Introduction
to

Literary Criticism of Matthew Arnold

Selected and introduced
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(Footnotes omitted)

Of course you’re always at liberty to judge the critic. Judge people as critics, however … and you’ll condemn them all!

But this is just what you have in the world,—quantity rather than quality. Do not seek in it impartiality, true critical spirit; in reading it you must do the criticism for yourself; it loves criticism as little as the world loves it.

Matthew Arnold opens *Culture and Anarchy* with an expression of regret that a book he valued was no longer familiar to his audience and apparently out of print. Though *Culture and Anarchy* is still available it doesn’t appear on undergraduate Victorian literature courses as often as it used to. Worse still, in our view, a paperback collection of his essays is no longer a choice open to a professor selecting a syllabus for such a course. A typical course in Victorian literature is very likely to be an expression of gender equality or politics—so called. If there have to be six to eight authors then half of them must be women. Elizabeth Barrett Browning must get equal time with her husband unless the professor is prepared to risk the charge of blatant sexism. In the case of the Rossettis equal representation isn’t sufficient; the programme has solidified its hold to the point of making a particular poem obligatory. One of Arnold’s aliens—those hypothetical, suppositious creatures who are not shaped by class or race or gender—might think “Goblin Market” the poetic sign of the times. As critic, Arnold will receive no more than a dismissive mention. Such are the fruits of the vaunted rewriting of the canon! Pluralism, as George Grant was fond of lamenting, has a way of funding a monolith.

Unfortunately students encounter these dismissive views of Arnold without any comparable opportunity to study the history of literary criticism which critical theory presumes to have supplanted. Consequently, they have no real basis for judging where the truth lies. In so many vital respects Arnold’s “critical spirit” stands out as a significant antithesis. We hope this volume will provide the
relevant texts for demonstrating the place he deserves in the “master-current” of English literary criticism. The phrase is of course Arnold’s own, and though his ingrained habit of ironic self-deprecation prohibited his assuming such a position of eminence, he did specify the making of such judgements as “one of the critic’s highest functions; in discharging it he shows how far he possesses the most indispensable quality of his office,—justness of spirit.” The development of this “master-current” in English literary criticism has a more distinct arc, trajectory, or contour than that of either poetry or the novel, and this needs to be recognized. The incisive opposition between prose and poetry that determines Arnold’s reservations concerning eighteenth-century poetry should not distract us from recognizing how his emphasis on “judgement” springs directly from his admiration for Samuel Johnson. Arnold may dissent from particular judgements, but he takes the Lives of the Poets as a “point de repère” to which we can all return and “always find our way again, if we are embarrassed.” “To get these rightly chosen and thoroughly known”, Arnold goes on to say, is what he considers the heart of literary-critical and educational endeavours. “To mark out a number of illustrative and representative works, connecting them with these points de repère” can only be realized by acts of judgement that Arnold makes the heart of his criticism. The connecting of “so many natural centres” would mean substantiating the surprising continuity between Johnson and Arnold, and this would in turn establish a basis for mapping out the pivotal part Carlyle plays in the unfolding of the English literary critical tradition as evidenced in his Lectures on “The Hero as Poet” and “The Hero as Man of Letters” as well as essays such as those on Burns and Scott. Arnold’s essential place in this history of English literary criticism could then be carried forward to the middle of the twentieth century by examining the early works of F. R. Leavis, where the question of judgement is paramount: Revaluation, the lecture material published as “Judgement and Analysis”, The Great Tradition, and The Common Pursuit.

