

Discourses in America – By Matthew Arnold
NOTES

Numbers: or the Majority and the Remnant

Plato used, apparently, the term remnant. Plato was gloomy about his time. And, he was right. The remnants are like men among wild beasts. He'll get destroyed by them.

“The grandeur and loftiness of Attic democracy had vanished, while all the pernicious germs contained in it were fully a life of comfort and a craving for amusement were encouraged in every way, and the interest of the citizens was withdrawn from serious things. Conversation became more and more superficial and frivolous.” And the creation of a pastry chef was cheered with loud applause.

Even in communities with exceptional gifts, even in the Jewish, the Athenian State, the majority are unsound. But there is the remnant

To be one voice outside of the state is important. But, you need critical mass of remnants to make a difference. But, if too small they cannot do too much.

Isaiah and Plato were prophets of doom.

“Because these matters are what do really govern politics and save or destroy States, Socrates maintained that in his time he and a few philosophers, who alone kept insisting on the good of righteousness and the unprofitableness of iniquity, were the only really politicians then living.”

“But now see how much more serious people are the philosophers and prophets than the politicians. Whatsoever things are amiable! – the failure in amiability, too, is a source of danger and insecurity.”

“What man is there that knoweth not how that the city of the French is a worshipper of the great goddess Lubricity?” Or rather, as Greek is the classic and euphonious language for names of gods and goddesses, let us take her name from the Greek Testament, and call her the goddess Aselgeia. That goddess has always been a sufficient power amongst mankind, and her worship was generally supposed to need restraining rather than encouraging.”

But French arts and popular literature worship there. MA takes umbrage at Renan saying, “Nature cares nothing for chastity.” Catholicism used to restrain them, but their Gaul roots got reason, and order, but also more sensual when the Romans took them. France did not go with the reformation because the Germanic qualities in her were not strong enough.

Still, the Germanic side kept the Frenchmen in check. But the French lit of the eighteenth century blew that open.

On these generalizations, "I will allow any number of exceptions you please."

They give us what we call the average sensual man. When the German morality dies, this is what you're left with. This man has gaiety, quickness, sentiment, sociability, rationality, but on the moral side he is almost ludicrously insufficient.

French lit of the 17th is peculiarly fitted to do great good, and nothing but good.

"the great goddess Lubricity, let us stand fast, and say that her worship is against nature, human nature, and that it is ruin. For this is the test of its being against human nature, that for human society it is ruin. An the test is one from which there is no escape." Aseigeia's "followers are marred and stunted by it and disqualified or the ideal society of the future."

Plato tells us that we have within us a many-headed beast and a man, and that by dissoluteness we feed and strengthen the beast in us, and starve the man.

With immorality, hardness and insolence come in its train; and insolence which grows until it ends by exasperating and alienating everybody; a hardness which grows until the man can at last scarcely take pleasure in anything, outside the service of his goddess, except cupidity and greed, and cannot be touched with emotion by any language except fustian."

So instead of saying that Nature cares nothing about chastity, let us say that human nature, our nature, cares about it a great deal. By her present popular literature, France gives proof that she is suffering from a dangerous and perhaps fatal disease; and that it is not clericalism which is the real enemy to the French so much as their goddess. "the present popular literature of France is a sign that she has a most dangerous moral disease."

In a new democratic society like the US, with its strength, its life of business, its sheer freedom and equality, the danger is in the absence of the discipline of respect; in hardness and materialism, exaggeration and boastfulness; in a false smartness, a false audacity, a want of soul and delicacy.

The philophers and the prophets, whom I at any rate am disposed to believe, and who say that moral causes govern the standing and the falling of States, will tell us that the failure to mind whatsoever things are elevated must impair with an inexorable fatality the life of a nation. , just as the failure to mind whatsoever things are just, or whatsoever things are amiable, or are pure, will empair it;

"the failure to mind whatsoever things are elevated should be real in your American democracy, and should grow into a disease, and take firm hold on you, then the life

of even these great United State must inevitably suffer and be impaired more and more until it perish.

The German stock, as his father used to say, is the most moral races of men that the world has yet seen.

LITERATURE AND SCIENCE

“An intelligent man, will prize those studies which result in his soul getting soberness, righteousness, and wisdom, and will less value the others.” This is a good guide if you’re in the House of Lords or in the pork trade in Chicago.

Nowhere is it raised with more energy than the US, the design of abasing what is called ‘mere literary instruction and education’ and exalting what is called ‘sound, extensive, and practical scientific knowledge.’”

The building up of human life, the power of conduct, intellect, and knowledge, the power of beauty, the power of social life and manners; human nature is built up by these powers; we have the need for all of them. Having an instinct for intellect and knowledge, we acquire pieces of knowledge; and presently, in the generality of men, there arises the desire to relate these pieces to our sense for conduct, to our sense for beauty – and there is a weariness and dissatisfaction if the desire is balked. Now in this desire lies, I think, the strength of that hold which letters have upon us.

Greek accents and physiology are isolated facts. But then we seek naturally to combine the pieces of our knowledge together, to bring them under general rules, to relate them to principles;

Instrument knowledge does not, on its own, lead to anything but being a specialist.

The Mediaeval Universities came into being, because the supposed knowledge, delivered by Scripture and the Church, so deeply engaged men’s hearts, by so simply, easily, and powerfully relating itself to their desire for conduct, their desire for beauty. All other knowledge was dominated by this supposed knowledge and was subordinated to it.

But now, says Professor Huxley, conceptions of the universe fatal to the notions held by our forefathers have been forced upon us by physical science.

The Middle Ages could do without humane letters and the study of nature, because its supposed knowledge was made to engage its emotions so powerfully. And, these emotions remain and should be touched by humane letters.

“How, finally, are poetry and eloquence to exercise the power of relating the modern results of natural science to man’s instinct for conduct, his instinct for beauty? And

here again I answer that I do not know how they will exercise it, but that they can and will.”

Homer’s scientific view of the world is likely grotesque.

People, he relates, who come to America and only report back on the geology.

On the instinct for self-preservation in humanity. The instinct for beauty is set in human nature, as surely as the instinct for knowledge is set there, or the instinct for conduct. If the instinct for beauty is served by Greek literature and art as it is served by no other literature and art, we may trust to the instinct of self preservation in humanity for keeping Greek as part of our culture.

DaVinci said, “The antique symmetry was the one thing wanting to me.” If so for him, so much more so for us.

The glorious beauty of the Acropolis at Athens did not come from single fine things stuck about on that hill, as statue here, a gateway there; - no it arose from all things being perfectly combined for a supreme effect.

We seem finally to be even led to the further conclusion that our hairy ancestor carried in his nature, also, a necessity for Greek.

EMERSON

I regard myself, not as speaking to please Emerson’s admirers, not as speaking to please myself; but rather, I repeat, as communicating with Time and Nature concerning the productions of this beautiful and rare spirit.

But his poems are often a series of observations with no real evolution.

One is reduced to guessing, and cannot be quite sure that after all one has guessed right. He is not plain enough and concrete enough – in other words, not poet enough – to be able to tell us.

Emerson cannot be called a great philosophical writer. He cannot build; his arrangement of philosophical ideas has no progress in it, no evolution.

In two noted poems by Emerson, the observer isn’t detached enough.

Carlyle preached the dignity of labor, the necessity of righteousness, the love of veracity, the hatred of shams. But what is the due and eternal result of labor, righteousness, veracity? Happiness.

And when religion tells you it does not aim at happiness, it aims at it in the next life. Carlyle failed here where Franklin and Emerson aimed right.

