

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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REVISITING MATTHEW ARNOLD'S NOTION OF CRITICISM

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In discussing Matthew Arnold's essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864), this paper seeks to emphasize the inherent importance of the topic articulated in the title of Arnold's essay. Rather than seeking to reconstruct Arnold's ideas on criticism over the course of his critical career, or review some of the readings of Arnold by later generations of critics, the paper primarily underscores aspects of Arnold's essay which are relevant to scholarship in literary studies and the humanities in any historical period, albeit in different forms. In particular, the article examines Arnold's definition of criticism, the role of the concept of "disinterestedness" within it, and possible new ways of reflecting on it, in the context of current trends of emphasizing the political dimension in English studies, substantial expansions of the discipline of English studies, and more general social changes that erode the cultural stature of literature and literary study today.

Key words: Matthew Arnold, criticism, culture, disinterestedness

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INTRODUCTION

The origin of this paper has been in my teaching: what does one say about Matthew Arnold's essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864) in the classroom, now, in the twenty-first century? Around the middle of the twentieth century, Lionel Trilling casually stated that "Arnold was the most influential critic of his age" (Trilling 1949: 219); until roughly the 1970s Arnold's texts, both critical and poetic, were commonly regarded in academia as important reading, and centrally featured in the canon of Victorian and more generally English literature and criticism. As is well known, in the last five decades Arnold's place in the history of criticism was significantly reappraised; some interpretations saw in his writing one of the foundations of exclusivist and antiquated Western concepts of culture

and literary canon.¹ Viewing Arnold as a progenitor of the very idea of a list of culturally central literary works is a reading that, though not entirely unjustified, is reductive and contrived, and certainly somewhat ahistorical, since Arnold did not write within or for anything like the academic-institutional framework of the late twentieth century. Generally, it should not be lost on readers of Arnold that his original question about criticism is framed with a strong sense of *situat-edness* in its own time: what is the function of criticism *at the present time*? It is still important to attend to the maze of historical readings and transpositions of Arnold's texts down to the present day, but I will rather regard Arnold's essay on criticism as an occasion for engaging in a different kind of reflection: what does the *type* of question his essay poses about the function of criticism mean now, in our time? In that regard, it is particularly worth revisiting Arnold's advocacy of the attitude of "disinterestedness" in criticism (which originated in his opposition to the practically-minded criticism of his contemporaries); the notion of disinterestedness enjoys little critical currency today given the common hermeneutical assumption that everything is (easily shown to be) political.

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In this paper I will therefore not discuss the varied readings and uses of Arnold's essay by generations of critics after him, an interesting but considerable task.² Rather than dealing with the history of reading Arnold and scrutinizing the ideologies and specific contexts of the various critical uses of Arnold, I will take the view here that it is at least equally important to revisit Arnold's essay *outside* the context of the (especially recent) history of responses to his writing, and that it is equally, if not more, pertinent to consider the formal relevance of the very question in the title of Arnold's essay. Teaching Arnold's essay, and writing about it, requires acknowledging the centrality and persistence of that question.

¹ Stefan Collini sums up the tenor of such interpretations in "Afterword", added in the 1994 edition of his *Matthew Arnold. A Critical Portrait* (1988), attributing the manner Arnold's ideas were read in contemporary debates on the concepts of canon and culture to "circumstances specific to the late-twentieth century [...]" Chief among these circumstances are, first, the attack, from various quarters, on any unitary or exclusive conception of culture; second, the burden of moral sustenance placed upon the study and teaching of literature, and third, the spread of a theoretically grounded scepticism about the very possibility of 'disinterestedness'" (2008: 126).

² A recent and rather detailed discussion of the critical reception of Arnold (among his contemporaries and later generations of critics) can be found in James Walter Caufield's 2012 book on Arnold; especially interesting is Caufield's analysis of different ideological approaches to Arnold in recent decades, both on the left, which "has erected the image of an elitist, authoritarian, and Eurocentric Arnold, the founding father of high-brow exclusivity and chief priest of cultural centrality", and the right, "which employs an almost identical image of Arnold in its own unashamedly elitist, authoritarian and Eurocentric defense of Great Books canonicity, an inviolable core of texts that is thought to constitute 'our' common culture" (Caufield 2017: 29).

Inevitably, of course, Arnold's formulation of the basic question of the function of criticism requires some close reading of reconstruction, simple as it appears and quotable as it has often been. Inevitably too, I will make occasional references to views of some contemporary critics on criticism; this will not be done to reinforce my framing of the question of the function of criticism, but rather to bring into focus some of the key aspects of the situation of criticism today. Needless to say, the topic of my essay merits a treatise-style discussion, but what the essay format only allows is a sketching out of the problematic.

I would like to begin this paper by first conducting an experiment in misreading in order to demonstrate how easy it is to read Arnold's essay out of context; some of that availability to misinterpretation comes from the resemblance of some of Arnold's formulations and various instances of academic and critical jargon from our own time. Imagine for a second that you are completely unaware of Arnold's ideas, and that you have just stumbled upon his claim that the function of criticism is "simply to know the best that is known and thought in the world, and by in its turn making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas" (Arnold 1999b: 37).

So let us assume this is all we care to know about his notion of criticism: "the best that is known and thought in the world"—does not the use of the term *best* foreshadow that great refrain of our time, the pursuit of excellence, which has become a common but not entirely clear part of the language we use to discuss what we do as scholars and teachers? Does not the drift of Arnold's phrase anticipate the culture of competitiveness which we in the humanities have come to abide, distasteful as it may be to the qualitative turn of our professional habitus? Could not Arnold's phrase, which features the term "world", make us think of the global village that our world has become, the place of English in that global village, and the role of us academics in conveying reflection and knowledge on that globalized space? Doesn't Arnold's goal of creation of "a current of true and fresh ideas" bring to mind our own engagement in constant renovation and expansion of our discipline, which may perhaps have created a disciplinary landscape verging on hyperproduction, a current of fresh ideas so strong that it is less like a current and more like a deluge? And what about Arnold's vagueness regarding the definition of the subject matter of criticism—the purview of our critical work encompasses the best of what, precisely? Doesn't this vagueness seem to presage the diffuse character and scope of subject matter which is now our province of study, sprawling far beyond literature itself? Of course, we know that Arnold has not been read in such anachronistic ways; we know such readings verge on misconstructions, even though some of their elements may coincidentally overlap

with actual academic trends in our time. My point here is that if we recognize that Arnold's intellectual context was rather different from our own, we should also regard various narratives of historical continuity linking Arnold to the present day as a stretch in both historical and conceptual senses.

CRITICISM AND PAROCHIALISM

112 Terry Eagleton noted of F. R. Leavis that "he spoke a distinctive critical language, one largely of his own invention" (Eagleton 2023: 215). The same could be said of Arnold's prose, with his highly distinct usages of terms such as criticism and culture, his characteristic phraseology ("free play of the mind", "order of ideas", "study of perfection", "epoch of concentration", "epoch of expansion", "touchstones"), his peculiar naming of English social classes, etc. Primarily an essayist (and a polemicist), and not an author of systematic treatises, Arnold did not so much develop a conceptual system as gestured towards one. Moreover, his essay on the function of criticism is quite a disorderly piece of composition, excursive as it is and occasionally deficient in elaboration. For readers today another source of confusion lies in his use of the terms literature and criticism in the essay. On one occasion criticism is regarded as a form of literature, on another—the only one in the text, the term "literary criticism" makes an appearance, but even there not in the contemporary sense of the study of imaginative literature. Arnold's essay may be said to inhabit a transitional moment in the history of these concepts, in which there still persists an older, general notion of literature that includes a range of writing, imaginative as well as non fictional. However, the essay also conveys an understanding of distinct identities of the "critical effort" in general, criticism of literature (in the broad sense), and literature in a narrower, "creative" sense. When Arnold actually makes clear references to works of "creative" literature in the essay, he tends to use the word "poetry" (it is a coincidence that fiction was not much to his literary taste).

