

To Think Anew: Arnold, the Literary, and Social Justice

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Everything, in short, confirms us in the doctrine, so unpalatable to the believers in action, that our main business at the present moment is not so much to work away at certain crude reforms of which we have already the scheme in our own mind, as to create, through the help of that culture which at the very outset we began by praising and recommending, a frame of mind out of which the schemes of really fruitful reforms may with time grow. (Arnold 5:221)

A critical analysis of the present global constellation – one which offers no clear solution, no “practical” advice on what to do, and provides no light at the end of the tunnel, since one is well aware that this light might belong to a train crashing towards us – usually meets with reproach: “Do you mean we should do *nothing*? Just sit and wait?” One should gather the courage to answer: “YES, precisely that!” There are situations when the only true “practical” thing to do is to resist the temptation to engage immediately and to “wait and see” by means of a patient, critical analysis. (Žižek 7)

[...] I assert *literature* to contain the materials which suffice for thus making us know ourselves and the world (Arnold 10:56)

*I*n his 2008 reflective book, *Violence*, Slavoj Žižek recounts an anecdote, taken from Sartre, about a young man in war-ridden 1940s France, who is “torn between the duty to help his lone, ill mother and the duty to enter the Resistance and fight the Germans.” According to Sartre, there is no “a priori answer to this dilemma. The young man needs to make a decision grounded only in his own abyssal freedom and assume full responsibility for it.” But Žižek offers what he terms “an obscene third way” to respond to this quandary: “to advise the young man to tell his mother that he will join the Resistance, and to tell his Resistance friends that he will take care of his mother, while, in reality, withdrawing to a secluded place and studying” (7-8). Žižek’s “obscene” third option may trouble us; the young man is effectively abandoning his mother *and* removing himself from the desperate war effort in order to study. And yet, I want to suggest that this option may serve as a useful analogy for my own ambition to study literature during a time in which Žižek himself repeatedly announces our global crisis. I have chosen to focus my professional life on literary study, often at an elite and highly specific level, as part of what I believe is a sincere attempt to better understand questions and challenges of our world. I most assuredly do not regret this choice, and I am repeatedly thankful for the many ways in which the scholarly study of literature has informed my own belief systems, directed my diverse political responses, and led to critical conversations with a range of people.

Over the past seven years, the English Department at Lehigh University has developed a focus in Literature and Social Justice. We decided to craft this departmental concentration for two primary reasons: (1) our shared faculty interests and (2) our increasing inability – due to our smaller size (twenty-one full-time faculty members) – to function as a traditional doctoral-granting English department with broad coverage in traditional historical periods. The idea of Literature and Social Justice has given my colleagues and me new ways to collaborate, train students, and identify ourselves within the larger University community increasingly uninterested in the Humanities. This focus, moreover, has informed our

scholarly agendas and hiring decisions, and driven numerous initiatives, including an annual lecture series, various reading groups, our graduate curriculum, and even an inaugural graduate student conference in March 2015. As a department, we have also entered into several longstanding dialogues about the role of literature in learning about, envisioning, and addressing questions of social justice. Throughout many of these conversations, I have found myself returning to Auden's famous pronouncement in his elegy for Yeats: "For poetry makes nothing happen." While it is difficult to accept an unequivocal reading of Auden's line, I openly acknowledge that the literary experience does not in itself amend inequalities, repair injustices, or suspend widespread prejudices. I firmly believe that the study of literature has an integral relationship to the work of social justice; I am convinced that literature makes *something* happen – or, perhaps more accurately, helps us to *do* something. But I also find myself increasingly nervous about what Žižek identifies as the threat of "pseudo-activity, the urge to 'be active,' to participate." Žižek continues: "People intervene all the time, 'do something': academics participate in meaningless debates. [...] The truly difficult thing is to step back" (217). Literature may not directly act upon social crises, but it invites us to think anew about problems in our world – to "resist the temptation to engage immediately and to 'wait and see' by means of a patient, critical analysis" (Žižek 7).

