

Notes on
The Function of Criticism at the Present Time (1865)
By Matthew Arnold

In remarks on translating Homer, MA made some claims for the critic that he wishes to discuss. Wordsworth, it is said, holds the critical faculty in lower esteem than that of the inventive. And Wordsworth suggests that critics just engage in creative endeavors themselves.

Criticism is lower than invention, MA says, but should these folks give up criticism for poetry? Wordsworth and Goethe were great critics.

But, people that create don't always create great pieces. And, not all epochs can create great pieces.

Literature works with ideas. But original ideas come from philosophers; literature synthesizes and exposes these ideas. If the time has no new ideas, the poet hasn't much to work with.

It is the object of critical power to see things as they truly are, using many branches of knowledge. Critics make an order of ideas prevail, they reach society, and there is a stir and growth everywhere, out of which comes creative epochs of literature.

The poet must know these streams. That is why Goethe is lasting and Byron is not. Goethe knew life and the world and he knew them as they really are.

The literature from the first quarter of the 19th suffered from not knowing enough. It had much energy, but it left Byron empty, Shelley incoherent, and Wordsworth wanting in variety. Wordsworth disparaged Goethe for his caring for books.

But, it is not purely reading that is important. Sophocles read little as Shakespeare. Shelley read lots. It is the epoch. The Elizabethan and Periclean ages had fresh thought.

In contrast to the French Revolution era, Greece and the Renaissance were, "in the main disinterestedly intellectual and spiritual movements; movements in which the human spirit looked for its satisfaction in itself and in the increased play of its own activity."

The revolution era was political and practical and more conducive to revolution than renaissance. That is why the previous era gave us Voltaire and Rousseau, not the revolutionary era. Goethe said the French Revolution threw culture back.

But it was the soup from which Byron and Wordsworth drank – feeling, not mind.

1789 asked "is it rational?" 1642, "Is it legal? According to conscience?"

The French Revolution was inspired by universal rational ideas and the love of the multitude for these ideas. That is why it is the greatest event in history.

But the mania for putting all of these ideas into immediate practice was the problem. The British wouldn't have run them so quickly into practice.

Being an anomaly is an objection to an idea in politics, but not in the purely intellectual realm.

But, in practice, "force and right are the governors of the world, force till right is ready." And till the right is ready, the existing order is the legitimate order. But ideas will never be ready without the free play of ideas.

The French running into ideas into action created no intellectual fruit, but just an era of concentration, led by Burke. Burke's ideas well express, the philosophy of an

epoch of concentration. Burke is great because he brings thought to bear upon politics.

Burke in his last writing on the French Revolution imagined that the tide might be with the revolutionaries. So, great, thinks Matthew, to be able to conceive of the opposite side, it is very un-English.

The English don't only dislike political ideas against the tide, they dislike all ideas against the tide.

The idea of free play of the mind upon all subjects being a pleasure in itself, without an object of desire, hardly enters the Englishman's thoughts. Curiosity in the English language is considered bad.

But eras of concentration must give way to those of expansion; and he sees that happening in England at some point. .

To best serve the function in expansion, the critic's thought should be disinterested – aloof from practical considerations. To resolutely follow it's own nature, that is to have free play on those subjects which it touches. To know the best that is known and thought in the world is enough to create a fresh current of thought.

Criticism's current bane is that it serves practical interests before serving free play of the mind. All papers are tied to parties. This is fine, but there also needs to be disinterested thought.

This new thought must not aim at self-satisfaction, but perfection. Spiritual perfection and practice are impossible when we keep saying how great the Anglo-Saxon is.

Especially when the English have hideous names! Higginbottom!! He focuses on a story wherein Wragg strangled her child.

We must embrace the "Indian virtue of detachment." But practical people won't listen to anything unless you promise a practical outcome. So the whole Constitution looks like a giant machine for the manufacture of philistines.

Liberals have no thought and applaud each other for staying within the parameters of their party.

Colenso mixed science and religion. MA doesn't like this. But doesn't reprint the argument because of hurt feelings on Colenso's part.

People were upset to have a liberal attack a liberal.

Renan sort of rewrote Jesus into modern times. MA likes this attempt (though it is not so successful).

Not war on the Bible like Voltaire, but a new configuration is good. The problem comes when these efforts are smaller than the products should be.

When one looks at the disgusting English divorce courts where you drag your dirty laundry into public for money it makes one pine for the ideal marriage theory of Catholicism. To praise, by the way, Catholicism is not to disrespect Protestant achievement or overlook Catholic errors.

To a person lamenting the passing of virulent activism in youth, MA says perhaps that thought played out and it is time for reflection, not mourning. And to run in the street with every half-baked idea is not a good idea.

To enlarge our thought we must also consider foreign thought. English lit needs to see what other nations think.

While people see criticism as aiming to criticize English lit only, he must make a new definition of criticism: a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world.

He is concerned with criticism throughout Europe. What will nourish us towards growth and perfection?

To have the sense of creative activity is the greatest happiness and the great proof of being alive.

Criticism must be ever widening its knowledge. Then it will bring as much joy as a poor, starved, fragmented creation might.