

Mathew Arnold: A Critical Portrait*

Stefan Collini

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This is the the paperback edition of the 1988 Oxford University Press edition with a new afterward and a new supplementary reading note. Among other publications, the new edition points out the author's more recent scholarly publication on Arnold among other publications. The truth of the matter is that there has been an increased interest in Arnold. Attesting to his popularity are new editions including a poetry collection, *Culture and Anarchy*, and other essays in a new edition. In addition, *The Selected Letters* of the poet appeared in 1992 containing some new letters that have been unearthed more recently.

Collini argues that Arnold "stands at the center of a series of debates." Many scholars are critical of Arnold in many areas, including his unique conception of culture and the burden he places upon the study and teaching of literature. In addition, the modern widespread skepticism about the possibilities of disinterestedness also contributes to the criticism of Arnold. Collini argues, however, that it is those who want to criticize what they think is Arnold's attitude towards culture that keep his name alive in professional circles.

The main thrust of the book is to emphasize that it is Arnold the literary and cultural critic that was, and will continue to be, of interest and influence on us. Thus, the book emphasizes Arnold's writing in the 1860s, specifically *Essays on Criticism* and *Culture and Anarchy*. Even in this selection, the author tries to concentrate on bring-

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ing out the true temper of Arnold's mind and his distinctive style. He admires in the first chapter the "voice" Arnold is able to present to his reader. The other six chapters are devoted to Arnold's life, poetry, literary, social, and religious criticism. The last chapter summarizes the Arnoldian legacy, where Arnold is seen to be more central to cultural debates at the end of the 20th century than at any other time since his death in 1888. The two generations that followed him started rejecting everything Victorian. The hostility, early in the century, went even against the "spoilt romanticism" of Victorian verse. Arnold, though, escaped by being called the most learned of English poets after Milton.

As a critic, his authority was called upon in the twenties and the thirties by those who wanted to emphasize the social aspects of his ideas. T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis and I.A. Richards's writings invoked his name in their call for cultural renewal. Lionel Trilling's book on Arnold brought him into prominence in the years after the Second World War. The spread of higher education brought him to more prominence since "literature became the religion of western culture." Collini says that Arnold's influence can be seen as the most important in the departments of English of the 1960s. Thus it was academia that brought him into prominence.

In recent decades he has become the target of attack by those who are political radicals. His champions, however, established a journal titled *Essays in Criticism*, an Arnoldian title. Nevertheless, he is still under attack, for instance, by those who attack the idea of a canon of important major works, for he had shaped the modern concept of culture and order.

Collini suggests that Arnold did not always practice what he preached. He continues, "His work, the poetry included, does not really touch the extremes of human life. He can be pessimistic but he does not rise to the tragic; he can be joyful without ever reaching the sublime." He knew these feelings but they "did not find unforgettable expression in his writing."

Collini notices that some are suspicious of the serenity and balance of Arnold's tone, but these qualities are the result of the "intimacy and informality" of Arnold's writing that is clearly cultivated. He continues, "We are persuaded and buoyed up by reading Arnold's best prose" because it embodies "a deeply pondered response" to "the larger scheme of life."

Collini states that he is not a devoted Arnold champion. That may be true, but then one has to wonder as to the reasons that drove him to spend time and work on this writer if he is not an enthusiastic reader of his work. Life is too short to waste part of it in pursuit of something one doesn't like. However, one understands the compul-

sion that drove Collini to this statement. It has become almost mandatory to apologize for liking anything about Arnold. He is one of many who make the same statement about Arnold, for it is not fashionable in the last decade of the 20th century to seem too impressed with Arnold. Timothy Peltson, for example, writes in *College English* (November 1994), "I am not an Arnoldian, and there is much in his collected works that I cannot read with pleasure or agreement." However, Peltson goes on to come to Arnold's defense by asserting that Arnold is not at all "the predictable and doctrine-mongering writer of many recent polemics, and reading him is a more varied and surprising experience than could be inferred from most recent accounts." Furthermore, one has to agree with Peltson's comment that in Arnold's "effort to describe the awkward predicaments of modern literature and criticism, Arnold is exemplary and, in many ways, unsurpassed."

As a reader of Collini's work, I am more satisfied with his chapter on Arnold's poetry than with any other in the book. In this chapter, Collini points out that most of Arnold's poetry was written before his thirtieth birthday. Arnold excelled in love and loss, lyric and elegy. His preoccupation with transience and loss gives us a sense that he was never a young poet. He suggests that, although Arnold had a limited range and a stock of Romantic stage properties including moons, graves, and tears flowing freely and too often, he has been regarded as one of the major poets of the 19th century. Interest in his poetry is continuing because of the evidence present in his poetry of the corruption of faith by doubt. Collini complains that the poetry arises too exclusively from the mind and that its themes revolve around reflection and loss, frustration and sadness.

Collini describes Arnold's poems accurately as "reflections on the nature of meaning of certain kinds of experience." What is fascinating to me and to many modern readers of Arnold's poetry is epitomized in Collini's description of Arnold's poetry as functioning as "the dialogue of the mind with itself," a description that is more complimentary of the poetry than Collini most likely intended it to be.