This desire that Žižek discusses to act in response to social problems was quite common in the Victorian period – a great era of reform, in which numerous individuals and organizations made sincere efforts to help others and improve society. While we have now developed a healthy skepticism about the benevolent ambitions and actions of the Victorians, they were clearly a people committed to addressing pervasive cultural challenges. Matthew Arnold was intimately involved in these efforts as he worked for much of his life to promote democracy and public education. He was also one of the most important nineteenth-century British cultural critics, and he offers influential views on the efficacy of literature and its critical study within a changing culture. Still, in his best-known work,

Culture and Anarchy (1867-69), Arnold voices caution about England's earnest pursuit of change. Writing amidst the turbulence of the Industrial Revolution, the various Reform Bills, and the expanding British Empire, he insists "our main business at the present moment is not so much to work away at certain crude reforms of which we have already the scheme in our own mind." He is nervous about the compulsion to alter policies based upon preconceived notions and instead advocates his ideal of culture, which, according to Arnold, has the potential to nurture "a frame of mind out of which the schemes of really fruitful reforms may with time grow" (5:221). For Arnold, our experience of the literary is a vital component of culture that inspires creative thinking and helps us to understand longstanding social issues in a new way. He does not present the literary experience as a panacea or a magical formula that might ameliorate all the evils of modern society; rather, he upholds our experience of and critical response to imaginative writings as an integral part of developing cultured individuals who are sympathetic to social injustice and informed to engage in meaningful democratic reform.

Arnold anticipates Žižek's admonition to patiently study social issues prior to engaging in reforms – an admonition that leaves him, like many intellectuals, open to charges of apathy and elitism. Numerous high-profile scholars, including Cornell West, Edward Said, and Terry Eagleton, engaged in critical dialogues with Arnold.¹ Said positions Arnold's theory of culture as a response to his rebuke of the 1867 Hyde Park riots and associates him with other twentieth-century thinkers who maintain "their culture was in a sense the only culture" (316). Eagleton famously claims that the "beauty" of Arnold's thinking "lies in the effect it will have in controlling and incorporating the working class" (24). He identifies Arnold as a deeply conservative intellectual who serves as the precursor of the politically detached American New Criticism – a view that has, as Bill Bell points out, "informed a whole generation of students and teachers" (217). And West both admires and scrutinizes Arnold's vision of culture, suggesting that it encourages "intellectuals [...] to shed their parochialism, provincialism, and class-bound identities." West, however,

qualifies this claim, noting that Arnold's rhetoric is "symptomatic among many bourgeois, male, Eurocentric critics whose universality gestures exclude (by guarding a silence around) or explicitly degrade women and people of color" (122-23). Arnold is certainly a complex thinker; he predicts the coming democratic culture, criticizes modern capitalism, and consistently announces his enduring belief in the ends of culture, but he also maintains a high aesthetic standard, participates in the ideology of Victorian imperialism, and chastises the British middle classes as philistines.² We should, of course, remember that early twentieth-century critics such as Irving Babbitt went so far as to install Arnold as a guardian of the Western intellectual canon; Babbitt even concludes that Arnold believes, "If we are to have a discipline we must have standards" (121). But as David Russell finds, "it would be reductive [...] to criticize Arnold as a purveyor of canonical truth" (136). He shies away from strict directives or immutable claims and insists upon culture as an inclusive rather than exclusive ideal; moreover, as Raymond Williams reminds us, "those who accuse him of a policy of 'cultivated inaction' forget not only his arguments but his life" (119). Arnold was sincerely invested in public reform, and his critical writings ultimately point to the power of literature and criticism to frame our actions by accurately showing us the issues in our world and promoting creative thinking about their possible resolutions. Indeed, Arnold's writings ultimately suggest that students of literature have the capacity to become well-informed and highly effective agents of change.

