

The Function of Criticism at the Present Time

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Matthew Arnold

Matthew Arnold saw literature and culture as having a civilizing influence on society, functioning as a sort of religion for a secular world. The role of the critic was to select from the mass of creative work "the best that is thought and said" and provide guidance to the general public concerning what to read and how to read it.

In 1865 Matthew Arnold wrote, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time", in which he discusses the tenuous relationship between criticism and creation, one that before this, was virtually non-existent. Though literary criticism had been taking place for years, it was generally disregarded and held as useless. William Wordsworth once said that, "If the quantity of time consumed in writing critiques on the works of others were given to original composition, of whatever kind it might be, it would be much better employed". By acknowledging this view, and then creating a rational argument against it, Arnold's essay helped to send the genre into a new direction, as well as to create a new respect for it.

Arnold begins his argument by stating that, "The critical power is of lower rank than the creative, this is because man finds his true happiness within the creative process." However, this creative process cannot be limited to great works of literature, or most people would be denied their true happiness. Arnold says that well-doing, learning, or even criticizing can be creative projects and that they can be just as fulfilling as a great work of literature. He then says that the critical process may in fact be a crucial one for the creation of literary works.

Criticism may be necessary because the creative power works with certain materials, and for the author these materials are ideas; "the best ideas on every matter which literature touches, current at the time. However, authors do not actually discover these ideas, rather they synthesize them into works of art. Therefore, if these ideas are not readily known to the author, then he has nothing to write about. Arnold says that, "for the creation of a masterwork of literature, two forces must concur, the power of the man, and the power of the moment. That is, the author needs to live in a society where true ideas exist.

✓ Arnold sees that real criticism is essentially the exercise of the quality of curiosity. Curiosity is the disinterested desire for knowledge in all fields. It is an instinct that urges man to seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge. The creative activity must be preceded by criticism. Criticism paves the way for creative activity.

Disinterestedness: Arnold sees that the indispensable rule of English criticism is disinterestedness or objectivity. It also means independence of judgement.

How can criticism show disinterestedness?

- ✓ Criticism should follow the law of its own nature which is freedom. Criticism should be a free activity which is not subject to any external influence.
- ✓ Criticism should refuse to submit to political or practical consideration.
- Criticism should serve nothing but itself.

What is the business of criticism?

- The business of criticism is to know the best that is known and thought in the world.
- Moreover, it should spread this knowledge to create a flow of new ideas.
- Its business is to practise the function with strict honesty and sense of duty. He opposes the flexible honest in criticism.

What hinders criticism?

- Arnold sees that practical considerations hinder faithful criticism and suffocates it. Criticism should be free of these considerations. It should be firstly a free play of mind. The free play of mind is much more important than any practical ends.

Spiritual Function of Criticism:

The spiritual function of criticism is to protect man from a self-satisfaction that holds him back. It lends him to perfection by introducing his mind to excellent ideas, beauty and fitness. Non-objective practical criticism makes man blind to shortcomings and faults in their practice. This will lead to narrow-mindedness.

Arnold specifies certain activity for criticism. Criticism should refrain itself from the sphere of practical life. It involves itself in a slow and obscure work. The common people never have the enthusiastic motive of seeing things as they are, so inadequate ideas will satisfy them.

Scepticism was a direct result of the new intellectual theories of Darwin. Darwin's theory of evolution lead to scepticism about religious beliefs and Christian faith. His theory contradicts the story of creation in the Bible.

Arnold advocates the importance of education. He believed that schools were essential location for civilising and enlightening the next generation of lower classes. He anticipated that this generation will occupy the political positions. This shows that he has a good vision because the Victorian age witnessed the gradual rise of the middle class. This also reflects his belief that proper education is one of the best equipments to have a better life. It is a means by which man can improve his life and position.

Arnold defines criticism as the disinterested endeavour to learn and propagates the best that is know and thought in the world. He means that it is an objective and unbiased attempt to reveal the best ideas that are tackled.

Arnold provides criticism with an important social function and paved the way for its institutionalization. He means to make criticism a genre for study at school.

(He believes that poetry is in its essence a criticism of life) The poet should apply his ideas to life. Poetry should give an answers to the question how to live.

[Arnold believes that criticism is responsible for generating the context of ideas and high standards that are required for the production of literature.]

In his book Culture and Anarchy, he shows his aim at raising the impulse to the development of the whole man. He wants to create harmony among all parts of man to make him reach

perfection. In this book, he gave answers to most of the questions that engaged people and writers' minds such as what kind of education the one should receive. These answers came at a moment in English history when anarchy and social unrest prevailed. He shows that the best persons would be critics who are unbiased thoughtful and against fanaticism. They aspire to perfection. In Culture and Anarchy, he asserts the value of poetry on attitude to the cultural anarchy of his age.

Arnold is mainly interested in the personality and moral tone. He was criticised for focusing on moral tone. He enthusiastically defends the function of criticism and literature against its enemies. He defends culture as "a study of perfection." He believes that culture is seductive and harmonious not conflictual. Arnold sees that criticism requires flexibility and curiosity. The critic should be also open to life and a true evaluation.

Arnold confirms that the creative power of poetry requires ideas and material to provide it with inspiration and achieve success. These ideas nourish the creative power. The critical effort tries to create cultural environment rich with ideas. He goes on to equate the emotional experience of writing criticism with the emotional experience of writing creative work. He intends to undermine typical opinion against criticism. He defends criticism against the opinion that believes that it serves no purpose, and that those who criticize cannot write something creative themselves. He compares between the success of Goethe and that of Byron. Arnold says that both of them had a great productive power, but Goethe was nourished by great critical effort which provided the required material for his work. Lord Byron possessed the same gift but was less productive because he found no rich cultural background and material. Byron lacked critical efforts.