

# Function of Criticism at the Present Time

Semester I

“The Sea of faith  
Was once ,too, at the full, and the round earth’s  
shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long , withdrawing roar  
Retreating to the breadth  
Of the night wind, down the vast edges dear  
And naked shingles of the world”

Dover Beach

- Presents a world which is frightening and all familiar reference have disappeared.

- Arnold helped the Victorians to make sense of their world.
- Collectively these writers-Thomas Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin- are referred to as the Victorian Sages
- Provided new narratives that were of great importance to their contemporaries

# Matthew Arnold

- Arnold began his career as a poet
- Turned to prose in his later years
- 1858 professor of poetry at oxford
- Inspector of educational institutions-made sensitive to the problems of the age
- He sought to deal with these problems in literary, political, religious and educational writings

- In 1865 *Essays in Criticism*: first series
- In this essay he developed his view of criticism as a disinterested and flexible mode of thought, whose application extended far beyond literature.

- Lionell Trilling “ Matthew Arnold is virtually the founding father of modern criticism in the English-speaking world.”
- Critics should strive to “see the object as in itself it really is “ and his celebrated definition of criticism as the “ disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world.”
- These authoritative statements, Trilling maintained, gave later scholars and teachers their inspiration and interpretive mission.

- Provided literary criticism with an important social function and paved the way for its “institutionalization”
- Writing and reading of literature as the urgent activity in the world.
- Serious criticism , he believed, was responsible for generating and maintaining the context of ideas and high standards that the production of literature required.
- Criticism for Arnold meant an engagement with history, education , politics, religion, philosophy and other subjects and concerns; literature is vitally connected to society and culture.
- Represent an ideal of literary and cultural humanism



“ of the literature of France and Germany, as the intellect of Europe in general, the main effort, for now many years, has **been a critical effort; the endeavour in all branches of knowledge , theology, philosophy, history, art , science, to see the object as in itself it really is.**”

- The essay is a proposition about criticism and its importance.
- It presents Criticism as a rigorous duty involving flexibility and openness to new experiences and curiosity.
- Appeals for a campaign against the fallacious estimates of value that must be waged with inflexible honesty.

# The voice against criticism

- The importance given to criticism will impair the power and value of English literature.
- Christopher Wordsworth: (Memoirs of Wordsworth(1851) “ if the quantity of time consumed in writing critiques on the works of others were given to original composition, of what ever kind it might be, it would be much better employed.”

# Defending the importance of Criticism

- Arnold defended criticism as an institution which helps people to perceive authentic value in the workings of the society and culture around them.
- It **“tends to establish an order of ideas”** and seeks to **“make the best ideals prevail.”**

- Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) whose critical works are more famous and his creative works was cited as an example.
- Lives of the Poets (1779-81) (Critical work)
- *Irene* (1749) (An unsuccessful neo-classical tragedy)(creative work)

- Wordsworth is more of a critic and less of a poet.
- “ Preface to Lyrical Ballads” is full of criticism .
- Wordsworth’s judgment on criticism was a result of the hostile reviews of his poetry.

# Why creative works need criticism

- The elements with which the creative power works are ideas, the best ideas on every matter which literature touches, current at the time
- As literature 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.
- Criticism creates that atmosphere and the order of ideas.

- Criticism makes the best ideas prevail.
- It tends to make an intellectual situation of which the creative power can profitably avail itself
- Life and the world in modern times very complex things.
- The creation of a modern poet , to worth much, implies a great critical effort behind it.
- A poet ought to know life and the world
- Goethe was such a poet who knew it well



# The cause of pre-maturity in English poetry

- English poetry in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was not mature .
- This pre-maturity comes from its having proceeded without having its proper data, without sufficient materials to work with.
- The English poetry of the first quarter of the century with plenty of energy, plenty of creative force, did not know enough.

# The Importance of reading

- Only reading books will not help.
- Shakespeare was not a deep reader, but in the **Greece of Pindar and Sophocles** , in the **England of Shakespeare**, the poet lived in a **current of ideas in the highest degree animating and nourishing to the creative power**; society was, in the fullest measure, **permeated by fresh thought, intelligent and alive.**

- All the books and reading in the world are only valuable as they are helps to this.
- Reading is by no means an equivalent to the artist for the nationally diffused life and thought of the epochs of Sophocles and Shakespeare.

# The case of the French Revolution

- The France of Voltaire and Rousseau had a powerful influence on the mind of Europe than the France of the Revolution.
- They had their source in a great movement of feeling, not in a great movement of mind.
- French Revolution took a political and practical character.

# How Criticism helps

- Criticism serves the cause of perfection by establishing them. By eluding sterile conflict, by refusing to remain in the sphere where alone narrow and relative conceptions have any worth and validity, criticism may diminish its momentary importance , but only in this way has it a chance of gaining admittance for those wider and more perfect conceptions to which all its duty is really owed

# How criticism works

- Subtle and indirect action
- Slow and obscure
- The mass of mankind will never have any ardent zeal for seeing things as they are ; very inadequate ideas will always satisfy them.
- It is only by remaining collected, and refusing to lend himself to the point of view of the practical men , that the critic can do the practical man any service; and it is only by the greatest sincerity in pursuing his own course, and by at last convincing even the practical man of his sincerity, that he can escape misunderstandings which perpetually threaten him.

# Practical allegiance

- “Where shall we find language innocent enough, how shall we make the spotless purity of our intentions evident enough, to enable us to say to the political Englishmen that the British constitution itself, which, seen from the practical side, looks such a magnificent organ of progress and virtue, seen from the speculative side , with its compromises, its love of facts, its horror of theory, its studied avoidance of clear thoughts. –that seen from this side , our August constitution sometimes looks,-forgive me, shade of Lord Somers!- a colossal machine for the manufacture of Philistines (the materialist middle classes)”

# Fate of a critic

- The critic will still remain exposed to frequent misunderstandings.
- With out this free disinterested treatment of things, truth and the highest culture are out of the question.



# The complacency of middle class as a threat to criticism

- The complacent middle class (*terrae filii*, Latin) (Man of the soil)
- “Let us have no nonsense about independent criticism, and intellectual delicacy, and the few and the many. Don’t let us trouble ourselves about foreign thought; we shall invent the whole thing for ourselves as we go along.”

- In this way the pursuit of truth becomes really a social, practical , pleasurable affair, almost requiring a chairman, a secretary, and advertisements.
- In general, plenty of bustle and very little thought.
- To act is so easy, as Goethe says; to think is so hard.

# Resisting the temptation

- It is true that the critic has many temptations to go with the stream, to make one of the party movement, one of those *terrae filii*.
- But the critic's duty is to refuse, or, if resistance is vain, at least to cry with Oberman: *Perissons en resistant* (Let us die resisting)

# What is the duty of criticism

- “To be perpetually dissatisfied with these works, while they perpetually fall short of a high and perfect ideal.”

# Suggested Reading