

In Search of the Golden Light: The Classicism of Matthew Arnold in his Essay “The Study of Poetry”

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Abstract

Poetry is one of the genres of literature that has been given considerable critical attention it so deserves from the classical time to our modern era. It has found expressions and critical commentaries in the works of both poets and non-poets alike. Poetry as a branch of literature has its antecedent in the early Greek practices with which they sought to project their worldview and understand themselves better. From study, poetry originated among the early Greek classical writers. It originated from two major essence, one being man's love for imitation, the other from man's love for music and harmony. Overtime, poetry has survived from the early practices, in the praise singing poise and worship of their gods to find better expression in several issues as it relates and affects life. Poetry as we see today across cultures, countries and continents has undergone several linguistic influences and cultural re-adjustment in its bid to satisfy the yearning taste of the given society and for its fuller understanding and appreciation. This could account for the varieties of forms, components and manner of poetic composition evident in the poetry of many poets that exist in a homogenous society. More than any other poet, Matthew Arnold was bothered about the true nature of poetry and what from his perspective poetry ought to take. This paper studied Matthew Arnold's concept of poetry and the classical qualities he outlined in his Study of Poetry which he believes is the real grandeur and ingredient that makes poetry great, unique and been sought after over and over again.

Introduction

Poetry never developed in thin air. It did not just one morning burst out in full maturity just like Athena busted out from the head of Zeus, a full-grown man. The nature of what we enjoy today as poetry irrespective of the form it came to us has its origin from the actions and activities of men that existed centuries ago, during the classical times, the earliest known time in literature. The evolution of poetry generally is due to two major causes and both causes are rooted in human nature. The first cause is man's instinct for imitation. The instinct for imitation is inherent in man from his earliest days. Man from nature is bequeathed with the gift of imitating and enjoying the works of imitation. Man differs from all other animals from this unique feature apart from other distinctive features found even in his language. He differs from other animals in the sense that he is the most imitative of all creatures, and he learnt his earliest lessons by imitation. Also inherent in man is the unique instinct which is of universal essence and that is the instinct to enjoy the works of imitation. Man delights so much in recreating something already in existence in his own unique way. He looks at it as an idol, a new creation from his fountain of creativity. Evidence of man's love for imitation abounds. The obvious reason for this is in the simple and universally acknowledged fact that learning gives pleasure. Learning of new things and ideas gives the liveliest pleasure, not only to philosophers but to men generally, irrespective of the limit of their capacity for it.

Thus the instinct of imitation is natural to man and that in no small way saw to the sprouting into life from the womb of the earth, poetry which today we enjoy and study as a distinguished genre of literature.

The second cause is another natural instinct in man, the instinct for music, harmony and for rhythm. As early as the creation of man, music became one of the fundamental things through which man derives an unusual emotional soothing pleasure, mind relaxation, harmony and satisfaction with life and his environment. Thus, there is the instinct for 'harmony', 'gratification' and 'rhythm', to suit the mind and delight the soul. It is from these natural aptitudes and phenomenon and by a sense of the gradual improvements on their first efforts, through a successive and constant rude and steady improvisations, man eventually created poetry and gave birth to it.

In other words, the nature of what we today celebrate and study as poetry took its origin from two intrinsic and inherent natural instincts rooted in man, which is from his love for imitation of things, ideas and persons and his love for harmony, music and rhythm.

Poetry, however, soon diverged into two channels, according to the temperaments of individual character of the poets. Two set of unique characters in man became clearly discernable. The character of the most serious minded and graver spirited men, and that of the more trivial and less serious-minded personalities. These two characters influenced the development of poetry greatly. The more serious and graver spirits among them imitated and represented noble actions and the doings of noble persons, while the more trivial or less serious minded ones imitated the actions of meaner sort of people. The serious minded person wrote hymns to the gods and panegyrics praises of famous men while the others wrote invectives. There is no other known poem

belonging to the class of the serious minded poets earlier than the poetry of Homer. Homer is one of the earliest known poets who existed during the classical period, the very beginning of the entire world's knowledge, philosophy, art and learning. Homer is the greatest of them all and one couldn't speak meaningfully and accurately about the development and origin of poetry without mentioning and including Homer and his classical poems which to Mathew Arnold, is the poetry with the best poetic excellence, beauty, grandeur, irresistible charm and power of wit, muse and admirable poetic fecundity which not so many preceding poets came close to achieving again-The classical poems of Homer.