The Coming Democracy and the Promise of Culture

Arnold's ideas on the literary experience and its potential value as an instrument of social reform are rooted in his larger arguments on culture and what he viewed as the impending democratic society. In a famous passage from *Culture and Anarchy*, he announces: "culture has one great passion, the passion for sweetness and light. It has one even yet greater! – the passion for making them *prevail*. It is not satisfied until [...] the raw and unkindled masses of humanity are touched with sweetness and light"

(5:112). His grand ideal of culture as sweetness and light is undoubtedly ambiguous and contentious, but what is clear is his ambition to extend this ideal to others.³ Unlike Thomas Carlyle, the early Victorian sage, Arnold did not favor the authority of special or strong individuals; rather, he repeatedly discusses the promise of an imminent democracy. In “Democracy” (1861), he claims “the masses of the people in this country are preparing to take a much more active part than formerly in controlling its destinies” (2:15). He presages a new kind of populist reform movement that will overwhelm the waning aristocracy, and he offers a compelling image of this community as “the concert of a great number of men [that] makes up for the weakness of each man taken by himself” (2:13). Although Arnold is excited by the promise of this developing democratic people, particularly its ability to promote the commonwealth rather than individual gain, he is worried about their lack of quality education and specifically their experience of literature. In “The Study of Poetry” he notes, “we are often told that an era is opening in which we are able to see multitudes of a common sort of readers, and masses of a common sort of literature,” and he bemoans that we are told “such readers do not want and could not relish anything better than such literature” (9:188). This is exactly the kind of language that exposes Arnold to well-deserved charges of aesthetic élitism, but as Russell explains in his recent essay, “his edifying model is not the cultivated elite who might diffuse knowledge, nor even a canon in which all knowledge ought to reside, but the rendering of an attitude or mode of relation by which all might have the space for a creative relation to life” (129).⁴ Arnold is clearly not fond of mass-produced popular writing, but he is not interested in creating a static canon or an authority of select masters; his comments, indeed, suggest the ability of all peoples to appreciate the value of literature.

Arnold continually reverts to a high aesthetic standard, but he has little interest in an élite social system based upon the worth of the independent individual; he believes in the coming democracy and overtly criticizes the lingering inequalities that mar nineteenth-century Britain. In his late essay, “Equality,” he boldly proclaims, “our shortcomings in

civilization are due to our inequality [...] the great inequality of classes and property" (8:299). He critiques the modern capitalist system for perpetuating cultural and economic disparities that negatively affect all segments of society and concludes: "our inequality materializes our upper class, vulgarizes our middle class, brutalizes our lower" (8:302). In order to address this pervasive problem, he proposes education and culture, which he makes clear "is an idea which the new democracy needs far more than the ideas of the blessedness of the franchise, or the wonderfulness of its own industrial performances" (5:109). For Arnold, neither the expansion of the vote, the growth of industry, nor a radical redistribution of wealth amongst the classes would resolve the problems of inequality and promote democracy. He observes throughout his writings how the "vigor and high spirit of the English common people bred in them a self-reliance which disposed each man to act individually and independently" (2:13). Arnold indicts this national characteristic, which he claims sanctions people's tendency to think and act as they like; for Arnold, it inhibits any sense of real democratic change that might precipitate a community based upon equality and an appreciation for the other. He maintains that we must fundamentally alter our mode of thinking and relating to the world and others in order to envision and bring about true social reform.

And Arnold even names what he believes prevents modern culture from developing this new mode of thinking: its reliance on Hebraism. He discusses Hebraism as the dominant cultural influence in nineteenth-century Britain and explains, "the uppermost idea with Hebraism is conduct and obedience" (5:165). Arnold associates this compulsion to obey with the overwhelming mechanization of industrial British culture; he is especially worried about the swelling working classes and emergent middle classes, whom he claims are especially susceptible to the power of Hebraism to institute mechanized modes of thinking, acting, and living. He points out, "we have fostered our Hebraising instincts, our preference of earnestness of doing to delicacy and flexibility of thinking, too exclusively, and have been landed by them in a mechanical and unfruitful