Criticism is for Arnold a modern method of knowledge: "Of the literature of France and Germany, as of the intellect of Europe in general, the main effort, for now many years, has been a critical effort; the endeavour, in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is" (Arnold 1999b: 26).³ The "critical power [...] tends to establish an

³ Here Arnold quotes himself from an earlier essay, "On Translating Homer" (1861).

order of ideas, if not absolutely true, yet true by comparison with that which it displaces; to make the best ideas prevail" (Arnold 1999b: 29). Out of this renewal of the order of ideas "come the creative epochs of literature" (Arnold 1999b: 29). Arnold's idea of criticism defines both the principle of knowledge (which suffuses a range of learning) and the purpose of knowledge. Criticism is about "ever widening its knowledge" (Arnold 1999b: 51), and helping usher in a new and better epistemological style (a new "order of ideas"), not a definitive order of ideas, but one assumed to be superior to the previous one. By the same implication, criticism is subject to constant reconstruction in its search for the best ideas. While Arnold's essay presents some sense of how he would like to see English society transform (at least culturally), he is cautious not to propose any idea of historical causality or teleology. Soon after suggesting that the goal of criticism is to replace an old order of ideas with a new one, he shies away from "considerations of the general march of genius and of society, – considerations which are apt to become too abstract and impalpable" (Arnold 1999b: 29).

Trying to explain why the current state of criticism in England falls short of his idea of it, Arnold points to the social effects of the French Revolution in England, presenting a specific historicizing assessment about both the present state of English society and the state of criticism in England. In his account of the character of the French Revolution itself, Arnold states: "That a whole nation should have been penetrated with an enthusiasm for pure reason, and with an ardent zeal for making its prescriptions triumph, is a very remarkable thing [...] But the mania for giving an immediate political and practical application to all these fine ideas of the reason was fatal" (Arnold 1999b: 32).⁴ The intellectual effects of the French Revolution were not favourable:

[The] movement of ideas [of the French Revolution], by quitting the intellectual sphere and rushing furiously into the political sphere, ran, indeed, a prodigious and memorable course, but produced no such intellectual fruit as the movement of ideas of the Renaissance, and created, in opposition to itself, what I may call an *epoch of concentration*. The great force of that epoch of concentration was England. (Arnold 1999b: 33)

During that epoch, criticism, which is an exercise of intellectual curiosity, "has undergone [in England] a long benumbing period of blight and suppression [...]"

⁴ Arnold held that even though an appeal to reason was an important part of the French Revolution, "the France of Voltaire and Rousseau told far more powerfully upon the mind of Europe than the France of the Revolution" (Arnold 1999b: 31).

But epochs of concentration cannot well endure forever; epochs of expansion, in the due course of things, follow them. Such an epoch of expansion seems to be opening in this country" (Arnold 1999b: 36). Arnold does not stop to offer more clarity on what he means by concentration and expansion; it seems best to assume that the terms are meant to describe the qualities of intellectual life of an epoch, narrow-mindedness versus broad-mindedness. In what he views as a dawning of a new epoch of expansion in England, "in spite of all that is said about the absorbing and brutalizing influence of our passionate material progress, it seems to me indisputable that this progress is likely, though not certain, to lead in the end to an apparition of intellectual life" (Arnold 1999b: 36). There is a good deal of caution in his formulations here, reflecting a reluctance to engage in prediction of social trends as well as a reservation about specifying what kind of social circumstances might give rise to an epoch of expansion (or the flourishing of intellectual life he means by it). In fact, the essay does not furnish any unmistakable examples of the dawning of such an epoch in actual English criticism,⁵ especially not criticism of imaginative literature; it does, however, suggest that a social climate is emerging in England that might be more conducive to intellectual curiosity.

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Arnold's understanding of this historical situation of English criticism should be remembered in the context of various later objections, whether it be by the scholars who reproached him with attaching an exaggerated social importance to criticism, or those who saw him as promoting a notion of cultural normativity (his writing does occasionally slip into both of these implications). The social role he assigned to criticism is considerable. The claim that criticism "tends [...] to make the best ideas prevail" (Arnold 1999b: 29) assumes a lofty goal, and it also begs the question of how the actual prevailing of the best ideas is supposed to happen. Modern readers may even wonder whether there is a hint here of seeing criticism as inhabiting something like a marketplace of ideas, but there is no evidence in the essay that Arnold may have had in mind an economic notion of the competition of ideas. We probably err the least in assuming that the prevailing of the best ideas simply denotes Arnold's hopeful belief in the power of criticism to shape public opinion, but the relationship between criticism and its public life, as in education, publication, reception and public debate, remains vague. As regards education, a topic not directly engaged in the essay, it is worth noting that Arnold's other critical texts endorse the idea of the State as the in-

⁵ The names of Cobbett, Ruskin and Carlyle come up, but with reservations about their being too closely involved in matters of practical politics; for instance, the essay mentions Ruskin's "pugnacious political economy" (Arnold 1999b: 42).

strument of culture (and the other way around),⁶ and that much of the spirit in which he wrote of the relationship between the State and culture came from his observation of the achievements of state-provided education in Germany and France, with Wilhelm von Humboldt especially drawing praise from Arnold for his educational reforms. The essay on criticism exudes a strong sense of polemical fervour in Arnold's desire to make his notion of criticism gain currency in English intellectual life, but from our perspective the fervour also throws into sharp relief the paucity of the educational field in England at the time. Namely, the essay was written at a time when there was not even a mandatory system of primary education in England, and the institutional history of English studies at universities was only just beginning, in forms that seem quaint today.⁷

It bears emphasising that "The Function of Criticism" is primarily a manifesto against what could be called parochialism (as well as an expression of parochialism), as the following passage about the function of "literary criticism" shows:

I have wished, above all, to insist on the attitude which criticism should adopt towards things in general; on its right tone and temper of mind. But then comes another question as to the subject-matter which literary criticism should most seek. Here, in general, its course is determined for it by the idea which is the law of its being: the idea of a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world, and thus to establish a current of fresh and true ideas. By the very nature of things, as England is not all the world, much of the best that is known and thought in the world cannot be of English growth, must be foreign; [...] The English critic of literature, therefore, must dwell much on foreign thought [...]. (Arnold 1999b: 49)⁸

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⁶ The State is for Arnold both subject to gradual improvement and instrumental to social improvement: "[...] believing in right reason, and having faith in the progress of humanity towards perfection, and ever labouring for this end, we grow to have clearer sight of the ideas of right reason, and of the elements and helps of perfection, and come gradually to fill the framework of the State with them, to fashion its internal composition and all its laws and institutions conformably to them, and to make the State more and more the expression, as we say, of our best self, which is not manifold, and vulgar, and unstable, and contentious, and ever-varying, but one, and noble, and secure, and peaceful, and the same for all mankind" (Arnold 1999a: 181).

