Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, and the Modern Temper
“Devoting me to God,” meant, as far as my mother knew herself what she meant, that she would try to send me to college, and make a clergyman of me: and I was accordingly bred for “the Church.” My father, who—rest be to his soul—had the exceedingly bad habit of yielding to my mother in large things and taking his own way in little ones, allowed me, without saying a word, to be thus withdrawn from the sherry trade as an unclean thing; not without some pardonable participation in my mother’s ultimate views for me. For, many and many a year afterwards, I remember, while he was speaking to one of our artist friends, who admired Raphael, and greatly regretted my endeavours to interfere with that popular taste,—while my father and he were condoling with each other on my having been impudent enough to think I could tell the public about Turner and Raphael,—instead of contenting myself, as I ought, with explaining the way of their souls’ salvation to them—and what an amiable clergyman was lost in me,—"Yes," said my father, with tears in his eyes—(true and tender tears, as ever father shed,) "he would have been a Bishop."—John Ruskin, Fors Clavigera (April 1875)

My sons do not yet work as they should do, and I often think that nothing would so raise their energies as sending them out to you, where they must work or starve. There is no earthly thing more mean and despicable in my mind than an English gentleman destitute of all sense of his responsibilities and opportunities, and only revelling in the luxuries of high civilization, and thinking himself a great person.—Dr. Arnold to J. P. Gell (principal of a college in Van Diemen’s Land), 1840
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For most Victorians the choice of a profession was both a more complicated and a more painful process than it had been for previous generations of Englishmen. For one thing, it had become for the first time a genuine choice, a matter of individual decision rather than social custom and class membership; for another, a man's vocation was now more than ever before considered to be the chief determinant of his way of life. Secular and religious prophets joined to proclaim work the primary duty and indeed the sole justification of life. Carlyle invoked Scripture to warn his contemporaries to "work while it is called Today, for the Night cometh, wherein no man can work."¹ Of the students of Matthew Arnold's father, the great schoolmaster Thomas Arnold, it was said that "every pupil was made to feel that there was a work for him to do—that his happiness as well as his duty lay in doing that work well."² Through the novels of George Eliot the public was to become familiar with a new kind of character whose life was very nearly coextensive with his work. He might work with his hands like Adam Bede or with his head like Tertius Lydgate, but he defined himself by his choice of vocation and by his commitment to it. As Caleb Garth tells the vacillating Fred Vincy in Middlemarch (whose story is set in the 1830s):

"You must be sure of two things: you must love your work, and not be always looking over the edge of it, wanting your play to begin. And the other is, you must not be ashamed of your work, and think it would be more honourable to you to be doing something else. You must have a pride in your own work and in learning to do it well, and not be always saying, There's this and there's that—if I had this or that to do, I might make something of it. No matter what a man is
—I wouldn’t give two pence for him . . . whether he was the prime minister or the rick-thatcher, if he didn’t do well what he undertook to do.”

In one sense Arnold and Ruskin stand out from other Victorians by virtue of the fact that they never did irrevocably commit themselves to a vocation. For years, and even decades, after he has become an inspector of schools, we find Arnold desperately trying to change his position and vaguely planning to get back to his true vocation of poet; and Ruskin is forever on the verge of forsaking his criticism, and writing itself, in order to paint (or sometimes to geologize or to botanize). Their own indecision spurred both their critics and their friends to remark uncharitably on their propensity to wander into fields where they were not genuinely at home. There was some truth as well as much malice in Whistler’s charge that all the political economists thought Ruskin a great art critic whereas all the artists thought him a great political economist; and when Jowett described Arnold as “the Balliol man who had not got on,” he was giving gentle expression to the feeling that Arnold had somehow squandered his power by expending it in incursions into alien territory.

