

视角 ·

感悟

Perspectives  
and  
Perceptions

黄源深



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## About the Author

Huang Yuanshen is a Professor of English. He was educated at English Department, East China Normal University (1957—1961) and English Department, Sydney University (1979—1981) where he gained an MA degree in 1981. He taught at East China Normal University from 1961 to 1998 as Professor of English (1986 on), and served as Chairman of English



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His critical focus is mainly on Australian literature although he also writes about other literatures. He has authored a number of books, some of which have won various awards. These of

Australian subjects include *Australian Society* (co-author, 1985), *An Anthology of Australian Literature* (1987) which won Book Award of Foreign Literary Studies in China (1995), *Australian Culture* (co-author, 1990), *A Unique Literature — A Critical View of Some Australian Literary Works* (1995) which won Shanghai Social Science Book Award (1996), *A History of Australian Literature* (1997) which won Book Award of Ministry of Education (1998) and Shanghai Social Science Book Award (1997), *A Dictionary of Australian Literature* (2006), *A Short History of Australian Literature* (2006), *Wake in Fright* (translation, 1985), *I Can Jump Puddles* (translation, 1987), *My Brilliant Career* (translation, 1991) which won Australia-China Council Translation Award (1996), *Lucinda Brayford* (translation, 2002), *Shallows* (translation, 2010). Other books are *Appreciation and Criticism of Foreign Literature* (2003), *Selected Readings in Twentieth Century Foreign Literature* (2004), *Selected Readings in English Essays* (2007), *Jane Eyre* (translation, 1994), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (translation, 2002), *Selected Short Stories of O. Henry* (translation, 2007), *The Old Man and the Sea* (translation, 2007), *College English, Book 1—4* which won Shanghai Book Award for Textbooks for College Students (1997), *College English, Book 5—8* which won Book Award of Ministry of Education (1995), *Integrated Skills, Book 1—6*, *A Textbook for College Students* which won Book Award of Ministry of Education (2002), *Extensive Reading, Book 1—4*, *A Textbook for College Students* which won Book Award of Ministry of Education (2002). He won another Australia-China Council Award in 2002 for his contribution to Australian studies in China. He has published more than sixty articles on Australian literature and foreign language teaching.

# Foreword

My choice of Australian literature as a research field was a sheer accident. In 1979 I was sent, after a national exam, on a two-year study tour to Australia, although, prior to that, news had been circulating that I was on the list of students to be dispatched to Great Britain. The credit, so rare at the time, of being in the first batch going abroad after the ten year's turmoil, dispelled a tinge of initial displeasure arising from the fact that the host country for my training (Australia) ill-matched the subject of my teaching (English literature). We were altogether nine of us at the University of Sydney and at first grouped separately under the supervision of Professor Leonie Kramer, a scholar of high distinction and then the only professor of Australian literature in the country. The first piece of Australian literary writing she assigned for us to read was Henry Lawson's "The Drover's Wife". It is a classic, heavily anthologized and widely read, about a bush woman who, left unaided with her four small children, combats alone every conceivable hardship in the bush and eventually kills, after all-night's vigilance and anxiety, a snake that has been a perennial threat to her children. The story, so powerful and catching, evoked in me an apprehension for my wife and children then helplessly left behind. So

here was a great literature and a great scholar! I determined, indeed quite wisely, to switch my academic pursuit from English to Australian literature. But what would have happened if I had been sent to Britain instead for training? Or if I had not met Professor Kramer who, even if I did meet her, had not decided on Lawson for our reading? It is perhaps not too far away from the truth to say that Fate, Lawson and Kramer combined to have changed the course of my life.

I'm glad of the decision I've made. In China today, more and more Australian writers are translated and read, Australian literature is introduced as an academic course in quite a few universities, and Australian studies centres pop up one after another. Australia, once to many only a continent of sheep and kangaroos, has now become one of the most favorite countries to the young for their pre-career training. Between China and Australia, distance diminishes and exchanges speed up. To all of this, I hope, I've contributed my tiny share.

The essays collected here record my understanding mainly of Australian literature from a perspective most likely different from those of western critics. It is nothing strange if some of my views should be at variance with the accepted judgments, for I always believe that independence is the spirit to be most valued, encouraged and observed in literary criticism. Readers who are fond of popular theoretical isms would be disappointed to find that my critical views are largely derived from the close reading of the literary text which, as a self-contained entity, is perhaps the starting point of any literary critical endeavor.

