

Victorian Criticism

In every age there have been critics and every critic has his own speciality, but there is a general trend which runs throughout that period. According to Eliot "each generation brings to the contemplation of art its own categories of appreciation, makes its own demands upon art, and has its own uses for art!" He further opined that every generation must provide its own literary criticism. This is true of Victorian Age also. The point will become much more clear if we compare Romantic and Victorian criticism. Two important changes that took place during Victorian period were (i) the rise of democracy and (ii) the progress of science. The Reform Act of 1832 had transferred power from the upper to the middle class and 'The Origin of Species' had questioned the existence of God. The Industrial Revolution had revolutionised industry. Queen Victoria wanted eve-

rything in its place and for that she evolved a compromise formula, fostered by English people's spirit of compromise. The effect of this compromise fell on criticism also. Victorian criticism is neither as rigid as that of the neo-classicists nor as flexible as that of the Romantics. The Victorian critics evolved standards which without being a binding were generally acceptable. Arnold suggested that an English Academy be established on the model of the French to regulate literary taste. Three important critics of the Victorian era are Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold.

Thomas Carlyle - The greatest personality in the field of criticism of this era is Thomas Carlyle. This is no other critic greater than him in life and letters. His spiritual and psychological standpoints have been formulated in 'Sartor Resartus', his 'French Revolution'

cannot be taken as a book of history because according to A. C. Rickett he lacked panoramic vision and in a historian this quality is a must. He is not interested in telling us about the revolution - beginning, progress and finish - but is interested in bringing out the significance of the past. His 'Critical Essays' are but attempt to bring out the man behind his "literary trappings". His best criticisms are something much more than critical estimates, they are spiritual appreciations. Carlyle does not talk in lighter vein. The literary creations must have passion or pronounced ethical bias for Carlyle to evaluate the work and the writer as well.

John Ruskin - He is the first great art critic. His 'Seven Lamps of Architecture' is a social criticism and 'The Stones of Venice' taken to be an art criticism, brings before us danger

matter of life and conduct. Mr. J.A. Hobson, in his book entitled Ruskin pointed out that Ruskin had all the qualifications of a social and economic critic. In short Ruskin's whole aim was to justify the poetic exclamation of Wordsworth "We live by admiration, hope and love!"

Matthew Arnold - He is another towering personality in the world of Victorian criticism. This never means that he was useful and appropriate for that age only. In fact, he is a name in the domain of criticism which can not be taken in a lighter vein. Matthew Arnold is the only critic after Aristotle who took his job seriously. He laid down certain principles of criticism. He had composed some poems before becoming a critic. Hence, his criticism originated from his personal experience of what he was writing about. His first critical work is the 'Preface' of his own poems of

1853. In this he follows Dryden that is he throws light on his own work and performance making suitable observations. Arnold's critical power developed after his appointment as Professor of Poetry at Oxford. The lectures that he delivered there prove his worth as a critic. The lectures have been collected in book form, entitled 'On Translating Homer' and 'The Study of Celtic Literature'. He wrote for literary journals also. Apart from the miscellaneous writings and the lectures that he delivered at Oxford, he published a selection in the well-known 'Essays in Criticism' in two series. These books and the 'Preface' of his poems of 1853 are his chief critical works. The ~~criticisms~~ criticisms contained in the above-mentioned books fall in two divisions (i) on the art of poetry and (ii) on the art of criticism. The first part belongs to the early phase when he was engaged in writing poetry more

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than sparing time to teach others how to judge it. The second part is the later phase when he was free to apply his mind to the problems of his craft.

He was the first critic to urge the importance and need of comparative criticism of different literatures. He was a force during his age also one of the best and most useful of the critics.

The end.

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