

## TEXT AND CONTEXT IN ARNOLD'S ESSAYS IN CRITICISM

I intend to argue that both the nature and the degree of Matthew Arnold's success in his literary-critical essays depend on the kind of relationship that he establishes between his critical context and the writing under consideration. Broadly, it is possible to distinguish two ways in which he relates text to context; one characteristic of the essays written before 1865, and the other of those written after 1877 (though, as one would expect, certain qualifications have to be made). I shall describe the two ways of working, and suggest the kind of critical success that Arnold attains in each<sup>1</sup>.

By critical context I shall understand whatever is set over against a body of writing to make clear its characteristics and quality. Rarely in Arnold's work is this context homogeneous; in part it is made up of concepts and criteria applicable solely to literature, but there are usually also general cultural and intellectual concerns that have, actually or potentially, a much wider reference. This general non-literary context is nonetheless part of the critical context; it is commonly in the light of these wider issues that Arnold discovers the significance of a writer, and almost universally his literary criteria are derived from them. My main concern is with the ways by which context as a whole is related to text, but I shall also pay some attention to the relationship between the two kinds of context, literary and non-literary.

The basic distinction seems to me to be this. In most of his earlier essays Arnold establishes his critical context explicitly and extensively before beginning any discussion of text, whereas in the later essays he generally starts to discuss the writing straight away, and establishes the critical context incidentally, point by point, as the discussion advances.

Of course, the distinction is not as absolute as this might suggest. It would be excessively schematic to argue that a critic's writing falls neatly and clearly into two halves, distinguished by a complete change of method. Elements of one way of working are often apparent even when the other is dominant. For example, in Arnold's first extended critical essay, the Preface to the 1853 poems, the method is a mixed one: though the earlier part of the essay is used to establish that general view of poetry which stands as the context for his assessment of the poetical theory and practice of his age, it does, in its comments on *Empedocles*, *Childe Harold*, *The Excursion*, etc., begin to make this assessment; and though the later part is chiefly given over to the application of his general principles, Arnold does at points extend and define them, as in his reference to Goethe's idea of *Architectonicè*. Further, the essay on Eugénie de Guérin, written in 1863, prefigures in a rather pale way the method of the later

period; and in that later period there is one major essay which, as I shall show, exemplifies the earlier way of working. But when these qualifications have been made, it is still the case that Arnold's strategy as a literary critic underwent a significant change in the middle of his critical career, during those years in which he turned from the criticism of literature to social and religious issues, and that this change had its effect on the kind and the degree of success that his essays achieved.

The earlier (and, one might say, classic) form of the Arnoldian critical essay appears fully-fledged in the Oxford Inaugural, "On the Modern Element in Literature" (1857). Here the text is the whole of the literatures of Greece and Rome. But this is left to the end; first comes the general discussion, which serves as critical context. Arnold begins with concepts that are not specifically literary – "the modern age" and "intellectual deliverance" – but which establish the framework for the literary discussion. The latter idea is particularly important; indeed, he presents it as the proper concern of much else besides literature:

All intellectual pursuits our age judges according to their power of helping to satisfy this demand [for an intellectual deliverance]; of all studies it asks, above all, the question, how far they can contribute to this deliverance. (CPW I, 19)<sup>2</sup>.

But Arnold does not apply this general non-literary concept unmediated to his text. Out of it he develops a criterion that is specifically literary in its application, that of "adequacy", and it is by this that he judges the literatures of Greece and Rome. True, the meaning of an "adequate" literature is a literature capable of offering an intellectual deliverance (the recognition of which constitutes an important part of our own intellectual deliverance) – that is, "adequacy" cannot be defined solely in literary terms. Yet it is associated, in the course of Arnold's discussion, with observable features of a literary work, particularly with range of reference and tone; we come to know what qualifies a literature to be considered "adequate", and the term becomes properly literary, though its origins are not so.

