CHAPTER - II

MATTHEW ARNOLD'S POETICS
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Before any attempt is made to analyse and assess Arnold's approach to the Romantic poets, it is necessary to outline, broadly, Arnold's role as a "preacher and propagandist of new ideas, in the field of criticism, which according to him includes literary as well as social criticism.

We would be quite unfair to Arnold, if we label him as a mere populariser. An impartial and dispassionate look at his body of criticism reveals, on the contrary, how profound Arnold is, as a literary critic. The new humanistic trend which took a concrete shape in the Anglo-American criticism of the twentieth century, no doubt, can be traced back to Arnold's pronouncements on the nature and function of poetry and the business of a healthy critic.

Arnold was primarily a humanist. He was speaking in "Literature and Science" - "On behalf of the illumination and refinement of that Reason by which man might shape' the conditions of his own existence."¹

So powerful was his role as a 'prophet of new ideas' that his influence helped to standardise the poetic taste of the period.

The critic's role in educating the taste of the public cannot be easily ignored and in this respect, the significance of Arnold's work in the Victorian period cannot be overlooked.

For a proper understanding of Arnold's critical stance and his statements on the nature and function of poetry, a detailed analysis of the essays "The Function of Criticism at the present time" and his 'Preface to 1853 poems' along with his "study of poetry" is indispensable. The objective of the famous essay "The Function of criticism at the present time" - a very important document in the enunciation of Arnold's critical canon - is to define the task of a critic. The task of the critic is to be first and foremost to be disinterested; 'to know the best that is known in the world' and to create a 'current of fresh and true ideas' to enable the creative artist to produce great works of art.

Arnold, assigned a vital role to the critic when he said that it was the business of the critic to make an
intellectual situation of which the creative power can profitably avail itself. It is also Arnold's contention that life and the world being in modern times, very complex things, the creation of a modern poet, to be worth much, implies a great critical effort behind it; else it must be a comparatively poor, barren and short lived affair.\(^2\)

It has been said that Arnold claimed too much for the critic. But one thing quite obvious here is, that the object of criticism may not be literary, "it is rather to establish an intellectual situation, an order of ideas, and to make the best ideas prevail."

For this purpose he insisted upon the practice of the virtue of disinterestedness - the key concept in the essay, "A disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world"\(^3\). Disinterestedness is the spiritual task of criticism which is to keep man away from complacency and to lead him towards perfection by making his mind open and educating


\(^3\)Ibid., p. 33.
it to dwell upon what is excellent in itself.

Arnold also complains of intellectual aridity and lack of proper critical discrimination on the part of the British poets of the first quarter of the 19th century. On the same grounds, he decries the uncontrolled energy and creative vigour of the Romantic poets and lavishes undue praise on France and Germany. He finds there the growth of critical power, which made them strong. In other words, Arnold emphasizes that the kind of critical movement that flourished in these parts of Europe, established an order of ideas and made an adequate intellectual situation possible, providing for a proper interpretation of the world for the creative artist.

Based on the proposition stated above are his conclusive judgements that Byron's poetry was so empty of matter, and Shelley's so incoherent and Wordsworth's even profound as it was lacked completeness and variety. In *Culture and Anarchy* we hear Arnold talking in similar accents when he says that criticism should regard the whole of Europe as one great confederation for intellectual and spiritual purposes and philistinism is against disinterestedness. The Barbarians and the philistines have made the English 'narrow' complacent.
He insisted on the English critic's need to study French and German literature to enlarge and broaden his outlook. Truly, Arnold like his contemporaries, 'is striving wholeheartedly to release his countrymen from their narrow prejudices' (provincialism in particular) and to direct them to the right kind of balance - the truest goal of human endeavour.

It is for this reason that he preaches the gospel of disinterestedness in criticism. According to him genuine criticism should be free from partisan feelings and should be, in other words, governed more by humanistic interest - the moral and social passion for doing good. He urges that English criticism should be characterized by a sense of disinterestedness, if it is to be fruitful. This need for disinterestedness in criticism, stems from Arnold's dissatisfaction with the undue emphasis of the British Philistine on action and orientation towards everything practical and immediately useful. Criticism in this sense must govern every organ of public life - political and religious - and must be in a position to acquire independent status in matters of judgement. It must also operate in a wider area, casting aside all thoughts of provinciality, political
prejudice and religious fanaticism. It should proceed to look upon a work of art in an unbiased way, offer fresh and new ideas of wider application and truths of universal significance. It then frees the mind of the tendency to act impulsively, or to indulge in thoughts bordering on exuberant self-satisfaction.

