Criticism after Romanticism

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1. Moral Criticism

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1.1. Matthew Arnold (1822-1888)

Matthew Arnold was a poet, critic and inspector of schools, as well as a teacher at Oxford. He represents a classical reaction within Romanticism in the second half of the 19th century; he started with an Aristotelian phase and a moralistic stress, but in his later writings it becomes evident that he is above all a Romantic critic. His critical authority in Victorian England was enormous, and he prefigures T.S. Eliot in both his temperament and his intellectual role.

In the preface to the 1853 edition of his Poems, he calls for a return to representative art and to classical standards: he opposes the excess of Romantic sentiment which appeared in some of his earlier poems. A poem, he says, must be constructive and profitable, and the best way to achieve this is to follow the classical ideals. First of all, classical subjects: "He rejects decisively the doctrine that a poet must 'leave the exhausted past, and draw his subjects from matters of present import.' Here is sounded the first note of his battle-song against the Philistines" (Sampson 586). Arnold defends classical studies, which were the staple of the humanistic education of the bourgeoisie and the leisured classes in Victorian England. Arnold does not seem to be very conscious that he is defending a mark of class differentiation, rather than the universal ideal he argues for.
Classical poetry, Arnold says, was more concerned with the representation of actions than with the portrayal of subjective states of mind. In the 1853 preface Arnold is all against the excess of Romantic subjectivism. Expression, the portrayal of a state of mind, are to him unworthy aims for a good poem; he stresses the importance intense and morally significant situations which ought to be the center of a good work.

Poetry [is] a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty.¹ "High seriousness," an expression freely translated from Aristotle, is what poetry ought to aim at, according to Arnold. This high seriousness is to be found only in the very greatest poets: Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton. And when Arnold says "seriousness" he means seriousness: he does not appreciate irony, comedy or the more relaxed view of life as portrayed by such poets as Chaucer. Poetry is concerned with beauty, not with humour or wit. The range of true poetry is considerably narrowed; Arnold's own poetry certainly follows his critical practice on this point.

Arnold also advocates a return to the classical critical standards, and a return to objectivity, away from the Romantic emphasis on subjectivity. Arnold links style with objectivity, and subject-matter, story or action, with objectivity. "Objectivity" is common to the good critic and the good poet: the good poet is direct and simple, and has a clarity of mind which allows him to see his subject matter in an objective way, as it is, and not as distorted by his own feelings. This is the beginning of a reflective reaction against Romantic extremity (cf. Bulloch's "aesthetic distance"; but also Coleridge's dislike of ventriloquism). Homer, Arnold says, composed with his eye on the subject, while Pope composed with his eye on the style. The right style will come spontaneously if only we pay attention to the subject we are dealing with.

Aristotle's criticism, and classical criticism in general, valued situations and character more than diction, Arnold observes, and this was right.

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.² Interest in plot and character makes us see the poem as a whole; interest in diction, thoughts or images, characteristic of Romantic critics, leads to a loss of perspective; the poet forgets what should be the total aim of the poem:

We have poems which seem to exist merely for the sake of simple lines and passages; not for the sake of producing any total impression. We have critics who seem to direct their attention merely to detached expression, to the language about the action, not to the action itself. (579).

This total effect must be a moral effect.

¹ Matthew Arnold, The Study of Poetry (1880); qtd. in Wimsatt and Brooks 447.
² Matthew Arnold, preface to the 1853 edition of Poems (rpt. in Adams 576-582)
In his later works Arnold will change sides and forget all structural requirements for the unity of effect required in a poem. In *The Study of Poetry* (1880) Arnold advises rather to recognize great poetry by means of what he calls "touchstones":

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 more good than to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and apply them as a touchstone to other poetry. . . . Short passages, even single lines, will serve our turn quite sufficiently.³

The difference in emphasis is clear. "This open appeal to the chunklet, the sample piece of precious stuff, is a rather startling shift towards the norm of style and away from the initial classic thesis of 1853 that the action is all" (Wimsatt and Brooks 445). Now Arnold believes that "the very highest poetical quality" is perceptible in such short fragments, regardless of the whole of the work. This is more typically romantic. "We will no doubt feel that Arnold's enthusiasm has carried him away" (Hall 195); it is clear that the admiration of a fragment commonly comes from our seeing it as a fragment of a whole which we admire.

