

MATTHEW ARNOLD'S POETRY FROM AN ETHICAL STAND-POINT.

At the very beginning of an examination of Matthew Arnold's poetry, one is struck by the significant fact that, in the heyday of his powers, he withdrew from the poetic field. True enough, in so doing, he announced his conviction that the world needs, above all, criticism, and he set to work to contribute to its want. But, though the reasoning be ever so conclusive, one may well question the genuineness of poetic talent to which expression can be so entirely, so arbitrarily, denied.

Arnold is, in truth, a poet who shines with reflected light. His inspiration is not native, his contact with life not close, immediate, fresh. Hence his note is not spontaneous and irrepressible. He did not come face to face with life through sheer force: he saw it through the medium of history, philosophy, literature. We shall soon see how this affected his thought; for the present it is enough to observe that he cannot be placed with those who borrowed no man's torch, whose glowing genius blazed its own path.

Properly to appreciate Arnold's position in the realm of ideas, we must transfer ourselves to the intellectual and social conditions in which his mind and taste were formed. He was not one of the supreme spirits whose inherent force transcends to a degree the influence of environment. His development is a tribute to painstaking and persistent effort; and the conditions under which the effort was made determined its direction and result.

The son of a distinguished classical scholar, Arnold was trained in the classical Hebrew, Greek, and Roman learning. His taste was formed on the ancient models, his thoughts directed into ancient channels. There is no questioning the sincerity of his love for the literatures on which to a large extent he was reared. He had not only a critic's appreciation of the service rendered by the gifted peoples of antiquity, but

he entered intimately into the finer manifestations of their peculiar traits. He loved their literature, their art, their life, as a Greek, a Roman, or a Hebrew might have loved them; they had for him a value in themselves, apart from their importance as links in the lengthening chain of universal thought.

But during the years when Arnold was poring over his Bible and his Homer in the cloistered shelter of Oxford, the new learning was knocking ever louder at the doors of the University. It had not yet won its way; it had not yet established its methods as proper not only to the narrow field of physical science, but to knowledge and life at large. So far, indeed, was the University from leading the age, that the spirit of the age had not yet by any means subdued it. But, in the world without, it had long been playing havoc; the critical and destructive effort of which the French Revolution was the loudest thunder-clap, was pursuing its course into every nook and corner of human activity.

Imagine a serious youth, educated in the Oxford of that day and then suddenly projected into the atmosphere of actual life. Even the powerful voices of Carlyle and Emerson, which had penetrated the academic walls, could not fully have prepared him for the change. He must have been overwhelmed at once by the antagonism, of which he had already been more or less dimly aware at Oxford. Reconciliation would be his first impulse; such at least one would infer from the history of mental emancipation. The first endeavor is to save, for no thinking man breaks lightly or painlessly from his past.

As a matter of fact, Arnold's attitude toward the characteristic movements and ideas of the century appears to me to be determined at every point by the play of the two forces here indicated. His earlier associations made him conservative, anxious to preserve; the *Zeitgeist* made him eager to renew, to recreate. Between the two, he wavers, trying to pour the new wine into the old bottles. His lifelong effort aimed to conciliate and combine two different civilizations: he saw an element of truth in each, and essayed to effect their immediate synthesis.

Though Arnold proclaimed himself a Liberal, and was in some quarters regarded as a dangerous innovator, his decided conservatism is unmistakable. He felt the strange fascination of the Past, not less than its strong, though partial, grasp of Truth. He was gently intoxicated by the "rare enchantment of the Middle Age." The "mystic chords" of his memory vibrate with the infinite suggestiveness of historic association. "Beautiful City!" he exclaims of Oxford, "so venerable, so lovely, so unravaged by the fierce intellectual life of our century, so serene. . . . Steeped in sentiment as she lies, spreading her gardens to the moonlight, and whispering from her towers the last enchantment of the Middle Age, who will deny that by her ineffable charm she keeps ever calling us nearer to the true goal of all of us, to the ideal, to perfection, nearer, perhaps, than all the science of Tübingen." "Fifty years ago," he says of Cardinal Newman, "he was in the very prime of life; he was close at hand to us at Oxford; he was preaching at St. Mary's pulpit every Sunday; he seemed about to transform and renew what was for us the most national and natural institution in the world,—the Church of England. Who could resist the charm of that spiritual apparition, gliding in the dim afternoon light through the aisles of St. Mary's, rising into the pulpit, and then in the most entrancing of voices breaking the silence with words and thoughts which were a religious music,—subtle, sweet, mournful." Arnold's temper in one of its aspects is fairly represented by the tone of these extracts, and, unless conservatism necessarily implies absolute impenetrability, they certainly point to a strongly conservative element in his organization.