At the end of both “On the Modern Element in Literature” and “The Study of Poetry”, Arnold invites the reader to respond to his argument as if it was a “method of enquiry” that he exhibited “so far as to put anyone who likes in a way of applying it for himself”. These phrasings are likely to prove misleading, especially to a contemporary student who has been trained to expect an approach that can be learned up, adopted and applied. In rejecting Arnold’s claims to a method of inquiry we are not endorsing the adverse judgements of numerous critics who have objected to Arnold’s refusal to provide an adequate definition or abstract account of the “high poetic quality” he perceives in his “touchstones”. Arnold can be lucid and clear enough about judgement to satisfy anyone who isn’t wilfully determined to misconstrue. Few of Arnold’s opponents have bothered to acknowledge his insistence that we must not make judgement, “the critic’s business”, a matter of acting the part of an “abstract lawgiver”. “The application of principles, in itself,” Arnold goes on to point out, is not “the most
satisfactory work to the critic” and is ever in danger of being “tautological”. Real judgement passes along “insensibly”, “a sort of companion and clue” that accompanies the communicating of “fresh knowledge”. As Arnold understands, “critical perception of poetic truth, —is of all things the most volatile, elusive and evanescent … .” To persist in interpreting Arnold’s characteristic critical activities as the handing out of grades by a Victorian schoolmaster is a judgement that warrants a category which Arnold reserved for the vulgar French phrase *saugrenu*. The whole of his essay on Joubert is an attempt by Arnold to establish how Joubert’s life and writing possessed the prime merits of the true literary critic. The capacity to praise great men is not much in favour today but it was one of Arnold’s obligatory tests of the literary critic’s worth. The risking of judgement in full awareness of “the impetuosity of our poor human nature, … its proneness to rush to a decision with imperfect knowledge” holds out the possibility of “a life-giving stimulus” that a fully human encounter with great literature can create.

The persistent resistance to Arnold is more likely to arise from his specific judgements of individual authors than his understanding of why we should be drawn to the best that has been thought and written. You don’t have to be a Chaucer expert or even a medievalist to feel the impulse to pounce on Arnold for charging Chaucer with a want of “high seriousness”. Even critics who no longer think there is such a thing as an author are inclined to construct something or someone called Arnold who is the epitome of the earnest moralizing Victorian philistine. We have certainly felt the temptation to say here is *saugrenu* for you, and that here Arnold has surely exceeded his own limits of “wrong judgement” and produced the “impudently absurd”; however, there is a *but* to register. Isolating that phrase and failing to balance it against his sincere and genuine praise of Chaucer is anything but the “justness of spirit” that Arnold commends. The problem Arnold addresses is how we would judge the relative merits of Chaucer and Dante. It is easy enough to dismiss the offending conclusion “high seriousness” but which of us thinks that we could do the job? I suspect most would rationalize their evasion by declaring the task not worth the effort. How would the usual account of Arnold’s abject failure to cope with Chaucer dispose of his invoking the voice of poor Villon “out of his life of riot and crime” as the accent of “seriousness” to mark the distinction? Arnold’s judgements are not predictable like those that issue from the ideologically-driven criticism of our day. The several pages he devotes to praising Burns are another crucial part of the context of the Chaucer section of “The Study of Poetry” and must materially affect our final estimate. Arnold is no friend of moralizing or “preaching”. Nor can we pretend that his talk of “spiritual refinements” and delicate perceptions impede in the slightest his vigorous responsiveness to Burns’s “piercing, sometimes almost intolerable pathos”. There is no shrinking from “hideousness and squalor” or “bestiality”. The poetry is “superb” and matched only “by Shakespeare and Aristophanes”. At this point in the argument the doubter might like to turn to the comparison between Menander
and Aristophanes in “The Modern Element in Literature” to see just how representative the vigour of Arnold’s appreciation of Burns is. It is “the boldest creations of a riotous imagination” that Arnold favours, not the cultivated refinement of Menander. The reason Arnold gives for his judgement is pretty much what Nietzsche, Lawrence and Leavis might venture: what makes for life—a word Arnold uses again and again as his primary criterion. There are many other judgements we would ask the reader to weigh. Many of these are in general terms questions of critical tolerance such as his admiration for Marcus Aurelius the persecutor of Christians and of the unorthodox philosopher Spinoza. Before writing this introduction we would have not expected to find Arnold detecting the fundamental difference between the spirit in which Flaubert and Tolstoy treat their characters, a question one of his great admirers, Henry James, was worrying over. This is all the more impressive for a critic who was uncomfortable with the novel as a literary form.