Thus the non-literary context gives birth to a criterion of literary value, and both are established before Arnold turns to his text. The idea of "intellectual deliverance" is not further developed, but "adequacy" is clarified and refined in the course of the properly literary discussion, so that we come to see the importance of certain qualities of feeling, representing a healthful moral tone, for an "adequate" literature. The relationship between text and context is not one of simple juxtaposition; we are not given the criterion and the writing side by side and left to draw our own conclusions. The significance of "adequacy" is deepened in the course of its application, and text and context are made to illuminate each other.

The pattern of this essay, distinguished by the postponement of any discussion of text until after the critical context has been firmly established,

is to be found in nearly all of the 1865 *Essays in Criticism* that are seriously concerned with the discussion of a literary text. The exception is "Eugénie de Guérin" (1863); here Arnold begins the discussion of his subject without any preliminary establishment of principles, and the main critical context is provided by his picture of English nonconformity, which is not introduced until well into the essay. In "Maurice de Guérin", however, written in the same year, the general pattern holds; the context, in this case purely literary, is the discussion of the "interpretative" power of poetry, and it is clearly set forth at the outset. Even in "Marcus Aurelius" (1863), where the literary-critical interest is slight, the critical context – in this case the entirely general discussion of different forms of the moral life – precedes and is distinct from the consideration of the writings. But in neither of these essays do we see the progression from general context through literary context to text; this is best illustrated in the 1865 volume by "The Literary Influence of Academies" (1864).

In its literary-critical aspect, the text under consideration in this essay is English prose; but as before the writing is not approached directly. As in the Inaugural of 1857, Arnold begins by establishing a general context, through his discussion of the French Academy and of the supposed intellectual characteristics of France and England. Out of this emerges an insistence on the importance of open and flexible intelligence, of the intellectual conscience, and of having some institution that embodies both and so comes to represent "centrality" in intellectual matters. All of this has, and is meant to have, a reference much wider than to literature alone. But out of it Arnold develops his literary context for the discussion of text that is to follow, and he does so by relating the recognition or non-recognition of these general cultural values to certain qualities of tone in literary prose. Thus, corresponding to the intellectual evil of provinciality there is detectable in the prose of certain writers the "note of provinciality"; corresponding to the dominion of "centrality" there is the note of "urbanity". These characteristics are related to observable features of the text (the presence or absence of "simplicity" and "measure", "the eruptive and aggressive manner", violence, capacity or incapacity for "shades and distinctions"), and are thereby established as properly literary. Again the literary criteria grow out of the general context, and only when both are before the reader does Arnold apply himself to his text.

Both this last essay and to a lesser degree the Inaugural seem to me successful as literary criticism. The basis of their success is suggested by a comparison with two other essays of the same period which employ essentially the same method but to less effect. These are the essays on Heine (1863) and Joubert (1864). I say "essentially" the same method, for there is some difference in the way that Arnold establishes his critical context and relates it to the text, and this difference has important consequences. As before, the discussion of the writing is left until after the

context has been fully laid before the reader. But the connection between the two aspects of the context, the general and the literary, is not the same. Instead of beginning with the general context and proceeding through a derived literary context to the text, in these essays Arnold begins by indicating his literary context, which he then relates back to certain more general cultural concerns. Instead of the preliminary discussion narrowing from the general to the specifically literary, it broadens from the literary to the general. In the Heine essay, he begins by relating Heine to a literary context, that of his predecessors and contemporaries in German literature. From this he moves to his general context, the opposition of the “modern spirit” to the impedimenta of outworn systems and the Philistinism that clings to them. And this is the primary critical context for the essay, for it is in terms of the “modern spirit” that Arnold identifies the main stream of nineteenth-century literature, and it is by their closeness to this main stream that Arnold judges Heine’s contemporaries, German and English, and Heine himself. Once these general cultural issues have been raised, the tendency is to discuss the writers less in terms of their poetry and more as embodiments of cultural forces: the movement is away from literature proper. Something similar is to be seen in the Joubert essay. Again Arnold begins with a literary context, his distinction between famous and obscure writers of genius. This is extended through the comparison with Coleridge; but as the essay advances we come closer to more general issues, as this comment on Coleridge shows. It depreciates the writing in favour of the man, the agent of cultural change:

How little either of his poetry, or of his criticism, or of his philosophy, can we expect permanently to stand! But that which will stand of Coleridge is this: the stimulus of his continual effort . . . to get at and to lay bare the real truth of the matter in hand, whether that matter were literary, or philosophical, or political, or religious; and this in a country where at that moment such an effort was almost unknown . . .  
(CPW III, 189).

The general context is that of the Heine essay – the struggle of the “modern spirit” against the impedimenta of Philistinism – though here the “modern spirit” appears in the form of the disinterested lover of light rather than of the soldier in the liberation war of humanity. What immediately precedes Arnolds’ discussion of text is not any derived literary context but a discussion of the differences between the intellectual milieus of Joubert and Coleridge. In fact the derived literary context does not appear until after the discussion of text, in the concluding paragraph on literature as “a criticism of life”.

The logical order of these last two essays is no different from that of the two considered earlier; the literary context is derived from and dependent on the general. What is different is the order of exposition within the part of the essay given to the establishment of critical context, and this difference has an important effect on their success. The quality of “On the Modern Element in Literature” and “The Literary Influence

of Academies” is in no small part the result of the smoothness of Arnold’s progression from his general context through the derived literary context to the writing itself. The reader is led to feel, not that a body of literature has been juxtaposed against a piece of general cultural polemic, but that he is following one argument, that the values generated in the earlier part of the essay are applied, and appropriately applied, to the writing that follows. In “Heine” and “Joubert” the reversal of the order of exposition interrupts this smooth progression; Arnold enters upon his discussion of text armed not with literary criteria but with certain general cultural or intellectual values which, as far as literary criticism is concerned, have little immediate appropriateness or intimacy with the text. The consequence is that the reader senses a gap between the first part of the essay and the second; the criteria of the first part do not carry over into the second, and the quotations seem merely illustrative rather than the material of a developing critical discussion. It is significant that in the Heine essay Arnold imports quite new (and more specifically literary) criteria – such as irony, wit, sentiment – when he begins his discussion of the verse.

When this has been said, it must be remembered that a large part of Arnold’s purpose in the years down to 1865 was not the illumination of particular texts but the reconstruction of the reader’s attitude to literature and much else besides. For such a purpose the method of these earlier essays has strong advantages. It permits the development of a forceful, consecutive argument in general terms, unobscured for the moment by the text; the writing, when it comes, can be used as an exemplum to support the general points, and the whole can have considerable polemical or didactic force. From this point of view the method of the later years is less powerful, and I shall suggest that the change in method reflects a change in Arnold’s purposes, or at least in the tactics that he felt were called for by the situation.

I now turn towards the method of the essays of Arnold’s later years. Here, with one major and possibly two minor exceptions – “The French Play in London” (1879) and “Milton” (1888) – there is not the separation between the establishment of context and the discussion of text that characterises the earlier essays. Consideration of the writing begins much sooner – often at the very beginning of the essay – and the necessary critical context is provided as the essay proceeds, *pari passu* with the critical discussion. The consequence of this different way of working is a quite different quality of relationship between critical context and text.