Arnold and Ruskin came from very different backgrounds. Ruskin, though he was born and bred in London, was the inheritor of an essentially Scottish tradition that combined (this is perhaps hard for us to comprehend today) a fundamentalist Evangelicalism with genuine literary and artistic culture. Matthew Arnold was the son of a father famed as an educator, a theologian, a political controversialist and a reformer who, though he spoke for the “Liberal” or “Broad” church faction of the Church of England, was as serious and intense in his religion as were the Evangelical Ruskins in theirs. Both young men were sent to Oxford, with which they were to retain strong if ambivalent emotional ties throughout life, and to which both were to return in maturity as professors. Ruskin matriculated as a gentleman-commoner at Christ Church in October 1836 and was in residence there until 1840; Arnold won an open scholarship to Balliol in November 1840 and took up residence in October of the following year.
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Whereas Ruskin's parents sent him to Christ Church with the explicit purpose of making an Evangelical clergyman out of him, Dr. Arnold, according to his son Tom, "never thought of prescribing to [Matthew] in any way either the field within which or the aims toward which, he should set his genius to work." Yet we can hardly doubt that Matthew recalled the many occasions upon which his father had reminded members of the sixth form at Rugby that "what we must look for here is, 1st, religious and moral principles; 2ndly, gentlemanly conduct; 3rdly, intellectual ability." Nor is it possible to doubt that Dr. Arnold impressed upon his son when he entered Oxford the scheme of priorities for education that he had long inculcated in his own family: "Rather than have physical science the principal thing in my son's mind, I would gladly have him think that the sun went round the earth, and that the stars were so many spangles set in the bright blue firmament. Surely the one thing needful for a Christian and an Englishman to study is Christian and moral and political philosophy. . . ."

Ruskin entered Christ Church carrying a heavy burden of parental, more especially fatherly, expectation. "His ideal of my future," Ruskin was to write of his father in Praeterita, "was that I should enter at college into the best society, take all the prizes every year, and a double first to finish with; marry Lady Clara Vere de Vere; write poetry as good as Byron's only pious; preach sermons as good as Bossuet's, only Protestant, be made, at forty, Bishop of Winchester, and at fifty, Primate of England." Whatever were John James Ruskin's expectations of his son, he had, according to Ruskin's biographer Derrick Leon, chosen in Christ Church the least likely instrument for their fulfillment. Christ Church was already being eclipsed in academic prestige by Balliol, which was to produce all the most brilliant men from 1831 to 1841; so that although Ruskin was at Oxford when it was spawning a host of intellectual and spiritual movements, "with such men as Clough, Matthew Arnold, Stanley and Jowett, all his contemporaries, Ruskin made no acquaintance." Though he was an extremely serious as well as religious young man, Ruskin seems to have been entirely indifferent to, or contemptuous of, the Oxford Movement, whose leader Pusey he was later to describe as a "sickly
and rather ill put together English clerical gentleman who never
looked one in the face or appeared aware of the state of the
weather." Unlike many other young men of his era, his faith was not
unsettled by exposure to university education, and he did not vex his
parents by refusing to attend chapel; in fact, he never missed.

Yet, by a curious irony, his very seriousness militated against his
entering the clerical profession. His seriousness—one of his friends
said he had the makings of a Robespierre in him—led him in other
directions. It led him to geology and a meeting with Darwin, to archi­
tecture and the Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic
Architecture, and to poetry. "I must," he wrote in 1838, "give an
immense time every day to the Newdigate, which I must have. . . ." He
did, indeed, have it, but not until his third try, in 1839, an "Eastern"
poem called "Salsette and Elephanta." On June 12 he recited the
poem in the Sheldonian, and seemed to have found his vocation as a
poet.

In those days the vocations of poet and cleric often nourished each
other, and winning the Newdigate Prize was as much a foreshadow­
ing of the second as of the first. But now there came an interruption
in Ruskin's education due to ill health, and a period of extended trav­
el with his parents on the Continent for the purpose of regaining his
strength. In November 1841 he was again able to work, albeit at home,
and in April of the following year, having given up the hope of hon­
ors, earned a pass degree from Oxford.