If Arnold is included in a course, he is invoked as the exemplification of the simplicity and poverty of nineteenth-century literary criticism which our socially and politically self-conscious theoretical age has long since surpassed. He is ridiculed for lacking a rigorous theoretical apparatus, serving as a straw man in order to prove the superiority of our literary theory at the present time. Postmodern writers have readily accepted and uncritically propagated T. S. Eliot’s formulation in the opening paragraph of “The Perfect Critic” that Arnold is not a real critic but merely a “propagandist for criticism” and a “popularizer rather than a creator of ideas”. Unfortunately, having never read to the end of the paragraph, they miss Eliot’s reflection on his own age that judging by the style of a “distinguished representative” of contemporary criticism, “modern criticism is degenerate.” Thanks largely to Terry Eagleton, Arnold’s critical arguments about the problems inherent in our (allegedly) democratic and egalitarian modern age that worships liberal individualism have been reduced in academic circles to the musings of a man who values “state repression in the name of individual liberty” and propagates the “slogans of a liberalism which, observing the final disintegration of the public sphere, shifts steadily towards autocracy”. Arnold’s criticism, insufficiently politicized by today’s standards, “loses all definitive identity and thus addresses each sector with absolutely nothing to say.” Of Arnold’s “criticism of culture”, Eagleton self-confidently proclaims in his political righteousness that “its superiority and invulnerability as a non-concept will thus be in direct proportion to its impotence … the negation of all particular claims in the name of a totality … which is therefore purely void because it is no more than a totalization of negated moments.” The charge of having “absolutely nothing to say” should be directed at Eagleton whose style here is, to quote Arnold, “a tissue of … abstract verbiage”. Although he hasn’t made any real criticism of Arnold in these statements, passages such as these have been enough to make the idea that Arnold is an authoritarian current among many who have not bothered to read his books and should know that the charge, like the accusation that Carlyle is a fascist and
Conrad is a racist, is utterly false. At best, it is merely a wilful misrepresentation. Arnold is represented as a nullity which the dominion of literary theory has exorcised from the world.

Given the portrait of Arnold popularized in English departments—when he is even discussed at all—the problem then is how to secure a place on the reading lists for one of the most important nineteenth-century writers and critics. Making a case to win the necessary recognition of the value of his ideas and arguments must simultaneously demonstrate many of the weaknesses in our contemporary thought and intellectual productions. The argument is one that academic audiences are not disposed to hear, which explains why Arnold’s voice is all but silenced. Arnold is the father of “culture studies” whom the present-day practitioners are quick to kill in order to conceal their own embarrassing origins. But he is also resented because he is a critic whose ideas anticipated and continue to “minister to the diseased spirit of our time.” Following Carlyle, Arnold is quick to criticize our modern critical habits “which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mechanically.” And having transformed university English into the self-devouring, newspaper-quality review that Carlyle predicted criticism would become, contemporary academics resent Arnold’s insights into our predilection for what we would call—following Arnold—the popular journalism which passes for criticism wherein “violent indignation with the past, abstract systems of renovation applied wholesale, a new doctrine drawn up in black and white for elaborating down to the very smallest details a rational society of the future” are cultivated. It is because Arnold questions our nearly unquestionable idols, such as “doing as one likes” and reducing life to a conflict of political ideologies, that he should be read.

Although phrases such as “the free play of the mind on all subjects” and “the best which has been thought and said in the world” are treated as slogans of a bygone age, Arnold’s ideas are important in pointing towards a conception of criticism that is larger than the theoretically controlled and politically inspired readings that stock the academic marketplace. Arnold’s criticism reminds us of the importance of the critical endeavour, and corroborates Leavis’s arguments that English must be recognized as a discipline of thought with a central place in the university. Unlike many academic productions today, Arnold’s works have a quality that Leavis recognized in calling on us to “read Arnold’s critical writing because for anyone who is interested in literature it is compellingly alive.” In the canon wars of the last quarter century, Arnold has endured a relentless stream of abuse, despite the fact that his writings are more alive than many of the poets or essayists now occupying his place in the university syllabus.

But committing ourselves to securing a place for Arnold in the contemporary University syllabus does not imply an uncritical endorsement of his thinking. Arnold, it should be recalled, protested vehemently against those who were troubled by his refusal to toe the
party line in reviewing well-meaning liberal books on “the religious problem”. One of the major reservations that need to be acknowledged if we are to note and honour Arnold’s critical ideals is his failure to recognize how the novel of the day was realizing his conception of “literature as a criticism of life”. As one of the major critics of the Victorian age we have ample reason for expecting more from him than the perfunctory dismissal of the “domestic epic dealing with the details of modern life which pass daily under our eyes” leaving, Arnold claims, “the reader cold in comparison” to classical literature. This fearless assertion, to paraphrase Arnold, is made even as in *Bleak House* Dickens conducted his strange and wonderful “inkwhich” into the cultural disease he metamorphosed as being in chancery. We suspect Arnold is guilty of echoing Carlyle’s remarks on the epic and the novel from “Biography”: “How stands it with fiction then? Why, then, I would say, the evil is much mended, but nowise completely cured. We have then, in place of the wholly dead modern epic, the partially living modern novel.” Such an adverse judgement in 1832 is a very different matter from recycling it in 1853.

