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“What I Want the Reader to See”: Action and Performance in Arnold’s Prose

The drama that enrolls itself in Arnold's critical discourse is openly staged around the author's effort to form a bond with the reader that is exemplary of the larger, more complex system of relationships that Arnold called culture. What Arnold practices in his prose is just the opposite of what happens in his poem "The Scholar-Gipsy." There, a reader has reached such intimate communion with a figure in a text that he attains virtual identity with him; but a point comes when the illusion of identity cannot be sustained, and a complicated meditative process overwhelms a simple narrative one so that the reader *in* the poem loses all contact with the scholar-gipsy while the reader of the poem becomes increasingly confused and in the final stanza nearly dispossessed.

In the prose, the reader is repossessed. The principal means by which Arnold effects the responsiveness and interplay in the criticism's drama of relationship is through his pervasive account of numerous distinctively defined qualities of sensibility that ultimately constitute the basis both of Arnold's reflexive presence in his prose and his reader's sense of a mutual bond with him. Arnold's prose is saturated with a language of motives for right action that are the insignia of the best self: disinterestedness; sweetness and light; sincerity and strength; flexibility; curiosity; imaginative reason; energy and honesty; resignation; mildness and sweet reasonableness; high seriousness; and many others. Considered thematically, these are important topics in themselves. But the pattern adds up to a modeling of the human personality around a new account of the virtues. All of Arnold's critical ideas are extensions of these personal traits, and the key to the social bond Arnold establishes with his audience is to be found in the symbolic density of personal traits that can be simultaneously understood as the collective endowment of an epoch, a nation, or a class. Arnold can thus conceive his audience at the richly subjective level of personal temperament, and, what is more, being a personal agent himself, he can enact what he defines. The virtues discussed in Arnold's prose are precepts of cultural identity, the nodal points through which the unfringeable self and social being connect. Such qualities are the collective representations of homo duplex. They inhere *in* the self, but for the other.

"The Function of Criticism" and "The Literary Influence of Academies" provide some illustrations of the point I have been pursuing. Both essays make a peculiar claim on their readers for they seem, notoriously, to be doing the opposite of what they are advocating. In "The Function of Criticism," Arnold seems forever to be engaging in the world of practice while repeating again and again the principle that "criticism must maintain its independence of the

practical spirit and its aims" (CP 3:280). In "The Literary Influence" he never does recommend the British academy that he appears to be proposing. These discordances vanish, however, when we attend to what actually happens in the essays. In "The Function of Criticism" Arnold is giving his reader practice in the ideal of criticism, whereas in "The Literary Influence" he is effectively turning his implied readers into the academy that Britain officially lacks.

The ideal of disinterested criticism, Arnold says, in the former essay, is "obedience to an instinct for trying to know the best that has been thought and said in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics, and everything of the kind." He follows this declaration immediately by saying, "This is an instinct for which there is, I think, little original sympathy in the practical English nature" (CPW 3:268). The elementary but still crucial point to be made about this passage, as well as the many others like it in the essay, is that it signifies Arnold's attribution to his readers of a Burkean return upon themselves. Their ability to transcend an ingrained national habit and rise to the cultural virtues of the best self is everywhere projected in the essay as the critical role of Arnold's readers. Moreover, the social contract of the essay depends on the reader's ability to make a disinterested appreciation of the decisive difference between the author and the tainted practitioners of criticism, who are held up not only as bad examples but as the scandalous source of criticism's disrepute. All the instances of "practice" in the negative sense that Arnold cites in the essay exist in a category entirely different from the practice Arnold himself undertakes for the sake of his reader. Practice as exhibited by the Philistines is a politicizing of criticism; but practice as exhibited by Arnold is the performance of criticism. To the degree that Arnold's reader responds to his implicit role in the essay, he undertakes a performance that mirrors the best self of the discriminating, disinterested critic. Notice the similarity in the way Arnold described criticism as a function with what could be said about the critic as a person: "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. It must be apt to study and praise elements that [are wanted] for the fulness of spiritual perfection" (CPW, 3:288). This is a fair description of what we must do to read "The Function of Criticism" and not find it, dialectically speaking, in violation of its own thesis.