⁷ An informative account of English studies in the nineteenth century can be found in Stefan Collini's *Literature and Learning*. It is a complex history that is beyond the scope of this paper. Collini observes that "the fortunes of English Literature as a course of study [...] came to be bound up with what was [...] a procedure or institution that acquired unprecedented social significance in the middle of the century: the competitive examinations for posts in public service" (2025: 112). At the new, civic universities the focus in English studies was on literary history. Oxford and Cambridge, the ancient universities, lagged behind in developing English studies in the nineteenth century.

⁸ The terms "literary criticism" and "critic of literature", which appear only once in the whole essay, are best understood as implying the broad concept of literature (not just imaginative literature).

Arnold deplored the parochialism of English criticism; his assessment of the achievement of the literature of the previous generation of English writers points to their deficiency in criticism:

[...] the English poetry of the first quarter of this century, with plenty of energy, plenty of creative force, did not know enough. This makes Byron so empty of matter, Shelley so incoherent, Wordsworth even, profound as he is, yet so wanting in completeness and variety. Wordsworth cared little for books, and disparaged Goethe. I admire Wordsworth, as he is, so much that I cannot wish him different; [...]. But surely the one thing wanting to make Wordsworth an even greater poet than he is,—his thought richer, and his influence of wider application,—was that he should have read more books, among them, no doubt, those of that Goethe whom he disparaged without reading him. (Arnold 1999b: 30)

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The English poets “did not know enough” in comparison with a continental writer like Goethe. It may be argued that the motivation of Arnold's critique of English cultural insularism is itself parochial: isn't his concern with the relative underachievement of English writers and critics in comparison with those of some other nations itself parochially motivated, designed as it is to raise English literature and criticism out of parochialism? Yet the “best that is known and thought in the world” is a phrase that at least nominally endorses the principle of universality, a well-nigh cosmopolitan assumption that takes precedence over what may be the parochial element in Arnold's manifesto against parochialism (here I use the word “cosmopolitan” loosely, insofar as Arnold's use of the term “world” does nominally connote a global breadth of perspective, contrasted to English insularism, but does not come with a sustained discussion of what he may mean by it).

True enough, other passages from Arnold's essay on the function of criticism present somewhat different perspectives. For instance, soon after claiming the vantage point of the world, a sort of cosmopolitanism, Arnold in fact narrows his transnational scope to Europe:

But, after all, the criticism I am really concerned with,—the criticism which alone can much help us for the future, the criticism which, throughout Europe, is at the present day meant, when so much stress is laid on the importance of criticism and the critical spirit,—is a criticism which regards Europe as being, for intellectual and spiritual purposes, one great confederation, bound to a joint action and working to a common result; and whose members have, for their proper outfit, a knowledge of Greek, Roman, and Eastern antiquity, and of one another. (Arnold 1999b: 50)

This, indeed, is the Arnold that resembles, or anticipates, the ideas underwriting the courses in Great Books or Western Civilization that had often been a general requirement in American higher education before reforms of the canon in the last decades of the twentieth century. A similar conclusion might follow from the appearance of the phrase "central standard" in the essay (Arnold 1999b: 49); the phrase is used without detailed explication.⁹ A reconstruction of Arnold's personal literary taste, expressed more extensively in some of his other essays, cannot be attempted here, but it was succinctly described by Collini: "poetry [...] outranked prose, Europe largely outranked England, the past always outranked the present" (Collini 2008: 66).

The essay on criticism conveys a sense of cultural envy coming from a perception of French and German dominance in criticism, and it is meant to promote the improvement of the quality of English criticism, by making it more cosmopolitan, perhaps also to enable it to make more of a mark within the "great confederation". But if his words that "the criticism [he is] really concerned with" is European do run counter to the essay's use of the term "world", the very presence of the term introduces the necessity of imagining a global viewpoint, however unrealized in the essay or occasionally contradicted by Arnold's own words. In calling attention to the term "world" lies the risk of overemphasizing its significance in his views or underemphasizing his actual Eurocentrism, but the term itself cannot be ignored or erased from his critical vocabulary. His practical Eurocentrism necessarily means that the scope of his intellectual interest is not truly global, as he ignores the question of cultural and intellectual practices in other parts of the world; his use of the word "world" nevertheless signifies a burgeoning cosmopolitanism, if in idea only.

A formally historicising note is in order here. The question of the relationship between the local and the cosmopolitan is pertinent to more than just the historical circumstances of English criticism in Arnold's time; any instance of criticism is embedded in a historical structure of situatedness. All our critical effort is by default

⁹ Even as he uses the phrase "central standard", Arnold acknowledges "judging" as a part of the critic's work, but not as important as gaining and "communicating fresh knowledge [...]" Sometimes, no doubt, for the sake of establishing an author's place in literature, and his relation to a central standard (and if this is not done, how are we to get at our *best in the world?*) criticism may have to deal with a subject-matter so familiar that fresh knowledge is out of the question, and then it must be all judgment; an enunciation and detailed application of principles. [...] Still under all circumstances, this mere judgment and application of principles is, in itself, not the most satisfactory work to the critic; like mathematics, it is tautological, and cannot well give us, like fresh learning, the sense of creative activity" (Arnold 1999b: 49–50). The word "standard" is repeated two more times in the essay, with the same meaning as the "best that is known and thought in the world".

parochial, not because criticism does not ever strive to look beyond the horizon of locality from which it speaks, but because all criticism (literature, culture, etc.) is marked by the specificity of its time and place. The positing of a universal or cosmopolitan critical idiom may serve as an important gesture of acknowledging the inherent parochialism of criticism and dealing with it, a necessary conceptual framework for reflecting on the situatedness of all criticism. In fact, as already Arnold's essay suggests, without such an assumption criticism remains hampered and sapped by its own parochialism. On the other hand, the very fact of critical conversation across the lines of localism does not mean removing the problem of the embeddedness of criticism in a specific cultural context. In actuality, and inevitably so, transnationalization of critical idiom unfolds as an adaptation of one local critical idiom into the context and usages of a different cultural space, creating a new critical idiom that may have cosmopolitan aspirations but still bears a local stamp on it. Some of the appropriation of French poststructuralist theory in the US in the last third of the twentieth century comes to mind, as does some of a more recent appropriation of American critical fashions into a range of academic environments around the world. It is interesting that at the end of the twentieth century it has become somewhat commonplace in American academia to assume that Arnold should be submitted to exemplary reprobation for his Eurocentric view of culture, while at the same time American critical idioms have come to constitute a new critical paradigm which is inevitably local (in the sense I just described) but which has also had a powerful influence in criticism on the global stage. The extended scope of the discipline of English (which now encompasses fields other than literature and a range of interdisciplinary approaches), the styles and methods of scholarship, the emphasis on the political dimension of literary study—all this and more have also become a template emulated in varying degrees in academic environments around the world. If such circumstances and developments may be taken to have generated an actually existing form of cosmopolitan discourse, it still remains the task of criticism to reflect on its historical character.

CRITICISM AND DISINTERESTEDNESS

In the context of the dominant inclination of criticism today to play up the ideological aspect of both literature and literary study, Arnold's insistence on disinterestedness of criticism seems quaint; he held that criticism should "try to know the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice,

politics, and everything of the kind" (Arnold 1999b: 35–36). In addition, the essay contains a language of objectivism, which is hardly persuasive to modern sensibilities, for who would dare argue today that there is a remotely thinkable way to read a (literary) text objectively? That is what Arnold called for: "to see the object as in itself it really is" (Arnold 1999b: 26). This sonorous declaration of objectivity leaves in its wake a large number of philosophical questions unaddressed, and it remains a rather unelaborated part of the essay. I will regard it mostly as Arnold's ancillary argument on behalf of his affirmation of the notion of disinterestedness, ultimately more centrally placed in his essay.

