

MATTHEW ARNOLD "THE STUDY OF POETRY" (1880)

Arnold, Matthew. "The Study of Poetry." Critical Theory Since Plato. Ed. Hazard Adams. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971. 603-607.

In his anthology of English poetry, Arnold illustrates the allegedly objective critical judgment of which he speaks in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" in terms of his selection of those poets worthy in his view of being anthologised. In his preface to the anthology, he clarifies what he means by 'judgment' by turning his attention in particular to the questions of literary history and canons. The main criteria informing Arnold's approach to literary history here are literature's higher truth (i.e. the degree to which a work captures not the realities of this world but ideals, that is, the perfection found in the world beyond this and which is the standard by which we ought to organise life in the here and now) and its moral value (i.e. the impact for good which literature has on the reader). Only works that meet these criteria ought to be part of that canon of works worthy of being studied.

Using metaphors concerning rivers in what would prove subsequently to be a very influential way, Arnold begins by arguing that the "stream of English poetry" (603) is only one "contributory stream to the world river of poetry" (603). He argues that we should "conceive of poetry worthily, and more highly than it has been the custom" (603), that is, as "capable of higher uses, and called to higher destinies, than those in general which man has assigned to it hitherto" (604). He contends that we must "turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us" (604) because, as Wordsworth put it, it is the 'breath and finer spirit of all knowledge' as a result of which it is superior to science, philosophy, and religion. To be "capable of fulfilling such high destinies" (604), however, poetry must be "of a high order of excellence" (604). In poetry, for this reason, the "distinction between excellent and inferior, sound and unsound or only half-sound, true and untrue or only half-true, is of paramount importance" (604). It is in poetry that conveys the "criticism of life" (604) and which meets the "conditions fixed . . . by the laws of poetic truth and beauty" (604) that the "spirit of our race will find . . . its consolation and stay" (605). 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" (604).

The "best poetry" (604) is that which has a "power of forming, sustaining, and delighting us, as nothing else can" (604). Its "most precious benefit" (604) is a "clearer, deeper sense of the best in poetry, and of the strength and joy to be drawn from it" (604). This sense should "govern our estimate of what we read" (604). Arnold contrasts this, what he terms the "real estimate" (604), with "two other kinds of estimate, the historic estimate and the personal estimate" (604), which are both "fallacies" (604). The former calculates a poet's merit on historical grounds, that is, by "regarding a poet's work as a stage" (604) in the "course and development of a nation's language, thought, and poetry" (604) (this is view advanced by Hippolyte Taine). The latter calculates a poet's merit on the basis of our "personal affinities, likings and circumstances" (604) which may make us "overrate the object of our interest" (604) because the work in question "is, or has been, of high importance" (604) to us personally. Many people, Arnold argues, skip "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 poetry" (505). All this misses, however, the indispensability of recognising the "reality of the poet's classic character" (605), that is, the test whether his work "belongs to the class of the very best" (605) and that

appreciation of the "wide difference between it and all work which has not the same character" (605). Arnold points out that "tracing historic origins and historical relationships" (605) is not totally unimportant and that to some degree personal choice enters into any attempt to anthologise works. However, the 'real estimate,' from which derives the "benefit of clearly feeling and of deeply enjoying the really excellent, the truly classic in poetry" (605) ought to be the literary historian's objective.

The question arises: how exactly does one recognise the poet's classic character? How should one determine whether a given poet meets those criteria which allow him to be ranked among the best? The answer: the critic must compare the work in question to the established classics, brief "passages, even single lines" (606) drawn from which serve as a "touchstone" (606) for assessment purposes. They, when memorised, function as an "infallible touchstone for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality, and also the degree of this quality, in all other poetry" (606). Having to hand "concrete examples" (607) and "specimens of poetry of . . . the very highest quality" (607) suffices to "keep clear and sound our judgments about poetry, to save us from fallacious estimates of it, to conduct us to a real estimate" (606). Given that the "characters of a high quality are what is expressed *there*" (607), Arnold contends that poetic quality is "far better recognised by being felt in the poetry of a master, than by being perused in the prose of the critic" (607).

However, what exactly does it mean to say that this or that work possesses a 'high poetic quality'? Arnold answers that poetic quality resides in both the "substance and matter" (607) and the "style and manner" (607) which are "inseparable" (607) from and "vitally connected" (607) to each other. The former consists in what he terms somewhat vaguely as a "higher truth and a higher seriousness" (607) while the latter consists in the equally vague "diction and movement" (607). For the work to possess poetic quality, both substance and style must be present. In the early twentieth century, the influential British critic F. R. Leavis would apply Arnold's criteria to the study of British literature in his famous work of literary history and *canon-formation*, The Great Tradition. The Leavisite canon, his views on who was in and who was out, the necessity, for example, to abandon Milton in favour of Donne, Joyce in favour of Lawrence, shaped the views of generations of subsequent critics even here in the Caribbean.