Homer is recognized, even to the present day as the supreme poet in the serious style, the master of it all. He stood out alone both in excellences of composition and in the dramatic character that he created, not to invective, but to his treatment of the ridiculous. He was the one who first laid down the main lines and forms that comedy was to assume. His *Margites* bears the same relationship to comedy just as his *Iliad* and *Odyssey* bear to tragedy. When tragedy and comedy appeared, those whose natural aptitude inclined them towards the one kind of poetry wrote comedies instead of lampoons or Iambic verse and those who were drawn to the other wrote tragedies instead of epics, thus the point where drama took off from poetry to become a larger and higher form of art.

Many poets, scholars, and critics have devoted a great time of their lives trying to say what poetry is and what it is not. A poem in the words of Percy Bysshe Shelley is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth.

According to Dylan Thomas, "a poem makes your toe nails twinkle" imagine that! A poem transforms the ordinary things and in the process of doing that, it may delight, surprise, excite and upset our usual way of seeing or hearing. Even though a poem may adopt a philosophic or religious, political or social stance, it is not a secret code to be deciphered or picked apart to uncover an obscure message.

In the words of Jill Baumgartner a poem 'is much like a tree falling in an uninhabited forest.' If no ear receives the sound waves of its crash, the sound does not exist. In other words, sound depends upon the existence of ears to receive the sound waves, and in much the same way, a poem depends upon the reader. Other definitions abound but that is not the concern of this paper. Poetry today exists in various forms and styles. The use of poetic licence has also contributed to the varieties of voices and manner of poetic compositions we witness in our gallery of poetry. We have the rhyme, blank and the most often exploited free verse in poetry. Sometimes we have verses that are so free that one begins to wonder if we have to create other sub-genres of poetry from the bulk of already existing ones. This takes us to the idea of Charles Nnolim's 'poets qua poets' and 'versifiers'. According to him:

There are two classes of people that write poetry: the poet qua poet and the versifiers. The poet qua poet is a committed adherent to poetic calling. I have in mind poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats and Shelley who did nothing else significant in their lives but write poetry. The versifier, on the other hand writes poetry occasionally, poems that may rise to sublimity on occasion, but he is distracted by other callings in life. He may be a novelist or dramatist or freelance journalist in the main, but when the spirit or the muse visits, he pens a verse or two and then retires to his original calling... (53).

This is the journey and development of poetry so far and in the recent time, poetry has evolved from been praises of heroic actions and legendary characters and gods to satirical pieces. It has uncovered much of its epic robe to wear a newly fashioned garment of criticism. Poetry which was known for its highly entertainment and celebrating poise has now become a handmaid to revolution, a weapon of criticism that attacks and wrecks the spirit of the culprits it was written to attack. It is in this regard that Chukwueloka Christian and Asika Ikechukwu speak of poetry thus:

Poetry is one of the genres of literature and has over the years found its best application and usage as a weapon, a tool for criticism with which poets mock and satirize societal actions, values and attitudes in the hopes of correcting and instilling in the people the right and ethical moral values which in no small measure will institute a more harmonious, idyllic and tension free society as well as engineer a more appreciable peaceful co-existence among individuals in society. This in turn will lead to a high degree of productivity and growth in all spheres of human endeavor (354).

Some poets in their bid to satirize and mock their societies in the most ridiculing and sarcastic manner they could often end up creating lines of poetry that is a clear cut departure from the conventions and poetic rules laid down over the years which some believed is what makes the lines of poetry poetic and one's toe nails twinkle like Dylan Thom pointed out. But all these are not so much of concern to the present study. The crux of this study is to highlight on the quality of poetry, the classicism outlined by Mathew Arnold and the form he believes poetry ought to take at all time if it must retain its 'poetic' flavour and achieve the grandeur and effervescence beauty which makes a poem, poetic; a mind soothing creation of man and the most pleasurable genre of literature which stirs the mind, excite the emotions and feeling and entertains while it instructs.

Matthew Arnold and his Views of Classicism-The Classicism of Arnold.

Like few other poets in the English literature, Mathew Arnold was bothered and distressed about the true nature of poetry as well as its function and purpose to human life. Arnold was not concerned on the level of poetic ingenuity and command a poet may possess but his interest lies chiefly in his mastery of those qualities, language, beauty and style that gives life to poetry and nothing more. Arnold concerned himself with the true beauty of presentation, language and expression which a poem should carry and that beauty of lasting impression he only saw in the poetry of the classical times. Any poem that does not take its root, language and elegant style from the poetry of the classical times is not poetry to Mathew Arnold and does not deserve any serious attention by readers and scholars. Classical poetry to him possesses all the beauty, the ease, the inner glow, the quality, the superiority, the ideals, the characters, the grandeur, the poetic truth which all poems ought to possess. This is what classics means to him, the embodiment of all that is beautiful, worthwhile and everlasting which is what gives life to poetry and places it above all other fields of human endeavour.

