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~page 708~

Matthew Arnold:

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A STRANGE indifference surrounds the centenary of Matthew Arnold. Was it not but the other day that his name was upon all lips, his example in all minds, that every good liberal quoted him, and every lover of great verse lived with his works? Has his influence been transcended? Has his poetry faded or has its substance, like the substance of so much Victorian work, come to seem not for all time but strictly for one age?

No; the matter stands quite otherwise. If there is quiet about his name today it is because his thought and teaching have been so absorbed into the very current of our age that we are no more consciously aware of them than we are of our pulses and our blood. We all talk Arnold, think Arnold, preach and propagate Arnold. In the dead and almost fabled sixties of the nineteenth century he discovered Main Street with its "imperturbable self-satisfaction," its devastating "provinciality," its dangerous hostility to the "free play of the mind," to any "flexibility of the intelligence." He discovered the eternal Philistine of an industrialized and standardized civilization, who boasts of the output of his factories and the speed of his trains and never stops to consider that these "trains only carry him from an illiberal, dismal life at Islington to an illiberal, dismal life at Camberwell." It was Arnold who diagnosed the central Philistine heresy of substituting means for ends. "Freedom, like industry, is a very good horse to ride—but to ride somewhere."

He discovered Main Street; he discovered Babbitt; he discovered Mr. Mencken's neo-Puritans, reformers, hundred per-centers. "My brother Saxons, as is well known, have a terrible way with them of wanting to improve everything but themselves off the face of the earth." He added: "I myself have no such passion for finding nothing but myself everywhere." He used a rapier rather than a bludgeon; the nicknames which he gave to the enemies of the "children of light" were inspired by an elegant wit and high-bred malice. There is no one among us who would call our conventional political activities "a Thyestian banquet of claptrap." But we are all thinking, saying, proclaiming precisely that in somewhat other terms. How tonic it would be to have all our warm young liberals reread "Culture and Anarchy," which was published in 1869, and "Friendship's Garland," which appeared two years later! How magnificent it would be could they be turned aside from transitory dreams and schemes and panaceas and embrace the ideal and the work which alone, as Arnold pointed out, could cure the evils which he and they alike combat—"the work of making human life, hampered by a past which it has outgrown, natural and rational."

His immediate contemporaries belittled his publicistic activity, the criticism he exercised upon civilization in its totality. The Manchester people thought that machinery and money would save the world; even Mr. Frederic Harrison sneered at Arnold as being a "kid-glove philosopher," what we would now call a vicious high-brow. Arnold was saddened but not abashed. He knew then what recent history has proved through blood and fire. Nothing can save the world except that "free play of the mind" for which he was always pleading, nothing but hard and lucid thinking, nothing but the separation of concepts from myths.

The hostility of cultivated Philistia tended, then, to em-

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phasize primarily his criticism of literature. But even this criticism when it was at its freshest and keenest, as in the essays on The Function of Criticism, on Academies, and on Pagan and Medieval Religious Sentiment, embraced worlds of both perception and reasoning which the ordinary critic of letters had never permitted himself to tread. The second volume of the famous "Essays in Criticism" is thinner in substance and more rigid in temper. Arnold's estimate of Wordsworth was highly personal and of Shelley irritable and absurd. But in these writings, as well as in the delectable "Lectures on Translating Homer," he triumphantly illustrated the fact that literature must be treated with the living mind and the living spirit, that it can neither be labeled nor measured. And throughout the minor essays he set again and again an example of the highest humanism. Thus he revered Dante as a man and as the chief practitioner of the "grand style" in its mood of severity. But when a British editor desired to endear the Florentine to Manchester by constructing for him a conventional history, Arnold serenely brushed the man aside. "I can quite believe the tradition which represents him as not having lived happily with his wife. I can even believe an assertion of Boccaccio that Dante's conduct was at times exceedingly irregular. We know how the followers of the spiritual life tend to be antinomian in what belongs to the outward life." He smiled at the notion of turning Dante into the hero of a "sentimental but strictly virtuous novel." You have but to test Arnold at any crucial point like that. Not for nothing was he throughout life a disciple of Goethe. Not for nothing did he stigmatize

> The barren optimistic sophistries
> Of comfortable moles whom what they do
> Teaches the limit of the just and true.

Like the Marcus Aurelius of his portraiture, he is "wise, just, self-governed, serene."

His poetry, in the decline of Victorian lusciousness, got the reputation of being a little hard and cold. People repeat this criticism, we suspect, without rereading the verse. It has, in many passages, a mellow brightness as of moonlit hills or fountains under stars. But it has also passion, as in the highest lyrics, Philomela and Isolation, or in the great last section of Tristram and Iseult, and it has magic in whole poems—In Utrumque Paratus, the strangely neglected Switzerland lyrics, the divine songs of Callicles, and in single lines such as that incomparable one from Sohrab and Rustum:

> And youth and bloom and this delightful world.

It has, finally, despite querulous gainsayers, constant seriousness and satisfactoriness of substance. Granting that the son of Arnold of Rugby was more troubled over the decay of Christian dogma than we are, it should be remembered that that decay symbolized for him a fact of equal gravity to ourselves—the loss of a rational universe in which to be at home. But he never doubted how a new world was to be built—by justice and by reason, not by claptrap and myth. Of victory in that conflict he was never sure, of its inevitableness and glory always:

> Charge once more, then, and be dumb!
> Let the victors, when they come,
> When the forts of folly fall,
> Find thy body by the wall!

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