In Arnold's time there was no shortage of publications in literary and cultural criticism, but these publications had very distinct political affiliations, which he found problematic. His advocacy of disinterestedness (or his rejection of political criticism) is also articulated as rejection of practical-mindedness: Arnold took issue with what he saw as the current English national predilection for the practical and the national suspicion of the speculative. Here, we should think of his idea of objectivity in terms of quality of critical speculation—theoretical, objective study is superior to practically-minded study, as it engages in analysis of its object freely, without concerning itself with practical (or in effect, what we would call ideological) purposes of studying that object. In that sense, objectivity in Arnold's language is not the absolute opposite of subjectivity, but rather of practicality. Pursuing knowledge should be done not with a view to immediate transcription of criticism into politics but in the spirit of critical "curiosity", which he describes as "disinterested love of a free play of the mind on all subjects, for its own sake" (Arnold 1999b: 35); such exercise of objectivity in Arnold's view produces a new order of ideas.¹⁰

Parenthetically, it should be noted that in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) Arnold's primary concern is not with criticism but with elaborating a notion of culture. In this collection of essays, he describes "the scientific passion", which appears to be a concept related to his notion of criticism (as intellectual curiosity), as an important part of culture, but points out the importance of viewing culture in another way, "not as having its origin in curiosity, but as having its origin in the love of perfection; it is *a study of perfection*. It moves by the force, not merely or primarily of the scientific passion for pure knowledge, but also of the moral

¹⁰ Since the task of criticism is to produce a new order of ideas (and is thus involved in historical processes), the requirement of disinterestedness is not ahistorical. As Eugene Goodheart points out, disinterestedness "assumes the possibility of escaping from and judging narrowly conceived interest-driven perspectives, but not of escaping from history" (Goodheart 1994: 419).

and social passion for doing good" (Arnold 1999a: 59). This latter sense is "more interesting and more far-reaching than that other, which is founded solely on the scientific passion for knowing" (Arnold 1999a: 60), but Arnold also stresses the importance of mutuality and balance between the two aspects of culture, and suggests that social action needs to have a foundation in knowledge. In *Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams noted that for Arnold "[c]ulture [...] is both study and pursuit" (1983: 115). Or in other words, 'perfection' in the study of perfection is not to be understood as a condition, but as a process. This process of culture involves the development of "our best self", in contrast to what Arnold calls doing as one likes, a specific ethos he finds dominant in English society (and which has different class versions). The best self means "ris[ing] above the idea of class to the idea of the whole community, *the State*" (Arnold 1999a: 98). It imagines and promotes the idea of community: "[...] by our *best self* we are united, impersonal, at harmony [...] culture suggests the idea of *the State*" (Arnold 1999a: 99). Such views from *Culture and Anarchy* suggest a convergence between Arnold's ideas on criticism and culture:¹¹ the practice of disinterested exercise of critical thought expands knowledge and creates the conditions for greater creativity in the arts, and it is requisite to the pursuit of overall human and social perfection (all of which is meant to be balanced in Arnold's idea of culture).¹² This is then how Arnold's disinterestedness should be interpreted: political particularism in criticism is incompatible with the proper exercise of criticism as it contradicts the very process of culture. Raymond Williams particularly stressed Arnold's words that culture is about "developing all sides of our humanity; and as a *general* perfection, developing all parts of our society" (Arnold 1999a: 192).¹³ To quote Williams's comment on this passage, for Arnold culture is not "an activity concerning individuals alone, or some part or section of society; it is, and must be, essentially *general*" (1983: 115).

¹¹ Collini observes in his 1994 "Afterword" to his book on Arnold that some readers see significant differences between the Arnold of "The Function of Criticism" and the author of *Culture and Anarchy*: the "Left-Arnoldians" favour Arnold's concept of criticism, whereas the "Right-Arnoldians" prefer his concept of culture (Collini 2008: 131).

¹² All three classes of Arnold's description (Barbarians, Philistines, Populace) engage in their own versions of doing as one likes. In contrast, there are persons who think outside the dominant manner of their own class: "within each of these classes there are a certain number of *aliens*, if we may so call them,—persons who are mainly led, not by their class spirit, but by a general *humane* spirit, by the love of human perfection" (1999a: 110). These people, in Arnold's view, are the ones engaged in creating the idea of culture as he sees it.

¹³ This is from "Preface" to *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), in Stefan Collini's edition of *Culture and Anarchy and other writings* (1999).

But let us go back to the essay on the function of criticism: Arnold contrasts the critic with the "practical man" (1999b: 41), and states that "the critic must keep out of the region of immediate practice in the political, social, humanitarian sphere, if he wants to make a beginning for that more free speculative treatment of things, which may perhaps one day make its benefits felt even in this sphere, but in a natural and thence irresistible manner" (1999b: 42). In Arnold's time critics inhabited an intellectual space in which there were no institutions or practices of scholarly research and debate such as are part of higher education now. Arnold's own field of critical activity was primarily in the print form of public discourse, and he acted in that field only as a critic addressing other critics and a general readership (which in actuality was mostly middle-class; for all his disenchantment with the Philistines, as he called the middle class, Arnold, it could be argued, effectively addressed his writing to that class). And while his focus in the essay is on the (disinterested) intellectual ethos of the critic, he is still concerned with the potential social effects of criticism itself, whose work in the creation of a new order of ideas "may perhaps one day make its benefits felt" (Arnold 1999b: 42) in the sphere of practical things. Disinterested exercise of criticism is imaginably, though not necessarily, conducive to generation of good social results. To approach criticism with a mind to achieving political immediacy is a fallacy; to regard criticism as bringing possible future good requires objectivity, or suspension of immediately political motivation in criticism. Of course, the very assumption that criticism may have beneficial social effects "one day" exudes a social (or political) understanding of criticism. As Stefan Collini notes, Arnold's idea of criticism is "a sort of informal political theory" (2008: 67). This could be said to be true, to a lesser or greater degree, of criticism in general, since every instance of literary criticism is also an instance of historical discourse, insofar as it assumes, however implicitly, a specific understanding of history and society. In Arnold's case, one readily apparent political dimension of his theorizing lies in his belief that good criticism may cumulatively have salutary social effects.

Arnold's views on criticism (and culture) are often regarded as being overly oriented towards the past in taking stock of the "the best that is known and thought in the world", but notably this formulation is in the present tense, and this "best" in the present is in service of creating "a current of true and *fresh* ideas" (Arnold 1999b: 37, emphasis mine). Learning "the best [...]" is only part of the task of criticism; its other and arguably more important task is to create new ("fresh") ideas. However, it is easily evidenced that in his practical literary criticism Arnold approached the literature of the past with a purpose of quality

assessment. In a later essay, "The Study of Poetry" (1880),¹⁴ Arnold characterized poetry as "thought and art in one", and "a criticism of life" (1974: 261), and stated that "the criticism of life will be of power in proportion as the poetry conveying it is excellent rather than inferior, sound rather than unsound or half-sound, true rather than untrue or half-true" (1974: 262). The business of evaluating the quality of a literary text requires a definition of standards or touchstones: "there can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, than to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry" (Arnold 1974: 267). "The Study of Poetry" presents a brief overview of the quality of writing across a history of English literature, producing in the process something like a list of great works, a canon (which is not a term that he uses). Arnold's actual evaluations of texts in this essay are not impressive as exercises in interpretation; rather, they reflect a specific cultural taste that derives from his view that literature is a "criticism of life", and that it is "high seriousness" of such criticism that should be used as a criterion to distinguish works of greater quality in the history of English literature.¹⁵ That kind of criterion, much as it provokes objections of elitism, is ultimately as selective an act as any act of selection involved in studying and teaching cultural texts for their cultural relevance. Incidentally, the essay refers to English poetry as "one great contributory stream to the world-river of poetry" (Arnold 1974: 260); the idea of a world perspective thus shapes his notion of literary study here as well. Even in what might be construed as a rudimentary emergence of the idea of an English literary canon, Arnold did not revise his central proposition about literature and criticism, which may be regarded as potentially cosmopolitan; that must be taken into account in spite of his recurrent dissonances from his best formulations.