Mathew Arnold in this quest for classicism in poetry found distaste in the poetry of most renowned and great English poets, both of his time and the times before his age. His great taste and love for the decorum, richness and style of poetic ingenuity found only in the classical poetry also made him reject some of his own poems on the ground that they strive towards the side of triviality and melancholy and this to him is not what poetry should do. This idea could be seen in one of his excellent letters to his friend Arthur Hugh Clough in the 1850s as quoted in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*. The letters provided a great insight to Arnold's mind and taste on the nature, quality and skin with which poetry ought to be clothed. The note expressed his dissatisfaction thus:

"I am glad you like the "Gypsy scholar" – but what does it do for you? Homer animates – Shakespeare animates – in its poor way I think Sohrab and Rostum animates – the "Gypsy Scholar" at best awakens a pleasing melancholy. But this is not what we want."

It is evident that in his career Arnold had evolved and propagated a theory of what poetry should do for its reader, a theory based, in part, on his impression of what classical poetry had achieved. In Arnold view, poetry, in all her true essence of creation is to help make life bearable. He sees poetry as nothing but a possession which ought to bring joy and happiness.

In his preface to his poems in 1853, Arnold project that poetry must "*inspirit and rejoice the reader*"; that poetry must "*convey a charm, an infuse of delight*"; that which "*insight and rejoice the reader*"; that "*which brings joy*" is all he sees in the poetry of the classical poets and it is that beauty of eternal truth that all poet must strive and possess, achieve and master if poetry must be regarded as a unique system of art. This is what classics is to him, that great style and poetic beauty of the early classical writers that made poetry "*the inner spirit and breathe of all knowledge*" which Wordsworth describes it to be.

In the essay, '*The Study of Poetry*' (1880) Mathew Arnold poured out his true inner feelings on what poetry is and how it ought to be. To Arnold, poetry itself is the criticism of life: "*The criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such criticism by the law of poetic truth and beauty*". In the seminal paper he says that poetry alone can be our sustenance and stay in an era where religious beliefs are fast losing their hold. Arnold claims that poetry is superior to philosophy, science, and religion. Thus:

The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialized itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea is the fact. The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry. (1534).

In the views of Arnold, religion attaches its emotion to supposed fact and the supposed facts are failing it, but poetry attaches emotion to ideas and ideas are infallible. In his view also science is incomplete without poetry. It is to him what Wordsworth view as "*The impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science*;" but he wanted to know "*what is a countenance without its expression?*" And so concludes on the words of Wordsworth that poetry is the finer spirit and breathe of all knowledge.

As a critic, Arnold is essentially a moralist and has very definite ideas about what poetry should and should not be. A poetry of revolt against moral ideas, he says is a poetry of revolt against life and a poetry of indifference to moral ideas is a poetry of indifference to life. According to him:

But if we conceive thus highly of the destinies of poetry, we must also set out standard for poetry high, since poetry to be capable of fulfilling such high destinies, must be poetry of a high order of excellence, we must accustom ourselves to a high standard and to strict judgment (1535).

This is the trouble of Mathew Arnold, the search and preservation of the poetry of a high-order of excellence. He opined thus:

The best poetry is what we want; the best poetry will be found to have power of forming, sustaining and delighting us, as nothing else can. A clearer, deeper sense of the best in poetry and of the strength and joy to be drawn from it... (1535).

The best poetry which we want was what Arnold found only in the poetry of the classical poets. Their characters, style of expression, diction and subject matters possess the poetic truth which poetry ought to possess at all times. He recognized the beauty of the poetry of his own time but was able to fault the very manner and conduct of such a collection to possess inevitably something which will obscure in us the consciousness of what our benefit should be and to distract us from the pursuit of it. He maintained that "*constantly in reading poetry, a sense for the best, the really excellent and the strength and joy to be drawn from it, should be present in our minds and should govern our estimate of what we read but he cautioned that 'this real estimate' the only true one,*" should not be superseded by other kinds of estimate, which he called the historic estimate and the personal estimate, both of which are fallacious."