During his illness Ruskin had been beset by his first grave doubts
about becoming a clergyman. They are expressed at great length in a
letter of 22 September 1841 to his former tutor, the Reverend Thom­
as Dale. At first Ruskin asks whether it is not even criminal to direct
energies elsewhere than toward saving souls. "Nor can any distinction
be made between laymen and churchmen with regard to the claims of
this duty, but every one who believes in the name of Christ is called
upon to become a full and perfect priest. Our daily bread once
gained, every faculty of mind and body must be called into full action
for this end only, nor can I think that any one can rightly believe, or
be himself in a state of salvation, without holding himself bound,
foot, hand, and brain, by this overpowering necessity.” Granted all this, however, the question arises of whether there may not be various means by which the great goal of soul-saving is realized. Ruskin thinks there are, but he does not know how those who are free to choose their employment are to be regulated in their choice:

They have two questions to ask: "What means are there by which the salvation of souls can be attained?" and "How are we to choose among them?" For instance, does the pursuit of any art or science, for the mere sake of the resultant beauty or knowledge, tend to forward this end? That such pursuits are beneficial and ennobling to our nature is self-evident, but have we leisure for them in our perilous circumstances? Is it a time to be spelling of letters, or touching of strings, counting stars or crystallising dewdrops, while the earth is failing under our feet, and our fellows are departing every instant into eternal pain?

Here for the first time Ruskin poses the question, which was to plague him throughout his career, about whether the pursuit of art or science as liberal activities, "for the mere sake of the resultant beauty or knowledge," is morally justifiable. Here too for the first time he proposes (though he does not adopt) a solution of the dilemma according to which the artist may have an indirect spiritual and moral influence even if he does not occupy himself immediately in moral and priestly tasks:

... Is not the character and kind of intellect which is likely to be drawn into these occupations, employed in the fullest measure and to the best advantage in them? Would not great part of it be useless and inactive if otherwise directed? Do not the results of its labour remain, exercising an influence, if not directly spiritual, yet ennobling and purifying, on all humanity to all time? Was not the energy of Galileo, Newton, Davy, Michael Angelo, Raphael, Handel, employed more effectively to the glory of God in the results and lessons it has left, than if it had been occupied all their life-
time in direct priestly exertion, for which, in all probability, it was less adapted and in which it would have been comparatively less effectual?

After these solemn speculations, Ruskin at last reduces the question to the proportions of his personal dilemma: "I myself have little pleasure in the idea of entering the Church, and have been attached to the pursuits of art and science, not by a flying fancy, but as long as I can remember, with settled and steady desire. How far am I justified in following them up?"¹⁵

While he hangs between the vocation of writer on the one hand and clergyman on the other, Ruskin takes pains to discover the absence of moral urgency in other men's writings and to affirm its presence in his own. He expresses impatience with Carlyle's lectures *On Heroes* as "absolute bombast." He deprecates in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840) Dickens's lapse from "his former clear truth" into "diseased extravagance" and "perpetual mannerism." He reacts violently to a clerical friend who, in his ignorant condescension to the artist, had expected to find "refreshment" in Ruskin's poems:

> . . . And so, my cool fellow, you don't find any "refreshment" in my poems. . . . "Refreshment," indeed! Hadn't you better try the alehouse over the way next time? It is very neat of you—after you have been putting your clerical steam on, and preaching half the world to the de--- . . . and back again—to pull up at Parnassus expecting to find a new station and "refreshment" rooms fitted up there for your especial convenience—and *me* as the young lady behind the counter to furnish you with a bottle of ginger-pop. . . . ¹⁶

Upon receiving his degree, Ruskin was faced more squarely than ever before with the problem of choosing his life's work. But, perhaps unfortunately for him, his father's wealth allowed his choice of a career to remain a perpetual "problem" that never became a compelling necessity. Ruskin, having taken his pass degree, again wondered what he should be or do, "my father ready to let me do any-
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thing; with my room always luxuriously furnished in his house,—my expenses paid if I chose to travel.” The great decision was thus postponed while Ruskin and his parents planned their summer in Switzerland.

But during this summer in Europe Ruskin had a revelation, an experience of nature through the medium of art that seemed to dedicate him and eliminate the necessity of conscious choice. While at Fontainebleau Ruskin found himself one day in a cart road among young trees and lay down to sleep. Unable to fall asleep, he became interested in the pattern formed by the branches against the blue sky and began to draw a little aspen tree in his sketchbook. As he worked, his languor disappeared and “the beautiful lines insisted on being traced.” The tree seemed to grow by its own power before his eyes, its lines composing themselves “by finer laws than any known of men. At last, the tree was there, and everything that I had thought before about trees, nowhere.” He now recognized—an earlier discovery made in drawing ivy on Tulse Hill had pointed him in this direction—that the secret of capturing the beauty of nature lay not in rearranging and generalizing natural phenomena but in dutiful submission to organic, natural design in all its concrete, detailed particularization: “The woods, which I had only looked on as wilderness, fulfilled I then saw, in their beauty, the same laws which guided the clouds, divided the light, and balanced the wave. ‘He hath made everything beautiful, in his time,’ became for me thenceforward the interpretation of the bond between the human mind and all visible things; and I returned along the wood-road feeling that it had led me far;—Farther than ever fancy had reached, or theodolite measured.”

