

# ARNOLD MATTHEW

SELECTIONS FROM THE  
PROSE WORKS OF  
MATTHEW ARNOLD

Matthew Arnold

**Selections from the Prose  
Works of Matthew Arnold**

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# **Matthew Arnold**

## **Selections from the Prose**

## **Works of Matthew Arnold**

### **PREFACE**

This book of selections aims to furnish examples of Arnold's prose in all the fields in which it characteristically employed itself except that of religion. It has seemed better to omit all such material than to attempt inclusion of a few extracts which could hardly give any adequate notion of Arnold's work in this department. Something, however, of his method in religious criticism can be discerned by a perusal of the chapter on *Hebraism and Hellenism*, selected from *Culture and Anarchy*. Most of Arnold's leading ideas are represented in this volume, but the decision to use entire essays so far as feasible has naturally precluded the possibility of gathering all the important utterances together. The basis of division and grouping of the selections is made sufficiently obvious by the headings. In the division of literary criticism the endeavor has been to illustrate Arnold's cosmopolitanism by essays of first-rate importance dealing with the four literatures with which he was well acquainted. In the notes, conciseness with a reasonable degree of thoroughness has been the principle followed.

## INTRODUCTION

### I

[Sidenote: Life and Personality]

"The gray hairs on my head are becoming more and more numerous, and I sometimes grow impatient of getting old amidst a press of occupations and labor for which, after all, I was not born. But we are not here to have facilities found us for doing the work we like, but to make them." This sentence, written in a letter to his mother in his fortieth year, admirably expresses Arnold's courage, cheerfulness, and devotion in the midst of an exacting round of commonplace duties, and at the same time the energy and determination with which he responded to the imperative need of liberating work of a higher order, that he might keep himself, as he says in another letter, "from feeling starved and shrunk up." The two feelings directed the course of his life to the end, a life characterized no less by allegiance to "the lowliest duties" than by brilliant success in a more attractive field.

Matthew Arnold was born at Laleham, December 24, 1822, the eldest son of Thomas Arnold, the great head master of Rugby. He was educated at Laleham, Winchester, Rugby, and Balliol College, Oxford. In 1845 he was elected a fellow of Oriel, but Arnold desired to be a man of the world, and the security of college cloisters and garden walls could not long attract him. Of a deep affection for Oxford his letters and his books speak unmistakably, but little record of his Oxford life remains aside from the well-known lines of Principal Shairp, in which he is spoken of as

So full of power, yet blithe and debonair,  
Rallying his friends with pleasant banter gay.

From Oxford he returned to teach classics at Rugby, and in 1847 he was appointed private secretary to Lord Lansdowne, then Lord President of the Council. In 1851, the year of his marriage, he became inspector of schools, and in this service he continued until two years before his death. As an inspector, the letters give us a picture of Arnold toiling over examination papers, and hurrying from place to place, covering great distances, often going without lunch or dinner, or seeking the doubtful solace of a bun, eaten "before the astonished school." His services to the cause of English education were great, both in the direction of personal inspiration to teachers and students, and in thoughtful discussion of national problems. Much time was spent in investigating foreign systems, and his *Report upon Schools and Universities on the Continent* was enlightened and suggestive.

Arnold's first volume of poems appeared in 1849, and by 1853 the larger part of his poetry was published. Four years later he was appointed Professor of Poetry at Oxford. Of his prose, the first book to attract wide notice was that containing the lectures *On Translating Homer* delivered from the chair of Poetry and published in 1861-62. From this time until the year of his death appeared the remarkable series of critical writings which have placed him in the front rank of the men of letters of his century. He continued faithfully to fulfill his duties as school inspector until April, 1886, when he resigned after a service of thirty-five years. He died of heart trouble on April 15, 1888, at Liverpool.

The testimony to Arnold's personal charm, to his cheerfulness, his urbanity, his tolerance and charity, is remarkably uniform. He is described by one who knew him as "the most sociable, the most lovable, the most companionable of men"; by another as "preëminently a good man, gentle, generous, enduring, laborious." His letters are among the precious writings of our time, not because of the beauty or inimitableness of detail, but because of the completed picture which they make. They do not, like the Carlyle-Emerson correspondence, show a hand that could not set pen to paper without

writing picturesquely, but they do reveal a character of great soundness and sweetness, and one in which the affections play a surprisingly important part, the love of flowers and books, of family and friends, and of his fellow men. His life was human, kindly and unselfish, and he allowed no clash between the pursuit of personal perfection and devotion to the public cause, even when the latter demanded sacrifice of the most cherished projects and adherence to the most irritating drudgery.

## II

### [Sidenote: Arnold's Place among Nineteenth-Century Teachers]

By those who go to literature primarily for a practical wisdom presented in terms applicable to modern life, the work of Arnold will be reckoned highly important, if not indispensable. He will be placed by them among the great humanizers of the last century, and by comparison with his contemporaries will be seen to have furnished a complementary contribution of the highest value. Of the other great teachers whose work may most fitly be compared with his, two were preëminently men of feeling. Carlyle was governed by an overmastering moral fervor which gave great weight to his utterances, but which exercised itself in a narrow field and which often distorted and misinterpreted the facts. Ruskin was governed by his affections, and though an ardent lover of truth and beauty, was often the victim of caprice and extravagance. Emerson and Arnold, on the other hand, were governed primarily by the intellect, but with quite different results. Emerson presents life in its ideality; he comparatively neglects life in its phenomenal aspect, that is, as it appears to the ordinary man. Arnold, while not without emotional equipment, and inspired by idealism of a high order, introduces a yet larger element of practical season. *Tendens manus ripæ ulterioris amore*, he is yet first of all a man of this world. His chief instrument is common sense, and he looks at questions from the point of view of the highly intelligent and cultivated man. His dislike of metaphysics was as deep as Ruskin's, and he was impatient of abstractions of any sort. With as great a desire to further the true progress of his time as Carlyle or Ruskin, he joined a greater calmness and disinterestedness. "To be less and less personal in one's desires and workings" he learned to look upon as after all the great matter. Of the lessons that are impressed upon us by his whole life and work rather than by specific teachings, perhaps the most precious is the inspiration to live our lives thoughtfully, in no haphazard and hand-to-mouth way, and to live always for the idea and the spirit, making all things else subservient. He does not dazzle us with extraordinary power prodigally spent, but he was a good steward of natural gifts, high, though below the highest. His life of forethought and reason may be profitably compared with a life spoiled by passion and animalism like that of Byron or of Burns. His counsels are the fruit of this well-ordered life and are perfectly in consonance with it. While he was a man of less striking personality and less brilliant literary gift than some of his contemporaries, and though his appeal was without the moving power that comes from great emotion, we find a compensation in his greater balance and sanity. He makes singularly few mistakes, and these chiefly of detail. Of all the teachings of the age his ideal of perfection is the wisest and the most permanent.

## III

### [Sidenote: His Teachers and his Personal Philosophy]

Arnold's poetry is the poetry of meditation and not the poetry of passion; it comes from "the depth and not the tumult of the soul"; it does not make us more joyful, but it helps us to greater depth of vision, greater detachment, greater power of self-possession. Our concern here is chiefly with its relation to the prose, and this, too, is a definite and important relation. In his prose Arnold gives such result of his observation and meditation as he believes may be gathered into the form of



counsel, criticism, and warning to his age. In his poetry, which preceded the prose, we find rather the processes through which he reached these conclusions; we learn what is the nature of his communing upon life, not as it affects society, but as it fronts the individual; we learn who are the great thinkers of the past who came to his help in the straits of life, and what is the armor which they furnished for his soul in its times of stress.

One result of a perusal of the poems is to counteract the impression often produced by the jaunty air assumed in the prose. The real substance of Arnold's thought is characterized by a deep seriousness; no one felt more deeply the spiritual unrest and distraction of his age. More than one poem is an expression of its mental and spiritual sickness, its doubt, ennui, and melancholy. Yet beside such poems as *Dover Beach* and *Stagirius* should be placed the lines from *Westminster Abbey*:—

For this and that way swings  
The flux of mortal things,  
Though moving inly to one far-set goal.

Out of this entanglement and distraction Arnold turned for help to those writers who seemed most perfectly to have seized upon the eternal verities, to have escaped out of the storm of conflict and to have gained calm and peaceful seats. Carlyle and Ruskin, Byron and Shelley, were stained with the blood of battle, they raged in the heat of controversy; Arnold could not accept them as his teachers. But the Greek poets and the ancient Stoic philosophers have nothing of this dust and heat about them, and to them Arnold turns to gather truth and to imitate their spirit. Similarly, two poets of modern times, Goethe and Wordsworth, have won tranquillity. They, too, become his teachers. Arnold's chief guides for life are, then, these: two Greek poets, Sophocles and Homer; two ancient philosophers, Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus; two modern poets, Goethe and Wordsworth.

In Homer and Sophocles, Arnold sought what we may call the Greek spirit. What he conceived this spirit to be as expressed in art, we find in the essay on *Literature and Science*, "fit details strictly combined, in view of a large general result nobly conceived." In Sophocles, Arnold found the same spirit interpreting life with a vision that "saw life steadily and saw it whole." In another Greek idea, that of fate, he is also greatly interested, though his conception of it is modified by the influence of Christianity. From the Greek poets, then, Arnold derived a sense of the large part which destiny plays in our lives and the wisdom of conforming our lives to necessity; the importance of conceiving of life as directed toward a simple, large, and noble end; and the desirability of maintaining a balance among the demands that life makes on us, of adapting fit details to the main purpose of life.

Among modern writers Arnold turned first to Goethe, "Europe's sagest head, Physician of the Iron Age." One of the things that he learned from this source was the value of detachment. In the midst of the turmoil of life, Goethe found refuge in Art. He is the great modern example of a man who has been able to separate himself from the struggle of life and watch it calmly.

He who hath watch'd, not shared the strife,  
Knows how the day hath gone.

Aloofness, provided it be not selfish, has its own value, and, indeed, isolation must be recognized as a law of our existence.

Thin, thin the pleasant human noises grow,  
And faint the city gleams;  
Rare the lone pastoral huts—Marvel not thou!  
The solemn peaks but to the stars are known,  
But to the stars and the cold lunar beams;



Alone the sun rises, and alone  
Spring the great streams.

From Goethe, also, Arnold derived the gospel of culture and faith in the intellectual life. It is significant that while Carlyle and Arnold may both be looked upon as disciples of Goethe, Carlyle's most characteristic quotation from his master is his injunction to us to "do the task that lies nearest us," while Arnold's is such a maxim as, "To act is easy, to think is hard."

In some ways Wordsworth was for Arnold a personality even more congenial than Goethe. His range, to be sure, is narrow, but he, too, has attained spiritual peace. His life, secure among its English hills and lakes, was untroubled in its faith. Wordsworth strongly reinforces three things in Arnold, the ability to derive from nature its "healing power" and to share and be glad in "the wonder and bloom of the world"; truth to the deeper spiritual life and strength to keep his soul

Fresh, undiverted to the world without,  
Firm to the mark, not spent on other things;

and finally, a satisfaction in the cheerful and serene performance of duty, the spirit of "toil unsevered from tranquillity," sharing in the world's work, yet keeping "free from dust and soil."

From the Emperor Marcus Aurelius and from the slave Epictetus alike, Arnold learned to look within for "the aids to noble life." Overshadowed on all sides by the "uno'erleaped mountains of necessity," we must learn to resign our passionate hopes "for quiet and a fearless mind," to merge the self in obedience to universal law, and to keep ever before our minds

The pure eternal course of life,  
Not human combatings with death.

No conviction is more frequently reiterated in Arnold's poetry than that of the wisdom of resignation and self-dependence.

These great masters, then, strengthened Arnold in those high instincts which needed nourishment in a day of spiritual unrest. From the Greek poets he learned to look at life steadily and as a whole, to direct it toward simple and noble ends, and to preserve in it a balance and perfection of parts. From Goethe he derived the lessons of detachment and self-culture. From Wordsworth he learned to find peace in nature, to pursue an unworldly purpose, and to be content with humble duties. From the Stoics he learned, especially, self-dependence and resignation. In general, he endeavored to follow an ideal of perfection and to distinguish always between temporary demands and eternal values.

## IV

### [Sidenote: Theory of Criticism and Equipment as a Critic]

In passing from poetry to criticism, Arnold did not feel that he was descending to a lower level. Rather he felt that he was helping to lift criticism to a position of equality with more properly creative work. The most noticeable thing about his definition of criticism is its lofty ambition. It is "the disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world," and its more ultimate purpose is "to keep man from a self-satisfaction which is retarding and vulgarizing, to lead him towards perfection." It is not to be confined to art and literature, but is to include within its scope society, politics, and religion. It is not only to censure that which is blameworthy, but to appreciate and popularize the best.

For this work great virtues are demanded of the critic. Foremost of these is disinterestedness. "If I know your sect, I anticipate your argument," says Emerson in the essay on *Self-Reliance*. Similarly Arnold warns the critic against partisanship. It is better that he refrain from active participation in politics, social or humanitarian work. Connected with this is another requisite, that of clearness of vision. One of the great disadvantages of partisanship is that it blinds the partisan. But the critical effort is described as "the effort to see the object as in itself it really is." This is best accomplished by approaching truth in as many ways and from as many sides as possible.

Another precaution for the critic who would retain clearness of vision is the avoidance of abstract systems, which petrify and hinder the necessary flexibility of mind. Coolness of temper is also enjoined and scrupulously practiced. "It is only by remaining collected ... that the critic can do the practical man any service"; and again: "Even in one's ridicule one must preserve a sweetness and good humor" (letter to his mother, October 27, 1863). In addition to these virtues, which in Arnold's opinion comprised the qualities most requisite for salutary criticism, certain others are strikingly illustrated by Arnold's own mind and methods: the endeavor to understand, to sympathize with, and to guide intelligently the main tendencies of his age, rather than violently to oppose them; at the same time the courage to present unpleasant antidotes to its faults and to keep from fostering a people in its own conceit; and finally, amidst many discouragements, the retention of a high faith in spiritual progress and an unwavering belief that the ideal life is "the normal life as we shall one day see it."

Criticism, to be effective, requires also an adequate style. In Arnold's discussion of style, much stress is laid on its basis in character, and much upon the transparent quality of true style which allows that basic character to shine through. Such words as "limpidness," "simplicity," "lucidity," are favorites. Clearness and effectiveness are the qualities that he most highly valued. The latter he gained especially through the crystallization of his thought into certain telling phrases, such as "Philistinism," "sweetness and light," "the grand style," etc. That this habit was attended with dangers, that his readers were likely to get hold of his phrases and think that they had thereby mastered his thought, he realized. Perhaps he hardly realized the danger to the coiner of apothegms himself, that of being content with a half truth when the whole truth cannot be conveniently crowded into narrow compass. Herein lies, I think, the chief source of Arnold's occasional failure to quite satisfy our sense of adequacy or of justice, as, for instance, in his celebrated handling of the four ways of regarding nature, or the passage in which he describes the sterner self of the working-class as liking "bawling, hustling, and smashing; the lighter self, beer."

By emotionalism, however, he does not allow himself to be betrayed, and he does not indulge in rhythmical prose or rhapsody, though occasionally his writing has a truly poetical quality resulting from the quiet but deep feeling which rises in connection with a subject on which the mind has long brooded with affection, as in the tribute to Oxford at the beginning of the *Essay on Emerson*. Sometimes, on the other hand, a certain pedagogic stiffness appears, as if the writer feared that the dullness of comprehension of his readers would not allow them to grasp even the simplest conceptions without a patient insistence on the literal fact.

One can by no means pass over Arnold's humor in a discussion of his style, yet humor is certainly a secondary matter with him, in spite of the frequency of its appearance. It is not much found in his more intimate and personal writing, his poetry and his familiar letters. In such a book as *Friendship's Garland*, where it is most in evidence, it is plainly a literary weapon deliberately assumed. In fact, Arnold is almost too conscious of the value of humor in the gentle warfare in which he had enlisted. Its most frequent form is that of playful satire; it is the product of keen wit and sane mind, and it is always directed toward some serious purpose, rarely, if ever, existing as an end in itself.

