***The Study of Poetry* by Matthew Arnold**

**(English, P.G. 2nd Semester)**

Arnold starts with asserting that the future of poetry is immense. All our creed and religion have been shaken. They have grown too much tied down to facts. But for poetry the idea is everything. The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry. We should study poetry more and more, for poetry is capable of higher uses. We have to turn to poetry “to interpret life for us, to console us, and to sustain us.” Without poetry science will remain incomplete and much that passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry. Poetry can fulfill its high function only if we keep a high standard for it. No *charlatanism* should be allowed to enter poetry. Arnold then defines poetry as:

“A criticism of life under the conditions fixed for that criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty.”

Only the best poetry is capable of performing this task. Only that poetry which is the criticism of life can be our support and stay, when other helps fail us. So, it is important that readers should learn to choose the best. In choosing the best, the readers are warned against two kinds of fallacious judgments:

**The *historic estimate* and the *personal estimate*:**

The readers should learn to value poetry as it really is in itself. The historic estimate is likely to affect our judgment when we are dealing with ancient poets, the personal estimate when we are dealing with our contemporary poets. Readers should insist on the real estimate, which means a recognition and discovery of the highest qualities which produce the best poetry. It should be a real classic and not a false classic. A true classic is one which belongs to the class of the very best and such poetry we must feel and enjoy as deeply as we can*.*

It is not necessary to lay down what in the abstract constitute the features of high quality of poetry. It is much better to study concrete examples, to take specimens of poetry of the high, the very highest qualities, and to say, the features of highest poetry are what we find here. Short passages and single lines from Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton and others may be memorized and applied as *touchstones* to test the worth of the poems we want to read. This other poetry must not be required to resemble them; but if the touchstone-quotations are used with tact, they will enable the reader to detect the presence or absence of the highest poetic quality.

However, in order to satisfy those who insist that some criteria of excellence should be laid down, Arnold points out that excellence of poetry lies “both in its matter or its substance and in its manner or style.”But matter and style must have the accent of high beauty, worth and power*.* But Arnold does not define what this mark or accent is. He says we would ourselves feel it, for it is the mark or accent of all high poetry. If the matter of a poet has truth and high seriousness, the manner and diction would also acquire the accent of superiority. The two are vitally connected together.

Arnold then undertakes a brief review of English poetry from Chaucer to Burns in order to apply practically the general principles laid down above and so to demonstrate their truth. The substance of Chaucer’s poetry–– his view of things and his criticism of life--has “largeness, freedom, shrewdness, benignity.” He surveys the world from a truly human point of view. But his poetry is wanting in “high seriousness”. His language, no doubt, causes difficulty, but this difficulty can be easily overcome. Chaucer will be read more and more with the passing of time. But he is not a classic; his poetry lacks the accent of a real classic. This can be easily verified through a comparison of a passage from Chaucer with one from Dante, the first poetic classic of Christendom. This is so because he has the truth of substance but not “high seriousness”. Shakespeare and Milton are our great poetical classics, but Dryden and Pope are not poetical classics.

“Dryden was the puissant and glorious founder; Pope was the splendid high priest of the age of reason and prose, of our excellent and indispensable 18th century.”

But theirs is not the verse of men whose criticism of life has a serious seriousness, has poetic largeness, freedom, insight, benignity. Their application of ideas to life is not poetic application, they are not classics of English poetry; they are classics of English prose.

The most singular and unique poet of the age of Pope and Dryden is Gray. Gray is a poetic classic, but lie is the scantiest of classics. He lived in the company of great classics of Greece, and he caught their manners, and their views of life. His work is slighter and less perfect than it would have been, had he lived in a congenial age. Elsewhere, Arnold tells us that the difference between genuine poetry and the poetry of Pope, Dryden, and other poets of their school, is briefly this:

“Their poetry is conceived and composed in their wits; genuine poetry is conceived and composed in the soul.”

Thomas Gray’s poetry was so composed.

Next coming to Robert Burns, Arnold points out that his real merit is to be found in his Scottish poems. In his poetry, we do find the application of ideas to life, and also that his application is a powerful one, made by a man of vigorous understanding and master of language. He also has truth of substance. Burns is by far the greater force than Chaucer is, though he has less charm. But we do not find in Burns that accent of high seriousness which is born out of absolute sincerity, and which characterizes the poetry of the great classics. The poetry of Burns has truth of matter and truth of manner, but not the accent of the poetic virtue of the highest masters. Even in the case of Burns, one is likely to be misguided by the personal estimate. This danger is even greater in the case of Byron, Shelley and Wordsworth. Estimates of their poetry are likely not only to be personal, but also “personal with passion”. So Arnold does not take them up for consideration.

Having illustrated practically his touchstone method, Arnold expresses the view that good literature will never lose its currency. There might be some vulgarization and cheapening of literary values, as a result of the increase in numbers of the common sort of readers, but the currency of good literature is ensured by “the instinct of self-preservation in humanity”. So strong is Arnold’s faith in the value of poetry of the highest kind. Hence, he believes that only in the spirit of poetry our race will find its last source of consolation and stay.