Nevertheless, we think the contribution Arnold’s criticism made to the shaping of the genre he slighted has yet to be fully recognized. Because the matter is too large and complex for a brief introduction to accomplish, a sketch will have to do. One of the more promising lines of such an inquiry can be glimpsed in the two essays on Arnold’s importance written by Henry James. The first is a very early essay from the mid ’sixties, a review of *Essays in Criticism*, and the second appeared two decades later, prompted by Arnold’s lecture tour of America. Roger Gard, the editor of the Penguin edition which the following quotation is taken from, includes a head note to James’s essay indicating the essence of the argument: “Arnold is proposed as a model for the modern critic.” The basis of Gard’s label can be found in James’s summarizing remark: “If we were questioned as to the merit of Mr Arnold’s book as a whole, we should say that it lay in the fact that the author takes the high ground. The manner of his Essays is a model of what criticism should be.” James’s second essay is written by an author who has *The Portrait of a Lady* behind him and is just about to publish “The Art of Fiction”. This second assessment ends with the following effusion: “They find him, in a word, more than anyone else, the happily-proportioned, the truly distinguished man of letters. Where there is a question of his efficacy, his influence, it seems to me enough to ask one’s self what we should have done without him … “. A careful reading of these essays would demonstrate how James’s ideal man of culture amounts to praise as all but transparent autobiography. Arnold as James is the portrait of the civilized man and artist. The pair of them were especially endowed to reveal England to the Americans and the reverse. When James returned from his long stay abroad to write his encounter with America, *The American Scene*, many years later, he represents this through a series of variations on the phrases he uses to describe the figure of Arnold: “the voice is delightful, it has a hundred tones and modulations; and as he stands there the great dead
screen seems to vibrate and grow transparent.”

The criticism and the fiction are two modes of the same investigation. The sensibility of the narrator of *The Portrait of a Lady* and the opposition and identity of Isobel’s cousin Ralph and her cruel husband, Gilbert Osmond, constitute a subtle exploration of the health of a culture. The conceptual ground of the novel rests on Arnold’s familiar terms—moral seriousness and a free play of mind. Richard Poirier’s early book on James’s fiction, *The Comic Sense of Henry James*, catches something of the spirit of this dialectic in his final chapter devoted to *The Portrait of a Lady* without noticing how James has, in his own words of praise of Arnold, “salted and seasoned” the “conversation” of his main characters with the key words, phrasings, and concepts borrowed from Arnold’s essays. We suspect contemporary ideology is more likely to reduce the novel to the ubiquitous question/accusation—how does James represent women in the novel?—thus reducing it to another “Goblin Market”. On the other hand, a careful study of the relationship between Arnold’s essays and James’s novel is the only way we can understand how both these literary forms developed in the Victorian period.

Of course, Arnold’s influence upon the development of the novel extended beyond the nineteenth century. For instance, after James we can recognize the presence of Arnold’s ideas in Joseph Conrad’s masterpiece *Lord Jim*. As is usual for Conrad, he introduces important ideas in a half-joking manner, deliberately invoking Arnold’s presence through the character of Chester in Chapter XIV. Like Arnold instructing his Philistine audience, Chester tries to persuade Marlow of the importance of seeing things right by explaining “you must see things exactly as they are—if you don’t, you may just as well give in at once.” By repeating variations on the phrase several times in the chapter Conrad indulges in one of his “little jokes”, but he clearly wants readers to recognize the importance of Arnold’s insistence upon seeing “the object as in itself it really is” for his novel as a whole. Conrad writes *Lord Jim* as a sustained meditation on or inquiry into the problems surrounding Arnold’s famous phrase. He challenges us to reconsider Arnold’s significant ideas through the complicated structure of shifting perspectives that informs Marlow’s partial knowledge of Jim. In a sense, Conrad positions Arnold against Nietzsche in contrasting the pursuit of true judgement with the difficulties of perspectival knowing. The point is that at the turn of the century Conrad recognizes Arnold as a major figure whose ideas should be reconsidered alongside those of Carlyle, Darwin, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and others. Conrad knows that Arnold’s ideas have influenced the culture and language which he adopted for his creative efforts, and reminds us that Arnold’s ideas, though perhaps obscured or attenuated, still influence our language and thought today.