## V

### [Sidenote: Literary Criticism]

The first volume of *Essays in Criticism* was published in 1865. That a book of essays on literary subjects, apparently so diverse in character, so lacking in outer unity, and so little subject to system of any sort, should take so definite a place in the history of criticism and make so single an impression upon the reader proves its possession of a dominant and important idea, impelled by a new and weighty power of personality. What Arnold called his "sinuous, easy, unpolemical mode of proceeding" tends to disguise the seriousness and unity of purpose which lie behind nearly all of these essays, but an uninterrupted perusal of the two volumes of *Essays in Criticism* and the volume of *Mixed Essays* discloses what that purpose is. The essays may roughly be divided into two classes, those which deal with single writers and those discussing subjects of more general nature. The purpose of both is what Arnold himself has called "the humanization of man in society." In the former he selects some person exemplifying a trait, in the latter he selects some general idea, which he deems of importance for our further humanization, and in easy, unsystematic fashion unfolds and illustrates it for us. But in spite of this unlabored method he takes care somewhere in the essay to seize upon a phrase that shall bring home to us the essence of his theme and to make it salient enough so as not to escape us. How much space shall be devoted to exposition, and how much to illustration, depends largely on the familiarity of his subject to his readers. Besides the general purpose of humanization, two other considerations guide him: the racial shortcomings of the English people and the needs of his age. The English are less in need of energizing and moralizing than of intellectualizing, refining, and inspiring with the passion for perfection. This need accordingly determines the choice in most cases. So Milton presents an example of "sure and flawless perfection of rhythm and diction"; Joubert is characterized by his intense care of "perfecting himself"; Falkland is "our martyr of sweetness and light, of lucidity of mind and largeness of temper"; George Sand is admirable because of her desire to make the ideal life the normal one; Emerson is "the friend and aider of those who would live in the spirit."

The belief that poetry is our best instrument for humanization determines Arnold's loyalty to that form of art; that classical art is superior to modern in clarity, harmony, and wholeness of effect, determines his preference for classic, especially for Greek poetry. He thus represents a reaction against the romantic movement, yet has experienced the emotional deepening which that movement brought with it. Accordingly, he finds a shallowness in the pseudo-classicism of Pope and his contemporaries, and turns rather to Sophocles on the one hand and Goethe on the other for his exemplars. He feels "the peculiar charm and aroma of the Middle Age," but retains "a strong sense of the irrationality of that period and of those who take it seriously, and play at restoring it" (letter to Miss Arnold, December 17, 1860); and again: "No one has a stronger and more abiding sense than I have of the 'dæmonic' element—as Goethe called it—which underlies and encompasses our life; but I think, as Goethe thought, that the right thing is while conscious of this element, and of all that there is inexplicable round one, to keep pushing on one's posts into the darkness, and to establish no post that is not perfectly in light and firm" (letter to his mother, March 3, 1865).

## VI

### [Sidenote: Criticism of Society, Politics, and Religion]

Like the work of all clear thinkers, Arnold's writing proceeds from a few governing and controlling principles. It is natural, therefore, that we should find in his criticism of society a repetition of the ideas already encountered in his literary criticism. Of these, the chief is that of "culture," the

theme of his most typical book, *Culture and Anarchy*, published in 1869. Indeed, it is interesting to see how closely related his doctrine of culture is to his theory of criticism, already expounded. True criticism, we have seen, consists in an "endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world." The shortest definition that Arnold gives of culture is "a study of perfection." But how may one pursue perfection? Evidently by putting oneself in the way of learning the best that is known and thought, and by making it a part of oneself. The relation of the critic to culture thereupon becomes evident. He is the appointed apostle of culture. He undertakes as his duty in life to seek out and to minister to others the means of self-improvement, discriminating the evil and the specious from the good and the genuine, rendering the former contemptible and the latter attractive. But in a degree all seekers after culture must be critics also. Both pursue the same objects, the best that is thought and known. Both, too, must propagate it; for culture consists in general expansion, and the last degree of personal perfection is attained only when shared with one's fellows. The critic and the true man of culture are, therefore, at bottom, the same, though Arnold does not specifically point this out. But the two ideals united in himself direct all his endeavor. As a man of culture he is intent chiefly upon the acquisition of the means of perfection; as a critic, upon their elucidation and propagation.

This sufficiently answers the charge of selfishness that is frequently brought against the gospel of culture. It would never have been brought if its critics had not perversely shut their eyes to Arnold's express statements that perfection consists in "a general expansion"; that it "is not possible while the individual remains isolated"; that one of its characteristics is "increased sympathy," as well as "increased sweetness, increased light, increased life." The other common charge of dilettanteism, brought by such opponents as Professor Huxley and Mr. Frederic Harrison, deserves hardly more consideration. Arnold has made it sufficiently clear that he does not mean by culture "a smattering of Greek and Latin," but a deepening and strengthening of our whole spiritual nature by all the means at our command. No other ideal of the century is so satisfactory as this of Arnold's. The ideal of social democracy, as commonly followed, tends, as Arnold has pointed out, to exalt the average man, while culture exalts man at his best. The scientific ideal, divorced from a general cultural aim, appeals "to a limited faculty and not to the whole man." The religious ideal, too exclusively cultivated, dwarfs the sense of beauty and is marked by narrowness. Culture includes religion as its most valuable component, but goes beyond it.

The fact that Arnold, in his social as in his literary criticism, laid the chief stress upon the intellectual rather than the moral elements of culture, was due to his constant desire to adapt his thought to the condition of his age and nation. The prevailing characteristics of the English people he believed to be energy and honesty. These he contrasts with the chief characteristics of the Athenians, openness of mind and flexibility of intelligence. As the best type of culture, that is, of perfected humanity, for the Englishman to emulate, he turns, therefore, to Greece in the time of Sophocles, Greece, to be sure, failed because of the lack of that very Hebraism which England possesses and to which she owes her strength. But if to this strength of moral fiber could be added the openness of mind, flexibility of intelligence, and love of beauty which distinguished the Greeks in their best period, a truly great civilization would result. That this ideal will in the end prevail, he has little doubt. The strain of sadness, melancholy, and depression which appears in Arnold's poetry is rigidly excluded from his prose. Both despondency and violence are forbidden to the believer in culture. "We go the way the human race is going," he says at the close of *Culture and Anarchy*.

Arnold's incursion into the field of religion has been looked upon by many as a mistake. Religion is with most people a matter of closer interest and is less discussable than literary criticism. *Literature and Dogma*, aroused much antagonism on this account. Moreover, it cannot be denied that Arnold was not well enough equipped in this field to prevent him from making a good many mistakes. But that the upshot of his religious teaching is wholesome and edifying can hardly be denied. Arnold's spirit is a deeply religious one, and his purpose in his religious books was to save what was valuable in

religion by separating it from what was non-essential. He thought of himself always as a friend, not as an enemy, of religion. The purpose of all his religious writings, of which *St. Paul and Protestantism*, 1870, and *Literature and Dogma*, 1873, are the most important, is the same, to show the natural truth of religion and to strengthen its position by freeing it from dependence on dogma and historical evidence, and especially to make clear the essential value of Christianity. Conformity with reason, true spirituality, and freedom from materialistic interpretation were for him the bases of sound faith. That Arnold's religious writing is thoroughly spiritual in its aim and tendency has, I think, never been questioned, and we need only examine some of his leading definitions to become convinced of this. Thus, religion is described as "that which binds and holds us to the practice of righteousness"; faith is the "power, preëminently, of holding fast to an unseen power of goodness"; God is "the power, not ourselves, that makes for righteousness"; immortality is a union of one's life with an eternal order that never dies. Arnold did not without reluctance enter into religious controversy, but when once entered he did his best to make order and reason prevail there. His attitude is well stated in an early essay not since reprinted:—

"And you are masters in Israel, and know not these things; and you require a voice from the world of literature to tell them to you! Those who ask nothing better than to remain silent on such topics, who have to quit their own sphere to speak of them, who cannot touch them without being reminded that they survive those who touched them with far different power, you compel, in the mere interest of letters, of intelligence, of general culture, to proclaim truths which it was your function to have made familiar. And when you have thus forced the very stones to cry out, and the dumb to speak, you call them singular because they know these truths, and arrogant because they declare them!"<sup>1</sup>

In political discussion as in all other forms of criticism Arnold aimed at disinterestedness. "I am a Liberal," he says in the Introduction to *Culture and Anarchy*, "yet I am a Liberal tempered by experience, reflection, and self-renouncement." In the last condition he believed that his particular strength lay. "I do not wish to see men of culture entrusted with power." In his coolness and freedom from bitterness is to be found his chief superiority to his more violent contemporaries. This saved him from magnifying the faults inseparable from the social movements of his day. In contrast with Carlyle he retains to the end a sympathy with the advance of democracy and a belief in the principles of liberty and equality, while not blinded to the weaknesses of Liberalism. Political discussion in the hands of its express partisans is always likely to become violent and one-sided. This violence and one-sidedness Arnold believes it the work of criticism to temper, or as he expresses it, in *Culture and Anarchy*, "Culture is the eternal opponent of the two things which are the signal marks of Jacobinism, —its fierceness and its addiction to an abstract system."

## VII

### [Sidenote: Conclusion]

"Un Milton jeune et voyageant" was George Sand's description of the young Arnold. The eager pursuit of high aims, implied in this description, he carried from youth into manhood and age. The innocence, the hopefulness, and the noble curiosity of youth he retained to the end. But these became tempered with the ripe wisdom of maturity, a wisdom needed for the helpful interpretation of a perplexing period. His prose writings are surpassed, in that spontaneous and unaccountable inspiration which we call genius, by those of certain of his contemporaries, but when we become exhausted by the perversities of ill-controlled passion and find ourselves unable to breathe the rarified air of transcendentalism, we may turn to him for the clarifying and strengthening effect of calm intelligence and pure spirituality.

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<sup>1</sup> From *Dr. Stanley's Lectures on the Jewish Church*, *Macmillan's Magazine*, February, 1863, vol. 7, p. 336.

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## ~SELECTIONS FROM MATTHEW ARNOLD~

### I. THEORIES OF LITERATURE AND CRITICISM

#### POETRY AND THE CLASSICS <sup>2</sup>

In two small volumes of Poems, published anonymously, one in 1849, the other in 1852, many of the Poems which compose the present volume have already appeared. The rest are now published for the first time.

I have, in the present collection, omitted the poem<sup>3</sup> from which the volume published in 1852 took its title. I have done so, not because the subject of it was a Sicilian Greek born between two and three thousand years ago, although many persons would think this a sufficient reason. Neither have I done so because I had, in my own opinion, failed in the delineation which I intended to effect. I intended to delineate the feelings of one of the last of the Greek religious philosophers, one of the family of Orpheus and Musæus, having survived his fellows, living on into a time when the habits of Greek thought and feeling had begun fast to change, character to dwindle, the influence of the Sophists<sup>4</sup> to prevail. Into the feelings of a man so situated there are entered much that we are accustomed to consider as exclusively modern; how much, the fragments of Empedocles himself which remain to us are sufficient at least to indicate. What those who are familiar only with the great monuments of early Greek genius suppose to be its exclusive characteristics, have disappeared; the calm, the cheerfulness, the disinterested objectivity have disappeared; the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced; modern problems have presented themselves; we hear already the doubts, we witness the discouragement, of Hamlet and of Faust.

The representation of such a man's feelings must be interesting, if consistently drawn. We all naturally take pleasure, says Aristotle,<sup>5</sup> in any imitation or representation whatever: this is the basis of our love of poetry: and we take pleasure in them, he adds, because all knowledge is naturally agreeable to us; not to the philosopher only, but to mankind at large. Every representation therefore which is consistently drawn may be supposed to be interesting, inasmuch as it gratifies this natural interest in knowledge of all kinds. What is *not* interesting, is that which does not add to our knowledge of any kind; that which is vaguely conceived and loosely drawn; a representation which is general, indeterminate, and faint, instead of being particular, precise, and firm.

Any accurate representation may therefore be expected to be interesting; but, if the representation be a poetical one, more than this is demanded. It is demanded, not only that it shall interest, but also that it shall inspire and rejoice the reader: that it shall convey a charm, and infuse delight. For the Muses, as Hesiod<sup>6</sup> says, were born that they might be "a forgetfulness of evils, and a truce from cares": and it is not enough that the poet should add to the knowledge of men, it is required of him also that he should add to their happiness. "All art," says Schiller, "is dedicated to joy, and

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<sup>2</sup> ~Poetry and the Classics~. Published as Preface to *Poems*: 1853 (dated Fox How, Ambleside, October 1, 1853). It was reprinted in *Irish Essays*, 1882.

<sup>3</sup> ~the poem~. *Empedocles on Etna*.

<sup>4</sup> ~the Sophists~. "A name given by the Greeks about the middle of the fifth century B.C. to certain teachers of a superior grade who, distinguishing themselves from philosophers on the one hand and from artists and craftsmen on the other, claimed to prepare their pupils, not for any particular study or profession, but for civic life." *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

<sup>5</sup> *Poetics*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Theognis*, ll. 54-56.



there is no higher and no more serious problem, than how to make men happy. The right art is that alone, which creates the highest enjoyment."

A poetical work, therefore, is not yet justified when it has been shown to be an accurate, and therefore interesting representation; it has to be shown also that it is a representation from which men can derive enjoyment. In presence of the most tragic circumstances, represented in a work of art, the feeling of enjoyment, as is well known, may still subsist: the representation of the most utter calamity, of the liveliest anguish, is not sufficient to destroy it: the more tragic the situation, the deeper becomes the enjoyment; and the situation is more tragic in proportion as it becomes more terrible.

What then are the situations, from the representation of which, though accurate, no poetical enjoyment can be derived? They are those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done. In such situations there is inevitably something morbid, in the description of them something monotonous. When they occur in actual life, they are painful, not tragic; the representation of them in poetry is painful also.

To this class of situations, poetically faulty as it appears to me, that of Empedocles, as I have endeavored to represent him, belongs; and I have therefore excluded the poem from the present collection.

And why, it may be asked, have I entered into this explanation respecting a matter so unimportant as the admission or exclusion of the poem in question? I have done so, because I was anxious to avow that the sole reason for its exclusion was that which has been stated above; and that it has not been excluded in deference to the opinion which many critics of the present day appear to entertain against subjects chosen from distant times and countries: against the choice, in short, of any subjects but modern ones.

"The poet," it is said,<sup>7</sup> and by an intelligent critic, "the poet who would really fix the public attention must leave the exhausted past, and draw his subjects from matters of present import, and *therefore* both of interest and novelty."

Now this view I believe to be completely false. It is worth examining, inasmuch as it is a fair sample of a class of critical dicta everywhere current at the present day, having a philosophical form and air, but no real basis in fact; and which are calculated to vitiate the judgment of readers of poetry, while they exert, so far as they are adopted, a misleading influence on the practice of those who make it.

What are the eternal objects of poetry, among all nations and at all times? They are actions; human actions; possessing an inherent interest in themselves, and which are to be communicated in an interesting manner by the art of the poet. Vainly will the latter imagine that he has everything in his own power; that he can make an intrinsically inferior action equally delightful with a more excellent one by his treatment of it: he may indeed compel us to admire his skill, but his work will possess, within itself, an incurable defect.

The poet, then, has in the first place to select an excellent action; and what actions are the most excellent? Those, certainly, which most powerfully appeal to the great primary human affections: to those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time. These feelings are permanent and the same; that which interests them is permanent and the same also. The modernness or antiquity of an action, therefore, has nothing to do with its fitness for poetical representation; this depends upon its inherent qualities. To the elementary part of our nature, to our passions, that which is great and passionate is eternally interesting; and interesting solely in proportion to its greatness and to its passion. A great human action of a thousand years ago is more interesting to it than a smaller human action of to-day, even though upon the representation of this last

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<sup>7</sup> ~"The poet," it is said~. In the *Spectator* of April 2, 1853. The words quoted were not used with reference to poems of mine. [Arnold.]

the most consummate skill may have been expended, and though it has the advantage of appealing by its modern language, familiar manners, and contemporary allusions, to all our transient feelings and interests. These, however, have no right to demand of a poetical work that it shall satisfy them; their claims are to be directed elsewhere. Poetical works belong to the domain of our permanent passions: let them interest these, and the voice of all subordinate claims upon them is at once silenced.