But first, the major exception. “The Study of Poetry” (1880) follows the pattern of the earlier essays: the first paragraph indicates a general context of broad cultural concerns out of which is developed the view of poetry (as a criticism of life marked by high truth and seriousness, capable of consoling and sustaining) which is the basis for Arnold’s

literary assessments in the essay. Only when this basis is clearly before the reader does he go on to his critical survey of English poetry. Nevertheless the essay has features that are typical of the later years, and of these the use of touchstones is the most striking. Though foreshadowed in the lectures "On Translating Homer", they do not become an important part of Arnold's critical method until after 1877. Their usefulness is that they mediate between the abstract literary context and the text; they embody the view of poetry which is Arnold's basis for judgement. They constitute a portable literary context, by which evaluations may be made without recourse to first principles and lengthy critical argument. Most important, they maintain that closeness and intimacy of relationship between text and context which we have seen to be a main condition of success in the earlier critical essays. This is not to say that Arnold always uses them appropriately or that the judgements derived from their use are always sound. But they do in a very economical way maintain in the reader's mind a vivid and concrete sense of the view of poetry developed in the earlier part of the essay; they help to bind the whole into a fluent and continuous argument and to avoid the gap between contextual exposition and text which is noticeable in an essay like that on Heine.

Arnold's purpose in "The Study of Poetry" is clearly didactic; he is taking the opportunity of Ward's *The English Poets* to attempt a reconstruction of his readers' attitudes to poetry. This may well account for his use of the method of the earlier essays, which had typically been directed to the same end. But there is one feature of this essay which, like the touchstones, is characteristic of the later essays generally, and which suggests that even in "The Study of Poetry" Arnold did not read his situation *vis-à-vis* his audience quite as he had done in the 1860's. This is his use of allusion to his own earlier essays as a means of establishing critical context. Such allusions are occasionally to be found in the essays of the earlier period; though not a literary-critical essay in the sense of this article, the introductory essay of the 1865 volume, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time", begins with a sentence from the second of the lectures on translating Homer, which is used as the basis and point of departure for the rest of the essay<sup>3</sup>. And plainly this back-reference could not become a part of Arnold's method until he had a body of critical writing behind him. But allusions of this kind become significant in the later essays: they are an important part of the method of "Byron", "John Keats", "Thomas Gray", "Wordsworth", "The French Play in London," and "A French Critic on Goethe", as well as of "The Study of Poetry". In this last essay, the first paragraph is taken with some adjustment from Arnold's introduction to volume one of *The Hundred Greatest Men* (1880)<sup>4</sup>. And a little further on he says:

In poetry, as a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty, the spirit of our race will find . . . its consolation and stay. (EC II, 5)<sup>5</sup>.

These words send us back ultimately to the Joubert essay of 1864 and proximately to the “Wordsworth” of 1879; though Arnold qualifies them for application to poetry rather than to literature in general, he does not, even to the extent of the Joubert essay, explain them. It is as though the earlier critical essays have come to constitute a literary context shared by critic and reader which can be established by brief allusion and then applied in this new discussion. Arnold’s manner of working suggests that he felt able to assume sufficient familiarity with his approach to literature to make it unnecessary to build up his literary context from ground level; and the frequency with which, in his later essays, he uses this technique of back-reference supports this suggestion.

If Arnold did feel able to make this assumption, then this would go some way towards explaining the characteristic method of the later essays. Where he is not (as in “The Study of Poetry”) attempting a major extension of critical perspective, there is no need to bring up the heavy artillery of a preliminary critical exposition; the discussion of text can begin from the start of the essay and the context can be established as the discussion proceeds. Apart from “Eugénie de Guérin”, which, weakly literary-critical though it is, to some extent anticipates the later method, the earliest essay to exemplify this way of working is that on George Sand, written in 1877; here the context is unobtrusive and scarcely separable from the discussion of the novels, and the argument depends in part on a familiarity with the ideas argued for in the earlier part of the essay on Heine. But the first major essay to employ the new method is that on Wordsworth, written in 1879.

