

Essay on Arnold's "On the Modern Elements in Literature"

Arnold's essay *On the Modern Elements in Literature* was occasioned by an unusual event, his election to the Chair of Poetry in Oxford. Unusually still, he did not choose to eulogise any person or institution. According to George Watson, it was "a lecture against the modern element in literature, in which Arnold seeks alliance with the classical dons in his audience against the prevailing tide of middleclass romanticism." In fact, Arnold was one of the great spokesmen of the Enlightenment, and that is why, what speaks about in these lines constitutes a view of history widespread in his day. It was put forward by Herder, Goethe and Novalis in Germany, by Saint Simonians in France and by Carlyle in England. In fact, he seeks a synthesis out of the past and present in the Hegelian mode. Added to this is Arnold's concern with literature as a criticism of life.

Arnold begins the essay with an anecdote—illustrative of moral deliverance of man, from the vast body of Buddhist literature in order to come to his point of what he called "intellectual deliverance". As an enlightened thinker himself Arnold was very much aware of the deeper significance of Buddhism. It is clear from way he starts the essay that he attached high significance to the Buddhist realization of the place and value of moral deliverance of man in the scheme of Buddhist philosophy. As a preacher and teacher Buddha, who was himself tested in various ways examined the worth of his disciple Poorna who wanted to preach the master's words among people. When Buddha was satisfied, he declared the result with the following lesson: one seeking to deliver others from desire must deliver himself first, one seeking to console others in their sorrow must console himself by realising the philosophy of chatwari arya sattyani (four-fold eternal truths), and one on his way helping others reach at the truth about the reality of the world and life, must first arrive at that. For Arnold the lesson was important since he saw in this a deliverance from all the destructive attributes—pride, sloth, anger and selfishness, attributes which are detrimental to collective civilised social life of man.

Arnold wanted to emphasise the point of this kind of deliverance before the Oxford audience perhaps because he wanted to bring home his point that a teacher like a teacher must rise above all the prejudices which are peculiarly human. Just after making a point about moral deliverance of man through an anecdote, he comes to the central issue of his lecture, that is, the intellectual deliverance of man which, he feels, necessary for a modern period like his nineteenth century. He thinks that intellectual deliverance is a specific demand of all the ages regarded as modern.

Arnold thinks that along with moral deliverance, intellectual deliverance is necessary for man because, according to him, man's true freedom lies in the enjoyment of both the kinds. He says that moral deliverance is demanded in all ages, but intellectual deliverance is not. Its necessity in the human civilisation is felt occasionally and rarely.

He finds that it is the search for intellectual deliverance that determines whether an age can be called modern or not. On the basis of this also Arnold thinks that a people can be called modern or not. Then he comes to the central issue. According to him, intellectual deliverance is the demand of the age in which they live. He finds that people judge the validity of all the intellectual pursuits in accordance with their contribution to the well-being of mankind. And the well-being depends on the intellectual deliverance of man.

After this Arnold explains why demand for intellectual deliverance arises in the present age. According to him, the need for intellectual deliverance arises because the present age faces a burden of history of a complex past and a complex present. He thinks specifically that it becomes an individual necessity because he/she has to deal with a vast body of facts of the present and past. Arnold emphasises that intellectual deliverance becomes possible only when the comprehension becomes possible. And the comprehension becomes possible when we can deduce the general truths about the things and facts all around us. Here Arnold speaks of a specific moment in the process of understanding, in which a particular higher state of the mind is achieved and a harmonious understanding of the things becomes possible. It is this state, Arnold thinks, in which we lose all the prejudices, impatience and irritation and the confused phenomena of the past and present become lucidly understandable. According to him, one who achieves that mental state, that is, one who finds out the true historical point of view of the times becomes the "intellectual deliverer" of the age.

However, Arnold thinks that comprehension of these becomes possible only when those are seen in relation to the past. It is here that the present age has to be compared and contrasted with other ages of human history. By quoting the some words of the Chancellor of Cambridge, Arnold tries to establish why this sort of comparing and contrasting becomes necessary. According to him, this is necessary because it will help us to rectify our mistakes and consolidate our position as civilised human beings.

Arnold marks out what people should aim at in achieving "intellectual deliverance" and explains his criteria of modernity of the present age. According to him, the intellectuals should concern themselves with two particular areas of study: one is significant culminating epoch and the other is a literature, which answered successfully all the issues of the past. He calls these types of an epoch and a literature modern in the sense that those arose out of the relationship with past. He finds that a great epoch may be without a representative literature. This happens when an age attains political and social maturity but does not take intellectual measure of all the development. In this case, he thinks, the epoch rather the literature of the age, should be the object of our study. Again, sometimes a great literature may be found in an intellectually and culturally inferior age. This happens because sometimes some thinkers may rise above the limited vision of the age and see more. In this case, the literature rather the epoch should be the object of our study. Now he stretches his argument little a bit and says that for the most representative interpretation of an age we must study the poetical literature of that age. According to him, since poetry demands greatest exertion of intellectual energy and faculties, it successfully records all the general facts about an age.

He finds that a great epoch may be without a representative literature. Again, sometimes a great literature may be found in an intellectually and culturally inferior age. That is why for our intellectual deliverance we should look for the co-existence and the simultaneous appearance of a great epoch and a great literature in an age. Here cites the example of the Greek culture at the time of Pericles as a great epoch and explains the outward characteristics that make it a great modern epoch. According to Arnold, one of the most characteristic outward features of a modern culture is the absence of violence in civil life. People do not move about in society with the constant fear of being attacked and with the constant alertness to defend his own life. Arnold thinks that with the disappearance of the threat to life society acquires confidence and people engage themselves in free social activities. This leads to the creation of tolerance in society, which, in turn, gives birth to the intellectual maturity of man. Once it is achieved man can observe facts with critical spirit, man can search for their laws and is able to judge by the rule of reason by rising above all the prejudices and caprices.

In order to make his points effectively clear, he compares and contrasts the age with the Elizabethan period. In the historical writings of Thucydides, he finds the evidence that the Athenians gave up the habit of wearing arms while moving in public life. On the other hand, during the Elizabethan period, he says, it was universal to move about with arms. Then Arnold points out another feature of modernity, namely the cultivation of refinement and rejection of the extravagance in dress. In Thucydides again, Arnold finds an evidence that the Athenians cultivated elegance and rejected extravagance. On the other hand, Arnold gathers from the description given in Sir Walter Scott's novel, Kenilworth how much the Elizabethans were obsessed with their taste for fanciful dress. Not only that, Arnold agrees with Pericles that they discovered sources of recreation for the spirit to counter in the balance of the labours of the body. Again, Arnold contrasts this with the Elizabethan taste for popular shows. Once again Arnold supports his argument by quoting Pericles. The point he wants to establish is that, with the disappearance of the threat to life the Greek society acquired confidence and the Greek people engaged themselves in free social activities. This led to the creation of tolerance in society, which, in turn, gave birth to their intellectual maturity.

In the historical writing of Thucydides, Arnold also finds an example of the supreme feature of a modern age, that is, the cultivation and manifestation of a critical spirit which led Thucydides to arrange analyse the facts about the Peloponnesian War rationally. Thucydides chose to write of the War because he thought of the event as the most instructive for mankind. According to him, the Peloponnesian War was more significant than the Trojan War. Arnold thinks that Thucydides' estimate of the Trojan War is not perfect, but he is highly impressed by his critical spirit.