Achilles, Prometheus, Clytemnestra, Dido<sup>8</sup>—what modern poem presents personages as interesting, even to us moderns, as these personages of an "exhausted past"? We have the domestic epic dealing with the details of modern life, which pass daily under our eyes; we have poems representing modern personages in contact with the problems of modern life, moral, intellectual, and social; these works have been produced by poets the most distinguished of their nation and time; yet I fearlessly assert that *Hermann and Dorothea*, *Childe Harold*, *Jocelyn*, the *Excursion*,<sup>9</sup> leave the reader cold in comparison with the effect produced upon him by the latter books of the *Iliad*, by the *Oresteia*, or by the episode of Dido. And why is this? Simply because in the three last-named cases the action is greater, the personages nobler, the situations more intense: and this is the true basis of the interest in a poetical work, and this alone.

It may be urged, however, that past actions may be interesting in themselves, but that they are not to be adopted by the modern poet, because it is impossible for him to have them clearly present to his own mind, and he cannot therefore feel them deeply, nor represent them forcibly. But this is not necessarily the case. The externals of a past action, indeed, he cannot know with the precision of a contemporary; but his business is with its essentials. The outward man of Oedipus<sup>10</sup> or of Macbeth, the houses in which they lived, the ceremonies of their courts, he cannot accurately figure to himself; but neither do they essentially concern him. His business is with their inward man; with their feelings and behavior in certain tragic situations, which engage their passions as men; these have in them nothing local and casual; they are as accessible to the modern poet as to a contemporary.

The date of an action, then, signifies nothing: the action itself, its selection and construction, this is what is all-important. This the Greeks understood far more clearly than we do. The radical difference between their poetical theory and ours consists, as it appears to me, in this: that, with them, the poetical character of the action in itself, and the conduct of it, was the first consideration; with us, attention is fixed mainly on the value of the separate thoughts and images which occur in the treatment of an action. They regarded the whole; we regard the parts. With them, the action predominated over the expression of it; with us, the expression predominates over the action. Not that they failed in expression, or were inattentive to it; on the contrary, they are the highest models of expression, the unapproached masters of the *grand style*:<sup>11</sup> but their expression is so excellent because it is so admirably kept in its right degree of prominence; because it is so simple and so well subordinated; because it draws its force directly from the pregnancy of the matter which it conveys. For what reason was the Greek tragic poet confined to so limited a range of subjects? Because there are so few actions which unite in themselves, in the highest degree, the conditions of excellence; and it was not thought that on any but an excellent subject could an excellent poem be constructed. A few actions, therefore, eminently adapted for tragedy, maintained almost exclusive possession of the Greek tragic stage. Their significance appeared inexhaustible; they were as permanent problems, perpetually offered to the genius of every fresh poet. This too is the reason of what appears to us

<sup>8</sup> ~Dido~. See the *Iliad*, the *Oresteia* (*Agamemnon*, *Choëpharæ*, and *Eumenides*) of Æschylus, and the *Æneid*.

<sup>9</sup> ~Hermann and Dorothea, Childe Harold, Jocelyn, the Excursion~. Long narrative poems by Goethe, Byron, Lamartine, and Wordsworth.

<sup>10</sup> ~Oedipus~. See the *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus Coloneus* of Sophocles.

<sup>11</sup> ~grand style~. Arnold, while admitting that the term ~grand~ style, which he repeatedly uses, is incapable of exact verbal definition, describes it most adequately in the essay *On Translating Homer*: "I think it will be found that the grand style arises in poetry when a noble nature, poetically gifted, treats with simplicity or with severity a serious subject." See *On the Study of Celtic Literature and on Translating Homer*, ed. 1895, pp. 264-69.

moderns a certain baldness of expression in Greek tragedy; of the triviality with which we often reproach the remarks of the chorus, where it takes part in the dialogue: that the action itself, the situation of Orestes, or Merope, or Alcmæon,<sup>12</sup> was to stand the central point of interest, unforgotten, absorbing, principal; that no accessories were for a moment to distract the spectator's attention from this, that the tone of the parts was to be perpetually kept down, in order not to impair the grandiose effect of the whole. The terrible old mythic story on which the drama was founded stood, before he entered the theatre, traced in its bare outlines upon the spectator's mind; it stood in his memory, as a group of statuary, faintly seen, at the end of a long and dark vista: then came the poet, embodying outlines, developing situations, not a word wasted, not a sentiment capriciously thrown in: stroke upon stroke, the drama proceeded: the light deepened upon the group; more and more it revealed itself to the riveted gaze of the spectator: until at last, when the final words were spoken, it stood before him in broad sunlight, a model of immortal beauty. This was what a Greek critic demanded; this was what a Greek poet endeavored to effect. It signified nothing to what time an action belonged. We do not find that the *Persæ* occupied a particularly high rank among the dramas of Æschylus because it represented a matter of contemporary interest: this was not what a cultivated Athenian required. He required that the permanent elements of his nature should be moved; and dramas of which the action, though taken from a long-distant mythic time, yet was calculated to accomplish this in a higher degree than that of the *Persæ*, stood higher in his estimation accordingly. The Greeks felt, no doubt, with their exquisite sagacity of taste, that an action of present times was too near them, too much mixed up with what was accidental and passing, to form a sufficiently grand, detached, and self-subsistent object for a tragic poem. Such objects belonged to the domain of the comic poet, and of the lighter kinds of poetry. For the more serious kinds, for *pragmatic* poetry, to use an excellent expression of Polybius,<sup>13</sup> they were more difficult and severe in the range of subjects which they permitted. Their theory and practice alike, the admirable treatise of Aristotle, and the unrivalled works of their poets, exclaim with a thousand tongues—"All depends upon the subject; choose a fitting action, penetrate yourself with the feeling of its situations; this done, everything else will follow."

But for all kinds of poetry alike there was one point on which they were rigidly exacting; the adaptability of the subject to the kind of poetry selected, and the careful construction of the poem.

How different a way of thinking from this is ours! We can hardly at the present day understand what Menander<sup>14</sup> meant, when he told a man who enquired as to the progress of his comedy that he had finished it, not having yet written a single line, because he had constructed the action of it in his mind. A modern critic would have assured him that the merit of his piece depended on the brilliant things which arose under his pen as he went along. We have poems which seem to exist merely for the sake of single lines and passages; not for the sake of producing any total-impression. We have critics who seem to direct their attention merely to detached expressions, to the language about the action, not to the action itself. I verily think that the majority of them do not in their hearts believe that there is such a thing as a total-impression to be derived from a poem at all, or to be demanded from a poet; they think the term a commonplace of metaphysical criticism. They will permit the poet to select any action he pleases, and to suffer that action to go as it will, provided he gratifies them with occasional bursts of fine writing, and with a shower of isolated thoughts and images. That is, they permit him to leave their poetical sense ungratified, provided that he gratifies their rhetorical sense and their curiosity. Of his neglecting to gratify these, there is little danger; he needs rather to be warned against the danger of attempting to gratify these alone; he needs rather to be perpetually reminded to prefer his action to everything else; so to treat this, as to permit its

<sup>12</sup> ~Orestes, or Merope, or Alcmæon~. The story of ~Orestes~ was dramatized by Æschylus, by Sophocles, and by Euripides. Merope was the subject of a lost tragedy by Euripides and of several modern plays, including one by Matthew Arnold himself. The story of ~Alcmæon~ was the subject of several tragedies which have not been preserved.

<sup>13</sup> ~Polybius~. A Greek historian (c. 204-122 B.C.)

<sup>14</sup> . ~Menander~. See *Contribution of the Celts, Selections*, Note 3, p. 177.[Transcriber's note: this is Footnote 255 in this e-text.]

inherent excellences to develop themselves, without interruption from the intrusion of his personal peculiarities: most fortunate when he most entirely succeeds in effacing himself, and in enabling a noble action to subsist as it did in nature.

But the modern critic not only permits a false practice: he absolutely prescribes false aims. "A true allegory of the state of one's own mind in a representative history," the poet is told, "is perhaps the highest thing that one can attempt in the way of poetry." And accordingly he attempts it. An allegory of the state of one's own mind, the highest problem of an art which imitates actions! No assuredly, it is not, it never can be so: no great poetical work has ever been produced with such an aim. *Faust* itself, in which something of the kind is attempted, wonderful passages as it contains, and in spite of the unsurpassed beauty of the scenes which relate to Margaret, *Faust* itself, judged as a whole, and judged strictly as a poetical work, is defective: its illustrious author, the greatest poet of modern times, the greatest critic of all times, would have been the first to acknowledge it; he only defended his work, indeed, by asserting it to be "something incommensurable."

The confusion of the present times is great, the multitude of voices counselling different things bewildering, the number of existing works capable of attracting a young writer's attention and of becoming his models, immense: what he wants is a hand to guide him through the confusion, a voice to prescribe to him the aim which he should keep in view, and to explain to him that the value of the literary works which offer themselves to his attention is relative to their power of helping him forward on his road towards this aim. Such a guide the English writer at the present day will nowhere find. Failing this, all that can be looked for, all indeed that can be desired, is, that his attention should be fixed on excellent models; that he may reproduce, at any rate, something of their excellence, by penetrating himself with their works and by catching their spirit, if he cannot be taught to produce what is excellent independently.

Foremost among these models for the English writer stands Shakespeare: a name the greatest perhaps of all poetical names; a name never to be mentioned without reverence. I will venture, however, to express a doubt whether the influence of his works, excellent and fruitful for the readers of poetry, for the great majority, has been an unmixed advantage to the writers of it. Shakespeare indeed chose excellent subjects—the world could afford no better than *Macbeth*, or *Romeo and Juliet*, or *Othello*: he had no theory respecting the necessity of choosing subjects of present import, or the paramount interest attaching to allegories of the state of one's own mind; like all great poets, he knew well what constituted a poetical action; like them, wherever he found such an action, he took it; like them, too, he found his best in past times. But to these general characteristics of all great poets he added a special one of his own; a gift, namely, of happy, abundant, and ingenious expression, eminent and unrivalled: so eminent as irresistibly to strike the attention first in him and even to throw into comparative shade his other excellences as a poet. Here has been the mischief. These other excellences were his fundamental excellences, *as a poet*; what distinguishes the artist from the mere amateur, says Goethe, is *Architectonicè* in the highest sense; that power of execution which creates, forms, and constitutes: not the profoundness of single thoughts, not the richness of imagery, not the abundance of illustration. But these attractive accessories of a poetical work being more easily seized than the spirit of the whole, and these accessories being possessed by Shakespeare in an unequalled degree, a young writer having recourse to Shakespeare as his model runs great risk of being vanquished and absorbed by them, and, in consequence, of reproducing, according to the measure of his power, these, and these alone. Of this prepondering quality of Shakespeare's genius, accordingly, almost the whole of modern English poetry has, it appears to me, felt the influence. To the exclusive attention on the part of his imitators to this, it is in a great degree owing that of the majority of modern poetical works the details alone are valuable, the composition worthless. In

reading them one is perpetually reminded of that terrible sentence on a modern French poet,—*il dit tout ce qu'il veut, mais malheureusement il n'a rien à dire*.<sup>15</sup>

Let me give an instance of what I mean. I will take it from the works of the very chief among those who seem to have been formed in the school of Shakespeare; of one whose exquisite genius and pathetic death render him forever interesting. I will take the poem of *Isabella, or the Pot of Basil*, by Keats. I choose this rather than the *Endymion*, because the latter work (which a modern critic has classed with the Faery Queen!), although undoubtedly there blows through it the breath of genius, is yet as a whole so utterly incoherent, as not strictly to merit the name of a poem at all. The poem of *Isabella*, then, is a perfect treasure-house of graceful and felicitous words and images: almost in every stanza there occurs one of those vivid and picturesque turns of expression, by which the object is made to flash upon the eye of the mind, and which thrill the reader with a sudden delight. This one short poem contains, perhaps, a greater number of happy single expressions which one could quote than all the extant tragedies of Sophocles. But the action, the story? The action in itself is an excellent one; but so feebly is it conceived by the poet, so loosely constructed, that the effect produced by it, in and for itself, is absolutely null. Let the reader, after he has finished the poem of Keats, turn to the same story in the *Decameron*:<sup>16</sup> he will then feel how pregnant and interesting the same action has become in the hands of a great artist, who above all things delineates his object; who subordinates expression to that which it is designed to express.

I have said that the imitators of Shakespeare, fixing their attention on his wonderful gift of expression, have directed their imitation to this, neglecting his other excellences. These excellences, the fundamental excellences of poetical art, Shakespeare no doubt possessed them— possessed many of them in a splendid degree; but it may perhaps be doubted whether even he himself did not sometimes give scope to his faculty of expression to the prejudice of a higher poetical duty. For we must never forget that Shakespeare is the great poet he is from his skill in discerning and firmly conceiving an excellent action, from his power of intensely feeling a situation, of intimately associating himself with a character; not from his gift of expression, which rather even leads him astray, degenerating sometimes into a fondness for curiosity of expression, into an irritability of fancy, which seems to make it impossible for him to say a thing plainly, even when the press of the action demands the very directest language, or its level character the very simplest. Mr. Hallam,<sup>17</sup> than whom it is impossible to find a saner and more judicious critic, has had the courage (for at the present day it needs courage) to remark, how extremely and faultily difficult Shakespeare's language often is. It is so: you may find main scenes in some of his greatest tragedies, *King Lear*, for instance, where the language is so artificial, so curiously tortured, and so difficult, that every speech has to be read two or three times before its meaning can be comprehended. This over-curiousness of expression is indeed but the excessive employment of a wonderful gift—of the power of saying a thing in a happier way than any other man; nevertheless, it is carried so far that one understands what M. Guizot<sup>18</sup> meant when he said that Shakespeare appears in his language to have tried all styles except that of simplicity. He has not the severe and scrupulous self-restraint of the ancients, partly, no doubt, because he had a far less cultivated and exacting audience. He has indeed a far wider range than they had, a far richer fertility of thought; in this respect he rises above them. In his strong conception of his subject, in the genuine way in which he is penetrated with it, he resembles them, and is unlike the moderns. But in the accurate limitation of it, the conscientious rejection of superfluities, the simple and rigorous development of it from the first line of his work to the last, he falls below them, and comes nearer to the moderns. In his chief works, besides what he has of his own, he has the elementary soundness

<sup>15</sup> ~rien à dire~. He says all that he wishes to, but unfortunately he has nothing to say.

<sup>16</sup> Boccaccio's *Decameron*, 4th day, 5th novel.

<sup>17</sup> ~Henry Hallam~ (1777-1859). English historian. See his *Introduction to the Literature of Europe in the Fifteenth, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, chap. 23, §§ 51, 52.

<sup>18</sup> ~François Pierre Guillaume Guizot~ (1787-1874), historian, orator, and statesman of France.

of the ancients; he has their important action and their large and broad manner; but he has not their purity of method. He is therefore a less safe model; for what he has of his own is personal, and inseparable from his own rich nature; it may be imitated and exaggerated, it cannot be learned or applied as an art. He is above all suggestive; more valuable, therefore, to young writers as men than as artists. But clearness of arrangement, rigor of development, simplicity of style—these may to a certain extent be learned: and these may, I am convinced, be learned best from the ancients, who, although infinitely less suggestive than Shakespeare, are thus, to the artist, more instructive.

What then, it will be asked, are the ancients to be our sole models? the ancients with their comparatively narrow range of experience, and their widely different circumstances? Not, certainly, that which is narrow in the ancients, nor that in which we can no longer sympathize. An action like the action of the *Antigone* of Sophocles, which turns upon the conflict between the heroine's duty to her brother's corpse and that to the laws of her country, is no longer one in which it is possible that we should feel a deep interest. I am speaking too, it will be remembered, not of the best sources of intellectual stimulus for the general reader, but of the best models of instruction for the individual writer. This last may certainly learn of the ancients, better than anywhere else, three things which it is vitally important for him to know:—the all-importance of the choice of a subject; the necessity of accurate construction; and the subordinate character of expression. He will learn from them how unspeakably superior is the effect of the one moral impression left by a great action treated as a whole, to the effect produced by the most striking single thought or by the happiest image. As he penetrates into the spirit of the great classical works, as he becomes gradually aware of their intense significance, their noble simplicity, and their calm pathos, he will be convinced that it is this effect, unity and profoundness of moral impression, at which the ancient poets aimed; that it is this which constitutes the grandeur of their works, and which makes them immortal. He will desire to direct his own efforts towards producing the same effect. Above all, he will deliver himself from the jargon of modern criticism, and escape the danger of producing poetical works conceived in the spirit of the passing time, and which partake of its transitoriness.