It is very important to judge poetry rightly and to separate the really great from the second-rate. That is because poetry is now the only spiritual force which is capable of surviving in the modern times. It is stronger than religious creeds, and is called upon to take their place.

The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry" (*Study* 596). Actually, religion is dead: only the external machinery remains; we do no longer have religion in the way our forefathers did; instead, we have religious organizations. Poetry is to sustain human spirituality in the absence of religion. Poetry teaches us how to relate knowledge to the human "sense of conduct" and the human "sense for beauty"; it is an imaginative guiding principle for science, which is merely instrumental.

Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete, and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry. (*Study* 596).

In this sense, Arnold's essay *Literature and Science* (1882), an answer to an essay on the same subject by Huxley, is the equivalent of Shelley's *Defense against Peacock*.

Alongside with his high estimate of poetry, Arnold stresses the importance of literary criticism, to the extent that some have called him a propagandist for criticism rather than a critic. Criticism in general is the activity of judging and valuing, and it can be applied to any subject; Arnold wrote an important book of social criticism, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), a defense of high bourgeois culture against both utilitarianism and revolution. Literary criticism is an important branch of criticism. In his essay "The

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³ Matthew Arnold, *The Study of Poetry* (select. in Adams 596-600) 599.
Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864), Arnold stresses the important task of educating the English public, which is defective in critical spirit, in taste. Arnold denounces the limited and obtuse bourgeois attitudes of the English towards art and philosophy, an attitude which (following Carlyle and German critics) he terms "philistinism." The public of Victorian England, he complains, is complacently and self-assertively vulgar. The Philistine cannot go beyond the immediately practical, and is blind and deaf to the more comprehensive moral or rational views. The English have a reluctance to think and feel which is not found in the French, whom their revolution has made a critical and active people. In England there is no true literary criticism: the reviewers of The Edinburgh Review, The Quarterly Review, The Times, etc., are Philistines just like their public, and they are only guided by a narrow conventionality and a spirit of political party (Whig or Tory).

We have spoken before of the objectivity of the poet and critic. The main rule of criticism ought to be just the contrary of partisanship: disinterestedness. Disinterestedness not in the sense of not caring about something, but in the sense of critical distance, of objectivity, of not just looking to one's more immediate concern while judging. Later, Marxist critics have contested the possibility of being ultimately "disinterested" and denounced this doctrine as a bourgeois fiction. Still, Arnold's ideal of the critic is the one adopted by English and American academic criticism in our century (Richards, Leavis, Frye, Wimsatt). According to this view, "the critic is disinterested precisely because he has a social function, not because he lacks it . . . .Without disinterest, there is no possibility of truth or of building a highly developed culture" (Hall 193).

The problem of valuation is an acute one for Arnold, because of the high estimate he has of the function of poetry. He warns us not to be misled in our judgement by two common fallacies: the historical fallacy and the personal fallacy.

- The historical fallacy consists in an excessive reverence to the poetical works of the past, without entering into a judgement of their real merits. This will result in our confusing the notion of what a classic is. A classic is a work of real value, not an old work which is held in reverence. Indeed, if Arnold spoke so freely of the classics, it is to a large extent in ignorance of the historicist sweep in linguistics and literary criticism which is building up around him. In his warning against the historical fallacy there is a danger of a fall into anachronism and narrowness; we have to judge old works with far more qualifications than Arnold seemed to think necessary.

- The personal fallacy consists in overrating the value of those works which appeal to us for some personal reason, which involve our affections for reasons not strictly poetical.

The historic estimate is likely to affect our judgement and our language when we are dealing with ancient poets; the personal

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4 Rpt. in Adams 583-515.
estimate when we are dealing with poets our contemporaries, or at any rate modern. (Study 598) This warning shows that Arnold is against the Romantic extreme of subjective criticism, as defended by Sainte-Beuve or Anatole France.