In "The Study of Poetry" on one occasion Arnold brings up the figure of the "student of poetry" (1974: 270), meaning one engaged in a serious reading of poetry, but in the essay Arnold does not engage in interpretation or research in our sense of the terms, and certainly he does not have in mind a concept of a

¹⁴ The essay was written as an introduction to T. H. Ward's selection of English poetry (see Collini 2008: 63). In other words, it was addressed to a general reading public, rather than an audience of other critics.

¹⁵ For instance, "Chaucer is not one of the great classics [...] The substance of Chaucer's poetry, his view of things and his criticism of life, has largeness, freedom, shrewdness, benignity; but it has not [...] high seriousness. Homer's criticism of life has it, Dante's has it, Shakespeare's has it" (Arnold 1974: 274–275). Arnold takes the notion of high seriousness from Aristotle, but without much explanation; he vaguely means an overall quality of a writer's criticism of life.

university-level canon of English literature. In fact, Arnold was of little importance to the early history of the discipline of English studies. As Stefan Collini points out, "Arnold played a negligible part in the establishment of English studies at the universities" (Collini 2025: 296).¹⁶ Collini writes that

English as a discipline had largely taken shape by 1920 without Arnold's writing playing much of a direct role. After 1920, his work is invoked more freely [...] but the truth surely is that his work, or at least name, was then most often summoned up in order to *criticize* the state of English studies rather than being saluted as its informing ideal. The Arnoldianism of figures such as Leavis and Trilling is in many ways a reaction *against* what they saw as the narrow, fact-grubbing positivism and historicism promoted by university departments of English. (Collini 2025: 300–301)

In other words, the appreciation of Arnold by critics such as Leavis and Trilling must also be seen as a response to the actual early trends in the disciplinary history of English studies.

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CRITICISM AND ACADEMIC SCHOLARSHIP

My concern in this paper has not been to pursue the idea of reconstruction of some essential Arnoldian perspective, an Arnoldism which can then be criticized or defended from a present-day point of view. Nor do I propose that criticism is similarly placed in his time and ours. Differences between his time and our own cannot be overstated: Arnold belongs to that period in the history of the discipline of English which may be regarded as its very beginning, or perhaps even as the moment just before the beginning, when much of the academic institutional framework that we know today had not yet been constructed. On the whole, proposing that there is an element of contemporaneity in Arnold's essay would be misleading. However, there is an enduring kernel of relevance in Arnold's essay, and it lies in the fact that, for reasons that have to do with his historical context as well as his critical disposition, Arnold focused on some fundamental questions about the character of criticism, with which literary scholars continue to grapple whether they have Arnold in mind or not. These questions are not just tangentially

¹⁶ Collini mentions that in Britain "the consolidation of English's place as an academic subject [took place] in the years between 1890 and 1920" (Collini 2025: 269).

relevant; they are central to the very exercise of the discipline of literary study. Arnold framed his concept of criticism as disinterested intellectual effort, an autonomous activity, socially and politically unaffiliated. The exercise of criticism may enrich the understanding of the world; his assumption that enrichment of knowledge might itself have (cumulative) transformative social effects is difficult to reconstruct precisely, both for the vagueness of his articulation of it, and for the vagueness of his overall social analysis, which cannot be discussed at length here.¹⁷

To teach Arnold's essay on criticism, and to write about it is a complex matter: his notions of disinterestedness and culture are bound to raise eyebrows, as much as his own literary and cultural preferences and taste. But reading Arnold's essay today necessarily requires engaging in reflection about the locus of the profession of criticism itself. Even if we were to abstract the rich and varied history of critical responses to Arnold, his question about the function of criticism may be said to have relevance to the imperative of reflection on the function of the academic work of research and teaching today—what is the function of *academic* work at the present time? To raise the question about the function of criticism outside the academic context, in the general public sphere, is of course still possible in our time, yet the vast majority of intellectual work in the humanities is taking place within academic spaces.

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EXPANSION OF THE DISCIPLINE OF ENGLISH

Raymond Williams wrote in 1958, in a tone that now appears almost shockingly complimentary to Arnold, that "[w]e shall, if we are wise, continue to listen to him, and when the time comes to reply, we can hardly speak better than in his own best spirit" (1983: 128). Several decades later, in the 1994 critical edition of *Culture and Anarchy*, Gerald Graff criticized Arnold for offering a reductive notion of "common culture" (a term Arnold himself did not use). Graff does not reject any notion of "common culture", and proposes that "[a] democratic idea of common culture" is about "a common *debate* over culture;" on the other hand, "[t]his democratic condition of perpetual conflict, contestation and negotiation [...] in which [...] the terms of cultural commonality are always in the making, is

¹⁷ A discussion of Arnold's social analysis would require a close reading of his essays such as "Democracy" and "Equality", and, of course, *Culture and Anarchy*, but such a discussion is outside the scope of this paper.

precisely what Arnold meant by *anarchy*" (Graff 1994: 192). Graff contends that while Arnold's idea of culture does give prominence to the category of reason, this is only superficial and vague, and ultimately wary of critical rationality. Arnold's understanding of the concept of reason and his style of argumentation do merit more scrutiny; his elaboration of his chief concepts occasionally furnishes clear examples of cultural normativity and unreflective parochialism. On the other hand, Graff's reading of Arnold's concepts as opposed to modern rationality can be disputed on both conceptual and historical grounds, if one considers closely the tenor and historical context of Arnold's polemical writing.¹⁸

The question of disinterestedness of criticism is worth revisiting as the rejection of the possibility of disinterestedness has become something like a common assumption. In that regard, the bluntness of Arnold's critique of political criticism helps throw into sharp relief a problem that is not solved by ignoring it: what happens when the pursuit of disinterestedness is thrown aside? If we dismiss the notion of disinterestedness, do we also propose that interested criticism is the only thinkable form of critical rationality (as Graff's position implied), or that there is an inevitable political immediacy to criticism? If exercise of critical rationality inevitably means rootedness in a "political" perspective/purpose, does that mean an obligation to cultivate the primacy of such a perspective in research and teaching, rather than an obligation to reflect on it critically as well? In criticizing Arnold's notion of disinterestedness the first step is easy enough, that of censuring Arnold for not realizing that there is no escaping the political dimension in any branch of learning that deals with the cultural or the social; but it is the next step that presents difficult problems in the classroom and research, in different ways. If a scholar's own ideology is the point of teaching literature, it necessarily comes into play before the discussion of the literary text even begins: the ideological pretext takes precedence over the text. Research, on the other hand, is a slightly different affair, a different form of discourse addressing a different audience, but even in research, scholars necessarily have to negotiate the risk of their ideological perspective overwhelming their subject matter, and scholarship generally claims an epistemological or methodological frame broader than its own politics in acknowledgment of the commonality of the very character of scholarly discourse.