The present age makes great claims upon us: we owe it service, it will not be satisfied without our admiration. I know not how it is, but their commerce with the ancients appears to me to produce, in those who constantly practise it, a steadying and composing effect upon their judgment, not of literary works only, but of men and events in general. They are like persons who have had a very weighty and impressive experience; they are more truly than others under the empire of facts, and more independent of the language current among those with whom they live. They wish neither to applaud nor to revile their age: they wish to know what it is, what it can give them, and whether this is what they want. What they want, they know very well; they want to educe and cultivate what is best and noblest in themselves: they know, too, that this is no easy task—[Greek: Chalepon] as Pittacus<sup>19</sup> said,[Greek: Chalepon esthlon emenai]—and they ask themselves sincerely whether their age and its literature can assist them in the attempt. If they are endeavoring to practise any art, they remember the plain and simple proceedings of the old artists, who attained their grand results by penetrating themselves with some noble and significant action, not by inflating themselves with a belief in the preëminent importance and greatness of their own times. They do not talk of their mission, nor of interpreting their age, nor of the coming poet; all this, they know, is the mere delirium of vanity; their business is not to praise their age, but to afford to the men who live in it the highest pleasure which they are capable of feeling. If asked to afford this by means of subjects drawn from the age itself, they ask what special fitness the present age has for supplying them. They are told that it is an era of progress, an age commissioned to carry out the great ideas of industrial development and social amelioration. They reply that with all this they can do nothing; that the elements they need

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<sup>19</sup> ~Pittacus~, of Mytilene in Lesbos (c. 650-569 B.C.), was one of the Seven Sages of Greece. His favorite sayings were: "It is hard to be excellent" ([Greek: chalepon esthlon emenai]), and "Know when to act."

for the exercise of their art are great actions, calculated powerfully and delightfully to affect what is permanent in the human soul; that so far as the present age can supply such actions, they will gladly make use of them; but that an age wanting in moral grandeur can with difficulty supply such, and an age of spiritual discomfort with difficulty be powerfully and delightfully affected by them.

A host of voices will indignantly rejoin that the present age is inferior to the past neither in moral grandeur nor in spiritual health. He who possesses the discipline I speak of will content himself with remembering the judgments passed upon the present age, in this respect, by the men of strongest head and widest culture whom it has produced; by Goethe and by Niebuhr.<sup>20</sup> It will be sufficient for him that he knows the opinions held by these two great men respecting the present age and its literature; and that he feels assured in his own mind that their aims and demands upon life were such as he would wish, at any rate, his own to be; and their judgment as to what is impeding and disabling such as he may safely follow. He will not, however, maintain a hostile attitude towards the false pretensions of his age; he will content himself with not being overwhelmed by them. He will esteem himself fortunate if he can succeed in banishing from his mind all feelings of contradiction, and irritation, and impatience; in order to delight himself with the contemplation of some noble action of a heroic time, and to enable others, through his representation of it, to delight in it also.

I am far indeed from making any claim, for myself, that I possess this discipline; or for the following poems, that they breathe its spirit. But I say, that in the sincere endeavor to learn and practise, amid the bewildering confusion of our times, what is sound and true in poetical art, I seemed to myself to find the only sure guidance, the only solid footing, among the ancients. They, at any rate, knew what they wanted in art, and we do not. It is this uncertainty which is disheartening, and not hostile criticism. How often have I felt this when reading words of disparagement or of cavil: that it is the uncertainty as to what is really to be aimed at which makes our difficulty, not the dissatisfaction of the critic, who himself suffers from the same uncertainty. *Non me tua fervida terrent Dicta; ... Dii me terrent, et Jupiter hostis.*<sup>21</sup> Two kinds of *dilettanti*, says Goethe, there are in poetry: he who neglects the indispensable mechanical part, and thinks he has done enough if he shows spirituality and feeling; and he who seeks to arrive at poetry merely by mechanism, in which he can acquire an artisan's readiness, and is without soul and matter. And he adds, that the first does most harm to art, and the last to himself. If we must be *dilettanti*: if it is impossible for us, under the circumstances amidst which we live, to think clearly, to feel nobly, and to delineate firmly: if we cannot attain to the mastery of the great artists—let us, at least, have so much respect for our art as to prefer it to ourselves. Let us not bewilder our successors: let us transmit to them the practice of poetry, with its boundaries and wholesome regulative laws, under which excellent works may again, perhaps, at some future time, be produced, not yet fallen into oblivion through our neglect, not yet condemned and cancelled by the influence of their eternal enemy, caprice.

## THE FUNCTION OF CRITICISM AT THE PRESENT TIME <sup>22</sup>

Many objections have been made to a proposition which, in some remarks of mine<sup>23</sup> on translating Homer, I ventured to put forth; a proposition about criticism, and its importance at the present day. I said: "Of the literature of France and Germany, as of the intellect of Europe in general, the main effort, for now many years, has been a critical effort; the endeavor, in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is." I added, that owing to the operation in English literature of certain causes, "almost the last thing for

<sup>20</sup> ~Barthold Georg Niebuhr~ (1776-1831) was a German statesman and historian. His *Roman History* (1827-32) is an epoch-making work. For his opinion of his age see his *Life and Letters*, London, 1852, II, 396.

<sup>21</sup> *Aeneid*, XII, 894-95.

<sup>22</sup> Reprinted from *The National Review*, November, 1864, in the *Essays in Criticism*, Macmillan & Co., 1865.

<sup>23</sup> In *On Translating Homer*, ed. 1903, pp. 216-17.



which one would come to English literature is just that very thing which now Europe most desires, —criticism"; and that the power and value of English literature was thereby impaired. More than one rejoinder declared that the importance I here assigned to criticism was excessive, and asserted the inherent superiority of the creative effort of the human spirit over its critical effort. And the other day, having been led by a Mr. Shairp's<sup>24</sup> excellent notice of Wordsworth<sup>25</sup> to turn again to his biography, I found, in the words of this great man, whom I, for one, must always listen to with the profoundest respect, a sentence passed on the critic's business, which seems to justify every possible disparagement of it. Wordsworth says in one of his letters<sup>26</sup>:—

"The writers in these publications" (the Reviews), "while they prosecute their inglorious employment, cannot be supposed to be in a state of mind very favorable for being affected by the finer influences of a thing so pure as genuine poetry."

And a trustworthy reporter of his conversation quotes a more elaborate judgment to the same effect:—

"Wordsworth holds the critical power very low, infinitely lower than the inventive; and he said to-day 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; it would make a man find out sooner his own level, and it would do infinitely less mischief. A false or malicious criticism may do much injury to the minds of others, a stupid invention, either in prose or verse, is quite harmless."

It is almost too much to expect of poor human nature, that a man capable of producing some effect in one line of literature, should, for the greater good of society, voluntarily doom himself to impotence and obscurity in another. Still less is this to be expected from men addicted to the composition of the "false or malicious criticism" of which Wordsworth speaks. However, everybody would admit that a false or malicious criticism had better never have been written. Everybody, too, would be willing to admit, as a general proposition, that the critical faculty is lower than the inventive. But is it true that criticism is really, in itself, a baneful and injurious employment; is it true that all time given to writing critiques on the works of others would be much better employed if it were given to original composition, of whatever kind this may be? Is it true that Johnson had better have gone on producing more *Irenes*<sup>27</sup> instead of writing his *Lives of the Poets*; nay, is it certain that Wordsworth himself was better employed in making his Ecclesiastical Sonnets than when he made his celebrated Preface<sup>28</sup> so full of criticism, and criticism of the works of others? Wordsworth was himself a great critic, and it is to be sincerely regretted that he has not left us more criticism; Goethe was one of the greatest of critics, and we may sincerely congratulate ourselves that he has left us so much criticism. Without wasting time over the exaggeration which Wordsworth's judgment on criticism clearly contains, or over an attempt to trace the causes,—not difficult, I think, to be traced,—which may have led Wordsworth to this exaggeration, a critic may with advantage seize an occasion for trying his own conscience, and for asking himself of what real service at any given moment the practice of criticism either is or may be made to his own mind and spirit, and to the minds and spirits of others.

<sup>24</sup> An essay called *Wordsworth: The Man and the Poet*, published in *The North British Review* for August, 1864, vol. 41. ~John Campbell Shairp~ (1819-85), Scottish critic and man of letters, was professor of poetry at Oxford from 1877 to 1884. The best of his lectures from this chair were published in 1881 as *Aspects of Poetry*.

<sup>25</sup> I cannot help thinking that a practice, common in England during the last century, and still followed in France, of printing a notice of this kind,—a notice by a competent critic,—to serve as an introduction to an eminent author's works, might be revived among us with advantage. To introduce all succeeding editions of Wordsworth, Mr. Shairp's notice might, it seems to me, excellently serve; it is written from the point of view of an admirer, nay, of a disciple, and that is right; but then the disciple must be also, as in this case he is, a critic, a man of letters, not, as too often happens, some relation or friend with no qualification for his task except affection for his author.[Arnold.]

<sup>26</sup> See *Memoirs of William Wordsworth*, ed. 1851, II, 151, letter to Bernard Barton.

<sup>27</sup> ~Irene~. An unsuccessful play of Dr. Johnson's.

<sup>28</sup> ~Preface~. Prefixed to the second edition (1800) of the *Lyrical Ballads*.

The critical power is of lower rank than the creative. True; but in assenting to this proposition, one or two things are to be kept in mind. It is undeniable that the exercise of a creative power, that a free creative activity, is the highest function of man; it is proved to be so by man's finding in it his true happiness. But it is undeniable, also, that men may have the sense of exercising this free creative activity in other ways than in producing great works of literature or art; if it were not so, all but a very few men would be shut out from the true happiness of all men. They may have it in well-doing, they may have it in learning, they may have it even in criticizing. This is one thing to be kept in mind. Another is, that the exercise of the creative power in the production of great works of literature or art, however high this exercise of it may rank, is not at all epochs and under all conditions possible; and that therefore labor may be vainly spent in attempting it, which might with more fruit be used in preparing for it, in rendering it possible. This creative power works with elements, with materials; what if it has not those materials, those elements, ready for its use? In that case it must surely wait till they are ready. Now, in literature,— I will limit myself to literature, for it is about literature that the question arises,—the elements with which the creative power works are ideas; the best ideas on every matter which literature touches, current at the time. At any rate we may lay it down as certain that in modern literature no manifestation of the creative power not working with these can be very important or fruitful. And I say *current* at the time, not merely accessible at the time; for creative literary genius does not principally show itself in discovering new ideas: that is rather the business of the philosopher. 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 with them, in short. But it must have the atmosphere, it must find itself amidst the order of ideas, in order to work freely; and these it is not so easy to command. This is why great creative epochs in literature are so rare, this is why there is so much that is unsatisfactory in the productions of many men of real genius; because, for the creation of a master-work of literature two powers must concur, the power of the man and the power of the moment, and the man is not enough without the moment; the creative power has, for its happy exercise, appointed elements, and those elements are not in its own control.

Nay, they are more within the control of the critical power. It is the business of the critical power, as I said in the words already quoted, "in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is." Thus it tends, at last, to make an intellectual situation of which the creative power can profitably avail itself. It tends to establish an order of ideas, if not absolutely true, yet true by comparison with that which it displaces; to make the best ideas prevail. Presently these new ideas reach society, the touch of truth is the touch of life, and there is a stir and growth everywhere; out of this stir and growth come the creative epochs of literature.

Or, to narrow our range, and quit these considerations of the general march of genius and of society,—considerations which are apt to become too abstract and impalpable,—every one can see that a poet, for instance, ought to know life and the world before dealing with them in poetry; and life and the world being in modern times very complex things, the creation of a modern poet, to be worth much, implies a great critical effort behind it; else it must be a comparatively poor, barren, and short-lived affair. This is why Byron's poetry had so little endurance in it, and Goethe's so much; both Byron and Goethe had a great productive power, but Goethe's was nourished by a great critical effort providing the true materials for it, and Byron's was not; Goethe knew life and the world, the poet's necessary subjects, much more comprehensively and thoroughly than Byron. He knew a great deal more of them, and he knew them much more as they really are.

It has long seemed to me that the burst of creative activity in our literature, through the first quarter of this century, had about it in fact something premature; and that from this cause its

productions are doomed, most of them, in spite of the sanguine hopes which accompanied and do still accompany them, to prove hardly more lasting than the productions of far less splendid epochs. And this prematureness comes from its having proceeded without having its proper data, without sufficient materials to work with. In other words, the English poetry of the first quarter of this century, with plenty of energy, plenty of creative force, did not know enough. This makes Byron so empty of matter, Shelley so incoherent, Wordsworth even, profound as he is, yet so wanting in completeness and variety. Wordsworth cared little for books, and disparaged Goethe. I admire Wordsworth, as he is, so much that I cannot wish him different; and it is vain, no doubt, to imagine such a man different from what he is, to suppose that he *could* have been different. But surely the one thing wanting to make Wordsworth an even greater poet than he is,—his thought richer, and his influence of wider application,—was that he should have read more books, among them, no doubt, those of that Goethe whom he disparaged without reading him.

But to speak of books and reading may easily lead to a misunderstanding here. It was not really books and reading that lacked to our poetry at this epoch: Shelley had plenty of reading, Coleridge had immense reading. Pindar and Sophocles—as we all say so glibly, and often with so little discernment of the real import of what we are saying—had not many books; Shakespeare was no deep reader. True; 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. And this state of things is the true basis for the creative power's exercise, in this it finds its data, its materials, truly ready for its hand; all the books and reading in the world are only valuable as they are helps to this. Even when this does not actually exist, books and reading may enable a man to construct a kind of semblance of it in his own mind, a world of knowledge and intelligence in which he may live and work. This is by no means an equivalent to the artist for the nationally diffused life and thought of the epochs of Sophocles or Shakespeare; but, besides that it may be a means of preparation for such epochs, it does really constitute, if many share in it, a quickening and sustaining atmosphere of great value. Such an atmosphere the many-sided learning and the long and widely combined critical effort of Germany formed for Goethe, when he lived and worked. There was no national glow of life and thought there as in the Athens of Pericles or the England of Elizabeth. That was the poet's weakness. But there was a sort of equivalent for it in the complete culture and unfettered thinking of a large body of Germans. That was his strength. In the England of the first quarter of this century there was neither a national glow of life and thought, such as we had in the age of Elizabeth, nor yet a culture and a force of learning and criticism such as were to be found in Germany. Therefore the creative power of poetry wanted, for success in the highest sense, materials and a basis; a thorough interpretation of the world was necessarily denied to it.

At first sight it seems strange that out of the immense stir of the French Revolution and its age should not have come a crop of works of genius equal to that which came out of the stir of the great productive time of Greece, or out of that of the Renaissance, with its powerful episode the Reformation. But the truth is that the stir of the French Revolution took a character which essentially distinguished it from such movements as these. These were, in the main, disinterestedly intellectual and spiritual movements; movements in which the human spirit looked for its satisfaction in itself and in the increased play of its own activity. The French Revolution took a political, practical character. The movement, which went on in France under the old régime, from 1700 to 1789, was far more really akin than that of the Revolution itself to the movement of the Renaissance; the France of Voltaire and Rousseau told far more powerfully upon the mind of Europe than the France of the Revolution. Goethe reproached this last expressly with having "thrown quiet culture back." Nay, and the true key to how much in our Byron, even in our Wordsworth, is this!—that they had their source in a great movement of feeling, not in a great movement of mind. The French Revolution, however,—that object of so much blind love and so much blind hatred,—found undoubtedly its motive-power

in the intelligence of men, and not in their practical sense; this is what distinguishes it from the English Revolution of Charles the First's time. This is what makes it a more spiritual event than our Revolution, an event of much more powerful and world-wide interest, though practically less successful; it appeals to an order of ideas which are universal, certain, permanent. 1789 asked of a thing, Is it rational? 1642 asked of a thing, Is it legal? or, when it went furthest, Is it according to conscience? This is the English fashion, a fashion to be treated, within its own sphere, with the highest respect; for its success, within its own sphere, has been prodigious. But what is law in one place is not law in another; what is law here to-day is not law even here to-morrow; and as for conscience, what is binding on one man's conscience is not binding on another's. The old woman<sup>29</sup> who threw her stool at the head of the surpliced minister in St. Giles's Church at Edinburgh obeyed an impulse to which millions of the human race may be permitted to remain strangers. But the prescriptions of reason are absolute, unchanging, of universal validity; *to count by tens is the easiest way of counting*—that is a proposition of which every one, from here to the Antipodes, feels the force; at least I should say so if we did not live in a country where it is not impossible that any morning we may find a letter in the *Times* declaring that a decimal coinage is an absurdity. That a whole nation should have been penetrated with an enthusiasm for pure reason, and with an ardent zeal for making its prescriptions triumph, is a very remarkable thing, when we consider how little of mind, or anything so worthy and quickening as mind, comes into the motives which alone, in general, impel great masses of men. In spite of the extravagant direction given to this enthusiasm, in spite of the crimes and follies in which it lost itself, the French Revolution derives from the force, truth, and universality of the ideas which it took for its law, and from the passion with which it could inspire a multitude for these ideas, a unique and still living power; it is,—it will probably long remain,—the greatest, the most animating event in history. And as no sincere passion for the things of the mind, even though it turn out in many respects an unfortunate passion, is ever quite thrown away and quite barren of good, France has reaped from hers one fruit—the natural and legitimate fruit though not precisely the grand fruit she expected: she is the country in Europe where *the people* is most alive.