The critics and scholars of his time often regard the best poetry as that which has vigor, freshness and pathos. Critics regards the classics as that which manner and style of presentation possess the grandeur of high historic and linguistic value. Such poems are the monuments of epic genius and to them are the true classics. This view Arnold found to be rather unsatisfactory and fallacious haven elaborated on how poets and critics could be blinded by what he called historical and personal estimate, both of which are fallacious. Arnold argues that the historic estimate affects our judgment while dealing with ancient poets and the personal estimate affect us greatly when we are dealing with poets of our contemporaries. This class of beauty as enumerated by these critics is not in any way classics. He elaborated with an example of a French critic, M. Vitet on his comment upon a famous document of the early poetry of his nation, the "*Chanson de Roland*". According to M. Vitet, the poem is not just a document of some poetic value, and of very high historic and linguistic value; rather he sees in it a grand and beautiful work, a monument of epic genius. According to Arnold, M. Vitet finds in the general design of the poem the grandiose conception, in its details he finds the constant union of simplicity with greatness which to him are the marks of a genuine epic quite distinguished from the artificial epic of literary ages. But Arnold views these praises as highly out of place; it is the type of praise ought to be accorded to the poems of Homer because only such poems attained the high of 'simplicity with greatness', the mark of a genuine epic. He buttressed this fact by comparing some lines in '*Chanson de Roland*' with lines in Homer's '*Iliad*'. In that of '*Chanson de Roland*' he saw a poem that has an undeniable poetic quality of its own but in all sense of word is rather a primitive creation. In Homer's '*Iliad*' he believes we are lifted into another order, another order of poetry altogether. This is a poem that deserves all supreme praise as that which M. Vitet gives to '*Chanson de Roland*'; this is a genuine classic to him, a poem of excellent and order laced in the beauty of imagery, style, diction and idealistic expressions. On the views of critics, their regards and their own belief of classics, *Arnold warns that "if our words are to have meaning, if our judgments are to have any solidarity, we must not heap that supreme praise upon poetry of an order immeasurable inferior* (1537)." Homer's poetry is the ideal poetry, a genuine classic poetry and nothing more. It is the poetry that belongs to the class of "*the truly excellent and the 'very good'*". They real classic poetry contains in them the very poetic beauty and truth, an infallible touch stone for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality, and also the degree of this quality in all other poetry which we may place beside them.

Arnold believed that a modern writer should be aware that contemporary literature is built on the foundations of the past, and should contribute to excellence, grandeur and beauty, which makes poetry immortal by continuing a firm tradition. To elaborate his ideas on classicism, he quoted Goethe and Niebuhr in support of his view. He asserts that his age suffers from spiritual weakness because it thrives on self-interest and scientific materialism, and therefore cannot provide noble characters such as those found in classical literature. The classical poetry and other differ in the matter and substance of the poetry and they are in its manner and style. Both of these, the substance and matter on the one hand, the style and manner on the other, have a mark, an accent, of high beauty, worth, and power.

The best poetry is to Arnold that which in Aristotle's observation consist in itself the possession of a higher truth and a higher seriousness, which marks its superiority over history. This '*higher truth and a higher seriousness*' is what Arnold found in the poetry of the classical times. Thus, classics means to him, poetry of a high order, superiority and truth. It is the poetry which has superiority over history and has no confinements with time and place of its creation rather its character and subjects matters carry in them, a universal truth, something of universal essence, which defiles all times and places. Its style and manner of presentation gives us joy and creates an everlasting picture in us. It is rooted in the truth, laced in the poetic beauty and movement marked with genuine style and manner. This is the true classic poetry and if poetry must achieve this course as the '*finer breathe and the spirit of all knowledge*' it must conform to the dictates of classicism in poetry. Anything other than that is not genuine poetry and could not be spared. Not even his own poems were left out in the bulks of poetry that lacks the charming beauty, grandeur, the poetic beauty of movement in style and manner and the superiority of language of the classical poetry. So they deserve not much attention by the readers. This view of

classicism and what it is to him is expressed thus:

Let us add therefore to what we have said, this: that the substance and matter of the best poetry require their special character from possessing, in an eminent degree, truth and seriousness. We may add further, what is in itself evident, that to the style and manner of the best poetry their special character, their accent, is given by their direction, and even yet more, by their movement.... The superior character of truth and seriousness, in the matter and substance of the best poetry, is inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement marking its style and manner... (1539).

This summoned up his concept of classicism in *'The Study of Poetry'*. He urged the modern poets to look to the ancients and their great characters and themes for guidance and inspiration. Classical poetry in his view, possesses pathos, moral profoundly and noble simplicity while modern themes, arising from an age of spiritual weakness, are suitable for only comic and lighter kinds of poetry and does not possess the loftiness to support epic or heroic poetry. Arnold turns his back on the prevailing Romantic view of poetry and seeks to revive the classical values of objectivity, urban, and architectonics. He berated the Romantics, for ignoring the classical writers for the sake of novelty, and for their allusive 'suggestive' writing which defies easy comprehension. Only in the classical poet can they find the beauty of expression, style and manner which will inform the poetic beauty to achieve the poetic truth that transcends all age and times. Only a mastery of these can enable the poets of his time, to create poetry laced on the power of truth, beauty of imagination and superiority in language, movement, style and shape which is the mark of a true poetry.