When Arnold's notion of disinterestedness is closely read in the context of his own work and time, it becomes clear that, in spite of his Eurocentric slippag-

¹⁸ Graff's account of Arnold's concepts is reductive in failing to consider the dynamic aspect of Arnold's concept of criticism, and even the dynamic aspect of his concept of culture as "a study of perfection".

es, his understanding of disinterested criticism *in principle* does not call for an unchanging fund of the best ideas, that it is less a matter of settled thought, and more a matter of methodology or form of thought ("free play of the mind") which in itself, again *in principle*, requires a broad or cosmopolitan perspective. In this methodological view, criticism is understood as a dynamic practice of reasoning, constantly engaged in searching and perfecting. In other words, there is certainly an aspect of his idea of criticism that is less about fixity than it is about variability and renovation, and most importantly about the very style of critical thought.

The question of the function of scholarship/criticism today cannot be considered without a reference to recent disciplinary developments. Since the last third of the twentieth century, especially in the United States, the English canon has been problematized, redefined and greatly expanded. In addition, the disciplinary profile of English studies started to expand by incorporating issues and methods of other academic disciplines (philosophy, linguistics, psychology, historiography, economics, jurisprudence, political science, anthropology, more recently information science, etc.). In this expansion, which is not exclusive to English studies but is also in evidence generally in philologies as well as in other humanistic disciplines, the discipline of English has shifted towards interdisciplinarity almost spontaneously. Because of that and because of its prominence in Anglophone national contexts and in the global context, English has become a rather sprawling disciplinary domain.¹⁹ A multiplicity of subfields as well as various practices of interdisciplinarity have emerged within the discipline, which has always had, for historical reasons, a pronounced global aspect to it. In the present competitive and contentious epoch the curriculum of English studies seems to be always under construction and always in dispute, in different ways in different locations, reflecting different social, political and economic contexts, academic debates and institutional frameworks. The massive production of literatures and scholarship in English around the world makes it very difficult to conceptualize a workable and remotely representative literary canon. In addition, one of the tendencies in canon design has been its contemporization, or a tendency of quick

¹⁹ This is of course old news. In his 1988 book on Arnold, Collini observed that "now, [English] is often the largest single humanities department in British and American universities. But more important than sheer expansion of numbers has been the fact that literary studies have borne the double burden of aspiring to some recognized disciplinary status, possessing its own technique and vocabulary, while at the same time providing a forum and an idiom in which larger moral and existential questions can be broached" (2008: 113). Trends in the expansion of English major enrolments generally have changed since that time in different ways in the UK and the US, for a variety of reasons, creating a rather different institutional climate.

curricularization of the latest production in literature, culture and scholarship, often in attempts to make the curriculum more appealing to students (this immediacy of subject matter of course may make political issues more immediately present too). In the American context, John Guillory has recently discussed a commonplace idiom in academic discussions of curricular reform, "the notion that students need to 'see themselves in the curriculum'" (2022: 228), which "echoes our students' own idiom of judgment, especially the notion that works of literature should be 'relatable'" (2022: 229). In his estimation, "[t]he English major is, for better or worse, unlikely to sustain for much longer a common core of courses [...]" (2022: 230). Given the volume of literatures in English, one might add that this is a logical trend. As the English language plays such an important part in the contemporary globalized world, Guillory is well aware of differences in the situation of English studies in different parts of the world; while there might be "a bright future for the global study of literature in English" (2022: 241) due to the global spread of English, the disciplinary situations in the United Kingdom and the United States are subject to tensions that have to do with curricular debates, funding issues and declining enrolments in English programmes.²⁰ The expansive trends in the understanding of the discipline of English are probably stronger in the United States than elsewhere in the world, for reasons that have to do with the sheer size of American higher education, as well as its specific organization and economies (an important element of which is the fact that students choose their majors *after* enrolling at a university, which has been one of the historical causes of occasional dramatic fluctuations in demand for certain programs of study). But it would probably be fair to assume that English teaching canons everywhere, albeit in different degrees, are becoming more open to global English and more contemporized.²¹

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It could be half-jokingly said that the current critical trends in English studies have become more Arnoldian if by that we mean cosmopolitan, and less Arnoldian if by that we mean rejecting disinterestedness in the name of immediacy. As I already noted, it is important to consider that the work of criticism today is closely intertwined with the fact that now the primary form of criticism is scholarship and that its primary locus is in academia. Around the middle of the

²⁰ Guillory's book *Professing Criticism* is generally interesting for its discussion of the disciplinary situation of English in American academia today.

²¹ An additional and obviously very important aspect of English studies is that it means something different in English-speaking countries than in other countries, where the study of English means not only the study of literatures in English, but also the study of the English language (and/or its varieties). This of course means substantial differences in the design of English study programmes.

twentieth century criticism was increasingly becoming the domain of the specialist professoriate; on the other hand, higher education itself steadily transformed towards a mass system of education in the second half of the twentieth century. At the present time, criticism is almost wholly absorbed by the academic realm, which has meant its adaptation into specific forms of research and teaching, with relatively frequent turns in critical fashions and redefinitions of the idea of disciplinary work, in different local and international variations. While academia absorbed social and cultural criticism as an intellectual activity in our epoch, and professionalized it as academic work, criticism absorbed a vast world of social and political concerns, interests and perspectives, often creating a sense of cultural immediacy to its intellectual work. The recent historical developments regarding the academic professionalization of criticism cannot be given a detailed overview here, but they have presented a new cultural context with new forms of contestation around the character of the relationship between the academic-professional aspects of research and teaching and the issues related to the social and political dimension of academic work.

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THE POLITICAL IN CRITICISM

One response to this new situation, which superficially may resemble Arnold's notion of disinterestedness, was Stanley Fish's critique of political criticism within the context of American academia in the 1990s. In opposition to the kind of academic work which saw itself as engaged in immediate production of political effects, Fish argues that the task of the academic scholars is to "immerse ourselves [...] in the lore and skill of a specialized craft" (1995: 141). Fish's argument against political criticism is fundamentally a disciplinary one: "To be sure, academic work, even the work of literary interpretation can always be put to 'real world' political uses, but when it is, it will no longer be responsible to academic requirements and desiderata; rather, it will be employed and evaluated with reference and desiderata of some [...] political goal" (1995: 132). His emphasis on the disciplinary identity of literary study also includes rejection of the idea of interdisciplinarity and the idea of unified knowledge. Simply put, different disciplines constitute different objects of study, and pursuits of interdisciplinarity in the study of an object usually end up with one discipline subordinating the others (this surely is a hurried account of interdisciplinarity, and there is surely more to be said both about the inevitably changing definitions of disciplinary autonomy and the necessity of

interdisciplinary work). Fish does not so much criticize the interdisciplinary aspect of much of scholarly work as the wholesale relinquishment of disciplinary perspective for a broad interdisciplinarity. In disputing the use of literary criticism as a means of engaging immediate political goals, Fish does not deny the political situatedness of all criticism or propose "that interpretive work has no political implications or consequences. Indeed, that would be impossible since, as many have argued, no activity enables or authorizes itself, but is given its place *and* its intelligibility by the assumptions, emphases, and relays of power already in place in a society" (1995: 133–134). In this most general sense, he acknowledges that all criticism is inevitably political, as everything in human society is, but when criticism claims a primary allegiance and effectivity outside the conventions of the discipline and academic work, it becomes something else, and loses its disciplinary and academic identity.

