

MATTHEW ARNOLD

A STUDY IN CONFLICT

By E. K. Brown
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PREFACE

Viii – Not a bio: this will look at a life-long conflict within his personality.

CHAPTER ONE:

THE PROBLEM: POSES AND UNCERTAINTIES

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1 - People have always wondered that MA's poems and prose conflict and his poetry itself is inconsistent.

In his 1853 preface he said poems should subordinate the parts to the whole, have a total impression, more than one liners.

But, few men have more systematically disregarded their own preaching.

3 – Tristan and Isolde was particularly trashed for having little narrative, but flashes of brilliance.

4 – Brilliant lines in Scholar Gipsy are said to not belong.

5 – Inconsistency is odd in “the greatest critic of his age.”

5 – He also has no consistent style of his own.

7 – This master critic seems to have been insensitive to unevenness his whole life.

8 – This is amazing as he is very sensitive to unevenness in others. He pointed this out between Wordsworth's poems and within Byron's.

10 – Why was this critic so incapable of self-criticism?

Lewis Gates sees four kinds of style in MA: 1) The severe style in Ed reports (Not personal). 2) The familiar easy style of literary essays; 3) The harsh style in controversy; 4) the emotional style in gushing tribute.

11 – When he does his 4th style he is not submitting a reasoned case, he is laying siege to his emotions. This happens in nearly all the first series of essays in criticism.

13 – MA hates Macaulay, who has a constant rhetorical manner, whereas MA has no assured manner of his own, he is various and multiform.

Gates says MA's manner is 'stagy'.

14 – It lacks the fullness of sincerity.

15 – Other critics have noticed his unevenness, so it must be true.

18 – Gates said, “There is a good deal of the poseur in him – I not only concede it cheerfully, but to be honest, I enjoy it.”

Brown will now indicate what the essential inner conflict in MA was.

19 – In MA's 1864 Oxford poetry chair discourse the key word is 'disinterested'. It is not a simple word. It is a strategy of presenting your ideas.

- 20 – The Victorian middle class is pliable only when it is worked upon in a roundabout fashion. But disinterested has another meaning too. It means be away from the rush and roar of practical life.
- 21 – Criticism from the point of party will not see things as they truly are. And, criticism that does not derive from this cannot be valid.
- 22 – There are times when MA is disinterested and then times when he is eager to win readers on a moral or intellectual opinion.

CHAPTER TWO:

POETRY AND THE THEORY OF POETRY

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- 24 - Let's start with the deeper form of disinterestedness, the frame of mind. In the 1840 Rugby winner, Alaric, the heroic action is refused. In the Oxford prize poem, Cromwell, (3 years later), the idea of serenity, of possession of one's own spirit, enters into conflict with the ideal of heroic and responsible action.
- 25 – MA praises Shakespeare as “self-school'd, self-scann'd, self-honour'd, self – secure.” In MA's first collection (1849), has the conflict about disinterestedness in many forms. The beauty of stillness is in 'resignation' and 'mycerinus.'
- 26 – The disinterested man can enter into the experiences of others.
- 27 – The modern pace is too dizzying, solitude is necessary to cultivate disinterestedness.
- 28 – MA wants to be unsullied by the world. As early as 1848 he is trying to convert Clough to detachment.
- 29 – He wants to break with Clough, but not as a particular individual, as all that troubles him without advancing him.
- 30 – In 1851 he tells his sister that he is reading more and more ancients and withdrawing from modern literature.
- 31 – This will have a steadying and composing effect upon his judgement.
- 32 – People complain that MA laughs too much.
- 35 – There were no so many poems being published, In 1849 MA says the form, wealth and depth are superfluous to the poet. There are two aspects to form: expression and conception, aka style and structure. When style and structure keep with the matter, great poetry emerges. To see deeply into one's matter is not to see poetically, “Deep not wide”. The organization of a poem so that the vision it expresses shall be wide rather than deep is an instance of disinterestedness as a strategy.
- 36 – It should give pleasure, not excite curiosity and reflection. This, Brown says, is an early groping towards a theory of poetry. But, we see it in the poetry. Stray reveler is almost insignificant in substance, it is just delicate moods. It is all style and structure. The beautiful and pleasure are the aim.
- 37 – This excluded him from the intellectual and spiritual influences of his time. But by 1852 he had realized that pure form was not a form by which he could adequately express his poetic powers. It required suppressing too much within him. In the preface of 1853, subject is everything, form is but a garment!
- 38 – But the subject should have wideness and generality and thus escape interestedness. The mythic element comes to veil personal emotion. Arnold's feelings are there, but they are disguised. This is seen in the oberman poems.

