

:Touchstone Method by Methew Arnold

Poetry is something which sustain, console and interpret life for us. Arnold had given a very high position to poetry that it is a substitute for religion. Arnold says "The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry". At this point, Arnold offers his theory of Touchstone Method.

Arnold's touchstone method is a comparative method of criticism. According to this method, in order to judge a poet's work properly, a critic should compare it to passages taken from works of great masters of poetry, and that these passages should be applied as touchstones to other poetry. Even a single line or selected quotation will serve the purpose. If the other work moves us in the same way as these lines and expressions do, then it is really a great work, otherwise not.

Arnold wants us to avoid the false evaluation of the historic estimate and the personal estimate, and to attain to a real estimate by learning to feel and enjoy the best work of the real classic, and thus to appreciate wide difference between it and all lesser work. If you want to know whether any poetic work is of a high quality, we should compare it with specimens of poetry of the highest quality. According to him the most useful method of discovering the worth of poetry is "to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry". The real classics can serve as the touchstone by which the merit of contemporary poetic work can be tested. This is the central idea of Arnold's Touchstone Method.

Arnold was basically a classicist. He admired the ancient Greek, Roman and French authors as the models to be followed by the modern English authors. The old English like Shakespeare, Spenser or Milton were also to be taken as models. Arnold took selected passages from the modern authors and compared them with selected passages from the ancient authors and thus decided their merits. This method was called Arnold's Touchstone Method. He quoted the two lines from Milton;

"And courage never to submit or yield

And what is else not to be overcome"

It has been said that the sentiment or the moral here is noble, but that the diction and movement are faulty. Perhaps, in offering these two lines as a specimen of the highest poetry, Arnold just tripped.

However, this system of judgment has its own limitations. Arnold would probably have agreed that his method of comparing passage with a passage is not a sufficient test for determining the value of a work as a whole. Arnold himself insisted that we must judge a poem by the 'total impression' and not by its fragments. But we can further extend this method of comparison from passages to the poems as whole units. The comparative method is an invaluable aid to appreciation of any kind of art. It is helpful not merely thus to compare the masterpiece and the lesser work, but the good with the not so good, the sincere with the not quite sincere, and so on.

Arnold seems to go too far insisting all the time on work of the highest excellence in literature. It is not fair to demand that "all hills should be Alps". There may be an excellence in some minor poetry worthwhile on its own account. Arnold expresses the view that good literature will never lose its currency. There might be some vulgarization and cheapening of literary values, as a result of the increase in numbers of the common sort of readers, but the currency of good literature is ensured by, "the instinct of self-preservation in humanity." So strong is Arnold's faith in the value of poetry of the highest kind. Arnold declared that it would be much better to disregard the mass of current literature. By this method we can set apart the alive, the vital, and the sincere from the shoddy, the showy and the insincere.

He declared, "In poetry, it is the glory, the eternal honour that charlatanism shall find no entrance".

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