But the mania for giving an immediate political and practical application to all these fine ideas of the reason was fatal. Here an Englishman is in his element: on this theme we can all go on for hours. And all we are in the habit of saying on it has undoubtedly a great deal of truth. Ideas cannot be too much prized in and for themselves, cannot be too much lived with; but to transport them abruptly into the world of politics and practice, violently to revolutionize this world to their bidding,—that is quite another thing. There is the world of ideas and there is the world of practice; the French are often for suppressing the one and the English the other; but neither is to be suppressed. A member of the House of Commons said to me the other day: "That a thing is an anomaly, I consider to be no objection to it whatever." I venture to think he was wrong; that a thing is an anomaly *is* an objection to it, but absolutely and in the sphere of ideas: it is not necessarily, under such and such circumstances, or at such and such a moment, an objection to it in the sphere of politics and practice. Joubert has said beautifully: "C'est la force et le droit qui règlent toutes choses dans le monde; la force en attendant le droit."<sup>30</sup> (Force and right are the governors of this world; force till right is ready.) *Force till right is ready*; and till right is ready, force, the existing order of things, is justified, is the legitimate ruler. But right is something moral, and implies inward recognition, free assent of the will; we are not ready for right,—*right*, so far as we are concerned, *is not ready*,—until we have attained this sense of seeing it and willing it. The way in which for us it may change and transform force, the existing order of things, and become, in its turn, the legitimate ruler of the world, should depend on the way in which, when our time comes, we see it and will it. Therefore for other people enamored of their own newly

<sup>29</sup> ~The old woman~. At the first attempt to read the newly prescribed liturgy in St. Giles's Church, Edinburgh, on July 23, 1637, a riot took place, in which the "fauld-stools," or folding stools, of the congregation were hurled as missiles. An untrustworthy tradition attributes the flinging of the first stool to a certain Jenny or Janet Geddes.

<sup>30</sup> *Pensées de J. Joubert*, ed. 1850, I, 355, titre 15, 2.

discerned right, to attempt to impose it upon us as ours, and violently to substitute their right for our force, is an act of tyranny, and to be resisted. It sets at naught the second great half of our maxim, *force till right is ready*. This was the grand error of the French Revolution; and its movement of ideas, by quitting the intellectual sphere and rushing furiously into the political sphere, ran, indeed, a prodigious and memorable course, but produced no such intellectual fruit as the movement of ideas of the Renaissance, and created, in opposition to itself, what I may call an *epoch of concentration*. The great force of that epoch of concentration was England; and the great voice of that epoch of concentration was Burke. It is the fashion to treat Burke's writings on the French Revolution<sup>31</sup> as superannuated and conquered by the event; as the eloquent but unphilosophical tirades of bigotry and prejudice. I will not deny that they are often disfigured by the violence and passion of the moment, and that in some directions Burke's view was bounded, and his observation therefore at fault. But on the whole, and for those who can make the needful corrections, what distinguishes these writings is their profound, permanent, fruitful, philosophical truth. They contain the true philosophy of an epoch of concentration, dissipate the heavy atmosphere which its own nature is apt to engender round it, and make its resistance rational instead of mechanical.

But Burke is so great because, almost alone in England, he brings thought to bear upon politics, he saturates politics with thought. It is his accident that his ideas were at the service of an epoch of concentration, not of an epoch of expansion; it is his characteristic that he so lived by ideas, and had such a source of them welling up within him, that he could float even an epoch of concentration and English Tory politics with them. It does not hurt him that Dr. Price<sup>32</sup> and the Liberals were enraged with him; it does not even hurt him that George the Third and the Tories were enchanted with him. His greatness is that he lived in a world which neither English Liberalism nor English Toryism is apt to enter;—the world of ideas, not the world of catchwords and party habits. So far is it from being really true of him that he "to party gave up what was meant for mankind,"<sup>33</sup> that at the very end of his fierce struggle with the French Revolution, after all his invectives against its false pretensions, hollowness, and madness, with his sincere convictions of its mischievousness, he can close a memorandum on the best means of combating it, some of the last pages he ever wrote,—the *Thoughts on French Affairs*, in December 1791,—with these striking words:—

"The evil is stated, in my opinion, as it exists. The remedy must be where power, wisdom, and information, I hope, are more united with good intentions than they can be with me. I have done with this subject, I believe, forever. It has given me many anxious moments for the last two years. *If a great change is to be made in human affairs, the minds of men will be fitted to it; the general opinions and feelings will draw that way. Every fear, every hope will forward it: and then they who persist in opposing this mighty current in human affairs, will appear rather to resist the decrees of Providence itself, than the mere designs of men. They will not be resolute and firm, but perverse and obstinate.*"

That return of Burke upon himself has always seemed to me one of the finest things in English literature, or indeed in any literature. That is what I call living by ideas: when one side of a question has long had your earnest support, when all your feelings are engaged, when you hear all round you no language but one, when your party talks this language like a steam-engine and can imagine no other,—still to be able to think, still to be irresistibly carried, if so it be, by the current of thought to the opposite side of the question, and, like Balaam,<sup>34</sup> to be unable to speak anything *but what the Lord has put in your mouth*. I know nothing more striking, and I must add that I know nothing more un-English.

For the Englishman in general is like my friend the Member of Parliament, and believes, point-blank, that for a thing to be an anomaly is absolutely no objection to it whatever. He is like

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<sup>31</sup> ~French Revolution~. The latter part of Burke's life was largely devoted to a conflict with the upholders of the French Revolution. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790, and *Letters on a Regicidal Peace*, 1796, are his most famous writings in this cause.

<sup>32</sup> ~Richard Price, D.D.~ (1723-91), was strongly opposed to the war with America and in sympathy with the French revolutionists.

<sup>33</sup> From Goldsmith's epitaph on Burke in the *Retaliator*.

<sup>34</sup> ~Num. XXII~, 35.

the Lord Auckland<sup>35</sup> of Burke's day, who, in a memorandum on the French Revolution, talks of "certain miscreants, assuming the name of philosophers, who have presumed themselves capable of establishing a new system of society." The Englishman has been called a political animal, and he values what is political and practical so much that ideas easily become objects of dislike in his eyes, and thinkers "miscreants," because ideas and thinkers have rashly meddled with politics and practice. This would be all very well if the dislike and neglect confined themselves to ideas transported out of their own sphere, and meddling rashly with practice; but they are inevitably extended to ideas as such, and to the whole life of intelligence; practice is everything, a free play of the mind is nothing. The notion of the free play of the mind upon all subjects being a pleasure in itself, being an object of desire, being an essential provider of elements without which a nation's spirit, whatever compensations it may have for them, must, in the long run, die of inanition, hardly enters into an Englishman's thoughts. It is noticeable that the word *curiosity*, which in other languages is used in a good sense, to mean, as a high and fine quality of man's nature, just this disinterested love of a free play of the mind on all subjects, for its own sake,—it is noticeable, I say, that this word has in our language no sense of the kind, no sense but a rather bad and disparaging one. But criticism, real criticism, is essentially the exercise of this very quality. It obeys an instinct prompting it to try to know the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics, and everything of the kind; and to value knowledge and thought as they approach this best, without the intrusion of any other considerations whatever. This is an instinct for which there is, I think, little original sympathy in the practical English nature, and what there was of it has undergone a long benumbing period of blight and suppression in the epoch of concentration which followed the French Revolution.

But epochs of concentration cannot well endure forever; epochs of expansion, in the due course of things, follow them. Such an epoch of expansion seems to be opening in this country. In the first place all danger of a hostile forcible pressure of foreign ideas upon our practice has long disappeared; like the traveller in the fable, therefore, we begin to wear our cloak a little more loosely. Then, with a long peace, the ideas of Europe steal gradually and amicably in, and mingle, though in infinitesimally small quantities at a time, with our own notions. Then, too, in spite of all that is said about the absorbing and brutalizing influence of our passionate material progress, it seems to me indisputable that this progress is likely, though not certain, to lead in the end to an apparition of intellectual life; and that man, after he has made himself perfectly comfortable and has now to determine what to do with himself next, may begin to remember that he has a mind, and that the mind may be made the source of great pleasure. I grant it is mainly the privilege of faith, at present, to discern this end to our railways, our business, and our fortune-making; but we shall see if, here as elsewhere, faith is not in the end the true prophet. Our ease, our travelling, and our unbounded liberty to hold just as hard and securely as we please to the practice to which our notions have given birth, all tend to beget an inclination to deal a little more freely with these notions themselves, to canvass them a little, to penetrate a little into their real nature. Flutterings of curiosity, in the foreign sense of the word, appear amongst us, and it is in these that criticism must look to find its account. Criticism first; a time of true creative activity, perhaps,—which, as I have said, must inevitably be preceded amongst us by a time of criticism,—hereafter, when criticism has done its work.

It is of the last importance that English criticism should clearly discern what rule for its course, in order to avail itself of the field now opening to it, and to produce fruit for the future, it ought to take. The rule may be summed up in one word,—*disinterestedness*. And how is criticism to show disinterestedness? 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

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<sup>35</sup> ~William Eden, First Baron Auckland~ (1745-1814), English statesman. Among other services he represented English interests in Holland during the critical years 1790-93.

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. Its business is, as I have said, simply to know the best that is known and thought in the world, and by in its turn making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas. Its business is to do this with inflexible honesty, with due ability; but its business is to do no more, and to leave alone all questions of practical consequences and applications, questions which will never fail to have due prominence given to them. Else criticism, besides being really false to its own nature, merely continues in the old rut which it has hitherto followed in this country, and will certainly miss the chance now given to it. For what is at present the bane of criticism in this country? It is that practical considerations cling to it and stifle it. It subserves interests not its own. Our organs of criticism are organs of men and parties having practical ends to serve, and with them those practical ends are the first thing and the play of mind the second; so much play of mind as is compatible with the prosecution of those practical ends is all that is wanted. An organ like the *Revue des Deux Mondes*,<sup>36</sup> having for its main function to understand and utter the best that is known and thought in the world, existing, it may be said, as just an organ for a free play of the mind, we have not. But we have the *Edinburgh Review*, existing as an organ of the old Whigs, and for as much play of the mind as may suit its being that; we have the *Quarterly Review*, existing as an organ of the Tories, and for as much play of mind as may suit its being that; we have the *British Quarterly Review*, existing as an organ of the political Dissenters, and for as much play of mind as may suit its being that; we have the *Times*, existing as an organ of the common, satisfied, well-to-do Englishman, and for as much play of mind as may suit its being that. And so on through all the various fractions, political and religious, of our society; every fraction has, as such, its organ of criticism, but the notion of combining all fractions in the common pleasure of a free disinterested play of mind meets with no favor. Directly this play of mind wants to have more scope, and to forget the pressure of practical considerations a little, it is checked, it is made to feel the chain. We saw this the other day in the extinction, so much to be regretted, of the *Home and Foreign Review*.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps in no organ of criticism in this country was there so much knowledge, so much play of mind; but these could not save it. The *Dublin Review* subordinates play of mind to the practical business of English and Irish Catholicism, and lives. It must needs be that men should act in sects and parties, that each of these sects and parties should have its organ, and should make this organ subserve the interests of its action; but it would be well, too, that there should be a criticism, not the minister of these interests, not their enemy, but absolutely and entirely independent of them. No other criticism will ever attain any real authority or make any real way towards its end,—the creating a current of true and fresh ideas.

It is because criticism has so little kept in the pure intellectual sphere, has so little detached itself from practice, has been so directly polemical and controversial, that it has so ill accomplished, in this country, its best spiritual work; which is to keep man from a self-satisfaction which is retarding and vulgarizing, to lead him towards perfection, by making his mind dwell upon what is excellent in itself, and the absolute beauty and fitness of things. A polemical practical criticism makes men blind even to the ideal imperfection of their practice, makes them willingly assert its ideal perfection, in order the better to secure it against attack: and clearly this is narrowing and baneful for them. If they were reassured on the practical side, speculative considerations of ideal perfection they might be brought to entertain, and their spiritual horizon would thus gradually widen. Sir Charles Adderley<sup>38</sup> says to the Warwickshire farmers:—

<sup>36</sup> ~Revue des deux Mondes~. The best-known of the French magazines devoted to literature, art, and general criticism, founded in Paris in 1831 by Francois Buloz.

<sup>37</sup> ~Home and Foreign Review~. Published in London 1862-64.

<sup>38</sup> ~Charles Bowyer Adderley, First Baron Norton~ (1814-1905), English politician, inherited valuable estates in Warwickshire. He was a strong churchman and especially interested in education and the colonies.



"Talk of the improvement of breed! Why, the race we ourselves represent, the men and women, the old Anglo-Saxon race, are the best breed in the whole world.... The absence of a too enervating climate, too unclouded skies, and a too luxurious nature, has produced so vigorous a race of people, and has rendered us so superior to all the world."

Mr. Roebuck<sup>39</sup> says to the Sheffield cutlers:—

"I look around me and ask what is the state of England? Is not property safe? Is not every man able to say what he likes? Can you not walk from one end of England to the other in perfect security? I ask you whether, the world over or in past history, there is anything like it? Nothing. I pray that our unrivalled happiness may last."

Now obviously there is a peril for poor human nature in words and thoughts of such exuberant self-satisfaction, until we find ourselves safe in the streets of the Celestial City.

"Das wenige verschwindet leicht dem Blicke  
Der vorwärts sieht, wie viel noch übrig bleibt—"<sup>40</sup>

says Goethe; "the little that is done seems nothing when we look forward and see how much we have yet to do." Clearly this is a better line of reflection for weak humanity, so long as it remains on this earthly field of labor and trial.

But neither Sir Charles Adderley nor Mr. Roebuck is by nature inaccessible to considerations of this sort. They only lose sight of them owing to the controversial life we all lead, and the practical form which all speculation takes with us. They have in view opponents whose aim is not ideal, but practical; and in their zeal to uphold their own practice against these innovators, they go so far as even to attribute to this practice an ideal perfection. Somebody has been wanting to introduce a six-pound franchise, or to abolish church-rates, or to collect agricultural statistics by force, or to diminish local self-government. How natural, in reply to such proposals, very likely improper or ill-timed, to go a little beyond the mark and to say stoutly, "Such a race of people as we stand, so superior to all the world! The old Anglo-Saxon race, the best breed in the whole world! I pray that our unrivalled happiness may last! I ask you whether, the world over or in past history, there is anything like it?" And so long as criticism answers this dithyramb by insisting that the old Anglo-Saxon race would be still more superior to all others if it had no church-rates, or that our unrivalled happiness would last yet longer with a six-pound franchise, so long will the strain, "The best breed in the whole world!" swell louder and louder, everything ideal and refining will be lost out of sight, and both the assailed and their critics will remain in a sphere, to say the truth, perfectly unvital, a sphere in which spiritual progression is impossible. But let criticism leave church-rates and the franchise alone, and in the most candid spirit, without a single lurking thought of practical innovation, confront with our dithyramb this paragraph on which I stumbled in a newspaper immediately after reading Mr. Roebuck:—

"A shocking child murder has just been committed at Nottingham. A girl named Wragg left the workhouse there on Saturday morning with her young illegitimate child. The child was soon afterwards found dead on Mapperly Hills, having been strangled. Wragg is in custody."

