Preface

Matthew Arnold is the foremost Victorian literary critic and poet. His literary criticism is exceptionally powerful and unrelievedly modern. William E. Buckler, fittingly eulogizing the contemporary bearing of Arnold's literary criticism, called him the founding father of the main line of modern literary criticism. Arnold indeed gave criticism distinctiveness; a broad based cultural complexity and academic conscientiousness. After making an insightful study we can not but see the forward looking influence of Arnold upon such modern critics as T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards et al, the schools like the New Criticism and other critics of objectivity. Arnold also exerted immense influence upon the study of Comparative literature, which has occupied a very vital position today. Arnold amazingly anticipated T. S. Eliot's insistence on objectivity in literary criticism, I. A. Richards's view of the saving power of poetry and F. R. Leavis’s conviction of the moral role in literature. In the realm of literary criticism one path leads from the classical tradition through Sidney and
the Romantics like Wordsworth, Coleridge and others to the [present day theory oriented approaches. The other path leads through Dr. Johnson and Matthew Arnold to T.S.Eliot and F.R.Leavis and to a more text-oriented approach that, in turn merges with the theory oriented approach of the 1980s and of the 1990s. But it would be preposterous to assume that Arnold anticipated and encouraged the modern upsurge of theory. He rather disliked too much theorizing in the realm of literary criticism, for he believed that the ultimate end of criticism lies in helping the reader to enjoy literature and not to entangle him in the intricate and opaque web of theories. Writing several years ago a leading critic Joseph Epstein in his article “Matthew Arnold and the Resistance” teasingly pictured Arnold reeling at a MLA meeting, holding a sheaf of papers, the programme, and announcing one weird and queer paper after another. And in the colloquium the graduate students “come and go” talking of Michel Foucault. This is a true picture, for Arnold never involved himself in the pursuit of propounding theories that only makes things more incomprehensible and obscure. In the following chapters I have tried to
show how intensively Arnold anticipated modern criticism and how above all he endeavoured to sustain the spirit of objectivity.


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(Prasenjit Chattopadhyay)