Criticism must not be guided by external principles, it must rather discover its own way, following its own nature and the free play of the mind.

Its business is . . . . 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" ("Function")

Criticism must be sincere and honest, but it must not have an immediate end in view guiding it, because then it becomes stifled. 

*Slow and obscure it may be, but it is the only proper work of criticism*" (A, A 590)

In the long run, criticism will educate the public and teach them to draw the fine distinctions which at present escape them—for instance, the distinction between science and religion which lies at the bottom of Arnold's criticism of bishop Colenso. It is the duty of the critic to become acquainted with the cultural advances in foreign countries, and to introduce them, as well as to contribute to the universal diffusion of knowledge:

Every critic should try and possess one great literature, at least, besides his own; and the more unlike his own, the better" ("Function" 545)

Arnold believes Europe to be a wide spiritual confederation, and it is our duty to strengthen its ties.

Criticism is creative in a limited way, but it has the advantage of being a controllable creation. The creative power may manifest itself in criticism in those ages where artistic creation is not favoured by social conditions, and criticism will pave the way for a future development of art.

Most of Arnold's literary essays are collected in his *Essays in Criticism* (1865, 1889). His contribution to the nation-race brand of criticism typical of the Romantic age is to be found in *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867); he speaks there of the dreamy, magical and unruly lyrical spirit which lies at the deepest roots of the Celtic nations; this influenced the Celtic revival at the end of the XIXth century. It is just one more instance of his influence, which was widespread, although his critical principles have often been declared insufficient and narrow. The most direct followers of his views are the "New Humanists" in America, such as Irving Babbit and Paul Elmer More, but Arnold's influence extends until our own days, among those who believe that the foremost social duty of the critic is intellectual rigour and seriousness.

1.2. *John Ruskin* (1819-1900)
Ruskin, like Arnold, was a moralistic critic. He was more concerned with painting than with literature, but many of his ideas serve for both. His most important contribution to criticism was the concept of the "pathetic fallacy," one we can add to Arnold's "historical" and "personal" fallacies.

The pathetic fallacy identified by Ruskin consists in attributing human intentions and feelings to inanimate or irrational creatures. This is a common poetical resource, but Ruskin has mixed feelings towards it. Like Coleridge and some other Romantic critics, he insists that right perception is important for the poet; like Arnold, he thinks that truth is basic in art: what is untrue is not good, nor useful, nor ultimately pleasurable. The pathetic fallacy is always false to some extent, but it is justifiable if it is used to express the passion that moves the poet and alters his perception. If it is used mechanically, without passion, it is the sign of bad poetry: "the pathetic fallacy is powerful only as it is pathetic, feeble so far as it is fallacious."5 "Ruskin's analysis is perceptive, but if it is rigidly applied to all cases of personification and anthropomorphism, it results in some awkward judgements, for many poets have employed the pathetic fallacy in contexts where it is successful" (Adams 615).

According to this conception of Ruskin's, the truly great poets do not mix their feelings in their work, they do not judge their characters or let their emotions affect their observation: in as in the case of Coleridge or Arnold, we find in Ruskin a further step towards the ideal of the objective art, away from some Romantic ideals; an ideal which will be further expounded by Henry James or Edward Bullough.

1.3. John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

J. S. Mill is the philosopher who "humanised" Utilitarianism, the ultra-reasonable philosophy of Capitalism developed by Jeremy Bentham and his own father James Mill. For instance, he recognises the importance of art and literature, which had been dismissed by Bentham in a gesture both Platonic and businesslike. In J. S. Mill's essays on poetry we find an acknowledgement of the basic Romantic positions, in a more moderate and reasonable way than Blake or Shelley. Poetry is beneficial, Mill believes, because it moralizes the reader, purifying his emotions. "In doing so, it performs a cultural and social function ultimately consistent with utilitarian aims" (Adams 526). Like Shelley and other romantics, he understands

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5 John Ruskin, "Of the Pathetic Fallacy" (Modern Painters, III.iv.12 [1856]; rpt. in Adams 616-623) 623.
poetry as a quality which may manifest itself in many different ways. This
will be important later, to justify the novel's claim to being an artistic form.