In this essay – unlike those on Heine and Joubert – it is the writing and not the man that receives Arnold’s attention from the beginning. His method is to pursue the discussion up to the point at which it needs the support of explicit critical context, to provide the context, and to return to the discussion of the poetry. This is repeated a number of times in the essay, so that gradually the critical context is extended and the judgement of the poetry is advanced. Arnold opens with an examination of Wordsworth’s English reputation, which ends with the claim that the poetry has not had its deserts even in England and certainly not elsewhere. From this the natural movement is towards establishing the poetry’s true worth, and for this critical context is necessary. Arnold starts to build his context by pointing to what for him is the final authority: Europe seen as an intellectual confederation, an “Amphictyonic Court of final appeal”<sup>6</sup>. He returns to the poetry, to set it against the work of the “chief poetical names of the Continent since the death of Molière”, but to support his claim that Wordsworth’s work should stand “after Shakespeare, Molière, Milton, Goethe, indeed, but before all the rest” he needs to extend his critical context, and this he does through his discussion of the importance of “moral ideas” for poetry. The movement is now back to the poetry, to show that Wordsworth does in fact apply “moral ideas” to life, though

not by his versified philosophy (here the context is developed further: "Poetry is the reality, philosophy the illusion"). Wordsworth's great achievement is his communication of "the joy offered us in nature" and in "the simple primary affections and duties". But not all the poetry is on a level. To explain its unevenness Arnold extends his critical context again by introducing the idea of style as "the subtle turn, the heightening" of verse, which he illustrates with touchstones. The absence of such style is offered to account for Wordsworth's startling lapses, and the essay ends with a recapitulation of conclusions.

This back-and-forth movement, this progressive and parallel development of context and textual discussion, contrasts with the method of the earlier essays and achieves a different quality of relationship between the writing and the critical framework. The context develops under the pressure of the discussion, rather than in detachment, and is immediately applied; the effect is less *a priori*. This method would appear to make it easier to maintain the closeness between text and context which I have already indicated as a condition of critical success. But on the other hand it is likely to be less effective polemically and didactically than the earlier method; the context of general values and derived literary criteria is dispersed throughout the essay rather than clearly and forcefully placed before the reader at the outset. But Arnold's purpose here is not a general transformation of the reader's attitudes; by implication this has been attempted earlier:

It is important, therefore, to hold fast to this: that poetry is at bottom a criticism of life; that the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life, – to the question: How to live. (EC II, 143–4).

The core of the literary context is derived from the Homer lectures and the Joubert essay; once again Arnold is building on foundations already laid in the reader's mind by his earlier writings.

I said that this method "would appear" to maintain closeness between context and text, because Arnold does not in fact always succeed in doing this, any more than he did in the earlier essays. If the Wordsworth essay illustrates the successful use of the later method, that on Byron illustrates its failure. Their origins were similar: "Byron" first appeared in 1881 as the introduction to a selection of that poet's work which Arnold had made for Macmillan's "Golden Treasury" series, for which he had prepared his Wordsworth essay and selection in 1879. Again the discussion of the poetry begins at the beginning of the essay and the first context is literary: he sets Byron's poetry against that of his contemporaries. There is no early attempt to establish a theoretical context; most of the earlier part of the essay is built around the judgements of other critics, which Arnold rejects, refines, or elaborates, all the time clearing the ground for his own assessment. The critical context is established when it is needed, when this preliminary work has been



done; and again it is established by reference back to earlier essays:

I have seen it said that I allege poetry to have for its characteristic this: that it is a criticism of life, and I make it to be thereby distinguished from prose, which is something else. (EC II, 186).

The idea is current, but in a distorted form, and he corrects it. He adds the elaboration from "The Study of Poetry":

Truth and seriousness of substance and matter, felicity and perfection of diction and manner, as these are exhibited in the best poets, are what constitutes a criticism of life made in conformity with the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty . . . (EC II, 187).

