Chapter V

Arnold’s Celtic Discourse —

On the Study of Celtic Literature
On the Study of Celtic Literature.

*On the Study of Celtic Literature* is one of the really influential books of the nineteenth century ... . It added greatly to the effect of German scholarship in making Ireland and things Irish dignified in the eyes of our people.

Frank O'Connor

*The Backward Look: A Survey of Irish Literature*

*On the Study of Celtic Literature*, a series of Matthew Arnold's later Oxford lectures were delivered in 1865–66 and was published as a book in 1867. Three chief impulses spurred Arnold to the Celtic direction. These were his mother's Cornish descent, an exploration of Wales in 1864 and his poetic sympathy with the temperament he sought to define. But Arnold's hidden intention was, as the scores of critics like Rene Wellek, Clinton Machann, Douglas Bush, Owen Dudley Edwards et al have pointed out, to establish a Celtic chair at the University of Oxford, which was ultimately created in 1877. And as Douglas Bush has remarked, "One member of his final audience, the undergraduate John Rhys, was to be the first incumbent of the chair" (Bush 109).
On the Study of Celtic Literature is a proof of Arnold's ever expanding breadth of horizon. It is a seminal essay, which was a persuasive and timely utterance in the time of need. This essay, replete with intuitive insights and exceptional critical acumen, is in its turn considerably influenced by the writings of great French critic Ernest Renan's La poesie des races celtiques. Arnold's similarity with Renan is remarkable when he links together Irish, Welsh and Breton literatures, and when he elaborates, taking a cue from Renan, the idea of Celtic spirituality, melancholy and the Celtic treatment of nature.

Arnold's profound discourse On the Study of Celtic Literature makes us see one of the many facets of literary critic Matthew Arnold. This Oxford lecture of Arnold has a far-reaching and enduring impact upon, not only modern literary criticism, of which we shall make a reconnaissance, but also, it "made the study of matters Celtic a respectable subject for the academic elite of Oxford and Cambridge, and their far-flung if somewhat embittered exiles" (Edwards 151). Commenting upon the immeasurable influence exercised by
Arnold's Celtic discourses, eminent critic of Celtic studies Owen D. Edwards says:

His impact was very great in this field, although the initial reception of his theses among the makers of English public opinion was rather cold. He built the platform for the Celtic evangelists of the 1890s: the Oscar Wildes, the Bernard Shaw, the Great Allens, the Fiona Macleods, the W.B.Yeatses, the R. Berry o' Briens, the Ernest Rhyses. Their attack on English literary orthodoxy was the bolder because of him; as the Americans say, he made them walk tall (Edwards 151).

Modern literary criticism's debt to Arnold seems inexhaustible when in this Celtic discourse of Arnold we find him presaging some of the most significant modes of twentieth century criticism. Objective theories of literary criticism like the New Criticism, Formalism, and New Aristotelianism etc form major bedrocks of twentieth century literary criticism. New Criticism or Formalism is not a monolithic body of critical school, there are various strands running through this theory. What is
common among critics as diverse as Eliot, Richards, Allen Tate, J.C.Ransom, R.P.Blackmur, Yvor Winters, Kenneth Burke, W.Empson, is their ardent plea for 'objectivity' in criticism. Commenting on this trend in criticism, M.H.Abrams in his rich and remarkable study *The Mirror and the Lamp* says:

> And with differing emphases and adequacy, and in a great variety of theoretical contexts, the objective approach to poetry has become one of the most prominent elements in the innovative criticism of the last two or three decades († TML 27).

In our earlier discussions we have marked how Matthew Arnold adumbrated the objectivity of the Formalists in his call for "disinterestedness" or to see "the object as in itself it really is". These pleas by Arnold anticipate the advent of a Formalist or New Critical school that insisted on close reading and a detached objective way of looking at the texts. In his Celtic lecture, *On the Study of Celtic Literature* Arnold again asks for objectivism in literary criticism. After making an in-depth
study and a survey which corroborated the claim of authenticity and antiquity by Irish literature Arnold says, “I say, then, what we want is to know the Celt and his genius, not to exalt him or to abase him, but to know him. And for this a disinterested, positive, and constructive criticism is needed” (LEC 328).

Some lines later, Arnold again says, while lauding Celtic grammarian Zeuss, that “[t]he Celtic grammar of Zeuss..., offers a splendid specimen of that patient, disinterested way of treating objects of Knowledge” (LEC 328). All these opinions of Arnold seem to presage in a coherent, disciplined way the upsurge of critical fervour for objectivism in twentieth century literary criticism. These ideas of Arnold instantly make us think of his modern successors like T.S.Eliot, who in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” says “honest criticism and sensitive appreciation are directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry”(PL 94 §53). René Wellek with his deep insight and unsurpassable scholarship makes an echo of Arnold:

if we want to arrive at a coherent theory of literature, we must do what disciplines do: Isolate our object, establish our subject
matter, distinguish the study of literature from other related pursuits. It seems obvious that the works of literature is the central subject matter of a theory of literature and not the biography or psychology of the author, or the social background or the effective response of the reader (Wellek 156).

