Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, and the Modern Temper
Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, and the Modern Temper

EDWARD ALEXANDER

Ohio State University Press : Columbus
For Leah, Rebecca, and David
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments  ix
Introduction  xi

*chapter one*  Choosing a Profession  3
*chapter two*  Art and Revolution  19
*chapter three*  Past and Present  59
*chapter four*  The Modern Element in Art and Literature  107
*chapter five*  The Threat of Anarchy  161
*chapter six*  Darkness and Dawn  211

Notes  277
Bibliography  299
Index  305
Acknowledgments

In the course of writing this book I have incurred many obligations that I would like to acknowledge here.

To certain scholarly and critical works dealing with Arnold and Ruskin my debt is greater than can be demonstrated in notes. Primary among such works are the great Library Edition of Ruskin, edited by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, Kenneth Allott's edition of Arnold's poems, Lionel Trilling's *Matthew Arnold*, Dwight Culler's study of Arnold's poetry, and the studies of Ruskin by Derrick Leon and John D. Rosenberg.

For affording me access to manuscript materials, I am indebted to Professor Arthur Kyle Davis, Jr., Mr. David Masson, Professor F. L. Mulhauser, Mrs. Jeanne Pingree, Professor Arnold Whitridge, Miss Marjorie Wynne, and to Harvard University, Pierpont Morgan Library, Library of Congress, University of Texas, British Museum, Yale University, Bodleian Library, Houghton Library, Texas Technological College, New York University, New York Public Library, the Berg Collection, Johns Hopkins University, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Huntington Library, Colby College, Cornell University, Vassar College, Imperial College, and Leeds University.

I am indebted to the American Council of Learned Societies for a fellowship that enabled me to spend time on research for this book, and to the Graduate School Research Fund of the University of Washington for grants that paid for microfilming and typing.

For help and suggestions of various kinds I am indebted to Professor Edward Bostetter, Professor John L. Bradley, Mr. Herbert P. Cahoon, Mr. James S. Dearden, Professor Walter E. Houghton, Professor Rodney Kilcup, Mr. Howard Leichman, Professor Fraser Neiman,
Mr. Norman Podhoretz, Professor Samuel N. Rosenberg, and Professor Helen Gill Viljoen.


I am indebted also to the Clarendon Press, Oxford, for permission to quote from _The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough_, ed. Howard F. Lowry (1932).
Introduction

One main reason why I am so little available for letters is that these educational questions have laid their hold upon me—in great measure from accident, in the first instance—and I cannot shake it off, nor perhaps ought I to wish to. What is a poem or an essay more or less, compared with the civilisation of the English middle class?—Matthew Arnold, unpublished letter of 26 October 1878 to T. H. Ward

If there are any advantages to living at the present time, perhaps a sharpened and more intelligent curiosity about past cultures that endured crises that in some respects resemble our own is one of them. Northrop Frye, borrowing a metaphor and an idea from Matthew Arnold, once wrote that “the culture of the past is not only the memory of mankind, but our own buried life, and study of it leads to a recognition scene, a discovery in which we see, not our past lives, but the total cultural form of our present life.”¹ I have been drawn to the idea of a comparative study of Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin because over a century ago they grappled, in thoughtful and often fruitful ways, with intellectual and spiritual quandaries that today beset large numbers of people who are involved in the cultural enterprise yet suspect that it has been discredited by many events of recent history. At the present time the disinterested life of the mind is being called into question not only by the Philistines and Jacobins, who have always been skeptical of its value, but by those who until recently were supposed to be its paid practitioners. Many writers and scholars have suddenly discovered that intellect is no guarantee of sanctity, and that
culture and morality may conflict. Armed with this knowledge, they launch inquisitorial searches into the "relevance" of their colleagues' work, request said colleagues to document their contributions to moral and political sanitation, and occasionally induce sensitive and innocent men to believe that a liberal vocation is a selfish indulgence of asocial impulses.

It would be misleading to suggest that the problem of the artist's and the thinker's independence is, or can be, precisely the same in the 1970s as it was in the 1870s, or even in the 1930s; ideas, as Lionel Trilling once pointed out, do not have perfect autonomy and should not be conceived of as batons handed from runner to runner in a relay race that spans centuries. But if we treat an idea as, in part, the response to a particular situation, and keep in mind the inevitable differences between the Victorian situation and our own, we can, I think, learn something from the past and participate in that recognition scene which according to Frye is one of the chief rewards of historical scholarship.

The demand that art and learning subserve practical interests was widespread during the Victorian period, and caused much division of purpose among Victorian writers and artists. At least it caused division of purpose among the writers and painters who interest us today. The extremes of acquiescence in utilitarianism or of outright disavowal of it, the Spasmodic poets who passionately encountered the problems of modern life or a James McNeill Whistler who disdained them, will for the foreseeable future be less likely to arouse our curiosity than the figures who seemed to fluctuate between the extremes of commitment and detachment.