Many of the finest poems are in the form of novels, Mill affirms. But poetry is also as a mode of writing which can be opposed to fiction and to rhetoric. The highest poetry is not narrative; narrative has something childish about it. And indeed the aims of poetry and fiction are different:

Poetry, when it is really such, is truth; and fiction also, if it is good for anything, is truth: but they are different truths. The truth of poetry is to paint the human soul truly; the truth of fiction is to give a true picture of life. ("What is Poetry?" 538)

The poet knows man, and the novelist knows men. Of course, they may combine in any degree, but they are different things. Also, poetry is not eloquence, or rhetoric. Here Mill elaborates on Shelley's definition:

Eloquence is heard; poetry is over heard. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener . . . All poetry is of the nature of the soliloquy. (539-40)

This is because poetry must be directed towards itself, not to any extrinsic aim:

when the act of utterance is not itself the end, but a means to an end . . . then it ceases to be poetry, and becomes eloquence. (540)

Of course, poetry is not to be confused with a real soliloquy; it is only an as if. A similar generic difference (poetry / oratory / narrative) is to be found in all arts.

1.4. Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881)

The Scottish historian and political essayist Thomas Carlyle was a leading influence on nineteenth-century British thought. His ideal is an essentially aristocratic one: he often contends that might and right are the same, that a few peoples are superior to others, that democracy is absurd, and that government should be in the hands of one hero or dictator. His book On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History (1840) is animated by the ideal of the superior man, the hero who can appear in a variety of shapes in different historical moments. After dealing with the hero as warrior, as religious leader, etc., he presents the figure of "the hero as poet"—Shakespeare, for instance. Indeed, all heroes, all great men are poets in some way for him.

Like Blake or Shelley, Carlyle opposes the 18th-century scientific ideal. Alongside with Coleridge, he is the main transmitter of German Idealist and romantic ideas. In Sartor Resartus (1831) he introduces the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic symbols, which corresponds

6 John Stuart Mill, "What is Poetry?" (1833; rpt. in Adams 537-543) 537.
roughly to the difference between symbol and allegory as developed by Goethe, Schlegel, Schelling, Coleridge and others. All true works of art are intrinsic symbols. In the symbol we find a simultaneous concealing and revelation of the thought; the infinite is at once concealed and revealed in the particular image:

In the symbol proper . . . there is ever more or less distinctly and indirectly, some embodiment and revelation of the infinite; the infinite is made to blend itself with the finite, to stand visible, and as it were, attainable there.  

Symbols govern the whole of man's life; human activity in general, Carlyle believes, is symbolic as well as real.

1.5. **Ralph Waldo Emerson** (1803-1882)

Emerson was a Transcendentalist, which means that he is an American Romantic of the Concord group, a brand of Romanticism much given to the moral lecture on individual responsibility. Emerson's poetical creed is much the same as Coleridge's or Shelley's. His views on symbolism are especially interesting. Symbolism is a universal phenomenon, which goes far beyond poetry:

Nature offers all his creatures to [the poet] as a picture language. Being used as a type, a second wonderful value appears in the object, far better than its old value . . . . Things admit of being used as symbols because nature is a symbol, in the whole and in every part.

Like Carlyle, he discovers that the whole of human activity is ruled by symbolism and the establishment of similarities between things:

Every word was once a poem. Every new relation is a new word . . . . We are symbols and inhabit symbols (549)

Of course, the poet is the word-maker *par excellence*; his constant activity is needed because symbols appear and disappear, are abandoned or used to make other symbols:

The quality of the imagination is to flow, and not to freeze . . . . all symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive. (552)

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7 Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (1836; excerpt in Adams 533).
8 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet" (1842-43), rpt. in Adams 545-554) 546.