routine” (5:190). Hebraism impedes the careful and creative reflection on social ills that both Zizek and Arnold recommend, and instead nurtures isolated individuals, encourages them to respond mechanically to social injustices, and ultimately conforms them to a regulated life. He even identifies the Hebraising influence of popular literature and journalism which is employed by “plenty of people [...] to try to indoctrinate the masses with the set of ideas and judgments constituting the creed of their own profession or party” (5:112). While Victorian Britain endures sincere social problems, including tragic poverty, ongoing racism, gender inequalities, and disease, Arnold remains severely critical of Hebraism’s directive that people think and obey in accordance with established ideas. It drives individuals to work diligently and devoutly to follow rules, but Arnold argues that it “seems powerless [...] to deal efficaciously with our ever-accumulating masses of pauperism, and to prevent their accumulating still more” (5:216). The mechanization of the Victorian age transforms Britain into a modern society replete with a growing population, an industrial economy, and severe injustices, but Arnold refuses to accept the dominant model of Hebraism as a way to address his country’s trials and transformations.

Instead, Arnold locates in the work of culture the vital first step to seeing accurately and eventually responding to social difficulties. While we tend to recall Arnold’s association of culture with a lofty pursuit of perfection and “the best that can at present be known in the world,” he initially frames culture not as “a having and a resting, but a growing and a becoming” (5:191, 94). Culture, for Arnold, is not an accumulated clearinghouse of information or data, but an ongoing process that adapts and responds to changing social conditions. Early in *Culture and Anarchy*, he alludes to the active quality of culture when he explains that it “moves by the force, not merely or primarily of the scientific passion for pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social passion for doing good” (5:91). Arnold ties culture both to knowledge and action; it teaches us and moves us to respond with compassion, and in his Conclusion to *Culture and Anarchy*, he makes clear that culture strives “to get men to try, in

preference to staunchly acting with imperfect knowledge, to obtain some sounder basis of knowledge on which to act" (5:225). As we experience culture we learn about the failings in our society; culture prompts us to rejuvenate our thinking about possible reforms, to "turn a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically" (5:233-34). Arnold's culture is neither an élite nor a detached experience; rather, it invites us to move beyond routines of living, thinking, and relating to develop new modes for creative intellectual and political engagement.

The Efficacy of the Literary

For Arnold, literature is a vital component of the process of culture that has the potential to support and inform the coming democratic people by documenting social challenges, inspiring creative reflection, and communicating knowledge. Like many canonical figures in the history of Literary Criticism, Arnold offers lofty and memorable assessments of literature and its value in human experience that seem far removed from questions of social justice. In "The Study of Poetry," for example, he writes: "We should conceive of [poetry] as capable of higher uses, and called to higher destinies, than those which in general men have assigned to it hitherto" (9:161). In "Wordsworth," he shamelessly describes poetry as "nothing less than the most perfect speech of man, that in which he comes nearest to being able to utter the truth" (9:39). And in "On Poetry," he even proclaims "the future of poetry is immense, because in conscious poetry [...] our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay" (9:63). Arnold elevates literature, and especially poetry, to an élite status amongst human expressions and forecasts its grand prospects and possibilities, but he remains quite consistent in his assessment of the work of poetry and other creative language as critical engagements with the world. In "Wordsworth," he treats poetry as "at bottom a criticism of life," and immediately adds that "the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life, – to the question: How to live" (9:46). In "Byron," he echoes: "the main end and aim of all our utterance, whether

in prose or in verse, is surely a criticism of life” (9:228). While Arnold makes an important distinction between criticism and the creative faculty in “Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” he continually discusses the literary endeavor as a critical and creative activity that addresses challenging questions of human existence. The literary, for Arnold, critically confronts the challenges of the ethical life and responds creatively.