But his love of truth forbade him to stop here. Like one of his Masters, he too

"Saw the suffering human race,
He put his finger on the place,
And said: 'Thou ailest here, and here.'"

He recognized the changes which the new spirit was destined to accomplish; democracy and science must, he clearly fore-

saw, reconstruct alike politics, society, religion. "Oxford, the Oxford of the Past," he sadly admits, "has many faults, and she has paid heavily for them in defeat, in isolation, in want of hold upon the modern world." Or, again: "Hebraism and Hellenism are neither of them the law of human development, as their admirers are prone to make them; they are each of them contributions to human development. . . . The lesson must perforce be learned that the human spirit is wider than the most priceless of the forces which bear it onward."

I have noticed Arnold's disposition to reconcile the warring tendencies which he was fond of reducing to these apparently simple elements. But, though in practical life compromise is too often the only resource, in the domain of ideas it cannot permanently satisfy. There at least makeshifts are notoriously short-lived. They may bridge over the transition from orthodoxy or error—and that, not only religious orthodoxy or error—for many an individual, but they cannot achieve lasting validity.

Nowhere, perhaps, better than in his essays on Religion does his peculiar attitude manifest itself, and nowhere is its vulnerable character more clearly displayed. He was eager to save from destruction the "most natural and national institution in the world," the Church of England; yet he saw, as surely as Professor Huxley, that the *Zeitgeist* was eating away its very foundation. He thought it might still be saved by re-adjustment, by adaptation. To accomplish this he plead hard for a literary interpretation of the Bible; but he did not realize that when the Bible is subjected to such critical treatment as the modern spirit requires, and as he himself urged, it loses irretrievably its solitary importance. It can no longer be the corner-stone; it remains indeed one of the landmarks in the process of the ages, but, like the sacred books of the East, it has parted with its magical, its authoritative power, "for both were faiths and both are gone." Few, in truth, can pass through such changes as Arnold himself underwent and at every phase find in an institution or a book possibilities of adaptation adequate to accompany them. The past held him, not slavishly, but still strongly; and though in a way he main-

tained his spiritual and intellectual integrity, it was at the cost of such an effort as to most men would be impossible.

Naturally enough, he won no considerable following. At least one-half of his philosophy was bound to be unacceptable to any that could accept the other half. He went too far for one side and not far enough for the other. He stood, therefore, midway between the two camps, and drew upon himself the fire of both.

His poetry abounds in illustrations of the endeavor to face both ways, and, on the whole, confesses the futility of the attempt to maintain traditional forms while renewing the spirit:

“The world but feels the present’s spell,
The poet feels the past as well.”

In “Progress” he asks, incredulously:

“Say ye: ‘The spirit of man has found new roads,
And we must leave the old faiths and walk therein?’”

“What girl,” he questions in the “Future,”

“What girl
Now reads in her bosom as clear
As Rebekah read when she sat
At eve by the palm-shaded well?”

Now mark the contrast:

“But, oh, an inextinguishable sense
Haunts him that he has not made what he should;
That he has still, though old, to recommence,
Since he has not yet found the world God would.”

Unluckily, his heart was at variance with his judgment. The prospect of the conflict which would in the end establish the ideal order did not exhilarate him. He felt his affections to be with the age which he helped to destroy. So he speaks of the beautiful souls that seem to “have fallen on evil times and evil tongues” with a pathetic tenderness that suggests Arnold’s own kinship with them. He writes of Wordsworth:

“He grew old in an age he condemned,
And, like the Theban seer,
Died in his enemies’ day.”

Do we not discern the poet's own lineaments behind the veil of Empedocles,—

“ . . . Whose youth fell on a different world
From that on which his exiled age was thrown,
But in a world he loves not, must subsist
In ceaseless opposition ?”

So, likewise, of Senancour, with his “ sad lucidity of soul” :

“ The day I lived in was not mine ;
Man gets no second day.”