And if only to show one even later response to Arnold by one of our last great novelists (and literary critics for that matter), there is D. H. Lawrence’s inquiry into the problems of culture, love, and
thought in *Women in Love* (leaving aside for now Lawrence’s criticism). Lawrence’s critique of his culture, of the possibilities and impossibilities for English language and thought in the first part of the twentieth century, is simultaneously a concentrated critical history of the language and ideas of the nineteenth century. Lawrence explores Arnold’s significant ideas throughout *Women in Love*. Birkin’s use of the word “disinterestedness” is one clue to readers. Another is the short history of the rationalization of life and work in the chapter entitled “The Industrial Magnate”: in Gerald’s systematization of his father’s coal-mining company “what mattered was the pure instrumentality of the individual.” To make his criticism clear, Lawrence points directly towards Arnold’s works, such as *Culture and Anarchy*, by writing conversations that revisit Arnold’s arguments. In Chapter VII, entitled “Fetish”, a word that Arnold uses repeatedly in *Culture and Anarchy*, Lawrence stages a debate on Arnold’s title through a dialogue on art and criticism. Birkin and Gerald evaluate the African statue that Birkin is quick to identify as art and a production of “an awful pitch of culture, of a definite sort”. When Gerald questions “what culture?” Lawrence brings us back to the very question that Arnold raised in his own inquiry. Although Birkin is more often than not discussed as some extension of Lawrence himself into the novel, Birkin’s language and arguments, such as (in Chapter XIV) persuading Gerald that he is wasting his “best self”, and his occupation as a school inspector, demonstrate that Lawrence is at least partially connecting him with Arnold.

So not only do writers in the nineteenth century and after respond to Arnold as an important writer, but his ideas are carried forward by two of the most important writers of the twentieth century whose works exemplify the “criticism of life” that Arnold valued. Although Arnold mistakenly dismissed novels, he should count himself lucky that the novelists did not respond in kind. If James, Conrad, and Lawrence recognize Arnold’s significance and our age cannot, then it is a failure of judgement for which we are all responsible.

It is hard to imagine any of the most troubling questions at the heart of Victorian life without due consideration of Arnold’s thinking. Macaulay’s essay on Milton is often judged as an expression of a particular Victorian dilemma. What place could poetry or fiction have as a significant form of knowledge when a culture has come to think of science or social science as possessing an exclusive claim to truth? Poetry was by such reasoning a primitive matter akin to religion and could no longer be taken seriously in view of intellectual progress. Macaulay’s remarks on the “mechanism of language”, his crude rationalistic views of mimesis, reduce literature to a childish amusement. Given Macaulay’s habits of mind Shakespeare is dismissed as possessing little insight into the “motives of human actions” when measured against the exalted standard of Mandeville’s “able reasoning”. It is *Hard Times* indeed when the more educated members of a culture are openly or unconsciously hostile to literature. When one of the foremost thinkers of the age, J. S. Mill, reads Wordsworth as if his poetry
amounted to emotional therapy devoid of thought and thinks his remarks are a critical endorsement of poetry, one cannot help recognizing why Arnold would think the prospects for a great literature more than a little desperate. Carlyle’s third lecture on “The Hero as Poet: Dante, Shakespeare” stands as a welcome refutation of Macaulay on Bacon but his insistence on Shakespeare’s “power of vision” being understood as a “faculty of thought” is a rare exception. Mill’s praising Carlyle as a poet is immediately followed by the depressing notion that only when he is translated into something akin to Mill’s own prose can the evidence of Carlyle’s thought be acknowledged. Cribs for undergraduates such as Coles Notes offer to do something like this for Shakespeare’s plays; once the style has been replaced by an updated transliteration satisfaction is guaranteed.

Arnold’s essays repeatedly criss cross this slippery territory. In his debate with Huxley over the most suitable form of education, Arnold disposes of the standard attack on the belle-letterist position by enlarging the way the word literature should be used. The best Victorian journals, it should be recalled, published articles on politics, economics, anthropology, history, psychology alongside literary-critical essays, poetry, and fiction. Arnold’s determination to make “ideas” live in all forms of writing survives in great books or liberal studies programmes in some universities despite accusations of sexism, racism, and class prejudice.