Nevertheless, many critics have found that this insistence on disinterestedness of a critic, has nothing to do with the true sense of objectivity, necessary on the part of a critic, to judge a work of art, as a work of art.

In fact, many felt that Arnold's term 'disinterestedness' acts only as a restraint on fair criticism by involving preconceived schemes of perfection, which aim only to smother the critical perception of the critic and Arnold's own judgements are marred to a certain extent, by this practice of so called disinterestedness, resulting in his wrong estimate of most of the writers.

Corollary to his pronouncements on the business of criticism is his notable theory of the nature and function of poetry. The apparent contradictions, obscurities and inconsistent thoughts are found scattered throughout Arnold's
critical writings. They are in a way summed up in his 'Study of Poetry'.

His significant pronouncements on the nature and function of poetry are too well-known. Arnold defines "poetry as a criticism of life under conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty." Criticism of life - has been defined as the application of moral ideas to life and "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."

Arnold further, says that "more and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry, to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us ... most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry."

The most essential part of poetic greatness, consists in the 'noble and profound application of ideas to

4Ibid., p. 236.
5Ibid., p. 237.
6Ibid., p. 235.
If criticism were to lead to a 'promised land', it cannot be merely by a 'disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world', it should also be ardent, flexible, all encompassing and ever widening in its knowledge. It is this concept of criticism that underlies Arnold's definition and description of poetry as 'criticism of life'.

The correlation between his idea of criticism as a disinterested endeavour to see things as they are, urging humanity to progress on realistic lines, and the phrase 'application of ideas' is at once clear. Both appear to be investing the critic with the responsibility of purveying and judging the ideas of a philosopher, making only the best ideas prevail. But there seems to be a deep obscurity (not to speak of contradiction) discernible in these key statements of Arnold's. There seems to be an apparent inconsistency in thought, in his statement 'the noble and profound application of ideas to life is the most essential part of poetic greatness,' with what he says in the essay on Heine "poetry is simply the most beautiful impressive and widely effective mode of saying things and hence its importance." 7

7Ibid., p. 113.
Of course in one context he is talking about the style, in another, the content. The latter statement of Arnold's echoes the fundamental belief of Wordsworth that "the object of poetry is truth, not standing upon external testimony but carried alive into the heart by passion; truth which is its own testimony, which gives competence and confidence, to the tribunal to which it appeals, and receives them from the same tribunal."8

But a somewhat better and different definition of the nature of poetry is presented by Arnold, in his essay on Maurice De Guerin

"The grand power of poetry is its interpretative power, by which I mean, not a power of drawing out in black and white an explanation of the mystery of the universe but the power of so dealing, with things as to awaken in us a wonderfully full, new and ultimate sense of them and of our relations with them."9

Turning from the abstractions to the examples in flesh and blood, we may see Arnold's preoccupation with Wordsworth and Goethe, as revealing two contradictory


strains of thought in Arnold's exposition and critical canons.

He appears to shift his ground every time he deals with these two poets. Arnold's insistence on poetry to convey the best ideas provided by criticism in a beautiful and effective way, sounds different from his love for the natural magic and poetic element found in the works of Keats, Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Chaucer.

Goethe receives high praise from him. According to Arnold it is by no means as the greatest of poets that Goethe deserves the pride and praise of his German countrymen. "It is as the clearest, the largest, the most helpful thinker of modern times ...." ¹⁰

Strangely enough, Goethe falls short, when Arnold talks more about the magic and inevitable nature of the greatest poetry. He traces the sources of these in the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty. He writes those laws "fix as an essential condition, in the Poet's treatment of

such matters as are here in question, high seriousness; the high seriousness which comes from absolute sincerity\textsuperscript{11} and these qualities provide to poetry power.

High seriousness, as affirmed by Arnold, is another pre-requisite of genuine poetry. The accent of high seriousness is born of absolute sincerity, and it is this that gives Dante's or Milton's criticism of life the power that it has. Sincerity on the part of a poet consists in his speaking from the very depths of his soul. Thus for Arnold, poetry becomes more than a mere realistic rendering of external life, nay even, more than the utterances of certain disjointed moods and experiences of the poet. It is an expression of the moral and intellectual insight, the artist has into the whole of life.