Obviously, his acceptance of the new spirit could not be frank and joyous. He did not wholly trust it ; he felt that it would not discriminate ; that in its iconoclastic course neither age nor beauty would impede its slashing progress. He did not, therefore, hail its advent with loud acclaim. Democracy, equality, he declared, are here, and we must reckon with them, but their coming gave him no thrill of joy.

“ See, on the cumbered plain
Clearing a stage,
Scattering the Past about,
Comes the new age. . . .
All things begin again ;
Life is their prize,
Earth with their deeds they fill,
Fill with their cries.”

He had no love for such boisterous work, and he could not see beyond the battle-field, where the tangle looked so hopeless. Somehow, while he urged the necessity of a broader basis in life, he did not comprehend that you cannot win victories, even in the world of ideas, without struggle, and that you cannot struggle without din and confusion. And it was this turmoil that drove him at times to despair : this was “ the strange disease of modern life,” as though conflicting counsels, wasted energy, ill-regulated effort were not the price humanity must pay for the larger wisdom on which its futures must rely. Arnold did not understand it :

“ Our minds
Are confused as the cries which we hear,
Changing and shot as the sights which we see.”

And, accordingly, like that sweet character of whom he has written so touchingly, Lord Falkland, he longed always for peace. Must man, he cried, be either madman or slave? The "flying and elusive shadow, rest" becomes thus the dearest object of his search. Screened by the deep boughs of Kensington Garden, he exclaims:

"The will to neither strive nor cry,
The power to feel with others give,
Calm, calm me more, nor let me die
Before I have begun to live."

Assuredly there are few who do not at times yearn with him for the peace that is not "on sea or land." We have, it is unfortunately true, too little fixity, even to test fully our own experience. But this is, at any rate, by no means the whole case; nor should we marvel at the enthusiasm, nay, the extravagance, of men trembling with the consciousness of newly-found power and opportunities. Peace, simplicity, may come at last, but only when we have mastered and effected the revolution that is stirring. Meanwhile, it is worth asking, despite this superficial restlessness, is it necessarily impossible for the "perturbed spirit" to find a patient, philosophical, inward calm?

In the end, however, what remains for Arnold? He dares not despair; he cannot be glad. He is therefore resigned:

"The mute turf we tread,
The solemn hills around us spread,
If I might lend their life a voice
Seem to bear rather than rejoice."

In a general way I have, I think, fairly represented the train of thought which the poet Arnold pursues; but the critic Arnold went more or less beyond it. His poetry was perhaps his consolation, and representing his negative side may not do him full justice. At any rate, during the later years of his life, when he eschewed verse, he developed greater confidence in the beneficence of the changes that cost him so dearly. I say that he wrote little poetry during this period; yet a single poem—"Obermann Once More"—shows conclusively that he had in a measure outgrown the despondent yet resigned poet revealed in the mass of his verse. Now, at length, he beheld

the world which had once seemed to him "powerless to be born."

"The world's great order dawns in sheen,
After long darkness rude,
Divinelier imaged, clearer seen,
With happier zeal pursued."

Arnold himself thus came to know that resignation is not the last word to be spoken.

It is clear, then, that Arnold is not a poet with whom we can rest. He expresses a phase through which many have passed, and at a particular juncture we sympathize keenly with his prevailing mood. But, sooner or later, we emerge from it into a larger, a more patient optimism, very different from the patience which is the "too near neighbor of despair." Arnold's doubts are, however, not to be despised; for, as nothing is easier than unreflecting optimism, so nothing is harder than optimism which triumphs in the full consciousness of danger and difficulty. The poet Arnold did not attain this severe and arduous hopefulness; but the scream of the eagle and the whistle of the engine do not refute his criticism. It appears to me to be well worth inquiring more fully into the cause of his failure.

I have said that he did not get at life directly by plunging into its mighty current or sympathizing profoundly with all social classes, but that he looked at it somewhat remotely through the lenses of history and literature. This was attended with disastrous consequences. It prevented him from grasping the entire situation and deceived him as to his own competency. He had the equipment of a superb literary critic; he made it answer the needs of a social philosopher. It was altogether inadequate. As a matter of fact, he was prepared to deal only with some of the special intellectual aspects of life; yet he shrank from nothing, applying with singular confidence an ideal framed on quite insufficient data. Naturally enough, the results were often decidedly fanciful.