Arnold is quite Aristotelian in his thinking, but he moves beyond the mimetic operation of literature to consider its ability to interact with and respond to our experience. He announces in “Literature and Science” that literary works “contain the materials which suffice for thus making us know ourselves and the world” (10:56). It is a vital component of culture that provides critical access to the challenges of our lives, helps us to see them properly, and invites us to see ourselves in relation to others. In his 1869 Preface to *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold succinctly writes that “culture [...] shows us truly the faults [in society] to be corrected” (5:235). As a vital part of cultural experience, literature invites us to see problems that we might otherwise ignore or distance from ourselves. Arnold’s ideas anticipate the work of Martha Nussbaum, who maintains that literature “makes its spectator perceive, for a time, the invisible people of their world – at least a beginning of social justice” (*Cultivating Humanity* 94). Nussbaum explains that literature “asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own” (*Poetic Justice* xvi). Arnold does not endow literature with the power to immediately provide such education or empathy; rather, as Russell notes, for Arnold, “the literary text becomes the subject-in-common – not explained but rather offered to be used” (132). Arnold may have lofty ideas about the idea of literature, but he repeatedly highlights it as a form of human expression that performs and invites cultural work; we engage with the text, and this engagement is productive. Nussbaum ties the literary project to emotions that “contain a powerful, if partial, vision of social justice and provide powerful motives for just conduct” (*Poetic Justice* xvi). Arnold most assuredly acknowledges the emotive quality of literature and our

responses to it, but his view of the literary as a criticism of life points us in a different direction that highlights both its educational value and its capacity to stimulate new ways of thinking and acting.⁵ We learn about our society from literature, and we use this knowledge to develop a keen awareness of others and build new kinds of relationships. The literary text, for Arnold, not only shows us our world, it inspires "a fuller harmonious development of our humanity, a free play of thought upon our routine notions" (5:191). Arnold upholds literature as vehicle of culture that invites us to come to know others and relate to them as part of our larger democratic community.

He presents literature as a vital instrument in building this new society in which people can move beyond mechanical thought processes by relating knowledge gleaned from the literary experience to our modern society. In "Literature and Science," he famously defends the extant value of creative expression in an industrial economy; he claims that humans have "the desire to relate [...] pieces of knowledge to our sense for conduct, to our sense for beauty," and he argues "in this desire lies [...] the strength of that hold which letters have upon us" (10:62). The literary encounter helps us to connect emergent ideas and information to our actions; it is not an intellectual experience removed from the developments and realities of the moment but a means through which to learn to think and act in a more complex manner. He continues:

We shall find that the art and poetry and eloquence of men who lived, perhaps, long ago, who had the most limited natural knowledge, who had the most erroneous conception about many important matters, we shall find that this art, and poetry, and eloquence, have in fact not only the power of refreshing and delighting us, they have also the power, – such is the strength and worth [...] of their authors' criticism of life, – they have a fortifying, and elevating, and quickening, and suggestive power, capable of wonderfully helping us to relate the results of modern science to our need for conduct, our need for beauty. (10:68)

Literature serves as a tool to access and use the creative work of both the ancient past and contemporary science to inform our actions and our aesthetics; even dated literature has the ability to help us better understand and use the findings of modern science. It compels us to see the world anew – to view its problems with the perspective of another person and another time. For Arnold, literature promotes the kind of “patient, critical analysis” that Žižek finds essential to meaningful action (7). As we study literature, we develop the “freer play of consciousness upon the object of pursuit” rather than the “entire subordination of thinking to doing, [that] has led to a mistaken and misleading treatment of things” (5:186). Tim Marshall explains that Arnold’s goal is to foster a “more cultured ‘best self’” in opposition to “an ‘ordinary’ circumstantial self, the self as it is shaped by social class and immediate allegiance.” According to Marshall, the former “is altruistic, humane, above any kind of sectarianism or partial viewpoint” (360). Literature, for Arnold, has the potential to promote this “more cultured ‘best self’” because it asks us to learn about our world and its problems, glean knowledge from diverse sources and historical moments, and relate to others in new ways.

Criticism, the Challenge of Disinterestedness, and Patient Thinking

Arnold’s high assessment of literature is tempered by his admission that it is not always possible. He upholds the creative power as “the highest function of man,” but he immediately acknowledges “great epochs in literature are so rare.” He continues: “for the creation of a master-work of literature two powers must concur, the power of the man and the power of the moment” (3:261). Arnold famously discusses the Romantic poets of the early nineteenth century, and while he admires much of their verse, he finds they “did not know enough” (3:262). For Arnold, great literature requires great intellectual energy, and he points to criticism as a necessary vehicle to provide and revive such fervor. His recommendation is especially poignant for my colleagues and me at Lehigh as we pursue our focus on Literature and Social Justice, since the vast majority of us are actively engaged in writing criticism as opposed to literature. Arnold sees