The qualities of high poetry are to be found both in the matter and substance of poetry and in its manner and style. This special character of both the matter and manner of the best poetry depends upon truth and seriousness.

Viewed as a whole, truth, high seriousness a powerful application of ideas to life, absolute sincerity, excellence

of diction and movement in matters of style - are indeed, the essential requirements of great poetry, Arnold believes, that poetry should deal with moral ideas. He states in the study of Celtic Literature the grand business of modern poetry - a moral interpretation from an independent point of view, of man and the world - it is only German poetry, Goethe's poetry, that has, since the Greeks made much way with.\textsuperscript{12}

Speaking of Dante and Shakespeare as poets basing their creations on the traditional religion he says "But when Goethe came, Europe had lost her basis of spiritual life, she had to find it again; Goethe's task was ... to interpret human life afresh and to supply a new spiritual basis to it.\textsuperscript{13}

By the term, 'moral' Matthew Arnold does not imply composition of didactic poems. It is synonymous with the 'application of ideas to life'. The poet must answer the question - how to live. 'A poetry of revolt against moral


\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., p. 93.
ideas is a poetry of revolt against life; a poetry of indifference, towards moral ideas is a poetry of indifference towards life.\textsuperscript{14}

Over and above everything, it was Arnold's belief that poetry should help fill the spiritual void felt by a faithless age, "the language of which" must be very plain, direct, and severe and ... must not lose itself in parts and episodes and ornamental works; but must press forward to the whole.\textsuperscript{15}

This further leads the reader of Arnold's critical works, on to Arnold's insistence on the pursuit of truth, and the high standards of judgement, moral perfection and accents of high seriousness particularly with regard to a poet's vocation.

Poetry as a criticism of life, must reach a high standard of excellence. In other words, the most powerful criticism of life, is to be found in the excellent poetry. On the above grounds, he underrates the poetry of the


\textsuperscript{15}Letters of \textit{Matthew Arnold} to \textit{Arthur Hugh Clough} ed. N.F. Lowry (Oxford 1932), p. 124.
Augustans, calling them high priests and founders of the age of prose and reason, stating that their poetry lacked largeness of purpose, freedom and moral insight. He writes that the poetry of the Augustans is conceived and composed in their wits whereas genuine poetry is produced in the soul. Theirs is a poetry, not proceeding from an adequate poetic criticism of life.

But when he leans towards the classical writers, he approves of the nature of classical poetry and even recommends the classical poets as the perfect models since their poetry displays to a great extent the spiritual task of a poet - in the words of Johnson 'poetry is the art of uniting pleasure with truth by calling imagination to the help of reason.' This view of Arnold is reiterated, in other words, in his own statement that "poetry is nothing less than the most perfect speech of man in which he comes nearest to being able to utter the truth."

One discerns, at once, this combination of the moral and aesthetic approach as the keynote of Arnold's conception of the function of poetry, the emphasis being definitely on the moral aspect to console, to strengthen, to sustain, to elevate and to refine.
Apart from its independent value, as a source of joy, poetry to him was also for cultural amelioration. As affirmed by him, poetry is, in fact, concerned with this most valuable part of human nature and nothing but perfection is to be sought for when we are dealing with it. Culture was only another name for perfection. He regarded literature as doing a great service in the dissemination of culture and also as an invaluable means to this end.

Arnold constantly maintains that all human pursuits including poetry should be assessed in the light of man's fundamental concern vis. "the active attainment of culture." Arnold's aim seems to be "to steer clear of the objective, judicial approach of the classical critics on the one hand and of the eager, responsive approach of the Romantic critics on the other." He suggests a midway emphasizing the need for flexibility and receptiveness as well as a recognition of the authority of intellectual and aesthetic standards.

Arnold deplores the fall in our standards of evaluation. He declares that "mere glorification by ourselves of ourselves or our literature ... is both vulgar and retarding."16

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From this loss of hope, sprang his failure to trust the genius of poetry and its power of truth, which had been, truly, the heritage to him of his great predecessors.

The above survey will indicate how Arnold's views have become humanistic, moral and perhaps religious but have practically no reference to the spiritual and transcendental. It is this lack of response to, if not, positive suspicion of anything mystical, that makes it difficult for him to do full justice to Romantic poetry.

It is only proper therefore that an analysis of Arnold's understanding of the Romantic poets, its inherent limitations and his anti-romantic stance as found in a few of his letters and his critical doctrines, follows a brief account of the transcendental nature of English Romantic poetry.