With his *'Touch stone method'* he analyzed the works of poets who strived towards this *'poetic Beauty and truth'* but ended up in their own creation of something worthwhile but not in any way classics. The *'touchstone method'* is his theory with which to judge a poet's work properly by comparing it to passages taken from work of great masters of poetry and these passages should be applied as touchstones to our poetry.

On Chaucer's poetry, Arnold praised his style and his accent. Chaucer is out of the reach of any poet in the England of that stage of growth. However, he recognized and faulted something that is wanting, that is absent in the poetry of Chaucer, which poetry must have before it can be placed and made to occupy the glorious position meant for the class of the best, the true classics. That something which is lacking is the *spoudaiotes*, the high and excellent seriousness, which Aristotle assigns as one of the grand virtues of poetry. Chaucer's poetry, *"has criticism of life and his views of things has largeness, freedom, shrewdness, benignity but it has not this high seriousness."* This is the true classics for him. *'Homer's criticism of life has it, Dante's has it, Shakespeare's has it (1542)*. It is this chiefly which gives to our spirits what they can rest upon; and with the increasing demands of our modern ages upon poetry, this he believes will re-direct our poetic steps, insights and understanding and will give us what we can rest upon which will be more and more highly esteemed'. That is what classics are to him and so Chaucer lacks the high seriousness of the great classics and also an important part of their virtue.

On Alexander pope and Dryden, he made a statement that their poetry also lacks the seriousness of the classicism:

'It has not and cannot have them; it is the poetry of the builders of an age of prose and reason. Though we they may write in verse, though they may in a certain sense be masters of the art of verification, Dryden and Pope are not classics of our poetry, they are classics of our prose.' (1543).

Gray is to him a poetical classical of that literature and age. His poetry has a lot in common with the seriousness and poetic point of view of regarding life. He also caught their poetic manner. He is the scantiest and Frailtest of classics in our poetry, he is a classic. The best, the most beautiful, the superior language, style and manner as well as evocative power and seriousness of tone is the classic and in the works of these classical poets and to Mathew Arnold this is worth preserving if the future and role of poetry must be saved and fostered for the future generation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one may be easily moved to ask what this paper tries to achieve and how important it is in the quest to make our poetry, let's say our African poetry better. This paper may be considered out of place but in real sense of the word we are discussing poetry and from a perspective of one of the best poets the English literature and the world at large has ever produced. This paper becomes so necessary in our quest to absorb and make more readily understandable poetry in all its enigmatic poise. Poetry though it has its true antecedents and origin from the early Greek classical writers, has permeated and has reached virtually all parts of the earth. Poetry from the time of evolution was originally for entertainment and sacred purposes. It is one of the ways with which the early Greeks celebrated their gods, legendary figures and some mythological ideas that helped them to understand their world, outlook and perception to life better, which in the end is highly entertaining. This is the initial purpose but poetry across cultures and continents has become more than that. Its role has long ago

transcended from ordinary praises to become veritable and already made weapon of criticism with which poets attack, satirize and mock their societies in their bid to institute a more humane, harmonious, idyllic environment and ideal societies of their dreams. Poetry is now diversified and its fate is now dependent on the hands of our various poets across cultures who are the keepers and producers of poems and on their shoulders the fate of poetry is entrusted upon. This paper highlighted on the views of Matthew Arnold in his bid to make poetry better and infuse in it such excellence, breathe and grandeur which he believes is the only thing that makes poetry eternal, immortal and places it above all other disciplines of knowledge. This is what he sees only in the poetry of classical writers. The search is on even in our own contemporary times, irrespective of the nature of the poetic composition of our age. The truth remains that poetry should be made better and should always strive to that height of sublimity in art which is the goal and destination of all poems. Poetry irrespective of the language of communication, linguistic interferences ought to be better and passionately written to stand the taste of time. it is in this regard that this paper re-echoed and elaborated the views of classicism by Arnold with the aim that our modern poets should be delighted by that grandeur, quality and excellence that makes poetry great and poets everlasting and should look inwards to know how best they could achieve this classicism in poetry irrespective of the language and what they write about in their lines of poetry. The quest for sublimity in art will help our poets in their own way to produce what shall in the future be referred to as the classics of our own time, in our own unique way and own sense of purpose and experience.

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