In the best-known of his early essays, the “1853 Preface” and “The Modern Element in Literature” Arnold writes of the desperate need to find “intellectual deliverance” from the bewildering questions that plague his day. “The sources of intellectual stimulus”, “the foundation of a serious thought”, “intellectual maturity”, an adequate “intellectual interpretation”, and numerous comparable phrases are all attached to classical literature. Unfortunately, Arnold’s insistence on understanding literature as pre-eminently a question of the best thought available to us at any given moment in history leads to the misguided opposition between Shakespeare and the great classical writers and thinkers. The muddle he produces is evident in his condemnation of Shakespeare’s language in a passage that is no more than warmed-up Samuel Johnson. The “fertility of thought” Arnold grants Shakespeare couldn’t exist in the style Arnold wrongly attributes to the greatest stylist in our language. Though Arnold is on Carlyle’s side in realizing that it is “the profoundly thoughtful” that we must demand from all literature be it novel, poem, drama, or critical essay, he veers off to a position all too close to Macaulay’s when he concludes that Burke’s not Shakespeare’s utterance constitutes “the language of a thoughtful philosophic man”. In “Wordsworth”, however, Arnold is glad to report a French critic calling Shakespeare the king of style “as well as the king of the realm of thought”.

We can think of no more thought-provoking question for the undergraduate student reading English literature in today’s university than whether they are reading as though the love of thought was a given that one could take for granted as one might imagine a
professor of philosophy doing. When in his essay “The Study of Poetry” Arnold defines “poetry” as that “which is thought and art in one” we are entitled to pause over the opposition he sets up later between Wordsworth’s “poetry” as “the reality” and his “philosophy” as “the illusion”. In part the mixed question is whether philosophy is acceptable and even desirable as long as the modifiers “systematic” or “scientific” don’t cling to it. I imagine most admirers of Wordsworth accept Arnold’s judgement on “The Recluse” as not realizing the “sweet union of philosophy and poetry” Coleridge urged him to write. Arnold rejects the poem as a “tissue of elevated but abstract verbiage” which he finds the reverse of “poetic truth”. This last phrase Arnold sets over in stark opposition to “religious and philosophic doctrine[s]”. One might well wonder at this point in his argument how poetry could replace or be elided with religion as is the case elsewhere in his writings if this distinction holds good. There is also the oddly abstract quality of Arnold’s own style in this essay not to mention quotes from the very poem he rejects employed in support of his own critical position.

Of all the shifting impulses and contradictory pronouncements this urgent question elicited from Arnold, the following, from his most impressive essay “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” is probably the most significant:

… the elements with which the creative power works are ideas; the best ideas, on every matter which literature touches, current at the time. At any rate we may lay it down as certain that in modern literature no manifestation of the creative power not working with these can be very important or fruitful. And I say current at the time, not merely accessible at the time; for creative literary genius does not principally show itself discovering new ideas; that is rather the business of the philosopher. The grand work of literary genius is a work of synthesis and exposition, not of analysis and discovery . . . .

We have pulled up short in quoting from a lengthy paragraph as the further it goes the more elevated abstraction takes over. It would strike us as absurd to characterize Conrad’s Lord Jim as “dealing divinely” with Darwin’s or Freud’s ideas. Writing a novel in which the relation between the struggle to preserve one’s life and identity and a will to death is creative thinking but it is certainly not “making beautiful works” out of the original ideas of others, nor is it making “attractive combinations” out of the offerings of biology and psychology. I doubt very much whether Arnold would think his critical spirit fulfilled by the Freudian and Marxian approaches in interpretations of literature which students are routinely directed to perform in current educational practices. This is however what his “application of ideas to life”—the life of novels and poems and plays at least—has mutated into. The sense of dependency this key passage envisions for literature and the superiority granted to other forms of thought needs to be resisted. Students of English should feel their discipline of thought to be as demanding, stringent, and profound as
any other. Harold Bloom’s exceptional essay on a Shakespearean reading of Freud in The Western Canon stands out as a necessary corrective to the implications of Arnold’s position.