In this experience lay the germ of Modern Painters, for it gave Ruskin the philosophical weapons he needed to demonstrate that Turner and “modern painters” generally depicted nature more truthfully than did the idealizing, generalizing “ancient masters.” For the time being, at least, Ruskin had found his vocation and also a philosophy of art that would sustain him through the first two volumes of Modern Painters. But it is an exaggeration to assert, as Collingwood does,
that "thenceforward his path was marked out . . . he was not to be a poet . . . not to be an artist . . . not a man of science" but a critic of art who would bring to the world the message that great artists were impelled by sincerity to utter truth.\(^9\) On the contrary, in March of 1844, less than a year after his anonymous publication of the first volume of *Modern Painters*, we find Ruskin again wrestling defensively with the question of whether he should be an art critic or an Evangelical clergyman. A clerical correspondent, the Reverend Osborne Gordon, has asked him whether the cultivation of taste is an adequate justification of a man’s life. He replies by asserting that *Modern Painters* is no selfish cultivation of his own critical acumen but rather an “ardent endeavour to spread the love and knowledge of art among all classes.” Besides, he adds— tempting the gods to punish him, as indeed they did (*Modern Painters* was not completed for another sixteen years)—everything he hopes to do in his artistic endeavor “will be accomplished, if my health holds, in two or three years at the very utmost.” Finally, if Osborne doubts Ruskin’s ability to exert an elevating moral influence by preaching on the beauty of the creation, of which he knows something, why is the clergyman so confident of Ruskin’s ability to preach on the beauty of a system of salvation about which he knows nothing? “If I have not power of converting men to an earnest feeling for nature, I should have still less of turning them to earnestness in religion.”\(^20\)

The problem of choosing between art and religion rankled in Ruskin’s mind up until the time that it was replaced by, or rather transformed into, the problem of choosing between art and social criticism. As late as 1851, Ruskin could write:

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\ldots \text{I never was so doubtful as to what my remainder of life would probably be devoted to: I always, before, had some faint idea of becoming a clergyman either abroad or at home: but after the experiences I have had of the effects of my intercourse in a casual way with society for the last three years, I have given up all thoughts of it. I can do nothing right but when I am quiet and alone: But still I cannot settle my mind, because I always feel that though I am not fit to}
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be a clergyman, it is my own fault that I am not: i.e. though I don't love people, and am made ill by being disturbed, and am over excited in discussion and so on—I ought to love people more—and ought to like to see them—and to do them good—and I can never tell but some change might come over my religious feelings which could make What is now my poison become my food. . . .

In one sense, Ruskin never ceased to be a clergyman _manqué_, a fact noted at least in its external aspect in this 1853 account of one of his lectures in the _Edinburgh Guardian_:

Mr. Ruskin's elocution is peculiar; he has a difficulty in sounding the letter "R"; but it is not this we now refer to, it is to the peculiar tone in the rising and falling of his voice at measured intervals, in a way scarcely ever heard except in the public lection of the service appointed to be read in churches. These are the two things with which, perhaps, you are most surprised,—his dress and his manner of speaking,—both of which . . . are eminently clerical. You naturally expect, in one so independent, a manner free from conventional restraint, and an utterance, whatever may be the power of his voice, at least expressive of a strong individuality; and you find instead a Christ Church man of ten years' standing, who has not yet taken orders. . . .

It was not until Ruskin began to see, late in the fifties, that the logical culmination of his deep religious impulse was not a clerical career but a prophetic one, that he was able, not exactly to conceive of the "poison" of social service as his proper food, but to swallow it, out of a sense of duty.

