

The Function of Criticism at the Present Time

In his essay on The Function of Criticism at the Present time prefixed to the first series of his Essays in Criticism that Arnold defines criticism, elaborates his functions, and also lays down the essentials of a competent critic. His view of criticism must be assessed in the context of the degenerate and chaotic state of contemporary Criticism. He found "Cultural Anarchy" everywhere, and his avowed mission was to bring about cultural regeneration.

The Importance of the Critic and Criticism__Definition.

In the very beginning of the essay, Arnold admits that the critical faculty is lower than the creative one, but it is critical activity which makes creation possible. Successful creation requires a current of best and noble ideas, but such a current is not always available, and in such uncongenial times creative activities suffer. Thus Gray, who had a soul of a poet happened to be born in congenial times and so his poetic production is meager and scant. Arnold agrees with Taine that, for successful creation both "the power of the man" and the "power of the moment", must concur, and the power of the moment i.e., stir and growth of noble ideas is made possible by criticism. Criticism is not merely, "judgment in literature", its function is much more noble, exalted and catholic.

Arnold defines criticism as, "A disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world, and thus to establish a current of fresh and true ideas." Thus the task of the critic is threefold in character. First, there is the critic's duty to learn and understand____ he must, "see things as they really are." Thus equipped, his second task is to hand on his ideas to others, to convert the world, to "make the best ideas prevail". His work in this respect is that of missionary. But, thirdly, he is preparing an atmosphere favorable for the

creative genius of future by promoting "a current of ideas in the highest degree animating and nourishing to the creative power". Says R.A Scott James, "the function of Arnold's criticism in the broadest sense of the term is to promote that part of culture depends upon knowledge of letters". The critic is as much concerned with making the truth prevail as in seeing and learning it. He aims at "getting acceptance for his ideas", in "carrying others along with him in his march towards perfection".

Thus there is an element of the propagandist in Arnold's conception of the role of the critic and criticism. That's why he has been criticized as a salesman. The critic must propagate noble ideas, he must repeatedly stress them, for only then he can make them prevail. It is only in this way that culture can be promoted; it is only in this way a current of noble ideas can be established and successful creation made possible.

The critic: His Disinterestedness:

Further, Arnold's use of the word, 'disinterested', has been the subject of much hot controversy. What he exactly mean by saying that the critic must be 'disinterested'? Says R.A Scott James, The interests from which he would have us be free are those which militate against intellectual and prejudices of the "Barbarian", the aristocrat who has the "spirit and politeness", but it is a little inaccessible to ideas and light". Still less must it be swayed by the blind impulses of the 'Populace' which Arnold chooses to speak of in terms of "bowling, hustling, smashing and beer". Most of all shall it shun that falsification of ideas which marks the Philistines, the complacent middle classes who like fanaticism, business, money-making, deputations, comfort, tea meetings. Culture will always work to disentangle itself from untruths and half-truths, from values which are attached to the machinery of life rather than spiritual life which machinery should subserve; it will distinguish means from end; and the end it will set before itself is that of perfection, spiritual growth governed by 'sweetness and light'. It must shun provincialism, which may take the forms of excess, ignorance, or bathos, and endeavor to be "in contact with the mainstream

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.

In analyzing the pernicious influences which beset the critic, Arnold has made a great advance and has rendered a service to criticism. He has put for his guidance a majestic ideal of intellectual and spiritual excellence, in accord with the best that has been thought and known in the world. "But let us frankly face his position. He has urged that the critic should to certain other interests; but in doing so he asked for his subjection to certain other interests which may be the more subtly beguiling because they are noble. He has emancipated him from certain intellectually unworthy determinations, however sweetly and reasonably, by the moral and social passion for doing well". Disinterested implies that the critic or the artist must be concerned with nothing else but his subject matter. But Arnold ties the critic to preconceived notions of moral perfection which are likely to colour his judgment and make him overpraise some and unfair to others. "In this way does the apostle of moral perfection because the prophet of moral perfection (Scott James). He frees the critic from certain interest, uttered political, practical considerations, but he ties him up to other interests.

Function Of Criticism: Arnold's Exalted Conception:

Arnold has a high conception of the vocation of a critic and the function of criticism. The critic is himself cultured --- he knows the bent that has been thought and known --- he helps others to become cultured, and he makes literary activity possible by establishing a current of noble ideas when such a current is waiting. R.A Scott James criticizes Arnold, for over-emphasizing ideas, he propagates them and nothing remains for the literary genius but to walk in and undertake the grand work of "synthesis and exposition". No doubt the powerful critic plays his part in fertilizing the soil and in watering the young plant. "and if it be true, as I have suggested, that the critic himself is an artist whose chosen subject matter lies in the life of literature, then he, too must play his part in the

tossing to and fro of ideas between artist than one of the many voices which fill the air and set the echoes ringing, stirring the creative impulse of the potential poets in our midst." This art impulse does not necessarily spring from formally correct ideas – it is started by notions of any and every kind hurtling from side to side. It is not released only by the force of culture, though culture will keep it in the strait and narrow path.

The critic performs another important as well. He rouses men out of their self-satisfaction and complacency, for such complacency is vulgarizing and retarding. By shaking complacency of men, he makes their mind dwell upon what is excellent in itself, and the absolute beauty and fitness of things. He raises them above practical consideration by making them contemplate the ideally perfect. Practical considerations are vulgarizing, they make men incapable of perceiving fine distinctions. Arnold refers to such incapacity as philistinism, and it is criticism, in the true sense of the word, that can save us from it. The critic must rise above practical considerations, for such considerations impoverish the soul; he must always have ideal perfection as his aim, for it is only then that he can make others rise to it.

Indeed, Arnold makes too exacting a demand on the critic. He must know the best that is known and thought in the world: "in the world" and not merely in his own country or in one or two countries. And he must know the best not in literature alone, but in other subjects as well. He must be a man of stupendous knowledge and understanding, one who rises above the personal considerations and with missionary zeal, try to make the best ideas prevail. It is only through such catholicity of reading that the critic can combat the sins of parochialism and provincialism. Then again he must have tact enough to see things as they are in themselves, and to apply to life the noble ideas he has discovered.

False Standards Of Judgment __ Personal And Historical:

But then how is the critic to find out, how is he to discover, what is the best and the noblest, and how is he to perform his mission? First, as already pointed out above, he must have 'tact' which is unfailing to guide to the excellent. Secondly, he must free himself from certain false standards of judgments, which come in the way of real estimate. Such false standards are the personal and the historical. By the former he means an

intrusion of the critic's own likes and dislikes in his judgment of literature. "Our personal affinities, liking, and circumstances", he says "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 rises above personal predilections and prejudices." Personal estimates result in the historical, eruptive, and aggressive manner in literature.

The historic estimate is equally fallacious and misleading. A poem may be valuable historically, but it may not of much value, "as it is in itself." He writes, "the course of the development we may easily bring ourselves to make it of more importance as poetry than in itself. In reality, we may come to use a language of quite exaggerated praise in criticizing it; in short to overrate it. So arises in our poetic judgments the fallacy caused by the estimates which we may call historic." However, Arnold agrees with Taine that knowledge of the life of poet, knowledge of his character and circumstances, as well as of his social milieu, is essential for correct understanding.