Had re-thinking the Western Canon meant something other than a blatant take-over of the academic market, students would have had the opportunity to recognize Arnold’s central place in the history of literary criticism. The strengths and the weaknesses of Arnold’s remarks on ideas or philosophies can be traced through the critical pronouncements of a writer as unlike Arnold in every way as Thomas Hardy. His critical comments in prefaces to Poems of the Past and Present, The Dynasts, “General Preface to the Novels and Poems”, Late Lyrics and Earlier and Winter Words rarely stray from Arnold’s “familiar” formulations. It is Frederic Harrison, Arnold’s old opponent in Culture and Anarchy, whom Hardy contends with for attributing philosophic views to his poetry when he had attempted no more than a “series of fugitive impressions which [he] had never tried to co-ordinate”. Unfortunately postmodernism fell for the peculiar blend of pseudo-scientific posturing and aesthetic effusions into which Walter Pater dunked Arnold in his “Preface” to The Renaissance. Self-indulgence tends to be so much more attractive than self-criticism, especially in our age of advertisement and self-promotion.

One of the essays we have included was not available in the last paperback selection of Arnold’s writing. The essay is simply entitled “Emerson”, but it provides a snap-shot of the complex relations that existed between the literary figures John Holloway gathered under the heading The Victorian Sage. The exchanges among them constitute the essential history of literary criticism which is now being shoved to the margins of our course offerings. At the University Michael attended as an undergraduate student and I lectured at, literary criticism from the classics to the early half of the twentieth century has been reduced to a half course while critical theory receives three times the classroom attention. A student majoring in English is unlikely to have read more than a single Arnold essay. Since Carlyle is only remembered as the perpetrator of the infamous “Nigger Question” the chances of a student overhearing the dialogue between these two voices discussing the need for a moral, spiritual, intellectual or literary guide is virtually nil. Arnold is eloquent on the subject of needing such a figure and the qualities such a being must possess. The student of Arnold should compare the closing three paragraphs of the “1853 Preface” to the distinguished writers he considers as having failed to provide the desired interpretation of their age in “The Modern Element in Literature”. The “intellectual deliverance” Arnold imagines as the one thing needful for his time may be thought to be something he implicitly aspires to but never claims to have achieved. The essay on Emerson was prompted by a rereading of Carlyle and includes a return to Arnold’s early intellectual encounter with Newman at Oxford. The essay reveals the “opposite and cognate” impulses—to admire and venerate great men and resent and cut them down to size for presuming to fulfil their mission. The total significance of the
essay in the history of literary criticism can only be sketched in here.

In *Arnold and Carlyle* David J. DeLaura carefully demonstrates Carlyle’s influence on Arnold’s language and thought. It is this influence that Arnold attempts to cover up or repudiate in “Emerson”. In the second paragraph Arnold remembers the “puissant voice of Carlyle, so sorely strained, over-used and misused since, but then fresh, comparatively sound, and reaching our hearts with true pathetic eloquence”. The second clause emphasizes Arnold’s critical revaluation of his youthful admiration. But when Arnold reflects that “it is not always pleasant to ask oneself questions about the friends of one’s youth” because Carlyle “in my judgement, cannot well support such a return upon him” there is some difficulty with his declaration that “we should part with our illusions, we should know the truth.” Arnold claims that he is dismissing the “illusions” of youth for the “truth” of his mature judgement, but it is questionable whether his mature judgement is not also susceptible to those “improper elements [which] often come into our estimate of great men”. That is, Arnold’s revaluation of his youthful judgement is informed by a will to deflate Carlyle’s importance, and in the second half of the essay Arnold is dealing in almost “nothing but negatives”. In a paragraph full of negations, Arnold’s summary of the Carlyle–Emerson correspondence ignores aspects of the friendship the two men share and focuses too narrowly upon how the two writers “criticize themselves and one another in a way which leaves little for any one else to do in the way of formulating their defects.” And Arnold’s choice of quotations from the correspondence merely highlights his own oppositional criticism by corroborating his own ideas. Arnold’s design is clear when Emerson’s essays are elevated and declared to be “more important than Carlyle’s”, though this is simply untrue. Arnold’s language and thought is enabled by Carlyle’s arguments. Here we see Arnold doing what post-modern critics in turn did to Arnold: blaming the very man whom they are most indebted to. And it is almost no surprise when we read that Carlyle is not a “great writer”, because Arnold is determined to blame Carlyle for having a “perverse attitude”. Anticipating the kind of accusation that post-modern critics have used against him, Arnold rebukes Carlyle as a “preacher” of the wrong “gospel”. Arnold constructs Carlyle as the necessary antipode whom he has surpassed in his criticism, and the critic of yesterday who failed to accomplish the work that Arnold would set aright.