Nothing but that; but, in juxtaposition with the absolute eulogies of Sir Charles Adderley and Mr. Roebuck, how eloquent, how suggestive are those few lines! "Our old Anglo-Saxon breed, the best in the whole world!"—how much that is harsh and ill-favored there is in this best! *Wragg!* If we are to talk of ideal perfection, of "the best in the whole world," has any one reflected what a touch of grossness in our race, what an original short-coming in the more delicate spiritual perceptions, is shown by the natural growth amongst us of such hideous names,—Higginbottom, Stiggins, Bugg!

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<sup>39</sup> ~John Arthur Roebuck~ (1801-79), a leading radical and utilitarian reformer, conspicuous for his eloquence, honesty, and strong hostility to the government of his day. He held a seat for Sheffield from 1849 until his death.

<sup>40</sup> From Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, I, ii, 91-92.

In Ionia and Attica they were luckier in this respect than "the best race in the world"; by the Ilissus there was no Wragg, poor thing! And "our unrivalled happiness";—what an element of grimness, bareness, and hideousness mixes with it and blurs it; the workhouse, the dismal Mapperly Hills,—how dismal those who have seen them will remember;—the gloom, the smoke, the cold, the strangled illegitimate child! "I ask you whether, the world over or in past history, there is anything like it?" Perhaps not, one is inclined to answer; but at any rate, in that case, the world is very much to be pitied. And the final touch,—short, bleak and inhuman: *Wragg is in custody*. The sex lost in the confusion of our unrivalled happiness; or (shall I say?) the superfluous Christian name lopped off by the straightforward vigor of our old Anglo-Saxon breed! There is profit for the spirit in such contrasts as this; 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. Mr. Roebuck will have a poor opinion of an adversary who replies to his defiant songs of triumph only by murmuring under his breath, *Wragg is in custody*; but in no other way will these songs of triumph be induced gradually to moderate themselves, to get rid of what in them is excessive and offensive, and to fall into a softer and truer key.

It will be said that it is a very subtle and indirect action which I am thus prescribing for criticism, and that, by embracing in this manner the Indian virtue of detachment<sup>41</sup> and abandoning the sphere of practical life, it condemns itself to a slow and obscure work. Slow and obscure it may be, but it is the only proper work of criticism. The mass of mankind will never have any ardent zeal for seeing things as they are; very inadequate ideas will always satisfy them. On these inadequate ideas repose, and must repose, the general practice of the world. That is as much as saying that whoever sets himself to see things as they are will find himself one of a very small circle; but it is only by this small circle resolutely doing its own work that adequate ideas will ever get current at all. The rush and roar of practical life will always have a dizzying and attracting effect upon the most collected spectator, and tend to draw him into its vortex; most of all will this be the case where that life is so powerful as it is in England. But it is only by remaining collected, and refusing to lend himself to the point of view of the practical man, 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.

For the practical man is not apt for fine distinctions, and yet in these distinctions truth and the highest culture greatly find their account. But it is not easy to lead a practical man,—unless you reassure him as to your practical intentions, you have no chance of leading him,—to see that a thing which he has always been used to look at from one side only, which he greatly values, and which, looked at from that side, quite deserves, perhaps, all the prizing and admiring which he bestows upon it,—that this thing, looked at from another side, may appear much less beneficent and beautiful, and yet retain all its claims to our 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!<sup>42</sup>—a colossal machine for the manufacture of Philistines? How is Cobbett<sup>43</sup> to say this and not be misunderstood,

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<sup>41</sup> ~detachment~. In the Buddhistic religion salvation is found through an emancipation from the craving for the gratification of the senses, for a future life, and for prosperity.

<sup>42</sup> ~John Somers, Baron Somers~ (1651-1716), was the most trusted minister of William III, and a staunch supporter of the English Constitution. See Addison, *The Freeholder*, May 14, 1716, and Macauley's *History*, iv, 53.

<sup>43</sup> ~William Cobbett~ (1762-1835). English politician and writer. As a pamphleteer his reputation was injured by his pugnacity,

blackened as he is with the smoke of a lifelong conflict in the field of political practice? how is Mr. Carlyle to say it and not be misunderstood, after his furious raid into this field with his *Latter-day Pamphlets*?<sup>44</sup> how is Mr. Ruskin,<sup>45</sup> after his pugnacious political economy? I say, the critic must keep out of the region of immediate practice in the political, social, humanitarian sphere, if he wants to make a beginning for that more free speculative treatment of things, which may perhaps one day make its benefits felt even in this sphere, but in a natural and thence irresistible manner.

Do what he will, however, the critic will still remain exposed to frequent misunderstandings, and nowhere so much as in this country. For here people are particularly indisposed even to comprehend that without this free disinterested treatment of things, truth and the highest culture are out of the question. So immersed are they in practical life, so accustomed to take all their notions from this life and its processes, that they are apt to think that truth and culture themselves can be reached by the processes of this life, and that it is an impertinent singularity to think of reaching them in any other. "We are all *terræ filii*,"<sup>46</sup> cries their eloquent advocate; "all Philistines"<sup>47</sup> together. Away with the notion of proceeding by any other course than the course dear to the Philistines; let us have a social movement, let us organize and combine a party to pursue truth and new thought, let us call it *the liberal party*, and let us all stick to each other, and back each other up. 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. If one of us speaks well, applaud him; if one of us speaks ill, applaud him too; we are all in the same movement, we are all liberals, we are all in pursuit of truth." In this way the pursuit of truth becomes really a social, practical, pleasurable affair, almost requiring a chairman, a secretary, and advertisements; with the excitement of an occasional scandal, with a little resistance to give the happy sense of difficulty overcome; but, in general, plenty of bustle and very little thought. To act is so easy, as Goethe says; to think is so hard!<sup>48</sup> It is true that the critic has many temptations to go with the stream, to make one of the party movement, one of these *terræ filii*; it seems ungracious to refuse to be a *terræ filius*, when so many excellent people are; but the critic's duty is to refuse, or, if resistance is vain, at least to cry with Obermann: *Périssons en résistant*<sup>49</sup>.

How serious a matter it is to try and resist, I had ample opportunity of experiencing when I ventured some time ago to criticize the celebrated first volume of Bishop Colenso.<sup>50</sup> The echoes of the

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self-esteem, and virulence of language. See Heine, *Selections*, p. 120, [Transcriber's note: This is Footnote 144 in this e-text] and *The Contribution of the Celts, Selections*, p. 179.[Transcriber's note: This is Footnote 257 in this e-text.]

<sup>44</sup> ~Carlyle's~ *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (1850) contain much violent denunciation of the society of his day.

<sup>45</sup> ~Ruskin~ turned to political economy about 1860. In 1862, he published *Unto this Last*, followed by other works of similar nature.

<sup>46</sup> ~terrae filii~. Sons of Mother Earth; hence, obscure, mean persons.

<sup>47</sup> See Heine, *Selections*, Note 2, p. 117.[Transcriber's note: This is Footnote 140 in this e-text.]

<sup>48</sup> ~To think is so hard~. Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, Book VII, chap. IX.

<sup>49</sup> See Sénancour's *Obermann*, letter 90. Arnold was much influenced by this remarkable book. For an account of the author (1770-1846) and the book see Arnold's *Stanzas in Memory of the Author of "Obermann,"* with note on the poem, and the essay on Obermann in *Essays in Criticism*, third series.

<sup>50</sup> So sincere is my dislike to all personal attack and controversy, that I abstain from reprinting, at this distance of time from the occasion which called them forth, the essays in which I criticized Dr. Colenso's book; I feel bound, however, after all that has passed, to make here a final declaration of my sincere impenitence for having published them. Nay, I cannot forbear repeating yet once more, for his benefit and that of his readers, this sentence from my original remarks upon him; *There is truth of science and truth of religion; truth of science does not become truth of religion till it is made religious.* And I will add: Let us have all the science there is from the men of science; from the men of religion let us have religion.[Arnold.]~John William Colenso~ (1814-83), Bishop of Natal, published a series of treatises on the *Pentateuch*, extending from 1862-1879, opposing the traditional views about the literal inspiration of the Scriptures and the actual historical character of the Mosaic story. Arnold's censorious criticism of the first volume of this work is entitled *The Bishop and the Philosopher* (*Macmillan's Magazine*, January, 1863). As an example of the Bishop's cheap "arithmetical demonstrations" he describes him as presenting the case of Leviticus as follows: "'If three priests have to eat 264 pigeons a day, how many must each priest eat?' That disposes of Leviticus." The essay is devoted chiefly to contrasting Bishop Colenso's unedifying methods with those of the philosopher Spinoza. In passing, Arnold refers also to Dr. Stanley's *Sinai and Palestine* (1856), quotations from which are characterized as "the refreshing spots" in the Bishop's volume.

storm which was then raised I still, from time to time, hear grumbling round me. That storm arose out of a misunderstanding almost inevitable. It is a result of no little culture to attain to a clear perception that science and religion are two wholly different things. The multitude will forever confuse them; but happily that is of no great real importance, for while the multitude imagines itself to live by its false science, it does really live by its true religion. Dr. Colenso, however, in his first volume did all he could to strengthen the confusion,<sup>51</sup> and to make it dangerous. He did this with the best intentions, I freely admit, and with the most candid ignorance that this was the natural effect of what he was doing; but, says Joubert, "Ignorance, which in matters of morals extenuates the crime, is itself, in intellectual matters, a crime of the first order."<sup>52</sup> I criticized Bishop Colenso's speculative confusion. Immediately there was a cry raised: "What is this? here is a liberal attacking a liberal. Do not you belong to the movement? are not you a friend of truth? Is not Bishop Colenso in pursuit of truth? then speak with proper respect of his book. Dr. Stanley<sup>53</sup> is another friend of truth, and you speak with proper respect of his book; why make these invidious differences? both books are excellent, admirable, liberal; Bishop Colenso's perhaps the most so, because it is the boldest, and will have the best practical consequences for the liberal cause. Do you want to encourage to the attack of a brother liberal his, and your, and our implacable enemies, the *Church and State Review* or the *Record*,— the High Church rhinoceros and the Evangelical hyena? Be silent, therefore; or rather speak, speak as loud as ever you can! and go into ecstasies over the eighty and odd pigeons."

But criticism cannot follow this coarse and indiscriminate method. It is unfortunately possible for a man in pursuit of truth to write a book which reposes upon a false conception. Even the practical consequences of a book are to genuine criticism no recommendation of it, if the book is, in the highest sense, blundering. I see that a lady<sup>54</sup> who herself, too, is in pursuit of truth, and who writes with great ability, but a little too much, perhaps, under the influence of the practical spirit of the English liberal movement, classes Bishop Colenso's book and M. Renan's<sup>55</sup> together, in her survey of the religious state of Europe, as facts of the same order, works, both of them, of "great importance"; "great ability, power, and skill"; Bishop Colenso's, perhaps, the most powerful; at least, Miss Cobbe gives special expression to her gratitude that to Bishop Colenso "has been given the strength to grasp, and the courage to teach, truths of such deep import." In the same way, more than one popular writer has compared him to Luther. Now it is just this kind of false estimate which the critical spirit is, it seems to me, bound to resist. It is really the strongest possible proof of the low ebb at which, in England, the critical spirit is, that while the critical hit in the religious literature of Germany is Dr. Strauss's<sup>56</sup> book, in that of France M. Renan's book, the book of Bishop Colenso is the critical hit in the religious literature of England. Bishop Colenso's book reposes on a total misconception of the essential elements of the religious problem, as that problem is now presented for solution. To criticism, therefore, which seeks to have the best that is known and thought on this problem, it is, however well meant, of no importance whatever. M. Renan's book attempts a new synthesis of the elements furnished to us by the Four Gospels. It attempts, in my opinion, a synthesis, perhaps premature, perhaps impossible, certainly not successful. Up to the present time, at any rate, we must

<sup>51</sup> It has been said I make it "a crime against literary criticism and the higher culture to attempt to inform the ignorant." Need I point out that the ignorant are not informed by being confirmed in a confusion? [Arnold.]

<sup>52</sup> Joubert's *Pensées*, ed. 1850, II, 102, titre 23, 54.

<sup>53</sup> ~Arthur Penrhyn Stanley~ (1815-81), Dean of Westminster. He was the author of a *Life of (Thomas) Arnold*, 1844. In university politics and in religious discussions he was a Liberal and the advocate of toleration and comprehension.

<sup>54</sup> ~Frances Power Cobbe~ (1822-1904), a prominent English philanthropist and woman of letters. The quotation below is from *Broken Lights* (1864), p. 134. Her *Religious Duty* (1857), referred to on p. 46, is a book of religious and ethical instruction written from the Unitarian point of view.

<sup>55</sup> ~Ernest Renan~ (1823-92), French philosopher and Orientalist. The *Vie de Jésus* (1863), here referred to, was begun in Syria and is filled with the atmosphere of the East, but is a work of literary rather than of scholarly importance.

<sup>56</sup> ~David Friedrich Strauss~ (1808-74), German theologian and man of letters. The work referred to is the *Leben Jesu* 1835. A popular edition was published in 1864.

acquiesce in Fleury's sentence on such recastings of the Gospel story: *Quiconque s'imagine la pouvoir mieux écrire, ne l'entend pas*.<sup>57</sup> M. Renan had himself passed by anticipation a like sentence on his own work, when he said: "If a new presentation of the character of Jesus were offered to me, I would not have it; its very clearness would be, in my opinion, the best proof of its insufficiency." His friends may with perfect justice rejoin that at the sight of the Holy Land, and of the actual scene of the Gospel story, all the current of M. Renan's thoughts may have naturally changed, and a new casting of that story irresistibly suggested itself to him; and that this is just a case for applying Cicero's maxim: Change of mind is not inconsistency—*nemo doctus unquam mutationem consilii inconstantiam dixit esse*.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, for criticism, M. Renan's first thought must still be the truer one, as long as his new casting so fails more fully to commend itself, more fully (to use Coleridge's happy phrase<sup>59</sup> about the Bible) to *find* us. Still M. Renan's attempt is, for criticism, of the most real interest and importance, since, with all its difficulty, a fresh synthesis of the New Testament *data*—not a making war on them, in Voltaire's fashion, not a leaving them out of mind, in the world's fashion, but the putting a new construction upon them, the taking them from under the old, traditional, conventional point of view and placing them under a new one—is the very essence of the religious problem, as now presented; and only by efforts in this direction can it receive a solution.

Again, in the same spirit in which she judges Bishop Colenso, Miss Cobbe, like so many earnest liberals of our practical race, both here and in America, herself sets vigorously about a positive reconstruction of religion, about making a religion of the future out of hand, or at least setting about making it. We must not rest, she and they are always thinking and saying, in negative criticism, we must be creative and constructive; hence we have such works as her recent *Religious Duty*, and works still more considerable, perhaps, by others, which will be in every one's mind. These works often have much ability; they often spring out of sincere convictions, and a sincere wish to do good; and they sometimes, perhaps, do good. Their fault is (if I may be permitted to say so) one which they have in common with the British College of Health, in the New Road. Every one knows the British College of Health; it is that building with the lion and the statue of the Goddess Hygeia before it; at least I am sure about the lion, though I am not absolutely certain about the Goddess Hygeia. This building does credit, perhaps, to the resources of Dr. Morrison and his disciples; but it falls a good deal short of one's idea of what a British College of Health ought to be. In England, where we hate public interference and love individual enterprise, we have a whole crop of places like the British College of Health; the grand name without the grand thing. Unluckily, creditable to individual enterprise as they are, they tend to impair our taste by making us forget what more grandiose, noble, or beautiful character properly belongs to a public institution. The same may be said of the religions of the future of Miss Cobbe and others. Creditable, like the British College of Health, to the resources of their authors, they yet tend to make us forget what more grandiose, noble, or beautiful character properly belongs to religious constructions. The historic religions, with all their faults, have had this; it certainly belongs to the religious sentiment, when it truly flowers, to have this; and we impoverish our spirit if we allow a religion of the future without it. What then is the duty of criticism here? To take the practical point of view, to applaud the liberal movement and all its works,—its New Road religions of the future into the bargain,—for their general utility's sake? By no means; but to be perpetually dissatisfied with these works, while they perpetually fall short of a high and perfect ideal. For criticism, these are elementary laws; but they never can be popular, and in this country they have been very little followed, and one meets with immense obstacles in following them. That is a reason for asserting them again and again. Criticism must maintain its independence of the practical spirit and its aims. Even with well-meant efforts of the practical spirit it must express dissatisfaction, if in the sphere

<sup>57</sup> From "Fleury (Preface) on the Gospel."—Arnold's *Note Book*.

