THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

MATTHEW ARNOLD'S COMPLETE WORKS

By Gordon Hall Gerould

A VERITABLE new edition of Matthew Arnold would be an event of real importance in the world of letters. Such an edition might well furnish the book for more than one month, since Arnold was as various in his activities as he was eminent in many of them. Now that he is receding into the past, we ought to have a complete edition with adequate bibliographical notes, at least, and perhaps some brief prefaces to explain to a generation that is not Arnold's why as well as when he wrote. Unfortunately the publishers of what purports to be a new and complete edition have merely reissued a set of volumes from their old plates, inserting for uniformity's sake the date 1924 on the title pages, and adding to the "Discourses in America" a set of rather foolish notes evidently first written for the pleasure and profit of school children. The edition is, moreover, by no means so complete as it pretends to be. "A French Eton" is missing, as is "Civilization in the United States", not to mention the posthumously published "Notebooks".

Arnold deserves better treatment than this, although we doubtless ought to be grateful that certain volumes, hard to come by of late years, have now been placed on the market again. One fears, of course, that the economy of the new issue is the result of shrewd caution on the part of the publishers. It may well be that Arnold is more talked about today than read, and that the slightest expense for editorial supervision would have been unwarranted. If that is the case — and I don't pretend to know — it is a sad pity, for there are few of the great Victorians who have more to say to the third decade of the twentieth century. There are few to whom our decade can so well afford to listen.

The fact is that Arnold has never, living or dead, had the luck he deserved. It may appear absurd to commiserate a man born, as he was, to the intellectual purple, the son of his father, the young poet to whom all that was best in England was open, the secretary to a marquis, the vigorous executive in an expanding educational system, the courted popular essayist whose words became the platitudes of two continents. Yet it is nevertheless true that the best in Arnold was checked and hindered by life. Duty he knew, and he responded to it. Authority he acquired, and he wielded it to the advantage of English speaking folk in and out of England. Success came to him, and — one makes out — he enjoyed it to the full. The man grew, ripening in wisdom and power, but the poet was gradually stifled. Sympathies and perceptions that, if fostered, might have raised him to the lofty place in poetry for which he was seriously an aspirant, and might have made him a more surefooted literary critic than he became, were choked by the dust of the marketplace.

Both during his lifetime, moreover, and since, he has suffered at the hands

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of his admirers. They have made of him a pompous figure, bursting with self pride and crying out against life as it has to be lived. They have taken the clever phrases that he justifiably used to drive home his points as teacher and homilist, and restated them as eternal truths. They have forgotten his good sense, his ardor, his tenderness. They have constantly painted of him a repellent and slightly absurd portrait, and have forthwith fallen down to worship it. No wonder that half the world has mocked and eventually has ceased to read, as I fear is the case.

It should never be forgotten that Arnold was a poet who turned into a critic, not a scholarly critic who once in a while experimented with verse. Three volumes of the twelve in the edition before us — or of the fourteen that we might more justly have been given — are devoted to poetry. Not a very abundant production, perhaps, from a poet who lived to be nearly seventy, but a considerable body of verse none the less: enough to warrant an estimate of performance rather than of intention. Do these volumes contain a "great and ample body of powerful work which remains to him, even after all his inferior work has been cleared away", as Arnold puts the case in regard to Wordsworth? I think they do, even though we cannot wisely rate Matthew Arnold's among the very greatest names in our poetical history.

A narrative poem like "Sohrab and Rustum" is surely the work of a master, as is the much less praised and read "Tristram and Iseult", which happens to be one of the few modern treatments of an Arthurian theme that does not set on edge the teeth of anyone who knows mediæval romance. In another kind, "The Scholar-Gipsy", "Thyrsis", "Memorial Verses", and "Rugby Chapel" form a group that few poets have surpassed, while it would take too long to name the lyrics that have become a permanent part of our literary heritage. Let us grant that his dominant mood as a lyric poet was not joyous, that he questioned life in sombre fashion and found no explicit answer to some of his queries, that there is less variety in his work than in that of others; it is nevertheless true that he had a voice and magic of his own. No one else could have written "Philomela" or "Dover Beach" or "The Future", nor could our age at least spare the note they sound. Yet it is not true that the poetry of Arnold is all in one key, and that a minor, as we are sometimes given to understand by apologists. Where can one find more abandonment to pure joy than in the final outburst of Callicles in "Empedocles on Etna"? Not even Swinburne succeeded better in suggesting the movement of Greek choruses than did Arnold in this passage and in "Bacchanalia". Pensive and rather wistful though he was in most of his poetic hours, he could also strike other notes. Nothing of the sort in the language is better than the solemn close of "Sohrab and Rustum".

But as I have said, the poet turned into a critic. The impulse to write verse was gradually stifled. Except that it happened far too soon, this would perhaps not matter, since very few men have produced great poetry through a long series of years. It seems to me clear, however, that the virtues and faults of Arnold the essayist and lecturer were conditioned by the early manhood of Arnold the poet. There never were two men. The reconcilement with the world of ideas and the world of things that he had worked out for himself became the substance of what he taught in prose. It implies no

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disparagement of him to say that he was always the didactic essayist rather than the pure critic, who is forever testing and trying in an attempt to discover new aspects of truth, new facets of beauty. Sane judgment Arnold had, but not the judicial temper. He knew what he believed, and he explained the world in terms of his experience. I am inclined to think that the arrogance which sometimes marred his prose should be attributed to the poet's temper rather than to personal pride, for he was really a humble minded man beneath the surface.

To literature, to politics, to religion, Arnold applied himself with equal fervor, interpreting each in similar fashion and establishing — if he did nothing else — the sound doctrine that literature enters into every department of human activity. Because he had high courage and poetic ardor, he attacked the sham and shoddy of his own time with a violence that was half amused and half scornful. Perhaps he would have gone further as an interpreter if he had throttled his impulses down while he scrutinized the problems before him; but it is certain that he would never have impressed the world as he did, except for a certain intemperance of speech. He was not a Sainte-Beuve, as he aspired to be, but he was someone quite as useful. He was, throughout, Matthew Arnold. There has been but one.

I have said that our generation can well afford to listen to this Victorian. No one denies, I believe, that we live in a period of some confusion. Values are fluctuating, to put the case very mildly. In such circumstances the words of a man like Arnold, who by his poet's intuition had laid hold on certain changless elements in life, may be exceedingly profitable to the hearer. It is amazing, indeed, as one surveys his work afresh, that so many of the essays are pertinent to our troubled age.

The Works of Matthew Arnold. Complete Uniform Edition. The Macmillan Co.

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