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Selected Passages from  
Matthew Arnold's "The  
Study of Poetry" (1880)

"But whether we set ourselves, as here, to follow only one of the several streams that make the mighty river of poetry, or whether we seek to know them all, our governing thought should be the same. We should conceive of poetry worthily, and more highly than it has been the custom to conceive of it. We should conceive of it as capable of higher uses, and called to higher destinies, than those which in general men have assigned to it hitherto. More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry."

"For in poetry the distinction between excellent and inferior, sound and unsound or only half-sound, true and untrue or only half-true, is of paramount importance. It is of paramount importance because of the high destinies of poetry. 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, we have said, as times goes on and as other helps fail, its consolation and stay. But the consolation and stay will be of power in proportion to the power of the criticism of life. And the criticism of life will be of power in proportion as the poetry conveying it is excellent rather than inferior, sound rather than unsound or half-sound, true rather than untrue or half-true."

"The best poetry is what we want; the best poetry will be found to have a power of forming, sustaining, and delighting us, as nothing else can. A clearer, deeper sense of the best in poetry, and of the strength and joy to be drawn from it, is the most precious benefit which we can gather from a poetical collection such as the present."

"Yes; constantly in reading poetry, a sense for the best, the really excellent, and of the strength and joy to be drawn from it, should be present in our minds and should govern our estimate of what we read."

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[Arnold argues that many look at poetry from a historical perspective or on personal grounds. He rejects the historical approach because it ignores the whole point of poetry: deeply enjoying what is truly excellent. The historical approach may also cloud our judgment because we may privilege a text, not because it's any good, but because of what is associated with it (i.e. national or regional significance) or because it is part of a developmental stage of a work that was great. (i.e. Arnold would probably reject our contemporary celebration of, say, an artist's sketch that later developed into a "masterpiece."). He rejects the personal approach because our personal affinities and attachment may cause us to overrate or exaggerate a poem's greatness. Just because we think a poem is good doesn't mean we are right.]

Remember that a "touchstone" is hard black stone used to test the purity of gold and silver according to the color of the streak left when the metal is rubbed against it.

"Everything depends on the reality of a poet's classic character. If he is a dubious classic, let us sift him if he is a false classic, let us explode him. But if he is a real classic, if his work belongs to the class of the very best (for this is the true and right meaning of the word classic, classical) then, the great thing for us is to feel and enjoy his works deeply as ever we can, and to appreciate the wide difference between it and all work which has not the same high character. This is what is salutary, this is what is formative; this is the great benefit to be got from the study of poetry."

"Indeed there can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, than to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry." We need to use "the poetry of the great classics as a sort of touchstone..."

"The specimens I have quoted [from Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, and Milton] differ widely from one another, but they have in common this: the possession of the very highest poetical quality. If we are thoroughly penetrated by their power, we shall find that we have acquired a sense enabling us, whatever poetry may be laid before us, to feel the degree in which a high poetical quality is present or wanting there."

"Let us add, therefore, to what we have said, this: that the substance and matter of the best poetry acquire their special character from possessing, in an eminent degree, truth and seriousness. We may add yet further, what is in itself evident, that to the style and manner of the best poetry their special character, their accent, is given by their diction, and even yet more, by their movement. And though we distinguish between the two characters, the two accents, of superiority, yet they are nevertheless vitally connected one with the other. The superior character of truth and seriousness, in the matter and substance of the best poetry, is inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement marking its style and manner. The two superiorities are closely related, and are in steadfast proportion one to the other."

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[Arnold celebrates Shakespeare, Milton, and Dante, but Chaucer is questionable because “he lacks the high seriousness of the great classics. ... He has poetic truth of substance, though he has not high poetic seriousness, and corresponding to his truth of substance he has an exquisite virtue of style and manner.” Arnold wonders about Burns because his work has “truth of matter and truth of manner, but not the accent or the poetic virtue of the highest masters.” (Burns is a Scot, too!)]

“But for the supreme poetical success more is required than the powerful application of ideas to life; it must be an application under the conditions fixed by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty. Those laws fix as an essential condition, in the poet’s treatment of such matters as are here in question, high seriousness; the high seriousness which comes from absolute sincerity.”

“At any rate the end to which the method and the estimate are designed to lead and from leading to which, if they do lead to it, they get their whole value—the benefit of being able clearly to feel and deeply to enjoy the best, the truly classic, in poetry—is an end, let me say it once more at parting, of supreme importance. We are often told that an era is opening in which we are to see multitudes of a common sort of readers, and masses of a common sort of literature; that such readers do not want and cold not relish anything better than such literature, and that to provide it is becoming a vast and profitable industry. Even if good literature entirely lost currency with the world, it would still be abundantly worth while to continue to enjoy it by oneself. But it never will lose currency with the world, in spite of momentary appearances; it never will lose supremacy. Currency and supremacy are insured to it, not in deep by the world’s deliberate and conscious choice, but by something far deeper—by the instinct of self-preservation in humanity.”

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- You might find a use for these additional criteria:

Harold Bloom (from *The Western Canon*)

- “The strongest poetry is cognitively and imaginatively too difficult to be read deeply by more than a relative few of any social class, gender, race, or ethnic origin.”
  - “Great styles are sufficient for canonicity because they possess the power of contamination, and contamination is the pragmatic test for canon formation”
  - “Dr. Johnson [Samuel Johnson] assured us that nothing could please for long except just representations of general nature.”
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Richard Rorty (from *Achieving Our Country*)

- “We should see great works of literature as great because they have inspired many readers, not as having inspired many readers because they are great.”
- “If it is to have inspirational value, a work must be allowed to recontextualize much of what you previously thought you knew; it cannot, at least at first, be itself recontextualized by what you already believe.”

- If you have a minute and want another view, take a peek at yet another useful criteria:  
<http://www.brocku.ca/english/courses/IF95/depth-etc.html>