man will for ever turn to poetry to interpret life for him, to console him, to sustain him. Wordsworth describes poetry as "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge." Poetry is superior to history, philosophy, science, even religion. "Without poetry," says Arnold, "our science, will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry." Poetry possesses the 'supreme power of sustaining, edifying and elevating man to the highest possible degree.' This, as Sidney also says, is the end of poetry: "This purifying of wit, this en-

riching of memory, enabling of judgment and enlarging of conceit, the final end is to lead and draw us to as high a perfection, as our degenerate souls, made worse by their clayey lodging, can be capable of."

Need of Excellent Poetry

Therefore mankind needs for its existence and refinement excellent poetry more than anything else. "The best poetry is what we want ; the best poetry will be found to have a power of forming, sustaining, and delighting us, as nothing else can." If, then, we conceive thus highly of the destinies of poetry and expect it to fulfil the highest mission of which it is capable, we must set our standard for poetry high. The poetry that is capable of fulfilling such high destinies must be poetry of a high order of excellence. We must accustom ourselves to a high standard and to a strict judgment. We must learn to distinguish between high and low standards of poetry. Arnold says that it is not an easy task to accomplish. He says, "In poetry the distinction between excellent and inferior, sound and unsound or only half-sound, true and untrue or only half-true, is of paramount importance. It is of paramount importance because of the high destinies of poetry. In poetry, as a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty, the spirit of our race will find, as times goes on and as other helps fail, its consolation and stay. But the consolation and stay will be of power in proportion to the power of the criticism of life. And the criticism of life will be of power in proportion as the poetry conveying it is excellent rather than inferior, sound rather than unsound or half-sound, true rather than untrue or half-true."

Two Fallacies in the Judgment of Poetry

Arnold says that we must guard against two popular fallacies in our judgment of poetry. These two fallacies generally lead us to over-estimate the real order of excellence in a poet or a work. These two fallacies are : (1) The historic estimate. (2) The personal estimate. We are frequently tempted to adopt the historic estimate, or the personal estimate, and to forget the real estimate. The historic estimate generally affects our judgment when we are dealing with ancient poets and the personal estimate when we are dealing with modern or contemporary poets.

The Historic Estimate

The historic estimate affects our judgment of the ancient poets or ancient works. We usually attach historic importance to an ancient poet or a poem. "The course of development of a nation's language, thought, and poetry, is profoundly interesting and by regarding a poet's work as a stage in this course of development we may easily bring ourselves to make it of more importance as poetry than in itself it really is, we may come to use a language of quite exaggerated praise in criticising it, in short, to over-rate it." Our real judgement is affected by the conventional halo that is ascribed to an ancient poet. Our critical eye fails to discern the real accomplishment of an ancient poet through the halo of glory that usually surrounds him. A French critic rightly says that "the cloud of

glory playing round a classic is a mist as dangerous to the future of a literature as it is intolerable for the purposes of history...It substitutes a halo for a physiognomy, it puts a statue where there was once a man, and, hiding from us all trace of the labour, the attempts, the weaknesses, the failures, it claims not study but veneration ; it does not show us how the thing is done, it imposes upon us a model. It blinds criticism by conventional admiration. It gives us a human personage no longer, but a God seated immovable amidst. His perfect work, like Jupiter on Olympus ; and hardly will it be possible for the young student to believe that it did not issue ready made from that divine head." Matthew Arnold cautions us against this fallacious historic estimate of an ancient poet or a work. We must not let our judicious estimate be affected by the glow of antiquity. There are, however, some ancient poets who possess real class, character. Our discerning eye should be able to distinguish between the real gold and dross. Arnold says, "Every thing depends on the reality of a poet's classic character. If he is a dubious classic, let us sift him ; if he is a false classic, let us explode him. But if he is a real classic, if his work belongs to the class of the very best, then the great thing for us is to feel and enjoy his work as deeply as ever we can." We must read our classics with open eyes, and not with eyes blinded with superstition.

The Personal Estimate

Equally fallacious, though not so popular and dangerous, is the personal estimate of a poet or a work. A poet or a work may count to us on grounds personal to ourselves. 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, because to us it is, or has been, of high importance." Matthew Arnold cautions the enthusiastic critic against this fallacious personal estimate also.

The Touchstone Method

Now the question arises how to judge and decide the order of excellence of a modern poet or a work. Arnold suggests his "touchstone method" to accomplish this difficult task. He recommends that the modern poets or modern works should be judged by the touchstone of ancient classics. In other words, he recommends the comparative method of criticism. He suggests that modern poets should be compared with the celebrated ancient classics and their degree of excellence be indexed in proportion as they bear comparison to them. Explaining his touchstone method, Arnold says that "there can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of truly excellent than to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry. They are an infallible touchstone for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality, and also the degree of this quality, in all other poetry which we may place beside them. Short passages, even single lines, will serve our turn quite sufficiently." We should take recourse to concrete examples. Homer, Virgil, Dante, Sophocles among the ancient Greek and Roman poets and Shakespeare and Milton among the English poets, may be taken as

models for judging the order of excellence in a modern poet or a work: "If we are thoroughly penetrated by their power we shall find that we have acquired a sense enabling us, whatever poetry may be laid before us, to feel the degree in which a high poetical quality is present or wanting there."