It is true that Arnold defined civilization as the humanization of man in society; yet he does not appear to have realized fully the meaning of human brotherhood. With the con-

ception of society which is familiar to the sociological science of the day, he certainly is not in hearty sympathy. His scorn of the practical is significant, as likewise his failure to dwell on those conditions of Greek life, an impartial consideration of which might perhaps have moderated his enthusiasm for Greek civilization. With all the charm and wisdom and beauty of Greek literature, and notwithstanding the heavy price which humanity has paid for the loss of Greek flexibility, Arnold's insistence on this point strikes me as somewhat excessive.

For at best, Greek civilization was but a miniature, resting on a very narrow and selfish basis, and exhausting itself in a very short space of time. Its work during that brief, though brilliant, epoch was truly of incalculable value, but no modern nation either could or would duplicate its experience. Where Pericles aimed at the culture of ten, we must contrive the culture of a million. We can no longer relegate to slaves who are mere labor-saving devices, and whose presence in the community we ignore, the homely tasks which cramp the soul. It is our problem to civilize ourselves, not by avoiding the unattractive and sordid, but despite them or with their aid. We have under way, indeed, a stupendous undertaking, in the completion of which we shall be wise to draw as heavily as wisdom will allow on the inherited treasure of the race; but in its present fragmentary state, it is unquestionably unfair to compare with it that exquisite bit of sculpture which we call Greek civilization.

The Greeks, as Socrates remarks of Callicles in the *Gorgias*, were initiated into the greater before the lesser mysteries. That was the characteristic weakness of ancient life. We are now beginning with the petty details in the hope and expectation of ascending to the realization of a lofty conception of human relations in society. Like Arnold, we have found established conventions and interpretations too narrow, and we must return. But to what? Not with him to previous revelations, the full and exact meaning of which has been perverted in the effort to reduce them to a coherence that does not belong to them, but to that on which all revelations rest, and of which all are alike incomplete expressions,—to the

primal reason and conscience. It is not enough to stop with Judæa and Athens: neither one nor both can embody our religion. Why may we not come into immediate contact with the forces which produced both them and ourselves? It is idle to contend now that any previous deliverances of the human mind, however interpreted or however unified, can meet the necessities of the present. We need all the light which we can get from history, but, in the last resort, we must attack life from our own stand-point, not from that of the inherited authorities. This is in fact the spirit of the ethical and economical movements which are dominating thought and action.

The falsity of Arnold's entire conception of culture—and this conception inspires his verse as well as his prose—lies just here. He aimed at "symmetry;" yet this delicate balancing of old and new, of Hebraism and Hellenism, of science and literature, looks rather like a balancing of means than a balanced end. In the infinite diversity of mind and conditions, is it not a bit fanciful to suppose that symmetrical culture can be thus obtained? Endless adjustments would be necessary to secure impartiality of result. But it may be that the ideal is, after all, a vain one, and that the world will achieve ideal poise, not because the delicate balance within each organism is reflected in the delicate balance of the whole, but because a great variety of opposing and unequal forces,—*i.e.*, individualities, resting on and agreeing chiefly in moral integrity, reach a kind of moving equilibrium.

But whatever be the truth in this matter, we cannot, in the moral and social conditions which now confront us, talk of realizing at once ideal culture such as, even if admitted to be a sound conception, would befit a stationary or approximately perfect state. While we are doing the backwoodsman's work, we need the backwoodsman's muscle and tools. Similarly we require especially at this moment the knowledge and training that will promote the moralization and rationalization of social life. The necessities of society must determine the educational stress; before the imperious demands of life, no dream of an absolute and unrelated ideal can stand. We must start

with and from life, not with and from a scholar's ideal; and life is essentially renunciation, compromise. We must needs ever trim between what we wish and what we can, between what we ought and what we must. One way or another, no individual in this imperfect social state can escape the necessity of subordinating his own completeness to larger and nobler ends. To the first the compromise comes as a physical one, and he yields up life or limb on the field of battle; to the second, it comes as an intellectual compromise, and he foregoes the full development of his powers to perform some humble but urgent duty; to the third, the compromise may present itself in a moral guise, and he may be bound, however reluctantly, to sacrifice his moral wholeness for the sake of an object dearer than his own life, health, or soul. If, indeed, the world ever realizes the generous hopes that embody the true ideal, it will be because many successive generations have followed the narrow path before them, avoiding the effort to precipitate a hasty millennium. And this is no mean surrender of the ideal; on the contrary, it is the attempt to effect it step by step. The attempt is thus a joyous progress, and banishes the disappointment which must otherwise attend partial achievement.