In the Arnold family social duty was always intimately connected with religion. If it is true that Thomas Arnold did not exert overt pressure on his son to become engaged in the serious enterprise of moral and political reform, we may nevertheless assume that both his precept and example had a compelling effect on young Matthew. The reform of the public schools for which Thomas Arnold is now best
known was but one aspect of his reforming activity, which embraced both state and church; and when Matthew arrived at Oxford, his father's struggle against John Henry Newman and the Oxford Movement over the nature of the Church of England and of Christianity and over the church’s social role, was at its zenith. If for some reason Matthew had forgotten or resisted either his father’s precepts or his example, he was reminded of both shortly after arriving at Balliol. For Dr. Arnold, who had been laboring in Roman history since 1833, was appointed regius professor of modern history at Oxford in August 1841, just two months before his son went into residence at the university, and in January 1842 gave his first course of lectures. Dr. Arnold’s inaugural lecture, moreover, left no doubt of the urgency of the tasks that faced the current generation of men, for in it he argued that modern history gave signs of being the last step in civilization. Modern nations might well be the “last reserve of the world”; if they were, the world’s fate was in their hands, and “God’s work on earth will be left undone if they do not do it.”

Yet no one at Balliol College seemed less likely to undertake “God’s work on earth” than the eldest son of Dr. Arnold himself. Even at Rugby Dr. Arnold had been aware of the rift that was opening between himself and his son. “I do not see,” he said when Matthew was in the sixth form, “how the sources of deep thought are to be reached in him. I fear that he is not likely to form intimate friendships, being too gregarious an animal: he does not like being alone. . . . Matt likes general society, and flitters about from flower to flower, but is not apt to fix.” The great schoolmaster was shocked in 1840 by the news that his gay and carefree son had won an open scholarship to Balliol: “I had not the least expectation of his being successful, and the news actually filled me with astonishment. I have great hopes that success will act wholesomely on him.” But these hopes must have seemed impossible of fulfillment, for most of Matthew’s activities at Oxford looked like positive acts of defiance against his father’s commitment to intellect, to piety, to conscientious work. Few at Oxford, reported his fellow student Max Müller, “detected in Arnold the poet or the man of remarkable genius.” His most obvious
failing was want of seriousness. "A laugh from his hearers or readers seemed to be more valued by him than their serious opposition, or their convinced assent." 

Dr. Arnold died suddenly in June 1842, and although his death profoundly affected his son—Arthur Stanley recalled that "the first thing which struck [Matthew] when he saw the body was the thought that their sole source of information was gone . . . and the strange feeling of their being cut off for ever"—it does not appear to have purified him of foppishness, irresponsibility, and even (a notable contrast with the young Ruskin) impiety. In July of 1844 Clough, Dr. Arnold's prize pupil of Rugby days, reported that "Matt has gone out fishing when he ought properly to be working"; and in 1847 we hear from the same source that "Matt is full of Parisianism; theatres in general, and Rachel in special: he enters the room with a chanson of Beranger's on his lips—for the sake of French words almost conscious of tune: his carriage shows him in fancy parading the rue de Rivoli;—and his hair is guiltless of English scissors: he breakfasts at twelve, and never dines in Hall, and in the week or 8 days rather (for 2 Sundays must be included) he has been to Chapel once. . . ." 

Charlotte Brontë, invoking her easy familiarity with the invisible world, drew the inevitable conclusion after witnessing Matthew Arnold's "seeming foppery" that "the shade of Dr. Arnold seemed to me to frown on his young representative." 

If, in religious and spiritual matters, the young Matthew Arnold did not think and act as his father would have wished—Miss Brontë also noted that "his theological opinions were very vague and unsettled"—neither did he embrace the religion of his father's Tractarian enemies. He did for a long time attend regularly the Sunday afternoon sermons of Dr. Arnold's greatest adversary, John Henry Newman, at St. Mary's, and for the rest of his life would recall that "religious music—subtle, sweet, mournful." But, his brother Tom recalls, "so far as I know, Newman's teaching never made an impression upon him." 

