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Arnold's view on Poetry

Matthew Arnold was the greatest and most influential critic of the Victorian age. In his theoretical writings he was concerned with social, educational, religious, cultural as well as literary improvements. He was not satisfied with the social values and literary principles prevailing in his own times. He saw the degenerated standards of art and literature, false social values and indifference to moral ideas around him and wanted to bring about a reform in all of them.

Arnold's view about poetry are elaborately stated in his "Study of Poetry", which first appeared as an introduction to A.C. Ward's Selection from English Poets. Arnold has a high conception of poetry. He is confident that poetry has immense future. "It is in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on will find an ever surer and surer stay." It is capable of higher uses, interpreting life for us, consoling us, and sustaining us; that is, it will replace what we understand by religion and philosophy dependent on reasonings, which are but false shows of knowledge. Poetry with such a high destiny must be of the highest standard.

Arnold defines poetry "as a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty." In poetry of this kind, "the spirit of our race will find... as time goes on and as other helps fail, its consolation and stay. But the consolation and stay will be of power in proportion to the power

of the criticism of life." He explains it in the following manner:

"The greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life - to the question: How to live... In poetry, however the criticism of life has to be made conformably to the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty. Truth and seriousness of substance and matter, felicity and perfection of diction and manner, as these are exhibited in the best poets, are what constitute a criticism of life made in conformity with the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty; and it is by knowing and feeling the work of those poets that we learn to recognise the fulfilment of such conditions."

Poetry plays an eminent role in life. It is more important than religion. Arnold was very much dissatisfied with the kind of poetry written in his own time and he reacted against it. He felt that the poets paid more attention to the form and expression of the poem than to its subject and they tried to attract readers by the purple patches in the poem and never paid attention to the total impressions of the work. Arnold's own view is that poetic subject is the first consideration with a great poet, and poetic expression comes only afterwards. According to him, "human actions" are the best subject matter of poetry. The ancients to him were better poets than the moderns because 'they regarded the whole; we regard the parts.' With them, the action predominated over the expression; with us the expression predominates over the action.

According to Arnold, there is no difference between art and morality. He says: "A poetry of revolt against moral idea is a poetry of revolt against life; a poetry of indifference towards moral ideas is a poetry of indifference towards life." When Arnold pleads for treating in poetry moral ideas, he does not mean composing moral and didactic poems, but the poems that give answers to the question - how to live well.

Arnold's views on poetry have aroused considerable controversy among the critics. Prof. Saintsbury thinks that the objects of poetry are not merely actions but thoughts and feelings also and thus Arnold unnecessarily limits the scope of poetry. Then he thinks that Arnold's definition of poetry is too wide. "All literature is the application of ideas to life: and to say that poetry is the application of ideas to life, under the conditions fixed for poetry, is simply a vain repetition." The fact is that Arnold believes that the ideas and sentiments to have any permanent value must be based on actual life. Thoughts and feelings excluded from the action might be the creed of a few poets, but they have no charm for him. Saintsbury defends Arnold's theory when he says that Arnold is taking the field in favour of the doctrine of the poetic subject, as against the doctrine of the Poetic Moment.

Arnold's theory of poetry may be questionable in details and on minor points, but on the whole we can say that his views are quite mature, and are in harmony with modern ideas. Arnold was actually against the romantic poetry in which the poets were expressing personal sentiments and emotions without caring for the general human nature. Arnold knew the malady of his age very well and protested vigorously against it. He wanted to renew the permanent ethical values of life and to reconstruct art on its true basis. He also believed that art, thus realised, would help men in achieving ethical values. Therefore he insisted on the union of the best subjects and the highest expression in poetry. Only poetry of this sort can achieve its ultimate end.

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