<sup>58</sup> Cicero's *Att.* 16. 7. 3.

<sup>59</sup> ~Coleridge's happy phrase~. Coleridge's *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, letter 2.

of the ideal they seem impoverishing and limiting. It must not hurry on to the goal because of its practical importance. It must be patient, and know how to wait; and flexible, and know how to attach itself to things and how to withdraw from them. It must be apt to study and praise elements that for the fulness of spiritual perfection are wanted, even though they belong to a power which in the practical sphere may be maleficent. It must be apt to discern the spiritual shortcomings or illusions of powers that in the practical sphere may be beneficent. And this without any notion of favoring or injuring, in the practical sphere, one power or the other; without any notion of playing off, in this sphere, one power against the other. When one looks, for instance, at the English Divorce Court—an institution which perhaps has its practical conveniences, but which in the ideal sphere is so hideous; an institution which neither makes divorce impossible nor makes it decent, which allows a man to get rid of his wife, or a wife of her husband, but makes them drag one another first, for the public edification, through a mire of unutterable infamy,—when one looks at this charming institution, I say, with its crowded trials, its newspaper reports, and its money compensations, this institution in which the gross unregenerate British Philistine has indeed stamped an image of himself, —one may be permitted to find the marriage theory of Catholicism refreshing and elevating. Or when Protestantism, in virtue of its supposed rational and intellectual origin, gives the law to criticism too magisterially, criticism may and must remind it that its pretensions, in this respect, are illusive and do it harm; that the Reformation was a moral rather than an intellectual event; that Luther's theory of grace<sup>60</sup> no more exactly reflects the mind of the spirit than Bossuet's philosophy of history<sup>61</sup> reflects it; and that there is no more antecedent probability of the Bishop of Durham's stock of ideas being agreeable to perfect reason than of Pope Pius the Ninth's. But criticism will not on that account forget the achievements of Protestantism in the practical and moral sphere; nor that, even in the intellectual sphere, Protestantism, though in a blind and stumbling manner, carried forward the Renaissance, while Catholicism threw itself violently across its path.

I lately heard a man of thought and energy contrasting the want of ardor and movement which he now found amongst young men in this country with what he remembered in his own youth, twenty years ago. "What reformers we were then!" he exclaimed; "What a zeal we had! how we canvassed every institution in Church and State, and were prepared to remodel them all on first principles!" He was inclined to regret, as a spiritual flagging, the lull which he saw. I am disposed rather to regard it as a pause in which the turn to a new mode of spiritual progress is being accomplished. Everything was long seen, by the young and ardent amongst us, in inseparable connection with politics and practical life. We have pretty well exhausted the benefits of seeing things in this connection, we have got all that can be got by so seeing them. Let us try a more disinterested mode of seeing them; let us betake ourselves more to the serener life of the mind and spirit. This life, too, may have its excesses and dangers; but they are not for us at present. Let us think of quietly enlarging our stock of true and fresh ideas, and not, as soon as we get an idea or half an idea, be running out with it into the street, and trying to make it rule there. Our ideas will, in the end, shape the world all the better for maturing a little. Perhaps in fifty years' time it will in the English House of Commons be an objection to an institution that it is an anomaly, and my friend the Member of Parliament will shudder in his grave. But let us in the meanwhile rather endeavor that in twenty years' time it may, in English literature, be an objection to a proposition that it is absurd. That will be a change so vast, that the imagination almost fails to grasp it. *Ab Integro soeculorum nascitur ordo.*<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup> ~Luther's theory of grace~. The question concerning the "means of grace," i.e. whether the efficacy of the sacraments as channels of the divine grace is *ex opere operato*, or dependent on the faith of the recipient, was the chief subject of controversy between Catholics and Protestants during the period of the Reformation.

<sup>61</sup> ~Jacques Bénigne Bossuet~ (1627-1704), French divine, orator, and writer. His *Discours sur l'histoire universelle* (1681) was an attempt to provide ecclesiastical authority with a rational basis. It is dominated by the conviction that "the establishment of Christianity was the one point of real importance in the whole history of the world."

<sup>62</sup> From Virgil's *Eclogues*, iv, 5. Translated in Shelley's *Hellas*: "The world's great age begins anew."

If I have insisted so much on the course which criticism must take where politics and religion are concerned, it is because, where these burning matters are in question, it is most likely to go astray. I have wished, above all, to insist on the attitude which criticism should adopt towards things in general; on its right tone and temper of mind. But then comes another question as to the subject-matter which literary criticism should most seek. Here, in general, its course is determined for it by the idea which is the law of its being: the idea of a disinterested endeavor 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. By the very nature of things, as England is not all the world, much of the best that is known and thought in the world cannot be of English growth, must be foreign; by the nature of things, again, it is just this that we are least likely to know, while English thought is streaming in upon us from all sides, and takes excellent care that we shall not be ignorant of its existence. The English critic of literature, therefore, must dwell much on foreign thought, and with particular heed on any part of it, which, while significant and fruitful in itself, is for any reason specially likely to escape him. Again, judging is often spoken of as the critic's one business, and so in some sense it is; but the judgment which almost insensibly forms itself in a fair and clear mind, along with fresh knowledge, is the valuable one; and thus knowledge, and ever fresh knowledge, must be the critic's great concern for himself. And it is by communicating fresh knowledge, and letting his own judgment pass along with it,—but insensibly, and in the second place, not the first, as a sort of companion and clue, not as an abstract lawgiver,—that the critic will generally do most good to his readers. Sometimes, no doubt, for the sake of establishing an author's place in literature, and his relation to a central standard (and if this is not done, how are we to get at our *best in the world*?) criticism may have to deal with a subject-matter so familiar that fresh knowledge is out of the question, and then it must be all judgment; an enunciation and detailed application of principles. Here the great safeguard is never to let oneself become abstract, always to retain an intimate and lively consciousness of the truth of what one is saying, and, the moment this fails us, to be sure that something is wrong. Still under all circumstances, this mere judgment and application of principles is, in itself, not the most satisfactory work to the critic; like mathematics, it is tautological, and cannot well give us, like fresh learning, the sense of creative activity.

But stop, some one will say; all this talk is of no practical use to us whatever; this criticism of yours is not what we have in our minds when we speak of criticism; when we speak of critics and criticism, we mean critics and criticism of the current English literature of the day: when you offer to tell criticism its function, it is to this criticism that we expect you to address yourself. I am sorry for it, for I am afraid I must disappoint these expectations. I am bound by my own definition of criticism; *a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world*. How much of current English literature comes into this "best that is known and thought in the world"? Not very much I fear; certainly less, at this moment, than of the current literature of France or Germany. Well, then, am I to alter my definition of criticism, in order to meet the requirements of a number of practising English critics, who, after all, are free in their choice of a business? That would be making criticism lend itself just to one of those alien practical considerations, which, I have said, are so fatal to it. One may say, indeed, to those who have to deal with the mass—so much better disregarded—of current English literature, that they may at all events endeavor, in dealing with this, to try it, so far as they can, by the standard of the best that is known and thought in the world; one may say, that to get anywhere near this standard, every critic should try and possess one great literature, at least, besides his own; and the more unlike his own, the better. But, after all, the criticism I am really concerned with,—the criticism which alone can much help us for the future, the criticism which, throughout Europe, is at the present day meant, when so much stress is laid on the importance of criticism and the critical spirit,—is a criticism which regards Europe as being, for intellectual and spiritual purposes, one great confederation, bound to a joint action and working to a common result; and whose members have, for their proper outfit, a knowledge of Greek, Roman, and Eastern

antiquity, and of one another. Special, local, and temporary advantages being put out of account, that modern nation will in the intellectual and spiritual sphere make most progress, which most thoroughly carries out this program. And what is that but saying that we too, all of us, as individuals, the more thoroughly we carry it out, shall make the more progress?

There is so much inviting us!—what are we to take? what will nourish us in growth towards perfection? That is the question which, with the immense field of life and of literature lying before him, the critic has to answer; for himself first, and afterwards for others. In this idea of the critic's business the essays brought together in the following pages have had their origin; in this idea, widely different as are their subjects, they have, perhaps, their unity.

I conclude with what I said at the beginning: to have the sense of creative activity is the great happiness and the great proof of being alive, and it is not denied to criticism to have it; but then criticism must be sincere, simple, flexible, ardent, ever widening its knowledge. Then it may have, in no contemptible measure, a joyful sense of creative activity; a sense which a man of insight and conscience will prefer to what he might derive from a poor, starved, fragmentary, inadequate creation. And at some epochs no other creation is possible.

Still, in full measure, the sense of creative activity belongs only to genuine creation; in literature we must never forget that. But what true man of letters ever can forget it? It is no such common matter for a gifted nature to come into possession of a current of true and living ideas, and to produce amidst the inspiration of them, that we are likely to underrate it. The epochs of Æschylus and Shakespeare make us feel their preëminence. In an epoch like those is, no doubt, the true life of literature; there is the promised land, towards which criticism can only beckon. That promised land it will not be ours to enter, and we shall die in the wilderness: but to have desired to enter it, to have saluted it from afar, is already, perhaps, the best distinction among contemporaries; it will certainly be the best title to esteem with posterity.

## THE STUDY OF POETRY <sup>63</sup>

"The future of poetry 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. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialized itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and how the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea *is* the fact. The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry."<sup>64</sup>

Let me be permitted to quote these words of my own, as uttering the thought which should, in my opinion, go with us and govern us in all our study of poetry. In the present work it is the course of one great contributory stream to the world-river of poetry that we are invited to follow. We are here invited to trace the stream of English poetry. But whether we set ourselves, as here, to follow only one of the several streams that make the mighty river of poetry, or whether we seek to know them all, our governing thought should be the same. We should conceive of poetry worthily, and more highly than it has been the custom to conceive of it. We should conceive of it as capable of higher uses, and called to higher destinies than those which in general men have assigned to it hitherto. More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry. Science, I say, will appear

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<sup>63</sup> Published in 1880 as the General Introduction to *The English Poets*, edited by T.H. Ward. Reprinted in *Essays in Criticism*, Second Series, Macmillan & Co., 1888.

<sup>64</sup> This quotation is taken, slightly condensed, from the closing paragraph of a short introduction contributed by Arnold to *The Hundred Greatest Men*, Sampson, Low & Co., London, 1885.



incomplete without it. For finely and truly does Wordsworth call poetry "the impassioned expression which is in a countenance of all science"<sup>65</sup> and what is a countenance without its expression? Again, Wordsworth finely and truly calls poetry "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge":<sup>66</sup> our religion, parading evidences such as those on which the popular mind relies now; our philosophy, pluming itself on its reasonings about causation and finite and infinite being; what are they but the shadows and dreams and false shows of knowledge? The day will come when we shall wonder at ourselves for having trusted to them, for having taken them seriously; and the more we perceive their hollowness, the more we shall prize "the breath and finer spirit of knowledge" offered to us by poetry.

But if we conceive thus highly of the destinies of poetry, we must also set our standard for poetry high, since poetry, to be 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. Sainte-Beuve relates that Napoleon one day said, when somebody was spoken of in his presence as a charlatan: "Charlatan as much as you please; but where is there *not* charlatanism?"—"Yes," answers Sainte-Beuve,<sup>67</sup> "in politics, in the art of governing mankind, that is perhaps true. But in the order of thought, in art, the glory, the eternal honor is that charlatanism shall find no entrance; herein lies the inviolableness of that noble portion of man's being." It is admirably said, and let us hold fast to it. In poetry, which is thought and art in one, it is the glory, the eternal honor, that charlatanism shall find no entrance; that this noble sphere be kept inviolate and inviolable. Charlatanism is for confusing or obliterating the distinctions between excellent and inferior, sound and unsound or only half-sound, true and untrue or only half-true. It is charlatanism, conscious or unconscious, whenever we confuse or obliterate these. And in poetry, more than anywhere else, it is unpermissible to confuse or obliterate them. For 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<sup>68</sup> under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty, the spirit of our race will find, we have said, as time 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.

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. A clearer, deeper sense of the best<sup>69</sup> is the most precious benefit which we can gather from a poetical collection such as the present. And yet in the very nature and conduct of such a collection there is inevitably something which tends to obscure in us the consciousness of what our benefit should be, and to distract us from the pursuit of it. We should therefore steadily set it before our minds at the outset, and should compel ourselves to revert constantly to the thought of it as we proceed.

Yes; constantly in reading poetry, a sense for the best, the really excellent, and of the strength and joy to be drawn from it, should be present in our minds and should govern our estimate of what we read. But this real estimate, the only true one, is liable to be superseded, if we are not watchful, by two other kinds of estimate, the historic estimate and the personal estimate, both of which are fallacious.

<sup>65</sup> From the Preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800.

<sup>66</sup> From the Preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800.

<sup>67</sup> ~Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve~ (1804-69), French critic, was looked upon by Arnold as in certain respects his master in the art of criticism.

<sup>68</sup> ~a criticism of life~. This celebrated phrase was first used by Arnold in the essay on *Joubert* (1864), though the theory is implied in *On Translating Homer*, 1861. In *Joubert* it is applied to literature: "The end and aim of all literature, if one considers it attentively, is, in truth, nothing but that." It was much attacked, especially as applied to poetry, and is defended as so applied in the essay on *Byron* (1881). See also *Wordsworth, Selections*, p. 230.[Transcriber's note: This is Footnote 371 in this e-text.]

<sup>69</sup> Compare Arnold's definition of the function of criticism, *Selections*, p. 52.[Transcriber's note: This approximates to the section following the text reference for Footnote 61 in this e-text.]

A poet or a poem may count to us historically, they may count to us on grounds personal to ourselves, and they may count to us really. They may count to us historically. 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. So arises in our poetic judgments the fallacy caused by the estimate which we may call historic. Then, again, a poet or a poem 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. Here also we over-rate the object of our interest, and apply to it a language of praise which is quite exaggerated. And thus we get the source of a second fallacy in our poetic judgments—the fallacy caused by an estimate which we may call personal.

Both fallacies are natural. It is evident how naturally the study of the history and development of a poetry may incline a man to pause over reputations and works once conspicuous but now obscure, and to quarrel with a careless public for skipping, in obedience to mere tradition and habit, from one famous name or work in its national poetry to another, ignorant of what it misses, and of the reason for keeping what it keeps, and of the whole process of growth in its poetry. The French have become diligent students of their own early poetry, which they long neglected; the study makes many of them dissatisfied with their so-called classical poetry, the court-tragedy of the seventeenth century, a poetry which Pellisson<sup>70</sup> long ago reproached with its want of the true poetic stamp, with its *politesse sterile et rampante*?<sup>71</sup> but which nevertheless has reigned in France as absolutely as if it had been the perfection of classical poetry indeed. The dissatisfaction is natural; yet a lively and accomplished critic, M. Charles d'Héricault,<sup>72</sup> the editor of Clement Marot, goes too far when he 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 hinders," he goes on, "it hinders us from seeing more than one single point, the culminating and exceptional point, the summary, fictitious and arbitrary, of a thought and of a work. 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 labor, 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. Above all, for the historian this creation of classic personages is inadmissible; for it withdraws the poet from his time, from his proper life, it breaks historical relationships, it blinds criticism by conventional admiration, and renders the investigation of literary origins unacceptable. 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 whom such work is exhibited at such a distance from him, to believe that it did not issue ready made from that divine head."

All this is brilliantly and tellingly said, but we must plead for a distinction. Everything 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 (for this is the true and right meaning of the word *classic, classical*), then the great thing for us is to feel and enjoy his work as deeply as ever we can, and to appreciate the wide difference between it and all work which has not the same high character. This is what is salutary, this is what is formative; this is the great benefit to be got from the study of poetry. Everything which interferes with it, which hinders it, is injurious. True, we must read our classic with open eyes, and not with eyes blinded with superstition; we must perceive when his work comes short, when it drops out of the class of

<sup>70</sup> ~Paul Pellisson~ (1624-93). French author, friend of Mlle. Scudéry, and historiographer to the king.

<sup>71</sup> Barren and servile civility.