great value in such critical endeavors; he invests them with the production of new and compelling ideas and argues that it has the potential to inform our efforts at social reform. Arnold even discusses criticism as a mode of creative thinking when he writes: "it is undeniable [...] that men may have the sense of exercising this free creative activity in other ways than in producing great works of literature or art. [...] they may have it in well-doing, they may have it in learning, they may have it even in criticizing" (3:260). Criticism may not enjoy the special status that Arnold reserves for great literature, but it promotes new kinds of thinking upon difficult social situations and prepares us to draw upon our creative faculties once again.

While literature serves as a source of knowledge and criticism of life for Arnold, critical activity serves as a mechanism for accurately seeing and knowing our world. In "On Translating Homer," he claims that the "critical effort [...] in all branches of knowledge, – theology, philosophy, history, art, science, – [is] to see the object as in itself it really is." He presents criticism as a useful prerequisite for the production of great literature; without accurate observations of the world, the literary text is not qualified to offer its criticism. Arnold ultimately equates criticism with "simple lucidity of mind" (1:140). This lucidity empowers the critic to see and represent problems without confusion and ideally without partisan bias. Highly trained literary scholars have (with good reason) become quite suspicious of claims of objective disinterest as they are usually announced to obscure the authority of a privileged speaker, and as Eugene Goodheart notes, "Arnold, because of his centrality in the history of literary studies, continues to be a magnet for our suspicions" (415). But as Goodheart concludes, Arnold theorizes disinterest as "the human capacity for the transcendence of narrowly conceived self-interest [...] that makes freedom and the ethical project possible" (423).⁶ Arnold actually downplays the critic as any kind of authoritative arbiter, noting that the "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." If critics merely judge, indict, and offer authoritative pronouncements of

right and wrong, they do not cultivate new ways of engaging with the world; rather, Arnold insists “knowledge, and ever fresh knowledge, must be the critic’s great concern for himself” (3:283). Critical activity does not produce step-by-step procedures to resolve social problems; if it did, it would become a mechanized tool of Hebraism. Arnold believes that criticism “must be sincere, simple, flexible, ardent, ever widening its knowledge” (3:285). As criticism explores new ideas, it helps us to think against the grain of established thought and opens up new possibilities for creative work.

Criticism’s capacity to foster new modes of thinking makes it an especially powerful tool for addressing social injustices. In his discussion of criticism, Arnold bemoans what he identifies as the English obsession with pragmatism. He isolates “the mania for giving an immediate political application to all these fine ideas,” and he warns against trying “to transport [ideas] abruptly into the world of politics and practice, violently to revolutionise this world to their bidding” (3:265). Arnold knows that “the rush and roar of practical life will always have a dizzying and attracting effect upon the most collected spectator, and tend to draw him into its vortex,” and he looks to criticism to offer a zone of innovative thinking removed from the pragmatic arena of politics, which he repeatedly associates with preordained plans of action (3:274). For Arnold, the greatest threat to valuable criticism “is that practical considerations cling to it and stifle it. [...] Our organs of criticism are organs of men and parties having practical ends to serve” (3:270). Criticism should be neither authoritative nor directive; it should not inform us how to act or what to believe. Instead, as Russell suggests, Arnold’s model of criticism enables us to “think through an idea to an unpredictable conclusion without regard to whether it fits into some preconceived conservative or liberal or radical agenda” (426-27). The capacity of Arnold’s critical activity both to liberate itself from established modes of thinking and to prompt careful negotiation of ideas and situations without political agendas makes it a tremendously valuable resource for social reform projects. Arnoldian criticism, like his theory of literature, does not in and of itself resolve injustices and inequalities, but it

helps us to look upon such challenges clearly and urges us to resist the temptation for immediate reactions.

