MATTHEW ARNOLD
"THE FUNCTION OF CRITICISM AT THE PRESENT TIME" (1864)

Critical Theory Since Plato. Ed. Hazard Adams. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971. 592-603.

Pragmatic theorists from Plato onwards have emphasised the impact which literature has on the reader. Here, Arnold, arguably England's most important cultural critic in the second half of the nineteenth century and someone who has exerted enormous influence on subsequent generations of critics even here in the Caribbean, focuses not on what literature does to the reader but what the reader or critic ought to do to the literary works which he reads. Influenced by Plato's belief that the objective, absolute truth can be known, Arnold offers a 'disinterested' model of reading that aspires to be objective about both the meaning and value of the work in question (i.e. both what the work is about and its moral impact) and which, even though it appears very dated today in the light of recent theoretical developments, was profoundly influential upon literary criticism until at least the 1960's.

Arnold begins by defending the role of the critic against the accusation that the role performed by the creative writer is far more important: they argue for the "inherent superiority of the creative effort of the human spirit over its critical effort" (592). Arnold does not deny that a "free creative activity" (593) is the "highest function of man" (593) and that he finds in it his "true happiness" (593). However, he argues that this activity can be exercised "in other ways than in producing great works of literature or art" (593). Men may also express it, he contends, in "well-doing" (593), "learning" (593), and "criticising" (593). Moreover, he argues, the ability to write great works is not possible in all eras and "therefore labour may be vainly spent in preparing for it, in rendering it possible" (593). Arguing that creative writers work with "elements, with materials" (593) and that the elements in question are "ideas; the best ideas on every matter which literature touches, current at the time" (593), Arnold contends that "creative literary genius" (593) does not "principally show itself in discovering new ideas" (593) (which is the province of the philosopher) but in "synthesis and exposition, not of analysis and discovery" (593):

> its gift lies in the faculty of being happily inspired by a certain intellectual and spiritual atmosphere, by a certain order of ideas, . . . of dealing divinely with these ideas, presenting them in the most effective and attractive combinations,--making beautiful work with them, in short. But it must have the atmosphere, it must find itself amidst the order of ideas, in order to work freely. (593)

In short, the "creative power has . . . appointed elements, and those elements are not in its control" (593).

The "creative power" (593) depends, Arnold claims, upon the "critical power" (593). The goal of criticism, Arnold argues, is "to see the object as in itself it really is" (593). Criticism consequently functions 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 stir and growth everywhere; out of this stir and growth come the creative epochs of literature. (593)

Because a poet "ought to know life and the world before dealing with them in poetry" (593), the "creation of a modern poet . . . implies a great critical effort behind it" (593).

The key quality on the part of the critic is, Arnold argues, "disinterestedness" (597) which the critic accomplishes 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 steadfastly refusing to lend itself to any of those ulterior, practical considerations about ideas, which plenty of people will be sure to attach to them . . . but which criticism has really nothing to do with. Its business is . . . simply to know the best that is known and thought in the world, and by in its making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas. Its business is to do 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. (597)

He defines such disinterestedness as, in short, the "free play of 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 . . . must, in the long run, die of inanition" (596). The "bane of criticism" (597) in England, he argues, 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 the mind the second. (597)

Disinterested criticism which confines itself to the "pure intellectual sphere" (597) leads, by contrast, not to partisanship and biases but to objectivity and truth. Its "best spiritual work" (597) is to "keep man from a self-satisfaction which is retarding and vulgarising, to lead him towards perfection, by making his mind dwell upon what is excellent in itself, and the absolute beauty and fitness of things" (597).

Arnold acknowledges that the "virtue of detachment" (599) is not attractive to the "mass of mankind" (599) and that it is "not easy to lead a practical man . . . to see a thing which he has always been used to look at from one side only, . . . that this thing, looked at from another side, may appear much less beneficent and beautiful" (599). However, "without this free disinterested treatment of things, truth and the highest culture are out of the question" (599). This is why criticism must "maintain its independence of the practical spirit and its aims" (601). If we would think of "quietly enlarging our stock of true and fresh ideas" (602), we must "betake ourselves to the serener life of the mind and spirit" (602). Disinterestedness is not limited to the criticism of "politics and religion" (602). In literary criticism, he asserts, it is vital to adopt a similar attitude. If "judging" (602) is the critic's business, the "judgment which almost insensibly forms itself in a fair and clear mind, along with fresh knowledge is the valuable one" (602). This is why "fresh knowledge" (602) must ever be the critic's greatest concern. It is in "communicating fresh knowledge, and letting his own judgment pass along with it--but insensibly" (602), that is, not in a preachy way, that the critic will "do most good to his reader" (602).

Arnold argues that Romantic poetry was a failure. It possessed "plenty of energy, plenty of creative force" (594), he admits, but "did not know enough" (594) because, notwithstanding the impact of the French Revolution on the movement, their creative endeavour was not predicated upon sound and disinterested criticism. The French Revolution provoked much thought, he admits, but is to be distinguished from earlier momentous historical events. Where the latter produced "disinterested intellectual and spiritual movements . . . in which the human spirit looked for its satisfaction in itself and in the increased play of its own activity" (594), the French Revolution "took a political, practical character" (594). To be sure, he agrees, it animated a whole nation with an "enthusiasm for pure reason, and with an ardent zeal for making its prescriptions triumph" (595) (no mean achievement given "how little of mind . . . comes into the motives which . . . impel great masses of men" [595]). It derived a "unique and still living power" (595) from the "force,

truth, and universality of its ideas" (595) and from the "passion with which it could inspire a multitude for these ideas" (595). As a result, France is the "country in Europe where *the people* is most alive" (595). However, he argues, the "mania for giving an immediate political and practical application for all these fine ideas of the reason was fatal" (595). This is because ideas "cannot be too much prized in and for themselves" (595)as a result of which it is simply wrong to "transport them abruptly into the world of politics, and practice, violently to revolutionise this world to their bidding" (595). There is an immense gulf between the "world of ideas" (595) and the "world of practice" (595). The French Revolution made the fatal error of blindly "quitting the intellectual sphere and rushing furiously into the political sphere" (595).