



SOCIO-CRITICAL CANONS OF MATTHEW ARNOLD AND T.S.ELIOT: A BRIEF ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This paper examines social criticism as a recognizable genre with a focus on some economic, political or social mal-functioning by projecting both Mathew Arnold and T.S.Eliot as ‘critics of society’ who propagated the best that had been known and thought in the world and how, in spite of T.S.Eliot’s antagonistic critical pronouncement on Arnold, traces of Arnold’s views lie hidden in the critical writings of Eliot attesting to the fact that Arnold’s ‘1853 Preface’ contains the seminal notion of Eliot’s objective correlative and Eliot’s notion of unified sensibility reminds one of Arnold’s nostalgic admiration for the unity in the middle ages of the senses of conduct, beauty and knowledge. It neatly studies in depth the socio-critical canons of Matthew Arnold and T.S.Eliot projected in their selected works.

Social criticism is a recognizable genre. It’s focus is mainly on some economic, political or social mal-functioning. It ranges from popular discussions of current problems to the timeless depiction of the human condition in this world. Both Matthew Arnold and T.S. Eliot are said to have used criticism as a service to the public, proving themselves to be ‘critics of society. They both were in agreement with the view of Sainte Beuve who said that ‘Criticism’ should ameliorate society by restoring morals, by promoting healthy tastes and by cultivating the best tradition in literature. No doubt, Arnold made this quite clear by propagating the best that has been known and thought in the world. Eliot too fell in line with the thinking of Arnold by categorically stating that criticism should be aimed at the elucidation of worlds of art and the correction of tastes. Despite the fact that Eliot can be rightly called as the lineal descendent of Arnold, what is surprising to note here is that his attitude to Arnold has always been consistently antagonistic.

T.S. Eliot was of the opinion that Arnold was more a propagandist for criticism than a critic who had ventured into departments of thought for which his mind was rather unsuitable. In spite of this critical pronouncement of Eliot on Arnold, traces of Arnold’s writings lie hidden in the critical writings of Eliot for none can deny the fact that Arnold’s 1853 Preface contains the seminal notion of Eliot’s objective correlative and Eliot’s notion of the unified sensibility reminds one of Arnold’s nostalgic admiration for the unity in the middle ages of the senses of conduct, beauty and knowledge. The Victorian era, as Hudson has pointed out, was “an era of surprising change along many lines”, characterized by an “astonishing variety” (P 224) the two dominant movements that made this age remarkable in the history of England were the rise of democracy in the political and social spheres, and the progress of science in the intellectual sphere. In the words of Dover Wilson,

“Everywhere the forces of materialism seemed triumphant, everywhere the old creeds, the old traditions with all their beauty and historic association were in retreat” (P XVIII).

The growth of material prosperity was accompanied by the colossal growth of the spirit of materialism. As A.G. George has put it, “Emphasis on science and technology obscured not only the humanistic studies but also the human spirit” (P105). The spirit of inquiry and criticism, skepticism and religious uncertainty, spiritual struggle and unrest marked the age. This theme was voiced by Arnold in “Dover Beach”:

“ The sea of Faith
was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl’d.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long withdrawing roar.....”

It was against the spectacle of this background that Arnold wrote his socio-literary criticism. He was bitterly disappointed by the disappearance of values from life. “The great need of the age, as Mathew Arnold realized, was the mitigation of brutalizing social conditions and a missionary faith in education and graduation” (Klingopulos 44). His critical writings were aimed mainly at bridging the gap between society and literature for he felt that this was the cause for the paucity of values in literature.

Arnold is said to have made his initial debut as a critic with his “Preface” to the 1853 volume of poems. It is said that he had written a considerable amount of poetry before he turned to criticism and after being appointed professor of poetry at Oxford



in 1857, he dealt mainly with literary and social criticism. Several of his lectures during this period of service as professor of poetry at Oxford got published as critical essays in his three well known volumes: **On Translating Homer** (1861), **On the study of Celtic literature** (1867), and **Essays in Criticism** (1888). His **Essays in criticism** has been considered a landmark in nineteenth century English literature. “The study of Poetry” included in **Essays in criticism** contains many ideas for which Arnold is best remembered. He defines poetry as “a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty” (P236). **Culture and Anarchy** (1869) is central to Arnold’s writings on literary and social criticism. It is a development and expansion of his earlier attack on the smugness and self-complacency of Victorian philistinism, in “The Function of criticism at the Present Time”. “Culture” as the aim and pursuit of perfection, resulting from knowledge, is opposed to the “anarchy” of the masses who trust in material gains and worldly success. The remedy lies in Hellenizing the masses who are surfeited with an overdose of Hebraism. **Friendship’s Garland (1871)**, the most amusing of his books, might be considered as a sequel to **Culture and Anarchy**. Arnold speaks through the persona of a Prussian noble, satirizing the British self-complacency and deriding the contemporary British society and education. Finally Arnold turned to religion and theology by writing **St.Paul and Protestantism** (1870), **Literature and Dogma** (1873), **God and the Bible** (1875), and **Last Essays on Church and Religion** (1877). Through these works, Arnold undertook to reconstruct essential Christianity on a basis of pure naturalism. The dogmatists and man of science used to treat the utterances of St.Paul as scientific propositions. Arnold would rather consider them as emanating from the saint’s deep impulse and desire for righteousness. He wanted the Bible to be read as ‘literature’, not “dogma”, focusing attention on its and literary splendor as well as moral teachings. Dogmatic and orthodox theology prevented people from perceiving the true greatness of Christianity. In Arnold’s own words, “it prevents..... the method and secret and temper of Jesus, from being rightly received and from accomplishing its due effect” (Arnold 218)