This is the basis for his assessment of Byron, though he admits that it can only be rigorously applied to poets of the first rank. Again the touchstones appear, to embody the abstract context and to mediate between it and the text. But at the culminating stage of the essay, when Arnold prepares himself to deliver his own judgement, text and context draw apart; the vital closeness is not maintained. Instead of basing his considered assessment of Byron on the literary criteria which the essay has gradually been establishing, Arnold suddenly reverts to the general, non-literary context of the Heine essay: the conflict of the "modern-spirit" against Philistinism and its devotion to "a system of established facts and dominant ideas" (EC II, 193). This has no peculiar application to literature, and it allows the discussion to drift away from the poetry; it is on Byron's personality that the final judgement is pronounced.

Logically, the structure of these later essays is the same as that of the earlier: literary context is derived from and dependent upon a more general context of broad cultural concerns. This is apparent in the Byron essay, where – rather as in that on Heine – the literary context broadens out into the general. It is less obvious in "Wordsworth", but the dependence of literary context upon general is nonetheless implicit in the section on poetry and the question "how to live". The superiority of the Wordsworth essay over that on Byron lies in this, that in the earlier essay the general context does not squeeze out the literary; as a consequence, the closeness of text and context is maintained.

In most of the other essays of this later period the same method is used, with varying degrees of success: the critical context is extended according to the needs of the discussion. The essays "A French Critic on Milton" (1877) and "A French Critic on Goethe" (1878) – largely but not wholly criticism of criticism – open, like the Byron essay, with discussion of a variety of critical opinions. This leads to a consideration of Scherer's criticism, and finally to Arnold's own judgement on the writer concerned. "Thomas Gray" (1880) and "John Keats" (1880) are only to a limited degree literary criticism, but in so far as they are that, the context is developed concurrently with the critical discussion, and, in the latter, by reference back to "Maurice de Guérin". A fuller instance is the essay on Emerson (1884). As Arnold moves from one aspect of Emer-

son's work to another, so the appropriate context is indicated; on the whole it is comparative, though certain general criteria are introduced. At the end, as in the Byron essay, Emerson is set against the context that seems to Arnold to bring out his true worth; and, also as in the Byron essay, this context is not specifically literary, and we have the sense of text and context drawing apart. Even a markedly formless essay like "Count Leo Tolstoi" (1887) reveals something of the same way of working: the mention of Flaubert establishes an initial context, but it is not until well into the discussion of *Anna Karenina* that we are introduced to the moral criterion which establishes Tolstoi's superiority over Flaubert – his refusal to serve the goddess Lubricity.

Both ways of working brought Arnold successes and failures. In both cases the crucial factor is the literary context; where this is strong, it connects the general values from which it derives with the literary text in a close and critically fruitful relationship. But where it is weak, or where the direction of Arnold's argument leads him away from literary to more general criteria, the connection fails, and the unmediated application of the general context to the text leads to criticism which is at best insecurely literary. No doubt Arnold used the earlier method to greater effect; only the Wordsworth essay can match "The Literary Influence of Academies" and "The Study of Poetry". But this does not establish its absolute superiority; the methods are adjusted to different purposes, and, as I have suggested, the movement from one to the other may be related to a change in Arnold's sense of his task. Potentially the later method allows for a more sensitive adjustment of text and context. But the earlier provides a more powerful instrument for the critical re-education of the reader; and the greater weight of achievement in the essays that follow the earlier pattern confirms the view that Arnold saw such a re-education as his primary critical purpose.

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#### Notes

1. I have excluded from this discussion those essays in which the criticism of a literary text is not a significant part of Arnolds' purpose (such as that on Shelley), and also those that have to do with the nature and function of criticism.

2. References are to volume and page of *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, edited by R. H. Super (Ann Arbor, 1960–). Abbreviated CPW.

3. The sentence is the famous one on the pre-eminence of criticism in the recent intellectual life of Europe. See CPW I, 140.

4. For this introduction, see *Essays, Letters, and Reviews by Matthew Arnold*, edited by F. Neiman (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), pp. 237–9.

5. The reference is to the page of *Essays in Criticism, Second Series* (London, 1888). Abbreviated as EC II.

6. For this and other references in this paragraph, see EC II, 122–62.