That Matthew Arnold should have gone to Newman's sermons for their music rather than their doctrine suggests the underlying cause
for his youthful resistance to the influence of his father. As early as 1836 Arnold was writing poems and beginning to think of himself as a poet. At Rugby he won prizes for Latin Verse in 1838 and for the best English poem, "Alaric at Rome," in 1840; and in 1843, four years after Ruskin had achieved the same distinction, Arnold won the Newdigate Prize for his poem *Cromwell*, his only published work prior to 1849. His father, however, had always ranked history and philosophy far above imaginative literature, and the single poem Dr. Arnold wrote—in honor of the founder of the Junior Common Room at Corpus Christi—prompted his son to remark: "Ah, my poor father! He had many excellencies, but he was not a poet." Poetry at this time attracted Arnold, as a few years earlier it had attracted the far more serious young Ruskin, partly because it was a free or liberal activity, pursued for its own sake and not as a means to something beyond itself, be that something political, social, or religious. If, therefore, Arnold was to preserve his poetic gift, he had to lead a life that was free, untrammeled by the requirements of morality, politics, and religion. Arnold in later life always associated the true life of poetry with his days at Oxford, and "that life at Oxford," he told his brother in 1857, was "the freest and most delightful part . . . of my life. . . ." Whereas Dr. Arnold had during his lifetime epitomized the effective, practical personality, Matthew Arnold impressed people by his aesthetic rather than his moral qualities. "He was beautiful as a young man," wrote one of his classmates.

The effort that Ruskin made in the early forties to validate the activities of art and science as distinct from (if ultimately conducive to) religion had now to be undertaken by Arnold on behalf of poetry. Only in Arnold's case the task was not so much to justify the writing of poetry as opposed to the saving of souls, as to distinguish between the duties of the poet and those of the citizen. From the time that he was elected a fellow of Oriel College in March 1845, Arnold's chief adversary in this task was the man he would ironically address in 1848 as "Citizen Clough, Oriel Lyceum, Oxford." In Clough, with his strong desire for social and political commitment and involvement, Arnold saw the threat that was posed to poetry and to the free life of imagination by the conviction that right doing was a substitute for
right thinking and that the obligations of the citizen determined those of the poet.

What particularly distressed Arnold in viewing Clough and his poetry was his friend’s insufficient devotion to his craft and his readiness to make it a mere instrument for problem-solving. In a playful letter of 1845, filled mainly with effervescent praise for George Sand, Arnold pauses to reflect that “never without a Pang do I hear of the growing popularity of a strong minded writer.” For in such a case the writer is likely to direct his vision outward, and in consequence “lose his self-knowledge, and talk of his usefulness and imagine himself a Reformer, instead of an Exhibition.” Let us, he warns Clough, “keep pure our Aesthetics by remembering its one-sidedness as doctrine.” Confusing the duties of the poet with those of the citizen, then, is harmful both to poetry and to politics because it tends, paradoxically, to make each an instrument of the other. As Arnold reads Clough’s poetry, he becomes more and more aware of “the deficiency of the beautiful in your poems, and of this alone being properly poetical as distinguished from rhetorical, devotional or metaphysical.” Arnold admits that the production of the beautiful in poetry is a problem to him as well, but at least he sees that it is for this that the artist must strive. Good citizenship is no substitute for good poems; political activity is not the same as creative activity; the good man is not necessarily the good artist; and, Arnold frankly tells his friend, “I doubt your being an artist.”

Yet, as Arnold’s admission that he too finds it hard to produce “the beautiful” in poetry suggests, for him as for Ruskin the commitment to art as a good in itself, independent of its value in soul-saving, religious or political, was not unqualified and raised serious problems for the conscience. One of these problems is in fact dramatically and—from the point of view of a detached observer—ironically introduced in the very next paragraph of Arnold’s letter. No sooner has he finished berating poor Clough for not being enough of an artist than Arnold looks outward to the world and excitedly reports from it:

Later news than any of the papers have, is that the National Guard have declared against a Republic, and were on the
brink of a collision with the people when the express came away.—I trust in God that feudal industrial class as the French call it, you worship, will be clean trodden under.\textsuperscript{39}

The French Revolution of 1848 had begun, and the preacher of aesthetic purity who in 1847 had become the private secretary to the marquis of Lansdowne, lord president of the Privy Council, was now shocking his friends with overheated résumés of the very latest confidential reports on the insurrection. Political turmoil in the stormy world outside of the sacred preserves of art now threatened to undermine the aesthetic creeds of Arnold and Ruskin even before they had been fully formed.