Our performance is guided in more complex ways as well. Much the most important of these is the way Arnold creates an ensemble of voices playing off one another. The first is a textual voice, that is, the voice of various quoted texts, which by tone, style, or other textual gesture seems aimed at a reader of such monstrous insensitivity that Arnold's readers can only gape. The second voice is mimic. Arnold imitates the voice of Philistine critics so that their shrillness is plainly heard, but it is heard riding the graceful rhythms of Arnold's own prose. Here is just one instance: "Let us organise and combine a party to pursue truth and new thought; let us call it *the liberal party*, and let us all stick to each other, and back each other up. Let us have no nonsense about independent criticism [and] don't let us trouble ourselves about foreign thought; we shall invent the whole thing for ourselves as we go along" (CPW 3:276). The mingled measure of Philistine inanity and Arnoldian wit prompts the reader to an act of discrimination that is itself an initiation into disinterested criticism. Finally, there is an oracular voice, often speaking in a foreign tongue, which is dramatized as the very language of the best self. The supreme significance of this voice is that it occasions the display of Arnold's own responses as a reader, which are, in turn, cues to ours. The single most important oracular voice in the essay is Edmund Burke's. Burke, of course, does not speak in a foreign tongue, but he does speak in italics, which is almost as good.

The dramatic manipulation of all these voices has the same effect as multiple narration, which is not a disguising of the implied narrator but his elevation to a privileged positioner, in this case, the situating of a critical dialectician at some point beyond the logomachies of critical discourse. The act of reading the discourse carries the same effect-as author and reader jointly discover the best self instanced in the social bond their performance elicits. Arnold gives in the essay a marvelously illuminating reflection of how he approached the construction of this bond: "It is by communicating fresh knowledge and letting his own judgment pass along with it, but insensibly and in the second place, not the first, as a sort of companion and clue, not as an abstract lawgiver, -that the critic will generally do most good to his readers" (CPW 3:283; emphasis added).

"The Literary Influence of Academies" is an even more extraordinary manifestation of Arnold's virtuosity since what it is basically accomplishing with its reader is the symbolic construction of a British academy. Arnold's interest in the Academie Française is limited to its operation as "a force of educated opinion," which establishes and guards standards of clearness, correctness, and propriety in thinking and speaking (CPW 3:24 1). Obviously, this is a focus that has much more relevance to the prose literature of France than to its poetry. Arnold is quite open about this point; his essay, in fact, becomes a critique of English and French prose. An academy may not preside well over the genius of poetry, but it does superbly in presiding over "intelligence, the ruling divinity of prose" (CPW 3: 243).

It cannot escape Arnold's audience that his discussion, in effect, offers for judgment the degree to which his own prose measures up to the standards of taste and clarity that he believes an academy can promote. And this is all the more evident when Arnold forthrightly declares that the true prose is Attic prose, which is to say prose like his own.

"How much greater," Arnold contends, "is our nation in poetry than prose" (CPW 3:240). His essay pursues this proposition by detailed and subtle discussion of what he calls the note of provinciality in English prose. Such a note is altogether extirpated in Arnold's style. What Arnold wants his reader to see, of course, is just what the reader is reading. The reader has only to internalize as personal virtue what is inscribed as rhetorical decorum in the text on the page. Arnold comes very close to outrageous self-congratulation in the design of the essay, especially because he cites some of his own contemporaries, including Ruskin, for their sins. But the essay wins the risky game it is playing because it accords to its readers the power of "lucidity, measure and propriety" (CPW 3:248) that it associates with the influence of academies. Arnold turns deliberately and severely to his readers at the end and tells them: "Every one amongst us with any turn for literature will do well to remember to what shortcomings and excesses, which [all academy tends to correct, we are liable He will do well constantly to try himself in respect of these, steadily to widen his culture, severely to check in himself the provincial spirit" (CPW 3:257).

We can see the academy being built in these remarks, but it is an academy quite different in spirit from the rather forbidding enterprise of the French. If its task is the development of high culture, its basis is a bond of common culture. Arnold identified the best self with the social self, and his prose is an effort to turn the author-reader relationship into an image of the perfected social bonding that becomes available in culture. Arnold enters into a performative space with his reader in which he becomes not an abstract lawgiver but a companion. There in that space the cultural virtues appear in action. It is true that they appear, in the first instance, as the

contingencies of a role, a mask put on in partial fulfillment of that incredibly subtle process by which discourse is distributed between author and audience. But as Hamlet says, we may assume a virtue if we have it not and by the use of action fair and good become what we play. Raymond Williams has it right: Arnold's achievement was to give his revaluation a practical bearing in society.