- 41 – By 1853 it was no longer enough to devise beautiful dreams. We needed to think. And, beautiful and productive of enjoyment.
- 42 – Empedocles was his big effort in this direction. He looks back at when he and Parmenides dreamed of becoming only thought, ever in intellectual discourse.
- 43 – Empedocles position was incompatible with disinterestedness.
- 44 – In trying to create a poetry of thought, he had merely produced a poetry of the disease of thought. It still, in its Olympian manner, preserves disinterestedness.
- 45 – The Scholar Gipsy is also poem of discontent with intellectualism.
- 46 – The gipsy is a disinterested being.
- 1855's Stanzas for a Grande Chartreuse also attempts to find a place for thought within the disposition of disinterestedness. The poet lauds the progress of the world, but says it is not his.
- 47 – He describes the romantic view, but says he only does so because of the age he is in. Had he been born in the 12th century, he'd be in a monastery.
- 48 – He had decided the modern poet must be a poet of ideas. But, Brown thinks his letters show he recognizes his failure as a poet of ideas and form combined.
- 49 – Though he focuses on his leaving poetry for responsible life and the ed job.
- 50 – A detailed view investigation of Merope follows.
- 51 – MA presents characters, but we are not too feel attachment for them. This undercuts interest. The antagonist and protagonist are equally lauded.
- 52 – Thus disinterestedness has precluded the achievement of a great poem.

CHAPTER THREE:

THE FORMATION OF THE CRITIC

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In 1857 an idea for a poem Lucretius gets incorporated into his 1857 inaugural poetry lecture, "On the Modern Element in Literature."

54 – Lucretius was thoroughly modern in the sense of being 'highly civilized, complex, and eternally interesting.' But, he notes, the predominance of thought is not without its penalties.

55 – Here we get praise of Sophocles, seeing life steady as a whole, not over thought ennui. And, Roman writers were not modern as they lack steadiness of vision, serenity, and balance, so can't be great. Within the grand style, the grand style simple is superior to the grand style severe.

58 – The simple is more magical. Like Homer, not so intellectual.

It is not like the great poets of the North, in Othello and Faust.

Homer was secure in all his traits.

59 – If you have too many principles, they will blind your criticism, MA says. Too much erudition and temper is bad.

60 – He says bad things about translators of Homer, but gives no examples, so it has that structure of a dogmatic thinker.

61 – So Brown thinks the intellectual mobility stance in MA's lectures is only a strategy that is unevenly successful, but effective.

63 – He gives his own examples of Homer translations and says they are nothing, so persistently that you think him disinterested and mobile in spirit.

64 – He is ignorant, yet occasionally offensive and harsh.

65 – But occasionally he is so judgmental that all disinterestedness is gone.

66 – For the first 10 years he had no interest in education and his reports were without opinion. In 1861, with Popular Education in France, this begins to change.

67 - He briefly ventures to pummel English middle class civilization.

68 – This is because education policy was being made and he was involved. In 1863 his mind turned towards religion. He composed a religious essay on Marcus Aurelius.

70 – He now advocates dual criticism; towards the work and to try books as to the influence which they are calculated to have upon the general culture of single nations or of the world at large.”

If a work relates to religion, you must ask who is edified.

71 – Colenso’s book offers no edification to anyone. His switch from Homer to religion is complete, he has principles and he’s sticking to them. Still he hides behind objective ‘literary criticism’.

72 – He lambasts Colenso turning the Bible into math problems.

73 – He also has to write disinterestedly about people he knows, and this isn’t so easy. Coleridge and Stanley for instance.

74 – Stanley lived up to edification. It is ok to be heterodox, but you must edify (this is barely consistent).

76 – Since Spinoza is outside of religion proper, his living in ideas is no problem.

77 – But religion generally, Arnold declares, is within the prevue of literary criticism. Literary critics have not only a right, but a duty to consider them.

78 – Literary critics are the natural watchmen over such territory.

79 – Letters show MA has given up being disinterested. He must be subtle to influence the public, not direct.

80 – Charm is necessary.

81 – This tact was developed just prior to the first series of Essays in Criticism. And in 1863 he has the new manner in A French Eton, which is full of persuasion and charm.

82 – He denounces specific principles and then lays them out. There shall be scholarships and a prerequisite for the individual student’s eligibility shall be opening the school to inspection.

83 – He saw the crisis in education as one of civilization. We will next look at his disinterestedness’ impact on his general literary and social criticism before he became convinced of the crisis in English civilizations.

CHAPTER FOUR:

THE CLIMAX OF DISINTERESTEDNESS

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85 - The essays in criticism are great portraits, again and again, they laud disinterestedness.

86 – Keats is at one with nature, like the Scholar Gipsy, withdrawing from the boors at the inn.