Unfortunately for Arnold, T. S. Eliot initiated a reaction against him that has been perpetuated until the present day. Eliot is to Arnold as Arnold is to Carlyle; he too once read Arnold closely and his writings demonstrate the significance of Arnold’s influence everywhere. We need only read the introduction to *The Sacred Wood* where Eliot says that “Arnold is not to be blamed” for having “wasted his strength”, but then spends the rest of his introduction and the rest of his career blaming Arnold because he was “inadequate”. In the essay “Arnold and Pater” Eliot blames Arnold for the entire art-for-art’s-sake movement that Pater helped popularize in *The Renaissance*. Like Arnold in the “Emerson” essay,
Eliot is more intent on denigrating his former master for having “had little gift for consistency or for definition. Nor had he the power of connected reasoning.” It is also in this essay that Eliot articulates his influential idea that “the total effect of Arnold’s philosophy is to set up Culture in the place of Religion, and to leave Religion to be laid waste by the anarchy of feeling,” an argument that has been reformulated by Ian Robinson in *The English Prophets*. In his essay on Arnold, Leavis simply reproduces Eliot’s self-satisfying criticism of Arnold. Neither Eliot nor Leavis treated Arnold with the “justice” that Leavis said was “oddly difficult to arrive at”. These two writers have made it extremely difficult to defend Arnold, having fuelled the attack that post-modern critics have only been too glad to join and coarsen. Make no mistake, we admire Leavis, but like Eagleton, he too shares responsibility for the depressed condition of Arnold’s reputation at the present time.

The history of literary criticism can be more or less formulated as an ambivalence that manifests itself in grateful appropriation and resentful denigration: having studied as a disciple of a sage, the youthful critic later denigrates his former master using the very ideas that he learned at the master’s feet. But ours alas is a simpler and cruder age wherein rancour and resentment are utterly disconnected from gratitude or generosity. The full and complex spectacle of life and literature conjoined can only be found in a past we compulsively patronize and interrogate in the worst sense of the word. Were it otherwise the English departments that look down on Arnold as the embodiment of naïve liberal humanism might think of “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time”, an essay on architecture, journalism, religious thought and the divorce courts, as having beaten them to the punch when they flaunt their claims to having invented “culture studies”. If we dismiss Arnold’s catch phrases as empty cartridges how are we to disguise the multitude of sins hidden in the innocuous idiomatic words “interpretation” and “approach”? Instead of sneering at Arnold for confusing religion with literature think how he and Carlyle can be pondered as we try to understand the relation between say psychology and philosophy when a Kierkegaard or Nietzsche bring one form of thought to bear on another.

In the final paragraph of his introduction to the *Selected Prose*, P. J. Keating begins by assuming that “the modern reader” recognizes Arnold as “a classic of our criticism” but also a “classic of our prose”, and concludes with the conviction that “his criticism” survives “as great literature”. Times they are a changing! We can do neither. We, the publisher and the editors, can do little more than make the choice of study possible by publishing these essays. And of course hope. But to invoke a phrase from the Canadian legal system, when the best that has been thought and published is assumed by the influential voices of our day, Eagleton in England and Gerald Graff in America, to be Chris Baldick’s *The Social Criticism of English Criticism 1838–1842*, then the signs of the time are not propitious; and Arnold who thought “education the road to culture” might have real grounds for
second thoughts. They all think we should have backed Frederic Harrison who dismissed Arnold’s position as “cant”. But if Eagleton’s essay on Culture and Anarchy can pass muster as a critical advance on his mentor Raymond Williams’s effort then what isn’t cant? By the cultural-materialist argument what else could anything be but the corrupt product of a culture that tries ineffectually to hide or rationalize the truth: the exploitation, domination, and violence of the capitalist social system? If they take their argument seriously then the game is up—their “cant” is can’t, won’t, and don’t. And how could our sorry society, believing as it does in higher education without thinking, not spot the fraud and close us down? Arnold wrote for a “general public” but unlike Johnson he could not place his confidence in the common reader. Arnold abhorred jargon, the usages of professionalism and “erudition out of all proportion to its owner’s critical faculty”. What then would Arnold think seeing the life of a contemporary University steadily and seeing it whole would mean? Perhaps he stands a better chance of being read outside the institutions of higher learning.