High-seriousness

High-seriousness, according to Aristotle, is the hallmark of great poetry. The best poetry possesses high truth and high seriousness to a pre-eminent degree. Arnold ascribes high-seriousness to the Grand Style. The Grand Style is constituted of two elements—excellent matter and excellent expression. Matter and manner, according to Matthew Arnold, are interdependent on each other. "The superior character of truth and seriousness in the matter and substance of the best poetry is inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement marking its style and manner. The two superiorities are closely related and are in steadfast proportion one to the other. So far as high poetic truth is wanting to a poet's matter and substance, so far also, we may be sure, will a high poetic stamp of diction and movement be wanting to his style and manner. In proportion as this high stamp of diction and movement, again, is absent from a poet's style and manner, we shall find, also, that high poetic truth and seriousness are absent from his substance and matter." High-seriousness therefore arises from the harmonious blending of matter and manner of the substance and expression. Whenever, in the words of Matthew Arnold, a noble nature poetically gifted, treats with simplicity or with severity a serious subject, there arises the Grand Style, 'The Grand Style, for Arnold, is synonymous with Aristotle's 'high-seriousness' and Longinus's 'sublime'. This is the touchstone to judge the order of excellence accomplished by a poet.'

The English Classics

Chaucer is the earliest follower of the French and Italian classics in the English language. He is the father of the splendid English poetry. He is great in himself. He does not need the assistance of the historic estimate. He is great both in the substance and style of his poetry. He takes a large, free and synthetic view of human life. In Chaucer's poetry there is God's plenty. "He is a perpetual fountain of good sense." His readers are enamoured of his divine liquidness of diction, his divine fluidity of movement, his gold dew-drops of speech. He is the "well of English undefiled." He is the maker of an epoch and founder of a tradition. And yet Arnold does not count him among the great classics. Chaucer's poetry, in Arnold's view, does not have that high and excellent seriousness which Aristotle assigns as one of the grand virtues of great poetry. "The substance of Chaucer's poetry," says Arnold, "is view of things and his criticism of life, has largeness, freedom, shrewdness, benignity; but it has not this high-seriousness."

Shakespeare and Milton

Arnold says that there cannot be two opinions that Shakespeare and Milton are the two greatest English classics. Shakespeare is the king of the realm of thought as well as of poetic rhythm and style. Arnold fully

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concur with Henry Cochin's view that Shakespeare produced "the most harmonious verse which has ever sounded upon the human ear since the verse of the Greeks." And as for Milton there is no need of any plea to assert that "in the sure and flawless perfection of his rhythm and diction he is as admirable as Virgil or Dante." This Arnold takes as requiring no discussion, this he takes as certain.

Dryden and Pope

Then Arnold takes up a controversial issue whether Dryden and Pope are poetical classics. Dr. Johnson puts them very high in the hierarchy of poetical classics. Wordsworth and Coleridge deny this honour to them. We have to dispel the halo of the historic estimate in order to ascertain their real position in the history of English poetry. Arnold believes that Dryden and Pope are "the splendid high priests of our age of prose and reason." Their poetry is the poetry of the builders of an age of prose and reason." They are masters of the art of versification. Their poetry has force, vigour and admirable splendour and accuracy. Yet their poetry does not have that indispensable stamp of high-seriousness. It does not offer an adequate poetic criticism of life. It does not offer a powerful poetic application of ideas to life. Their poetry is essentially the product of their discerning intellect, which is primarily the prerogative of prose rather than of poetry. Therefore Arnold's verdict on Dryden and Pope is that "they are not classics of our poetry, they are classics of our prose."

Gray

The position of Gray is very singular. He had the makings of a poetical classic. He was deeply and widely read in Greek in poetry. Intellectually and emotionally he constantly lived in the company of the Greeks and caught much of their poetic sensibility and style. But his poetical output is very scanty. Had he written a little more, he would have been among the great poetical classics in English. Nevertheless he is a classic, though "the scantiest and frailest of classics in our poetry."

Burns

And finally Arnold considers the claim of Burns as a poetical classic. Indeed much of his poetry deals with Scotch life. In this respect he can be put down as a provincial poet. Yet there is in his poetry something above and beyond mere provincialism. There is at times a free, catholic and truly shrewd criticism of life. At moments he displays the high-seriousness of the great classics. His poetry is at times the effusion of absolute sincerity. He stands a very favourable comparison with Chaucer. Therefore Arnold awards the judgment on him: "Not a classic nor with the excellent high seriousness of the great classics, nor with a verse rising to a criticism of life and a virtue like theirs; but a poet with thorough truth of substance and an answering truth of style, giving us a poetry sound to the core."

Arnold's Contemporaries

Arnold hesitates to examine and assess the positions of contemporary poets like Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley and Keats in the hierarchy of the English classics. They were so near to him in time that he was

118 *Arnold*

afraid that an estimate of their poetry would inevitably take on a personal character. It is difficult for a contemporary to take a detached view without letting in the personal estimate to weigh with him. Therefore, he leaves the touchstone methods in the hands of the readers and leaves him free to make his own assessment.) ●