Fish's critique of political literary criticism may indeed appear similar to Arnold's rejection of political criticism. But there are quite significant differences. For Arnold, the ideal is to remove the presence of political motivation from criticism, the main goal of criticism being an epistemological one of creating a new order of ideas while for Fish, political literary criticism is a problem insofar as it is not proper literary criticism, but something else, not necessarily an untenable form of discourse, but not an academic form. In other words, for Fish, political criticism is a problem primarily for disciplinary and not epistemological reasons. It should be remarked, parenthetically, that Fish's view of academic work is informed by a measure of conventionalism (and an associated relativism): academic work assumes its definition from the internal professional conventions of the discipline (which are affected by broader social dynamics over time), and accordingly, the definition of academic work may be modified or reshaped with shifts in the disciplinary conventions (though Fish is usually somewhat confident about the resilience of the discipline to maintain its conventions). Arnold's concept of the best that is thought and known and his notion of culture as a study of perfection, on the other hand, acknowledge that the historical condition of knowledge is imperfection but adhere at the same time to the task of its perfectibility. Fish's perspective exudes both an epistemological relativism (attendant on his disciplinary conventionalism) and a trust in the stability of academic conventions as they are; Arnold registered the ideological particularism of actual criticism in his time and believed in the possibility of an epistemology that strives to surpass such particularism.

Arnold entertained the idea of the power of culture to bring about culture (sometimes tautology is necessary), and he imagined literature and criticism to play a significant part in the process of culture as pursuit of perfection. He

remonstrated against "bondage to machinery" and "idolatry of machinery" in England (1999a: 83); the term "machinery" he used broadly, often as a metonymy of the contemporary economic order (but also as a metaphor for established social attitudes and practices, uninformed by the idea of culture as study of human and general perfection). In our time the subordination of culture to logics of the economic has gone beyond anything Arnold could have observed in his society. Arguably, our epoch is different even from the time when Fish made his argument about political criticism in the 1990s; it is perhaps more perturbed by economic issues and technological upheavals, and the social landscape is generally more erratic and fragmented. The cultural capital of English as an academic discipline was still fairly considerable in the 1990s in the United States. In the long perspective of the history of criticism Fish's defence of the discipline of literary study may even appear as a distant relative to the kind of enthusiasm for both literature and the study of it that was common in mid-twentieth century. But since the 1990s, the new machinery, industrial and cultural, of information technology has been rapidly transforming societies and their institutions, human culture and everyday life. One of the effects of this momentous transformation is that cultural literacy is being redefined as well, with the status of literature and literary study getting eroded further within the overall realm of culture (radio, film and television already having had changed considerably the position of literature over the course of the twentieth century). The social predicament of writing (and reading) in general is now significantly altered in comparison with even the turn of the century. The attempts to contemporize the literary curriculum can do little to reinvigorate the discipline of literary study, and at best only do so temporarily. On a pessimistic view, the question is now how to strengthen the discipline against further slumping under the pressures of the new technological landscape, massive commercialization of culture, and sluggish social responses to the new economic and cultural circumstances. There is a discernible lack of conviction in public discourse on how to rethink the place of the humanities (and university education in general) under the rapidly changing circumstances (if we discount the practically-oriented phraseology of excellence, which cannot but sound odd in the humanities). But there is also an effervescence: the great proliferation of topics and approaches in literary study happening today may be regarded as an indication of the fragmentation of the field, but this multitude of perspectives, however cacophonous, is also significant for the very fact that the discipline of literary study has become a home for analytical engagement with a great scope of social life. The methodological practice of interdisciplinarity in literary study may have shifted the older understanding of the discipline, but it

is also potentially a mode of understanding the world better. And even the proliferation of subject matter and disciplinary subspecializations, which is creating the impression of the intellectual impossibility of surveying the entirety of the field, reflects the important methodological necessity of considering the relative autonomy of cultural phenomena; without the assumption of such an autonomy, criticism inevitably drifts into a deterministic view of culture.

In the mid-1990s Fish had a point in critiquing, on behalf of generic/discursive coherence, the kind of literary criticism that aspires towards immediate political significance in society, or blurs the boundary between scholarly discourse and extramural political discourse. But the political does not enter criticism only through the critic actively bringing one's own politics to the literary or cultural text under study (which is what Fish especially sought to renounce), nor only through the historical situatedness of the critic. The political (social, historical) is already there in the text; it is part of the fabric of every literary text; moreover, it is part of the intelligibility of every literary text. To acknowledge that is not to state a convention or norm of the contemporary era; rather, it is a general observation about the historical embeddedness of language, literature and culture. What is commonly practiced in the present period is the belief that literature as a discourse is just thinly disguised politics, and that literary study is an especially important locus of symbolical political activity. The problem with this kind of critical perspective lies in its downplaying the status of criticism/scholarship as a form of knowledge, and attaching to it an overstated aspect of political immediacy.

In this essay I use the phrase political immediacy as a description of the political self-understanding and aspiration of much of literary scholarship today. I need to add that I do not use the term "immediacy" in the sense that has been recently theorized by Anna Kornbluh, even though there is some overlap. Kornbluh uses the term immediacy in an attempt to give a shorthand, distinctive name to the cultural style of contemporary (American) capitalist society; her focus is on popular culture and everyday life, but she also touches on the manifestations of immediacy in criticism: "If contemporary theory has not recognized or analyzed immediacy despite its undeniable hegemony in cultural production [...] this is finally because so many of the experts in cultural criticism across so many disciplines and traditions have spent the twenty-first century manufacturing immediacy themselves" (Kornbluh 2023: 152). In discussing "immediacy reason" Kornbluh also notes "theory's divestment from knowledge and individuation of epistemology" (2023: 152).²²

²² Kornbluh likely meant the phrase "individuation of epistemology" to refer to the stance of "immediacy theory" she identifies in some contemporary critical writing, and especially in the

Whereas in some contemporary criticism she finds a stance that “brooks no abstract mediation” (Kornbluh 2023: 151), she argues that theory “ought to be one of the ultimate media of mediation; intercession; thick, slow, strange relay; and hewing out relative autonomy. It ought to be the medium in which we can step back from the merely evident. It ought to be the medium in which we can situate the valorization of immediacy as a historical specificity” (Kornbluh 2023: 152). While discussing her notion of immediacy would require a more detailed look at her theoretical assumptions about contemporary culture,²³ one may observe something of a resemblance in the imagination of the critical habitus between Arnold and Kornbluh. It bears reminding that Arnold held that the critic should refrain from the “immediate practice in the political [...] sphere” (1999b: 42) while also believing that criticism in its epistemological capacity may be socially transformative over a period of time. Kornbluh’s understanding of the role of theory is similar; in her view, theory emphasizes knowledge and mediation, and only in that way she assumes that it may also have social effects. Both Arnold and Kornbluh also place emphasis on the understanding of all of culture (or society); but, of course, there is no actual theoretical lineage between them; Kornbluh’s analysis is primarily indebted to the theoretical perspective of Fredric Jameson. In short, both Arnold and Kornbluh suggest, in different ways, that criticism/theory falls short of its function when it is committed to the hermeneutics of immediacy.

So what does one tell students not only about Arnold’s concept of criticism, but about the questions he raised which are relevant to the practice of criticism in any era? One might simply say that Arnold was obviously wrong and state that criticism

genre of autotheory. It is worth considering whether her critique of “immediacy reason” could be applied to other forms of epistemology as well.