A prudent regard for the fact that we cannot foreknow the part to be played by each individual admonishes us to interpret broadly the position here taken, and in early years to make our culture as general as may be. But in any case there are no grounds for uneasiness. The printing-press, the universities, the diversity of tastes which our very excesses tend to accentuate, will make certain a healthful variety; and as the rude work awaiting us is achieved, mankind will be directed back to the neglected paths by an inherent, perhaps unconscious, impetus.

Arnold's attitude thus appears to me fundamentally and essentially in error. His emphasis of the Past led easily to an actual, though expressly disavowed, injustice to the Present. He betrayed a signal capacity to appreciate the latter, when he said that the advent of Democracy is no cause for either rejoicing or sorrow. These are cold words. Democracy has,

it is true, done much to grieve the judicious, but assuredly its possibilities appeal strongly to the emotions and the imagination. Has mankind ever yet contemplated a loftier or more inspiring spectacle than that "federation of the world" towards which genuine Democracy feels its way?

Arnold could not do it justice because he could not get away from the conflict, he could not get away from himself. He had a carefully trained artistic sense, which was painfully and constantly wounded by the immaturities and extravagances of this overwhelming activity. He made the additional blunder of supposing that those who disagree with him inevitably agree with Mr. Carnegie; this is not true. The new movement has no severer critics than many who believe most fully in it. Steamboats and population are as far from satisfying us as from satisfying him; but we are not dismayed by them. We are not even dismayed by the fact that they apparently satisfy many. Any successful soldier will tell you that, despite the battle's turmoil, you must keep your vision on the main conflict. There is much firing into the air; many points are seized and elaborately fortified, only to be abandoned as the event progresses; neither general nor historian is distracted by this; he fixes his eye on the strategic, the final point, and there is the battle for him.

Arnold's faith was not large enough for that. He could not look steadily beyond; he could not always hear the "still, soft voice" above the "maddening discord." Yet to the undaunted listener it gives no doubtful sound. We are striving, even if blindly striving, with high purpose. However distant the achievement, it is much that it has become the object of effort, not with the few, but with the masses. That every effort is a strong reason for optimism. The restless activity whose result is so often amiss, as Arnold truly pointed out, is gradually teaching us wisdom. Let us not cease to exhort, to condemn, to object, when need be; but let us not for a moment consider that we are dealing with final and inexorable results. Persistent effort, despite repeated failure, will in the end make the path. Very likely its direction will surprise us. Much that we value most highly in government and institu-

tions may fall away from us like so much scaffolding. Our very patriotism may merge into a world passion. But, whatever its form, we cannot permit ourselves to doubt the outcome. We must face the contest like Virgil's oarsmen: *Posunt quia posse videntur*. Arnold's was no such defiant and heroic mood; in consequence, his poetry—half protest, half exhortation—is destined to occupy a precarious place in the history of the century's thought.

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DISCUSSIONS.

“RATIONAL HEDONISM.”

MISS JONES'S article in the October number of the INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ETHICS seems to me one of the best defences of Utilitarianism that I have yet seen. I have no intention at present of attempting a complete reply to it; but as several of her remarks are directed against statements of mine, a few explanations seem to be called for. It will be best to take up the points in order. I hope that the inevitable curtness and dogmatism of my remarks will not be supposed to imply any want of respect for Miss Jones's criticisms, which I have certainly found both interesting and suggestive. I think she has advocated a bad case about as well as it could be advocated.

Miss Jones begins* with an attempt to meet the objection raised by me (among others) to the term pleasure on the ground of its ambiguity. She meets this by giving a careful definition of pleasure and pain. But, unfortunately, this definition seems to me to be itself highly ambiguous. “Pleasure,” she says, “is *feeling which is judged in itself desirable*.” What does “feeling” mean? Is it used in Mr. Bradley's sense or in Dr. Ward's? If in the former, why should only feelings judged to be desirable be called pleasure, and not also thoughts? If in the latter, there is surely a *petitio principii*, since it is a disputed point whether feeling in that sense is ever judged to be desirable at all. And there are other senses

* Page 80.