In the publication of this book there are many who deserve my thanks, although for the obvious reasons I can only pick up a few names here. I must thank Dame Leonie Kramer who kindled my interest in Australian literature especially when I was wandering at the crossroad of my academic

career, and who has never ceased to help me in later years of my teaching and research. Thanks should also go to Dr. Catherine Runcie for her meticulous instructions, as well as close attention and constant support to my work. I must say thanks to Professor Zhuang Zhixiang for the sustained friendship and unsparing assistance in all these years of academic strain and stress. Lastly and also importantly, my gratitude is owed to Shanghai Institute of Foreign Trade for its patronage, without which, this book could hardly be brought into being.

Huang Yuanshen

Feb. 2010

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# Matthew Arnold's "Disinterestedness" Reconsidered

Matthew Arnold is by common consent a fervent apologist for criticism. Criticism means for him not simply literary criticism but rather the critical spirit in general, the application of intelligence to any and all subjects. He sums up succinctly the rule for criticism in one word — “disinterestedness”. It is, however, a word that provokes critical argument and differing interpretations. How is Arnold’s “disinterestedness” to be construed? Does his own criticism cling to this rule? Has the theory of “disinterestedness” current value? These are the questions this essay seeks to explore.

## **“Disinterestedness” and Its Implications**

Arnold’s “disinterestedness” first came to critical notice in his essay “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time”. The title of the essay unequivocally carries an immediate message — Arnold consciously addresses himself to his contemporaries. He confronts, in an undisguised manner, the problems in criticism that bedevil his countrymen. His target of attack is the British Philistine who,

according to Arnold, is preoccupied by practical considerations and ends, which he believes hinder criticism.

For what is at present the bane of criticism in this country? It is that practical considerations cling to it and stifle it. It subserves interests not its own. Our organs of criticism are organs of men and parties having practical ends to serve ... (p. 143)<sup>①</sup>

Arnold is fully aware of the danger to criticism of practical concerns, which may defeat the critical purpose of genuinely seeking truth.<sup>②</sup> “The pursuit of truth becomes really a social, practical, pleasurable affair ... with plenty of bustle and very little thought” (p. 148). Practical criticism “makes men blind even to the ideal imperfection of their practice, makes them willingly assert its ideal perfection” (p. 144).

In the essay “The Literary Influence of Academies”, provincialism — another bane of criticism — comes under fire:

The provincial spirit ... exaggerates the value of its ideas for want of a high standard at hand by which to try them. Or rather, for want of such a standard, it gives one idea too much prominence at the expense of others; it orders its ideas amiss; it is hurried away by fancies; it likes and dislikes too passionately, too exclusively.<sup>③</sup>

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① All references are to *Essays in Criticism*, Everyman's Library, 1969.

② “Joubert”, Matthew Arnold's *Essays in Criticism*, p. 160.

③ Matthew Arnold's *Essays in Criticism*, p. 50—51.

Even writers of rare talent, are more or less disabled in England by their remoteness from a "supposed centre of correct information, correct judgement, correct taste".<sup>①</sup> Passion and personal likes and dislikes, being an outcome of provincialism, lead people away from the truth. Thus when Sir Charles Adderley and Mr. Roebuck are complacently celebrating the greatness of the English race and its achievement, it requires the quiet challenge of criticism — "Wragg is in custody" (p. 145) — to get them back to the right track.

Both practical criticism and provincialism are marked by "interestedness" which makes real appraisal impossible. To cure the critical epidemic, Arnold writes out the prescription of "disinterestedness":

The rule may be summed up in one word — disinterestedness. And how is criticism to show disinterestedness? By keeping aloof from what is called "the practical view of things"; by resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches; by steadily refusing to lend itself to any of those ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas. (p. 142)

Thus viewed historically, "disinterestedness" should not be comprehended as a call for escape to the ivory tower or simply as an intellectual contempt for practical thoughts. In fact Arnold himself was deeply absorbed in the problems of his age and was not above engaging in polemics and controversy. And the idea of

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① Matthew Arnold's *Essays in Criticism*, p. 47.

“disinterestedness” itself, while proving to be of universal significance, is a practical attempt, a highly interested “disinterestedness” to pull Britain through its critical crisis. However, whether it serves a practical end or not is not the issue. The issue is what it imports.