²³ Kornbluh’s writing on the contemporary ascendancy of what she calls the culture of immediacy shaped by the logic of capitalism (in the US) is in itself a highly interesting stylistic/theoretical exercise, akin to a philosophical essay rather than a systematic exposition. Her book is in part an attempt to describe the period after the one Fredric Jameson described as postmodern; hence her phrase “too late capitalism”, which refers to Jameson’s understanding of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism. Kornbluh shares with Jameson two important scholarly assumptions: the emphasis on historicizing cultural issues, and the emphasis on the assumption of a totality of social dynamics (even though in this regard, her analysis, like Jameson’s, struggles with a deterministic understanding of the role of capital).

cannot be disinterested, and even suggest what kinds of criticism are preferable to others. But if one proceeds in this way in the classroom, as every teacher knows well, we in effect create a space of complete relativism and ideological entrenchment by the very assumption that our own political perspective is superior and worthy of being promoted and taught. A naïve ideal of objectivity in criticism is untenable; yet there remains the realistic principle of avoiding indulgence in the epistemologically reductive implications of the notion of the political immediacy of literary study. Addressing all aspects of literature and culture, including the political ones, without preaching political objectives is the best that teaching literature can do. That also involves talking about the discipline of literary study, its history, its varied uses of concepts such as ideology, politics, scholarship, and trying to define and make visible the fine lines of distinction which may help create space for disinterestedness in some subtle, inevitably imperfect but important degree, in contrast to the often hasty assumptions of political fluidity between academic scholarship and the extramural world.²⁴

In English studies the disciplinary fashions are shaped in the core regions (in the US more than in the UK), and the critical styles and idiom of the core are often adopted in other places around the world. The proclivity to regard criticism as immediately political is a feature of American academia in particular; it has been shaped by the specific configuration of American academia and specific aspects of American society. On the other hand, the sheer global spread of the discipline does not favour the emergence of a uniform paradigm of criticism, not to mention that trends in English studies cannot displace or eclipse the trends and importance of work in other humanistic disciplines. What complicates the discussion of disciplinary issues and the function of scholarship at this point in

²⁴ A useful, if necessarily dated, attempt to reflect on the issue of the political in scholarship can be found in Karl Mannheim's 1929 book *Ideology and Utopia*. In developing his idea of the sociology of knowledge Mannheim insisted that no scientific (in the sense of scholarly) study of political perspectives can claim objectivity, because every intellectual or analytical position is informed by its specific social affiliations and interests. But rather than settling for a radically relativist conclusion, Mannheim seeks to elaborate the idea of a sociology of knowledge based on an ambition to map out the overall structure of the situatedness of knowledge at a given point in time (the approach which he calls relationism); such a sociology would be marked by a historicizing awareness of its own position in a historical configuration. Interestingly, regarding the notion of objectivity in Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, Terry Eagleton casually states that "Mannheim [...] emerges as the Matthew Arnold of Weimar Germany" (2024: 108). Eagleton's remark is from his book *Ideology*, and in his analysis of Mannheim's discussion of the concept of ideology he finds, perhaps too hurriedly, Mannheim's form of historicism insufficiently complex; also, in his comments on Mannheim's discussion of the question of objectivity Eagleton does not examine that issue in the context of academic discourse.

time is the fact that the social landscape outside academia today is shaped by a range of developments that erode the role of literary study as well as generally the humanities. It would be a generalization, but a readily relatable one, to observe that the humanities are now grappling with the question of how to imagine shoring up their social authority. (This refashioning can hardly be achieved either by chasing after political immediacy or by embracing the quasi-corporate idiom of academic excellence). While the cultural stature of literature is diminishing, the categories of reading and cultural literacy are being redefined in the context of the tremendous changes to our cultural architecture brought about by the digital media and the concomitant massive refocusing (and fragmentation) of cultural attention. Moreover, the very concept of literary study, too, seems to be on the defensive in the public debates, such as they are, on the cultural and social place of academic knowledge.

For Arnold, criticism was a foothold in a world shaped by political particularism and mechanization, a necessary assumption through which he sought to construct a resource against the social fragmentation attendant on the former and dehumanization attendant on the latter. In our time, many of Arnold's notions have actually come into being: scholarship is arguably now more global than ever, and the contemporary search for a current of fresh ideas is not falling short of hyperproduction. Our epoch, fascinated with its own technological revolution to such a degree that it is often regarded as a force of nature which should be given free reign, is quickly creating a cultural landscape that does not seem to favour criticism greatly. While Arnold's views indeed merit objection for occasionally suggesting a concept of culture with a conservative bias and content, and even for obscuring social problems in the name of the healing power of culture, the wholesale repudiation of the concept of criticism as disinterested study runs the risk of reducing the educational and cultural authority of literary studies to ersatz political work as well as the risk of thinking of culture merely as antagonism and competition, and contestation without negotiation.²⁵ The reconfiguration of the world currently underway, with its new forms of mechanization, presents a new urgency of recognizing human and cultural value in the habits and competences of reading and studying literature, of the past and the present, in a cosmopolitan way, and that is not an easy proposition. To relieve criticism of both the habitual

²⁵ An examination of the contemporary academic debates of the very concept of culture, while obviously important, cannot be attempted here. Also, the concept of liberal education (i.e. broad education in a range of subjects), which tends logically towards interdisciplinarity and cosmopolitanism, should be considered as part of such a discussion.

repudiation of objectivity in the name of political immediacy and the eagerness to construct catalogues of cultural greatness, while insisting on the continued cultural role of literature, is to begin to do the work of literary scholarship.

The tenor of Arnold's question about criticism—what is its function now?—if understood as a kind of critical obligation of self-reflection in a given historical context, seems like a reasonable task for critics/scholars to entertain. Given the current popularity of thinking about criticism as political, re-reading Arnold may help foreground the need for reassessing the value of critical distance between the critic and the object of study, whether it be a literary text, a different kind of cultural text, or the totality of the social realm. Revisiting Arnold's notion of criticism leads, inevitably, to the question of the objectives of scholarly work at the present time, and thus also to the question of the goals of university education. Within the discipline of English studies (and literary studies in general) these questions have already gained great prominence due to the expansion of the discipline, something that could be described as an unstructured transformation of the discipline into a wide-ranging assemblage of cultural studies. Along with the primary focus of the discipline on the literary text, its focus on the larger context of culture has grown substantially stronger. At the same time, massive changes in the architecture of contemporary society have been markedly reshaping the place of literary study too. It almost goes without saying that entertaining such greater disciplinary ambition amid a rapidly and profoundly changing cultural scenery requires the distance of theory, and reviewing the concept of disinterested critical reflection.

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S a ž e t a k

OSVRT NA POJAM KRITIKE MATTHEWA ARNOLDA

Raspravljajući o eseju Matthewa Arnolda "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864), rad nastoji naglasiti inherentnu važnost teme koja je naznačena u naslovu eseja. Rad se ne bavi rekonstrukcijom Arnoldovih pogleda na kritiku tijekom njegove ukupne kritičarske karijere, kao ni vrednovanjem nekih od kasnijih tumačenja Arnolda; primarni je fokus na prepoznavanju aspekata Arnoldova eseja koji su relevantni za proučavanje književnosti i humanistike u bilo kojemu povijesnome razdoblju, premda u drukčijim oblicima. Rad posebice razmatra Arnoldovu definiciju kritike, mjesto pojma bezinteresnosti (*disinterestedness*) u toj definiciji te potencijalne nove načine promišljanja tog pojma u kontekstu suvremenih tendencija naglašavanja političke dimenzije u proučavanju književnosti na engleskom jeziku, značajnog proširenja anglističke discipline te širih suvremenih društvenih dinamika koje erodiraju kulturni status književnosti i proučavanja književnosti.

Ključne riječi: Matthew Arnold, kritika, kultura, bezinteresnost