Tennyson, the greatest poet of the age, spent much of his energy and more of his time trying to reconcile socially imposed conceptions of the poet's public duties with his own deep-seated tendency toward rest, luxuriance, and imaginative escape. In a pair of 1830 poems called "The Poet" and "The Poet's Mind" he could celebrate simultaneously both the Shelleyan conception of the poet as servant of reform of church and state, and the antithetical Coleridgean idea of the poet's sanctity and his separation from the ordinary concerns of hu-
manity. If, on the one hand, he spoke in verse of such questions as evolution, the nebular hypothesis, feminism, chancery procedure, industrial insurance, and the provision of coaling stations, he was also the poet of the irrational despair expressed in "Tears, Idle Tears," the poet who, in In Memoriam, told everyone, in Arnold's words, "his misery's birth and growth and signs, / And how the dying spark of hope was fed, / And how the breast was soothed, and how the head, / And all his hourly varied anodynes."  

In a writer like John Henry Newman the conflict between public duty and personal development took the form of a debate, never fully resolved, between the idea that knowledge must be subservient to morality and religion, and the contrary idea that knowledge and particular branches of knowledge are autonomous. On the one hand, Newman could argue that "Christianity, and nothing short of it, must be made the element and principle of all education," that Revealed Truth had given the aim and direction to Knowledge, and that when the university ministers, as it should, to the Church, "then classical poetry becomes the type of Gospel truth, and physical science a comment on Genesis or Job, and Aristotle changes into Butler, and Arcesilaus into Berkeley"; he could warn against sciences such as history judging religious matters by secular standards, and could chastise Catholic historians who allowed mere historical facts "to destroy super-historical truth." But he could also maintain, and most eloquently, that knowledge is capable of being its own end, and that knowledge which subserves other interests, which is a means to any end beyond itself, is not liberal knowledge but servile knowledge and therefore not the highest or most suitable attainment of free men, however needful to ordinary pursuits.

Arnold and Ruskin, like many of their contemporaries, were torn between their inclination, as artists, toward—to use Newman's terms—liberal activities, and their obligation, as citizens, to undertake useful activities. But in them the division of purpose was so deep as to cause a whole series of radical upheavals culminating in the abandonment of one career for another. They were—if anybody ever was—naturally inclined, or "called," to the life of art, to the celebration
of beauty and, through that, to the discovery of truth. But a growing concern with social and political questions—first as they impinged on the creation of art but then for their own sake—eventually diverted them from their original vocation and thrust them not only into the new activities of social and political controversy but into new roles, new occupations, and even new selves.

There was an important continuity but also a damaging discontinuity between their careers as artists and as social critics. Both men assumed that the criticism of art was the best preparation for the criticism of society; and we shall see how their different conceptions of the good work of art determined their different conceptions of the good society. But they were always plagued by the suspicion that, in turning their attention to society, in performing “useful” activities, whether as critics of education, politics, and economics, or as teachers of art and inspectors of schools and even builders of roads, they had neglected their true work and forsaken their true selves. “Goethe says somewhere,” wrote Arnold, “that people make an entirely false world and then call upon you to be useful in it;—it is well that occasionally one should recalcitrate and try to make the world itself a little less false.” In 1862 Arnold and Ruskin were more intensely and completely involved in the business of social criticism than they had ever been. Arnold was completing his very forceful attack on the Revised Code for Education and busy getting his pamphlet into the hands of influential persons. Ruskin was fresh from his onslaught against the political economists in the *Cornhill Magazine* and in the midst of a renewed assault on the same enemy in *Fraser’s*. Yet we find Arnold complaining, in the very month (March) that his article appeared, that “I sometimes grow impatient of getting old amidst a press of occupations and labour for which, after all, I was not born”; and Ruskin, in August of the same year, bitterly rejecting a friend’s misguided congratulations on his achievements: “You say I have effected more revolution than other writers. My dear Doctor, I have been useful, in various accidental minor ways, by pretty language and pleasant hints . . . but of my intended work I have done nothing.”

But beyond the feeling that the move from art to society had been
a choice of the wrong role, the wrong occupation, and the wrong self, lay the deeper fear that they might have overcome their alienation from society only at the cost of alienation from their own souls and the consequent sacrifice of all true joy in life. Ruskin in 1863 found himself "tormented between the longing for rest and for lovely life, and the sense of the terrific call of human crime for resistance and of human misery for help—though it seems to me as the voice of a river of blood which can but sweep me down in the midst of its black clots, helpless." Arnold, in a poem written about a year later entitled "Palladium," expressed the feeling that he was but rarely in communication with his own soul. Describing the wooden image of Pallas that stands above the battlefields of Troy where Hector struggles valiantly yet blindly, as if he had forgotten that ultimately it is the Palladium and not his own frantic efforts that guarantees Troy's preservation, Arnold proposes an analogy between the Palladium forgotten by its purported defenders and the soul almost forgotten by its unwitting owners:

So, in its lovely moonlight, lives the soul.  
Mountains surround it, and sweet virgin air;  
Cold plashing, past it, crystal waters roll;  
We visit it by moments, ah, too rare!