“Disinterestedness” first of all means exclusion of immediate political and sectarian ends from any critical process. Criticism, as Arnold sees it, is the endeavour to “see the object as in itself it really is” (p. 130). As people are immersed in a practical life, political and practical considerations may creep into their critical judgement and thus would blur their view of the object and prevent them from getting access to the truth, to the best and perfection:

They have in view opponents whose aim is not ideal, but practical; and in their zeal to uphold their own practice against these innovators, they go as far as even to attribute to this practice an ideal perfection. (p. 145)

Exaggeration and “exuberant self-satisfaction” (p. 144) would take the place of accurate and dispassionate sound judgement. “The critic must keep out of the region of immediate practice in the political, social, humanitarian sphere”, if he wants to achieve the end of seeing things as they really are (p. 148). In other words, he must be detached and objective rather than involved and biased. This is difficult because “the rush and roar of practical life will always have a dizzying and attracting effect upon the most collected spectator, and tend to draw him into its vortex ...” (p. 147) Nevertheless, for Arnold, detachment and objectivity are necessities to a critic.

“Disinterestedness” also means a wide horizon, a broad

perspective. Arnold defines criticism as "a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world" (p. 154). As England is not all the world, much of the best that is known and thought in the world must reside abroad. "The English critic of literature, therefore, must dwell much on foreign thought, and with particular heed on any part of it" (p. 155). Arnold is in favour of a criticism "which regards Europe as being, for intellectual and spiritual purpose, one great confederation" (p. 156). And none of Arnold's essays on criticism deals primarily with an English author. This broad perspective is a wise recommendation. Apart from being an effective remedy to provincialism, it would enable the critic, in performing his duty, to see things in proportion and thus come closer to knowing what may be "the best that is known and thought in the world".

Disinterestedness demands a denial of prejudice and the effort towards objectivity. Applying his theory to poetic criticism (in "The Study of Poetry"), Arnold warns against two different kinds of estimate — "the historic estimate and the personal estimate, both of which are fallacious", because:

... by regarding a poet's work as a stage in this course of development we may easily bring ourselves to make it of more importance as poetry than in itself it really is, we may come to use a language of quite exaggerated praise in criticising it; in short, to over-rate it. (p. 342)

Our personal affinities, likings, and circumstances, have great power to sway our estimate of this or that poet's work, and

to make us attach more importance to it as poetry than in itself it really possesses... (p. 342)

Here Arnold reasserts his recurring theme — criticism must see the “object as in itself it really is”. Personal “affinities” and “likings” may warp one’s view and thus thwart the aim of criticism. What Arnold advocates is a “real estimate” free from bias and prejudice.

Historically considered, the theory of “disinterestedness” is, among other things, an attempt to boost literary creation to engender a cultural life productive of great works. Arnold argues, the creation of great art “is not at all epochs and under all conditions possible” (p. 133). “It must have the atmosphere, it must find itself amidst the order of ideas” (p. 133). Pindar, Sophocles in Greece and Shakespeare in England succeeded because they “lived in a current of ideas in the highest degree” (p. 135) and “society was, in the fullest measure, permeated by fresh thought, intelligent and alive” (p. 135). Conversely, the tremendous natural powers of the Romantics were partially crippled by the lack, in English society of the nineteenth century, of a vigorous intellectual life such as had sustained more fortunate poets. This, according to Arnold, makes Byron so empty of matter, Shelly so incoherent, Wordsworth so wanting in completeness and variety. The deficiency, Arnold believes, is one which criticism can help to remedy. Criticism can be of incalculable service to future creative writers merely by performing its true business. And “its business is ... simply to know the best that is known and thought in the world, and by in its turn making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas”. In this way it will eventually produce an intellectual and spiritual atmosphere indispensable to the growth of

creative genius.

Practically "disinterestedness" has a long-term aim — to cure the weakness in intelligence of the English middle class, the English Philistine. Great Britain, Arnold realises, badly requires reinstating in a Europe dominated by the democratic intelligence of the French and by the disciplined vigour of the Germans. Its heyday over, British aristocracy has ceased to count. The historic duty thus falls upon the middle class, "the kernel of the nation". Yet the intelligence of the middle class is virtually non-existent. And so Arnold undertakes to lead this class into the light of a new era and the theory of "disinterestedness" is part of this ambitious endeavour.

Arnold proffered his famous "disinterestedness" which, local and temporary in its references to the cultural crisis in Britain, may nevertheless claim a universal and enduring value. The theory recommends impartiality, objectivity, detachment and broadmindedness, qualities which criticism of all age demands. But it is even more than that. With an end to know the genuine best in the world, it is a search for truth and perfection, towards which Arnold attempts to lead man. Although "perfection can never be reached", Arnold believes, the disinterested approach "is the nearest approach to perfection of which men and nations are capable".<sup>①</sup>

### **"Disinterestedness" and Touchstones**

Criticism is, Arnold repeatedly asserts, "to know the best that

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① Matthew Arnold, "Democracy", *Poetry and Prose*, ed. John Bryson, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1967, p. 569.