Criticism, moreover, prepares us to once more express ourselves creatively in literature and art as a meaningful response to social problems. Arnold argues "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 free speculative treatment of things, which may perhaps one day make its benefits felt even in this sphere" (3:275). Arnold identifies the potential social benefits of critical activity, but to achieve such an end, criticism must resist the temptation for the mechanical pragmatism of politics. Intellectual critics are not policy makers, and literary critics are rarely qualified to speak intelligently about tangible political reforms. Still, Arnold theorizes the material benefits of criticism, and he insists: "It must not hurry on to the goal because of its practical importance. It must be patient, and know how to wait; and flexible, and know how to attach itself to things and how to withdraw from them" (3: 280). Literary scholars should not expect their criticism to promptly ameliorate catastrophic problems or end longstanding prejudices; according to Arnold, we do not complete this work. Instead, we achieve important political changes by patient work that expands ideas and invites free creative thinking – and Arnold's theory of criticism helps us to place greater value on this work.

Arnold's ideas on literary and critical activity have assured him of a prominent place in the study of literature. He is undoubtedly a challenging thinker who invites us both to value the literary experience as an integral part of our lives, and to denigrate his grand notions and high aesthetic standards as arrogant and élitist. It is always a challenge to teach Arnold; students invariably find his ideas distant and old-fashioned. He is not an intellectual who seems immediately applicable to our contemporary lives, and his repeated recommendations *not* to take immediate action in response to social problems are difficult for socially conscious readers to accept – but he is rather unapologetic about this advice. At the end of *Culture and Anarchy*, he urges us "to get the present believers in action,

and lovers of political talking and doing, to make a return upon their own minds, scrutinize their stock notions and habit much more, value their present talking and doing much less; in order that, by learning to think more clearly, they may come at last to act less confusedly” (5:226). Arnold, like Žižek, sees little efficacy in the righteous indignation of political hardliners; he counsels them to reflect, “to make a return upon their own minds” in order to carefully consider their habitual thoughts and actions. Once we do this, we are empowered to act with more precision. Like so many contemporary intellectuals, Arnold was deeply and sincerely concerned about the plight of his society. He wanted to and indeed worked to improve the lives of others, but as he observes in his 1869 Preface to *Culture and Anarchy*, “machinery is the one concern of our actual politics, and an inward working, and not machinery, is what we most want.” He explains: “we keep advising our ardent young Liberal friends to think less of machinery, to stand with more aloof from the arena of politics at present, and rather to try and promote, with us, an inward working” (5:254). Arnold locates in literature and critical activity the potential to promote such internal reflection. Literature engages our world, providing a creative reassessment of its realities; criticism accurately represents our world, inviting future creative work and social action. Perhaps Auden was right that poetry makes nothing happen, but for Arnold, it most assuredly prepares us to do something. The careful study of literature, according to Arnold, has the potential to engender skilled social reformers who think freely and act creatively.

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Notes

¹ See, for example, Cornell West’s “The New Cultural Politics of Difference,” Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*, and Terry Eagleton’s *Criticism and Ideology* as well as his “The Rise of English” in *Literary Theory*.

² For a recent discussion of the influence of British imperialism on Arnold’s thought, see T.J. Boynton’s “‘Things that are outside ourselves’:

Ethnology, Colonialism, and the Ontological Critique of Capitalism in Matthew Arnold's Criticism."

³ For an extensive discussion of Arnold's elusiveness with respect to "culture," see Tim Marshall's "Culture and Matthew Arnold's 'Condition of England' Discourse in *Culture and Anarchy*."

⁴ Russell interestingly points out that Arnold, in his first address as Oxford Professor of Poetry in 1857, "On Modern Literature," sought to "engage more with ordinary people," as he was the "first to speak from this chair in English and not Latin" (123).

⁵ In "Literature and Science," Arnold questions: "First, have poetry and eloquence the power of calling out the emotions? The appeal is to experience. Experience shows that for the vast majority of men, for mankind in general, they have the power" (10:67).

⁶ In his recent article, Matthew Sussman makes a similar claim about Arnold's theory of criticism. He reports that Arnold's "critical faculty is thus both analytic, in that it strives to 'see the object as in itself it really is,' but also ethical, in that it constitutes an 'attitude' to be adopted 'towards things in general,' a 'right tone and temper of mind' that should be applied not just to art objects but also to people and cultures" (235).

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