The Victorian era was generally one of acceptance of Authority. Though there were voices of dissent, neither advancement in science nor the Progress of democracy could shake the faith of the people in the established orders of religion, Politics, industry, family life and literature. However, the turn of the century ushered in a new era of inquiry and interrogation and a re-examination of the hitherto cherished ideals. The questioning spirit of inquiry was caused and hastened by the progress and advancement of science. As T.S. Pearce observes:

“It is with such men as Darwin, Einstein, and Freud that the scientific attitude begins to invade all our thinking in religion, philosophy and the arts” (P37).

Eliot’s life-time saw changes in intellectual thought and attitude, precipitated by the scientific analysis of personality, the scientific investigation of human behavior and the science of psychology. In the face of a rationalistic attitude, the Christian notion of man as inherently the child of sin, as belonging at once to the natural and to the transcendent world, and owing his possibilities of salvation to the grace of God, a man whose essence is from self-determination and whose sin is the wrong use of his freedom, retains only an echo of its former vitality” (Bantock 23).

Eliot’s critical works consist mainly of essays and lectures. **The Sacred wood** (1920) is Eliot’s first noteworthy work on criticism. This was followed by **Homage to John Dryden** (1924) Much of his critical writings of the next twenty years consisted of expansion of or glosses on, the neoclassic doctrine laid down in the essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” and the analysis of metaphysical poetry. In 1927, the year in which he became a British citizen, Eliot was confirmed in the Church of England and forthwith became increasingly occupied with sociological and cultural questions. He expressed his views through such works as **The Criterion Thoughts after Lambeth** (1931), **After strange Gods** (1934), **The Idea of a Christian Society** (1939) and **Notes Towards the Definition of culture** (1948). He asserted his belief in the importance of religion – especially the Anglo – Catholic faith and campaigned for the preservation of culture and civilization. His belief was that ‘no culture has appeared or developed except together with a religion: according to the point of view of the observer, the culture will appear to be the product of the religion, or the religion the product of culture” (P15). In using the term “Culture” to mean a way of life, Eliot compares with Arnold, but unlike Arnold, he did not believe that culture was more comprehensive than religion and that there was only a facile relationship between the two. Eliot’s attitude to Arnold is encapsulated in the following lines:

“Arnold is neither a reactionary nor a revolutionary;
he marks a period of time, as do Dryden and
Johnson before him” (Eliot 133)

In “The Function of Criticism”, which is included in **Selected Essays**, Eliot defined criticism as “the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste” (P24). In “The Frontiers of Criticism”, Eliot examines the limits of criticism. Since criticism



is never an autotelic activity, it has functions beyond the mere interpretation of literary works of art. These various functions are briefly mentioned in the essay George Watson sums up Eliot's position as a critic thus:

"These, then are the three voices of T.S. Eliot the critic: first, the youthful, exploratory enthusiasm of the twenties, where an almost ideal balance between poetic and critical activity is realized; second, an abortive career of social and religious advocacy.... And third, a bold but exhausted attempt to recover the creative urge.... Eliot made English criticism look different but in no simple sense...." (PP195-96).

More than any other Victorian critic, it was Arnold who focused our attention on the peculiar problems faced by the age of transition. Since one of his main concerns was to awaken public consciousness to the signs of times. This was an era of upheaval in the social and political life of the English nation as the society was slowly evolving into "an almost completely democratic and urban-industrial one from a semi-medieval agricultural society" (Parrot 308). The first of Arnold's characteristic works of social analysis, "Democracy", contains a measured, unironic plea to the middle classes to see themselves as they really are. The nineteenth century saw the triumph of democracy in France, and Arnold realized that if England were to follow the example set by France, drastic changes had to be brought about in her social structure. The social structure of England was based upon a rigid system of classes and it was dominated by an aristocracy, living in a world of its own, with little or no idea of the state of the masses. The state, of course, is the best agency capable of leveling differences between the diverse social classes. Arnold accepted Edmund Burke's definition of the state as "the nation in its collective and corporate character" (William 115). In serving this function the