87 – Lovers of light, as Joubert says of Plato, get featured.

88 – Balder is also bright and loved by God. Balder is also above controversy.

89 – In Balder,
 “Unarm’d, inglorious: I attend the course
 Of ages, and my late return to light,
 In times less alien to a spirit mild,
 In new recover’d seats, the happier day.”

Aurilius' restraint gets praised.

90 – "Unity of aim, generous elevation of feeling, the love of light and of calm, the devotion to nature, the predominance of spirit over all else – these are the aspects of the disposition of disinterestedness." To see life steadily and whole.

If you don't do this you become 'provincial'.

91 – Because it is what they needed, Renan was the spokesperson for morality in France; Arnold for intelligence in England.

92 – If you read only books printed in your own language, you're provincial, you're no critic at all.

In "Pagan and Mediaeval Religious Sentiment," He says the Catholic Church is the church.

93 – He praises France to enlarge his nation's understanding.

94 – In France there is a sympathy with intellectual activity for its own sake" in England there is no equivalent. He speaks of different people's and races' excellence. Spinoza is the excellence of the Jews.

95 – What he is stressing is not what may be most important in the work, but what in the work will be most instructive for the current generation of readers.

Babbitt says MA's essay on Joubert is "one of the best critical essays ever written in English."

MA often repeats Joubert's "Always set for yourself a definite purpose" in his journals.

He did not, when writing Essays in Criticism, suggest living in an Ivory Tower.

96 – He charges and then withdraws.

97 – He asks if progress is real and then says, "These great questions are not for me." Well he raised them and ditched. The method is the reverse of dogmatism; it is suggestive and insinuating.

99 – In Essays in Criticism, he sticks with writers who have amazing powers but haven't gotten much attention. He says Byron is a man with "little culture and with no ideas."

100 – He decided to start criticizing English writers and thus has a very personal stamp at times, he is harsh on Coleridge's character.

102 – He withdraws a criticism of Wright then says he won't ask what happened to the poor girl Wragg. How to explain his mercilessness?

104 – He does have playful irony.

After Essays in criticism, the next work Celtic Literature is organized by its tone.

105 – But this is just to change opinion on English attitudes towards Wales.

106 – The urgency makes him want to attack philistinism by storm.

108 – But he retains a disinterested strategy and reinforces his "Englishness" when he can.

109 – While lacking specialized knowledge, he says the Celts are a great race, much more intimately linked with the English than they know.

110 – He doesn't want to exalt or abase the Celts, he wants to know him.

111 – But in the second lecture, the exalting begins To make it disinterested he cites others. Better than the Germans at poetry!

112 – Though, to be sure, the Germans are good at other things.

The English are part Celt. We should found a chair of Celtic at Oxford.

115 – The Celtic lectures are among his happiest uses of disinterestedness, in which he uses sobriety and calm.

**CHAPTER FIVE:
TOWARD A PRACTICAL CRITICISM**

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In *Schools and Universities on the Continent* (1868) we get a sense of crisis.

117 – In it MA moves smoothly from civilization to policy and back.

118 – Ideas appear that are fundamental to *Culture and Anarchy*. One is that England, for all her progress, is apart from the mainstream of Continental culture.

119 – The urgency paralleled what he saw in society, he saw the stoning of a police commissioner across the street from his house. In 1867 the Fenians blew up a prison.

120 – Writing his mother after the death of his infant son, he says public matters worry him.

122 – He uses the words ‘threatened’ and ‘imperilled’ and publishes “*Culture and Its Enemies*.” (his last Oxford speech).

He says of the middle class, “Consider these people, then, their way of life, their habits, their manners, the very tone of their voice; look at them attentively; observe the literature they read, and the things which give them pleasure, the words which come forth out of their mouths; the thoughts which make the furniture of their minds.”

123 – Disinterestedness is gone.

125 – In *Culture and Anarchy*, Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* has prominence.

126 – He makes a snide remark and then takes it back.

127 – Chapters 2 and 3 are almost bare of personal comment. He is praising thought above action. We need calm observation.

128 – He is highly vexed that people said he was impractical.

129 – Cultivating your best self is practical.

130 – To make reason and the will of God prevail, there is the part of thought and the part of action, (this means it is a composite concept).

As MA is unsystematic, the treatment of the sides is uneven.

131 – The best self is rational and then it is moral.

132 – While ‘disinterestedness’ was all over the Celtic work, it is barely in *Anarchy and Authority*. But he still eschews party.

134 – He could have been a politician, easily, but thought himself more effective outside of party politics.

137 – Still people must know the state is not their oppressor, but potentially the instrument of their common interest.

138 – Arnold is interested in that he wishes to reorganize the way the nation sees itself.