(9–12)

In "Thyrsis," a poem that Arnold probably conceived in the very same month of March 1862 when he published his attack on the Revised Code for Education, we find a more explicit linkage between the artist's involvement in social questions and the sacrifice of his soul and his happiness. Speaking of the Oxford landscape, which represents for him the true poetic life, Arnold alleges that in leaving it Thyrsis (Arthur Hugh Clough) sacrificed not only his poetry but his soul and his happiness by immersing himself in social questions:

Some life of men unblest  
He knew, which made him droop, and filled his head.  
He went; his piping took a troubled sound
Of storms that rage outside our happy ground;
He could not wait their passing, he is dead.

(46-50)

That Arnold was able to project his own dilemma into the formal medium of poetry and that he was able to blame Clough for choosing to do what Ruskin simply could not help doing already suggests the pattern of contrasts that is as important in a comparison of Arnold and Ruskin as the similarities. Although both men made similar moves from art to society and politics, and both recognized the diminution of soul and loss of joy that this might entail, Ruskin saw no alternative to total immersion of his soul in the miseries of the world that he wished to alleviate whereas Arnold believed it was possible to find some middle ground between the detachment he had left behind and the social commitment he had undertaken. The distinction between the stances they adopted as social critics was an epistemological as well as a psychological one. Whereas Ruskin believed that one could not truly fathom the darkness and suffering of the world unless one participated in them, Arnold was certain that total involvement in the world's miseries, far from enabling one to see them clearly, deprived one of the sense of perspective and of the relationship of parts to whole that comes only with moral poise and intellectual detachment. Another way of describing the pattern of contrasts that accompanies and impinges on the pattern of similarities in the movement of Arnold and Ruskin from artistic to social concerns is to say that Ruskin was a romantic and Arnold a classical Victorian; that one brought from his experience of art a belief in concrete particularity, in passionate involvement, in the greatness of failure and sorrow; whereas the other brought a belief in the grandeur of generality, in the wholeness and steadiness that come from detachment, and in the nobility of perfection and happiness.

In The Long Revolution, Raymond Williams has asserted that "it is with the discovery of patterns of a characteristic kind that any useful cultural analysis begins, and it is with the relationship between
these patterns, which sometimes reveal unexpected identities and correspondences in hitherto separately considered activities, sometimes again reveal discontinuities of an unexpected kind, that general cultural analysis is concerned." I have tried, in this study, to discover some of the patterns to which Williams alludes by instituting a series of comparisons between the careers and the writings of Arnold and Ruskin during a limited number of years. I have tried to combine comparative biography with a comparison of ideas without falling into the error of judging the ideas according to the personal circumstances out of which they grew. Recognizing the importance of the fact that two such formidable artists turned, at a certain point in their lives, from art to society, from liberal and poetic pursuits to useful and rhetorical ones, I have tried to show that their views on culture, society, politics, and economics invite comparison because they are eminently the views of artists who are seeking the means of sharing with others the beauty and truth which they have themselves glimpsed. Both men believed that, as Arnold said in *Culture and Anarchy*:

The great men of culture are those who have had a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to the other, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time; who have laboured to divest knowledge of all that was harsh, uncouth, difficult, abstract, professional, exclusive; to humanise it, to make it efficient outside the clique of the cultivated and learned, yet still remaining the best knowledge and thought of the time, and a true source, therefore, of sweetness and light.  

The quarrel that Arnold and Ruskin conducted with the society of their day was of great importance in itself, but I have also tried to analyze it as the external aspect of the quarrel that they conducted with themselves. As Marianne Moore has said, "There never was a war that was not inward"; and the quarrels that Arnold and Ruskin held with themselves over the role of the modern artist as social critic are at least as interesting and revealing as their public quarrels with
the advocates of utilitarianism and of aestheticism. For this reason I have drawn heavily on biographical materials in order to fathom the quality and intensity of the personal crises that their historical moment and their restless consciences created for Arnold and Ruskin.

The comparative method, however suspect in certain quarters today, was widely used for literary purposes in the Victorian period, not merely for "scientific" reasons based on dubious analogies between literature and anatomy but for the sound philosophical reasons that impelled Carlyle to compare Johnson and Hume, Mill to compare Bentham and Coleridge, Arnold to compare Hebraism and Hellenism. "In order to make our past meaningful," Ralph Cohen has written, "it is necessary to create in it a recognition of the choices men had." Comparison implies a judgment in which two things are measured by each other. It therefore offers an escape from, or at any rate a substitute for, absolute standards of judgment; and it provides some control on the temptation to generalize about a period by simple induction from the ideas and activities of one person who functioned in it. Comparison also offers, to be sure, the temptation to disembodify ideas from the special circumstances and ambiences in which they arose. I can only say that I have tried to avoid this danger by anchoring my comparisons in chronology and fact, and by dealing as far as possible with the simultaneous reactions of Arnold and Ruskin to particular aspects of the crisis that gripped English thought and society between 1848 and 1867. But ideas do have a way of bursting the bonds of their origins: that is why man's attraction to them has sometimes been taken as a sign of his freedom.