In this lecture on Celtic literature Matthew Arnold foretells to a certain extent the theory of eminent modern critic Murray Krieger. Krieger’s critical conceptions was moulded in the line of the New Criticism, and his own brand of almost same sort of criticism was ‘contextualism’. Frank Lentricchia in his epoch making book After the New Criticism dubs Krieger’s ‘contextualism’ as a type ‘of New Criticism’. Krieger’s ‘contextualism’ is infact a poetics that would seal off the poem from non poetic contexts, the proper context for anything in the poem, in Krieger’s argument, is only the poem itself. Arnold while speaking about the spuriousness of the so called counterfeit Ossian by Macpherson opines that the perceived spuriousness, the ‘'forged, modern,
tawdry" (LEC 370) in the book matters very little, one should see the
matchless beauty of the poems only. Inspite of all the accusations, "there
will still be left in the book a residue with the very soul of the Celtic
genius in it" (LEC 370). These ideas of Arnold infact, have strange
resemblance with those of the critics of objectivity like Eliot, Richards, the
New Critics, or critics like Krieger. Arnold's ardour for objectivity in
literary criticism and cogent pleas for close reading of the texts a la Eliot
and the New Critics finds its clearest expression in the concluding section
of the Celtic lecture. Running over the fact that most of the literary critics
are a failure he drives his point home, "The truth is, few people have any
real care to analyse closely in their criticism; they merely employ criticism
as a means for heaping all praise on what they like, and all blame on
what they dislike" (LEC 380).

It is virtually impossible to find any critique of Arnold that does not
contain the traces of his comparative critical faculty. On the Study of
Celtic Literature is no exception in this regard. Arnold here records his
intimate experiences how he was left spellbound by the sheer,
enchanting poetry of nature rendered with wonderful felicity by the Celts. This delectable side is termed as the 'delicate magic'. Arnold writes passionately, "Magic is just the word for it"(LEC 374). Speaking at length about the natural magic of the Celts, Arnold brings to the fore a profound discussion about various literatures, like Greek and Latin literature, German literature etc. What Arnold says is in fact, nothing but a comparatist's ultimate aim, not to read and treat various literatures in a piecemeal way but to treat them as an organic whole. According to Arnold one should not talk about literatures of England, French, Germany or Italy separately but to think of European literature as a single entity. Then Arnold provides us with a fine, exquisite piece of comparative discourse about the relative merits of Novalis, Ruckert, Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Keats. About their either Germanic or Celtic way of rendering the nature, Arnold writes:

Novalis or Ruckert, for instance, have their eye fixed on nature, and have undoubtedly a feeling for natural magic; a rough-and-ready critic easily credits them and the Germans with the
Celtic fineness of tact, the Celtic nearness to Nature and her secret; but the question is whether the strokes in the German’s picture of nature have ever the indefinable delicacy, charm, and perfection of the Celt’s touch... or of Shakespeare touch in his daffodil, Wordsworth’s in his cuckoo, Keats’s in his Autumn, Obermann’s in his mountain birch-tree or his Easter-daisy among the Swiss farms. To decide where the gift for natural magic originally lies, whether it is properly Celtic or Germanic, we must decide the question (LEC 376-77).

Then Arnold compares the different ways of handling nature— the conventional way, the faithful way and the Greek way. Subsequently Arnold compares and contrasts the modes of handling nature in the works of Pope, Latin poet Propertius, Theocritus, Keats, Goethe and Shakespeare who alone commingles both Greek and Celtic way of handling nature. Gleaning most appropriate and delectable lines from these poets Arnold presents an exceedingly well-balanced view of their comparative merits.
Post-colonial criticism, which is a much-hyped thing nowadays, has positively contributed to the intellectual ferment of this post-modernist era. Postcolonial studies tend to analyse the history, culture, literature and modes of discourse that are specific to the former colonies of England, Spain, France and other European imperial powers. Though these studies have focused specifically upon Africa, Asia, the Caribbean isles and South America, some theorists of post-colonialism extended the scope of such analyses to the discourse and cultural productions of such countries as Ireland, Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

Following the lead of contemporary Irish literary critics like Gerry Smith, the eminent post-colonial critics like Edward Said, Homi K. Bhaba, Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, Frantz Fanon are increasingly focusing their attention on the aspects of Irish literature, observed through "a perspective that reveals the extent to which the social and economic life represented in the literature was tacitly underwritten by colonial exploitation" (CLT 236).

Gerry Smyth in his brilliant research based book Decolonisation and
Criticism has pointed out how the Irish and non-Irish post-colonial critics are concentrating on Irish subject, Irish literature, discourses related with Celticism etc. In this regard Smith has very dexterously directed his readers' attention to the opinions on Arnold by some of the Post-colonial critics. Gerry Smith has shown us how Arnold's *On the Study of Celtic Literature* influenced two notable critics, like Sean O' Faolin and Eleanor Knott. Sean O' Faolin while writing a critique on exotic modern novelist James Joyce criticized him unfavourably for his experiment with literature and language as 'a revolt against the despotism of fact'. Commenting on this Smyth says that, "[t]hus, O' Faolin recalls Matthew Arnold's Celticism discourse of half a century before, unaware, perhaps, of the implicit structure of power and knowledge on which this discourse relied" (Smyth 85).

Again, another critic of Irish literature Eleanor Knott, also writes with distinct Arnoldian echo. In her book *Irish Classical Poetry, Commonly Called Bardic Poetry*, Knott reflects on the contradictory nature of Irish culture as conceived by modern scholarly discourse. Her writing, as Gerry
Smyth finds out, has a curious Arnoldian ring about it. Not only that Eleanor Knott cites Arnold but also very much like him offers, "...a sense of style and dignity ... as the distinguishing characteristics of Irish poetic discourse (Smyth 186)."