He must tell the middle class to speculate rather than legislate.

139 - Not being practical is practical.

**CHAPTER SIX:
RE-ENACTMENT WITH VARIATIONS**

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In the 5 years after *Anarchy and Authority*, MA took pleasure in recognition.

142 – Disraeli recognized him.

143 – He had influence without sales volume. As several children died, his socializing may have been for her.

144 – St. Paul and Protestantism is a sober book, it is a projection of the chapter on “Hebraism and Hellenism” in Culture and Anarchy. To read Paul you must understand broad culture and history.

145 – What Paul meant as poetry has been treated as dogma. This work is consistently disinterested, a quality he wishes to recover.

147 – He wanted it to be ‘healing and reconciling.’

MA did not go back to the Oxford chair because his statements on Christianity in Literature and Dogma were going to be too controversial.

148 – Lit and Dogmatism was a hit and helped his sales generally.

149 – The first two chapters were printed in Cornhill, and were dispassionate. But, when he did “Miracles do not happen,” he was banned. Disinterestedness is gone in said chapters. But, then returns to it.

151 – We cannot avoid what the great masses of England think.

“Our mechanical and materializing theology, with its insane licence of affirmation about God, its insane licence of affirmation about a future state, is really the result of the poverty and inanition of our minds.”

152 – And, in the preface, the Nonconformists are singled out for abuse.

He is harsh in God and the Bible too.

154 – He says a newly dead Bishop won’t be admitted to heaven!

The negative in God and the Bible is grounded in scholarship, the positive is arbitrary and personal.

155 – MA picks and chooses what Jesus said and meant to the point of it being MA’s Jesus.

156 – SO this is not really disinterested.

In 1877, after 10 years, MA returns to criticism with “A French Critic on Milton.” It is about other critics of Milton, so very impersonal.

157 – The word ‘disinterested’ is back, bigly.

158 – The next entry is an encomium to disinterestedness. He praises Falkland and friends saying, “By their heroic and hopeless stand against the inadequate ideals dominant in their time kept open their communication with the future, lived with the future.”

159 – In his return to criticism “A Study of Poetry,” he is all about disinterestedness as a virtue.

160 – He gives Wordsworth a higher place than had ever generally been given.

161 – He discloses that Wordsworth was a friend.

161 – W was “one of the very chief glories of English Poetry; and by nothing is England so glorious as by her poetry.”

163 – Joy in light was what he admired in Wordsworth and it was what he claimed for the great poets in “The Study of Poetry,” and it was what MA tried to achieve.

165 – When he returns to the Irish issue, he again tries to claim disinterestedness.

166 – But he has trouble when mentioning non-conformists.

167 – Thus he tells his opinion via discussing David Copperfield.

168 – And tries to write as a ‘quiet bystander.’

169 – Politically, Ireland was his principle theme. He didn’t write much about the domestic scene until his retirement in 1886. And, after Ireland he focused on the USA.

His first ‘Word about America’ is very conciliatory.

170 – He makes a parade of his inoffensiveness and detachment. His only complaints are delivered second hand.

171 – He delicately tells Americans they are gross.

A word more about America is nearly all praise. He loves our political system. Not until the last months of his life is he critical, in “Civilization and the United States.”

172 – In contrast to his intentions, MA wrote 5 political pieces and no poetry in his final two years. These are on particular issues and he is trying to ‘be of use.’

173 – The last years pieces have not been collected and this is not bad, as they are ephemeral.

175 – Even his final literary essay, on Shelley, is political.

176 – Rather than disinterested, he acts as a prosecutor of Shelley’s defender.

177 – It is not like the same person who wrote generously of Byron. But, he planned to write a 2nd part on Shelley, defending his good qualities, but never got around to it.

In his Civilization in the US, he reminds readers of how harsh he has been against Britain. He says Americans have a ‘morbid nervousness,’ but his attacking our newspapers seems to make it too personal. It is inconsistent.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

TERMINAL NOTE: THE WAY OF DISINTERESTNESS AND THE WAY OF PRACTICAL CRITICISM

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180 – Artists are generally not political theorists. So if they go this way it is too their weakness. It is best if they, like Browning, do their critique from within art.

181 – MA didn’t start into political / social issues until he was almost 40; and then did so with detailed proposals for education.

182 – The poet and the education reformer might have lives separate lives.

Brown says MA “was never a learned man.” And, so wandered beyond his true scope.

183 – The disasters this overstepping caused were more frequent in later years.

If people are genius artists, it is no guarantee that they’ll be genius in other areas of thought.

184 – Carlyle took a terrible position on a Jamaican person’s being beaten to death. He did so as an elected representative. MA didn’t chime in on this. But, it proves a point.