"State surmounts the limitations of the individual classes,
drawing what is best from each and acting on behalf of the
whole" (Keating 223)

It was this state of affairs that made Arnold make this famous remark:

"Our inequality has the effect of materializing our upper class,
vulgarizing our middle class, and brutalizing our lower class"
(John 101)

Inequality in society was one of the major concerns of Arnold's social criticism. In his essay, "Equality", he makes the tongue-in-cheek comment that inequality is "a religion with the people of England" (P254). As Arnold remarks in "Equality", a community "with the spirit of society is eminently a community with the spirit of equality" (P90). Arnold is said to have advocated the idea of culture as the best tonic for curing the diseased appetite amongst the English for inequality and as a panacea for various other ills of society. The causes of suffering and the ills of humanity can be eradicated only through wide-spread enlightenment. In this context, the critic has a gargantuan role in society – to know and propagate the best that has been thought and said in the world. This role entails upon the critic a knowledge of a broad spectrum of ideas prevalent in the world – the critic must know foreign thought and literature – and this guarantees him the best protection possible against insularity, complacency and provincialism, which come in for stringent attack in "The Literary Influence of Academies". Arnold's **Culture and Anarchy** extends and applies the criticism of society that had but been touched upon in "The Function of criticism at the Present Time" and "The Literary Influence of Academies". It is a deep, pungent, impressive and searching analysis of contemporary society depicted on a broad canvas. The kind of anarchy to which Arnold refers is not only social and political but also intellectual and spiritual. As a remedy, he prescribes that panacea for all ills, viz. culture. In his search for an authority, Arnold subjects to a close and searching analysis the three classes that together make up the backbone of Victorian society, viz. the Barbarians, the philistines and the populace. The Barbarians or the aristocracy are, "as children of the established fact" (P101), inaccessible to ideas; the philistines were Hebraic and the populace were raw and blind. Arnold calls them the "aliens" or the "remnant". Rising above petty prejudices and littlenesses, they develop their "best selves" and by "best self", Arnold refers to the reason of each class void of its interest. **In Friendship's Garland**, his trenchant criticism against British Philistinism is voiced through the views of Arminius, Baron Von Thunder-Ten-Tronakh, a scion of Prussian nobility. He rages against the English system of education, English law and legal administration; and repeatedly denounces the middle class for its worship of personal liberty, industry, publicity and Mammonism.

Arnold was not a believer in orthodox Christian faith; Being "rationalist Christian", he applied "higher criticism" or textual criticism to the Bible in order to shift that which could be verified from the unverifiable and to free the Bible from obscurantism and supernaturalism. T.S. Eliot, the most influential literary critic of the 20th century, did concentrate most of his attention on political, social and religious matters, after 1930, particularly in **After Strange Gods** (1934), **The Idea of a Christian Society** (1939), and **Notes Towards the Definition of Culture** (1948). His aim was to draw the attention of the



world to the havoc wrought by the technologically perfect megalopolis of modern times very much like his predecessor, Matthew Arnold. Eliot distrusted machinery, which they both realized to be the prime reason for the denigration of values in society. The Industrial Revolution has entailed mass migrations from the village to the city with the consequent breakdown of tradition and social values. Instead of solidarity, alienation has become the trademark of the industrial world. The irrational forces of wealth and machine obliterate the roots of tradition and faith and nihilism rears its ugly head. As a corrective and remedy, Eliot aimed at building up a Christian community pulsating with moral will and able to counter the forces of materialism with the spirit of culture and tradition. In the sociological sphere, he advocated a return to the traditional wisdom of the race and in the political sphere, decentralization of authority. Eliot opposed concept of equality propagated by the Liberals, and did not subscribe to Matthew Arnold's belief that the men of culture were the true apostles of equality. Eliot regarded liberalism as a negative force for Liberalism is baneful to religion because it progressively discards certain historical elements in Christianity that appear superfluous or obsolete to it, but after a series of rejections, "it loses force..... and with nothing to destroy is left with nothing to uphold and with nowhere to go" (Eliot 16). Reyonnd Williams comments:

"In this criticism of Liberalism and Democracy, Eliot is essentially repeating Carlyle; that both are movements away from something, and that they may arrive at something very different from what was intended or else, in social terms, arrive at nothing positive at all" (PP 229-30)

Eliot pleaded for decentralization as against the concept of totalitarianism. According to him, there exists in a society different levels of culture belonging to different classes of people. These various levels of culture can best be preserved in a decentralized society. Eliot's enlightened view is that a national culture should be a constellation of cultures. His analysis of socio ethical problems was religio-cultural. His fundamental belief was that man, who is essentially evil, could be disciplined only by religious institutions. Eliot saw the possibility of redemption in the Catholic Church and he desperately urged the need of a new, regenerate Christian society in modern times Eliot's ideal society is a stratified one, subscribing to belief in the concept of class, respecting tradition and following an organized manner of life.

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