<sup>72</sup> ~M. Charles d' Héricault~ was joint editor of the Jannet edition (1868-72) of the poems of ~Clément Marot~ (1496-1544).

the very best, and we must rate it, in such cases, at its proper value. But the use of this negative criticism is not in itself, it is entirely in its enabling us to have a clearer sense and a deeper enjoyment of what is truly excellent. To trace the labor, the attempts, the weaknesses, the failures of a genuine classic, to acquaint oneself with his time and his life and his historical relationships, is mere literary dilettantism unless it has that clear sense and deeper enjoyment for its end. It may be said that the more we know about a classic the better we shall enjoy him; and, if we lived as long as Methuselah and had all of us heads of perfect clearness and wills of perfect steadfastness, this might be true in fact as it is plausible in theory. But the case here is much the same as the case with the Greek and Latin studies of our schoolboys. The elaborate philological groundwork which we require them to lay is in theory an admirable preparation for appreciating the Greek and Latin authors worthily. The more thoroughly we lay the groundwork, the better we shall be able, it may be said, to enjoy the authors. True, if time were not so short, and schoolboys' wits not so soon tired and their power of attention exhausted; only, as it is, the elaborate philological preparation goes on, but the authors are little known and less enjoyed. So with the investigator of "historic origins" in poetry. He ought to enjoy the true classic all the better for his investigations; he often is distracted from the enjoyment of the best, and with the less good he overbusies himself, and is prone to over-rate it in proportion to the trouble which it has cost him.

The idea of tracing historic origins and historical relationships cannot be absent from a compilation like the present. And naturally the poets to be exhibited in it will be assigned to those persons for exhibition who are known to prize them highly, rather than to those who have no special inclination towards them. Moreover the very occupation with an author, and the business of exhibiting him, disposes us to affirm and amplify his importance. In the present work, therefore, we are sure of frequent temptation to adopt the historic estimate, or the personal estimate, and to forget the real estimate; which latter, nevertheless, we must employ if we are to make poetry yield us its full benefit. So high is that benefit, the benefit of clearly feeling and of deeply enjoying the really excellent, the truly classic in poetry, that we do well, I say, to set it fixedly before our minds as our object in studying poets and poetry, and to make the desire of attaining it the one principle to which, as the *Imitation* says, whatever we may read or come to know, we always return. *Cum multa legeris et cognoveris, ad unum semper oportet redire principium.*<sup>73</sup>

The historic estimate is likely in especial to affect our judgment and our language when we are dealing with ancient poets; the personal estimate when we are dealing with poets our contemporaries, or at any rate modern. The exaggerations due to the historic estimate are not in themselves, perhaps, of very much gravity. Their report hardly enters the general ear; probably they do not always impose even on the literary men who adopt them. But they lead to a dangerous abuse of language. So we hear Cædmon,<sup>74</sup> amongst, our own poets, compared to Milton. I have already noticed the enthusiasm of one accomplished French critic for "historic origins." Another eminent French critic, M. Vitet,<sup>75</sup> comments upon that famous document of the early poetry of his nation, the *Chanson de Roland*.<sup>76</sup> It is indeed a most interesting document. The *joculator* or *jongleur* Taillefer, who was with William the Conqueror's army at Hastings, marched before the Norman troops, so said the tradition, singing "of Charlemagne and of Roland and of Oliver, and of the vassals who died at Roncevaux"; and it is suggested that in the *Chanson de Roland* by one Tuoldus or Theroulde, a poem preserved in a manuscript of the twelfth century in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, we have certainly the matter,

<sup>73</sup> *Imitation of Christ*, Book III, chap. 43, 2.

<sup>74</sup> ~Cædmon~. The first important religious poet in Old English literature. Died about 680 A.D.

<sup>75</sup> ~Ludovic Vitet~ (1802-73). French dramatist and politician.

<sup>76</sup> ~Chanson de Roland~. The greatest of the *Chansons des Gestes*, long narrative poems dealing with warfare and adventure popular in France during the Middle Ages. It was composed in the eleventh century. Taillefer was the surname of a bard and warrior of the eleventh century. The tradition concerning him is related by Wace, *Roman de Rou*, third part, v., 8035-62, ed. Andreson, Heilbronn, 1879. The Bodleian *Roland* ends with the words: "ci folt la geste, que Tuoldus declinet." Tuold has not been identified.

perhaps even some of the words, of the chant which Taillefer sang. The poem has vigor and freshness; it is not without pathos. But M. Vitet is not satisfied with seeing in it a document of some poetic value, and of very high historic and linguistic value; he sees in it a grand and beautiful work, a monument of epic genius. In its general design he finds the grandiose conception, in its details he finds the constant union of simplicity with greatness, which are the marks, he truly says, of the genuine epic, and distinguish it from the artificial epic of literary ages. One thinks of Homer; this is the sort of praise which is given to Homer, and justly given. Higher praise there cannot well be, and it is the praise due to epic poetry of the highest order only, and to no other. Let us try, then, the *Chanson de Roland* at its best. Roland, mortally wounded, lays himself down under a pine-tree, with his face turned towards Spain and the enemy—

"De plusurs choses à remembrer li prist,  
De tantes teres cume li bers cunquist,  
De dulce France, des humes de sun lign,  
De Carlemagne sun seignor ki l'nurrit."<sup>77</sup>

That is primitive work, I repeat, with an undeniable poetic quality of its own. It deserves such praise, and such praise is sufficient for it. But now turn to Homer—

[Greek:  
Os phato tous d aedae katecheu phusizoos aia  
en Lakedaimoni authi, philm en patridi gaim]<sup>78</sup>

We are here in another world, another order of poetry altogether; here is rightly due such supreme praise as that which M. Vitet gives to the *Chanson de Roland*. If our words are to have any meaning, if our judgments are to have any solidity, we must not heap that supreme praise upon poetry of an order immeasurably inferior.

Indeed there can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, 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. Of course we are not to require this other poetry to resemble them; it may be very dissimilar. But if we have any tact we shall find them, when we have lodged them well in our minds, 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. Take the two lines which I have just quoted from Homer, the poet's comment on Helen's mention of her brothers;—or take his

[Greek:]  
A delo, to sphoi domen Paelaei anakti  
Thnaeta; umeis d eston agaero t athanato te.  
ae ina dustaeniosis met andrasin alge echaeton;<sup>79</sup>

the address of Zeus to the horses of Peleus;—or take finally his

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<sup>77</sup> "Then began he to call many things to remembrance,—all the lands which his valor conquered, and pleasant France, and the men of his lineage, and Charlemagne his liege lord who nourished him."—*Chanson de Roland*, III, 939-42.[Arnold.]

<sup>78</sup> "So said she; they long since in Earth's soft arms were reposing, There, in their own dear land, their fatherland, Lacedæmon." *Iliad*, III, 243, 244 (translated by Dr. Hawtrey).[Arnold.]

<sup>79</sup> "Ah, unhappy pair, why gave we you to King Peleus, to a mortal? but ye are without old age, and immortal. Was it that with men born to misery ye might have sorrow?"—*Iliad*, XVII, 443-445.[Arnold.]

[Greek:]

Kai se, geron, to prin men akouomen olbion einar<sup>80</sup>

the words of Achilles to Priam, a suppliant before him. Take that incomparable line and a half of Dante, Ugolino's tremendous words—

"Io no piangeva; sì dentro impietrai.

Piangevan elli ..."<sup>81</sup>

take the lovely words of Beatrice to Virgil—

"Io son fatta da Dio, sua mercè, tale,

Che la vostra miseria non mi tange,

Nè fiamma d'esto incendio non m'assale ..."<sup>82</sup>

take the simple, but perfect, single line—

"In la sua volentade è nostra pace."<sup>83</sup>

Take of Shakespeare a line or two of Henry the Fourth's expostulation with sleep—

"Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast

Seal up the ship-boy's eyes, and rock his brains

In cradle of the rude imperious surge ..."<sup>84</sup>

and take, as well, Hamlet's dying request to Horatio—

"If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,

Absent thee from felicity awhile,

And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain

To tell my story ..."<sup>85</sup>

Take of Milton that Miltonic passage—

"Darken'd so, yet shone

Above them all the archangel; but his face

Deep scars of thunder had intrench'd, and care

Sat on his faded cheek ..."<sup>86</sup>

add two such lines as—

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<sup>80</sup> "Nay, and thou too, old man, in former days wast, as we hear, happy."—*Iliad*, XXIV, 543.[Arnold.]

<sup>81</sup> "I wailed not, so of stone grew I within;—*they* wailed."—*Inferno*, XXXIII, 39, 40.[Arnold.]

<sup>82</sup> "Of such sort hath God, thanked be His mercy, made me, that your misery toucheth me not, neither doth the flame of this fire strike me."—*Inferno*, II, 91-93.[Arnold.]

<sup>83</sup> "In His will is our peace."—*Paradiso*, III, 85.[Arnold.]

<sup>84</sup> *Henry IV*, part 2, III, i, 18-20.

<sup>85</sup> *Hamlet*, V, ii, 361-62.

<sup>86</sup> *Paradise Lost*, I, 599-602.

"And courage never to submit or yield  
And what is else not to be overcome ..."<sup>87</sup>

and finish with the exquisite close to the loss of Proserpine, the loss

" ... which cost Ceres all that pain To seek her through the world."<sup>88</sup>

These few lines, if we have tact and can use them, are enough even of themselves to keep clear and sound our judgments about poetry, to save us from fallacious estimates of it, to conduct us to a real estimate.

The specimens I have quoted differ widely from one another, but they have in common this: the possession of the very highest poetical quality. 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. Critics give themselves great labor to draw out what in the abstract constitutes the characters of a high quality of poetry. It is much better simply to have recourse to concrete examples; —to take specimens of poetry of the high, the very highest quality, and to say: The characters of a high quality of poetry are what is expressed *there*. They are far better recognized by being felt in the verse of the master, than by being perused in the prose of the critic. Nevertheless if we are urgently pressed to give some critical account of them, we may safely, perhaps, venture on laying down, not indeed how and why the characters arise, but where and in what they arise. They are in the matter and substance of the poetry, and they are in its manner and style. Both of these, the substance and matter on the one hand, the style and manner on the other, have a mark, an accent, of high beauty, worth, and power. But if we are asked to define this mark and accent in the abstract, our answer must be: No, for we should thereby be darkening the question, not clearing it. The mark and accent are as given by the substance and matter of that poetry, by the style and manner of that poetry, and of all other poetry which is akin to it in quality.

Only one thing we may add as to the substance and matter of poetry, guiding ourselves by Aristotle's profound observation<sup>89</sup> that the superiority of poetry over history consists in its possessing a higher truth and a higher seriousness ([Greek: philosophoteron kahi spondaioteron]). Let us add, therefore, to what we have said, this: that the substance and matter of the best poetry acquire their special character from possessing, in an eminent degree, truth and seriousness. We may add yet further, what is in itself evident, that to the style and manner of the best poetry their special character, their accent, is given by their diction, and, even yet more, by their movement. And though we distinguish between the two characters, the two accents, of superiority, yet they are nevertheless vitally connected one with the 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 and seriousness are 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.

So stated, these are but dry generalities; their whole force lies in their application. And I could wish every student of poetry to make the application of them for himself. Made by himself, the

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 108-9.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 271.

<sup>89</sup> *Poetics*, § 9.

application would impress itself upon his mind far more deeply than made by me. Neither will my limits allow me to make any full application of the generalities above propounded; but in the hope of bringing out, at any rate, some significance in them, and of establishing an important principle more firmly by their means, I will, in the space which remains to me, follow rapidly from the commencement the course of our English poetry with them in my view.

Once more I return to the early poetry of France, with which our own poetry, in its origins, is indissolubly connected. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, that seed-time of all modern language and literature, the poetry of France had a clear predominance in Europe. Of the two divisions of that poetry, its productions in the *langue d'oïl* and its productions in the *langue d'oc*, the poetry of the *langue d'oc*,<sup>90</sup> of southern France, of the troubadours, is of importance because of its effect on Italian literature;—the first literature of modern Europe to strike the true and grand note, and to bring forth, as in Dante and Petrarch it brought forth, classics. But the predominance of French poetry in Europe, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, is due to its poetry of the *langue d'oïl*, the poetry of northern France and of the tongue which is now the French language. In the twelfth century the bloom of this romance-poetry was earlier and stronger in England, at the court of our Anglo-Norman kings, than in France itself. But it was a bloom of French poetry; and as our native poetry formed itself, it formed itself out of this. The romance-poems which took possession of the heart and imagination of Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are French; "they are," as Southey justly says, "the pride of French literature, nor have we anything which can be placed in competition with them." Themes were supplied from all quarters: but the romance-setting which was common to them all, and which gained the ear of Europe, was French. This constituted for the French poetry, literature, and language, at the height of the Middle Age, an unchallenged predominance. The Italian Brunetto Latini,<sup>91</sup> the master of Dante, wrote his *Treasure* in French because, he says, "*la parole en est plus délectable et plus commune à toutes gens.*" In the same century, the thirteenth, the French romance-writer, Christian of Troyes,<sup>92</sup> formulates the claims, in chivalry and letters, of France, his native country, as follows:—

"Or vous ert par ce livre apris,  
Que Gresse ot de chevalerie  
Le premier los et de clergie;  
Puis vint chevalerie à Rome,  
Et de la clergie la some,  
Qui ore est en France venue.  
Diex doinst qu'ele i soit retenue  
Et que li lius li abelisse  
Tant que de France n'isse  
L'onor qui s'i est arestee!"

"Now by this book you will learn that first Greece had the renown for chivalry and letters: then chivalry and the primacy in letters passed to Rome, and now it is come to France. God grant it may be kept there; and that the place may please it so well, that the honor which has come to make stay in France may never depart thence!"

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<sup>90</sup> ~Provençal~, the language of southern France, from the southern French *oc* instead of the northern *oïl* for "yes."

<sup>91</sup> Dante acknowledges his debt to ~Latini~ (c. 1230-c. 1294), but the latter was probably not his tutor. He is the author of the *Tesoretto*, a heptasyllabic Italian poem, and the prose *Livres dou Trésor*, a sort of encyclopedia of medieval lore, written in French because that language "is more delightful and more widely known."

<sup>92</sup> ~Christian of Troyes~. A French poet of the second half of the twelfth century, author of numerous narrative poems dealing with legends of the Round Table. The present quotation is from the *Cligés*, ll. 30-39.

Yet it is now all gone, this French romance-poetry, of which the weight of substance and the power of style are not unfairly represented by this extract from Christian of Troyes. Only by means of the historic estimate can we persuade ourselves now to think that any of it is of poetical importance.

But in the fourteenth century there comes an Englishman nourished on this poetry; taught his trade by this poetry, getting words, rhyme, meter from this poetry; for even of that stanza<sup>93</sup> which the Italians used, and which Chaucer derived immediately from the Italians, the basis and suggestion was probably given in France. Chaucer (I have already named him) fascinated his contemporaries, but so too did Christian of Troyes and Wolfram of Eschenbach.<sup>94</sup> Chaucer's power of fascination, however, is enduring; his poetical importance does not need the assistance of the historic estimate; it is real. He is a genuine source of joy and strength, which is flowing still for us and will flow always. He will be read, as time goes on, far more generally than he is read now. His language is a cause of difficulty for us; but so also, and I think in quite as great a degree, is the language of Burns. In Chaucer's case, as in that of Burns, it is a difficulty to be unhesitatingly accepted and overcome.

If we ask ourselves wherein consists the immense superiority of Chaucer's poetry over the romance-poetry—why it is that in passing from this to Chaucer we suddenly feel ourselves to be in another world, we shall find that his superiority is both in the substance of his poetry and in the style of his poetry. His superiority in substance is given by his large, free, simple, clear yet kindly view of human life,—so unlike the total want, in the romance-poets, of all intelligent command of it. Chaucer has not their helplessness; he has gained the power to survey the world from a central, a truly human point of view. We have only to call to mind the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*

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<sup>93</sup> Chaucer's two favorite stanzas, the seven-line and eight-line stanzas in heroic verse, were imitated from Old French poetry. See B. ten Brink's *The Language and Meter of Chaucer*, 1901, pp. 353-57.

<sup>94</sup> ~Wolfram von Eschenbach~. A medieval German poet, born in the end of the twelfth century. His best-known poem is the epic *Parzival*.



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