Of all decades in our history, a wise man would choose the eighteen-fifties to be young in.—G. M. Young, Victorian England: Portrait of an Age

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Matthew Arnold, “Dover Beach” (1851)

The more I watch the world, the more I feel that all men are blind and wandering. I am more indulgent to their sins, but more hopeless. I feel that braying in a mortar with a pestle will not make the foolishness depart out of the world. . . .—John Ruskin, letter of 9 January 1852
Past and Present

If the minds of poets and artists were wholly and simply determined by their social and historical circumstances, then we could assume that the doubts and distractions that beset Arnold and Ruskin as they pursued their respective callings in the turbulent forties would have subsided in the fifties. For the new decade was characterized, both in the eyes of contemporary observers like Bagehot and recent historians like Asa Briggs, by an atmosphere of optimism based upon prosperity, national security, trust in institutions, belief in a common moral code, and in free discussion and inquiry. W. L. Burn has, to be sure, warned against "playing the game of selective Victorianism" in describing this period, and has given evidence of a darker side to the picture of quiet contentment often painted; but he too asserts that by the fifties, "the fabric of society . . . could be taken for granted." Yet in the early fifties we find Arnold and Ruskin not only less certain than ever before of the rightness of their calling but firmly opposed to the dominant tendencies of the age, determined to swim against the stream even when they are not quite sure which direction the stream is taking.

We have already explored the reasons why, in the late forties, Arnold and Ruskin felt the need to detach themselves from what seemed to be the demands of their historical moment; and they were fully aware of the price that might have to be paid for such detachment. Late in 1848 Arnold could write to Clough: "I have been at Oxford the last two days and hearing Sellar and the rest of that clique who know neither life nor themselves rave about your poem gave me a strong almost bitter feeling with respect to them, the age, the poem, even you. Yes I said to myself something tells me I can, if need be, at last dispense with them all, even with him: better that, than be
sucked for an hour even into the Time Stream in which they and he plunge and bellow.”

Ruskin in 1849 wrote to his friend Henry Cole that he would not succumb to the supposed inevitabilities of the Time Spirit: “There is much truth in what you say respecting the inevitable tendencies of the age; but a man can only write effectively when he writes from his conviction—and may surrender the hope of being a guide to his Age, without thinking himself altogether useless as a Drag.”

The changed mood of England in the fifties caused no abatement in the determination of Arnold and Ruskin to resist the blandishments of the *Zeitgeist*. Arnold’s mode of resistance took the form of that strategy of withdrawal which he had begun to develop in the forties, whereas Ruskin’s resistance began to take the form of direct defiance. Writing to his sister Jane in January 1851, Arnold (still in the employ of Lord Lansdowne) expressed his determination to “retire more and more from the modern world and modern literature, which is all only what has been before and what will be again, and not bracing or edifying in the least. I have not looked at the newspapers for months, and when I hear of some new dispute or rage that has arisen, it sounds quite historical. . . .”

Ruskin, commenting later in the same year on the great popular enthusiasm for the Hungarian patriot Kossuth, on the new openness with which “Communism” is being avowed, and on the terrible abuses in government that justify lower-class political movements, wonders whether his feeling is humanitarian or merely contentious: “However, I must mind and not get too sympathising with the Radicals. Effie says with some justice that I am a great conservative in France, because there everybody is radical, and a great radical in Austria, because there everybody is conservative. I suppose that one reason why I am so fond of fish . . . is that they always swim with their heads against the stream. I find it for me the healthiest position.”

The oppositional spirit that animated Arnold and Ruskin in the beginning of the new decade was one of hostility not mainly to the status quo, or to reform, but to modernity itself. If in 1848 they refused to become fashionable Jeremiahs devoting themselves full time to denunciation of a corrupt civilization, so
now they refused to become fashionable Pollyannas. To fathom the depth of their conviction we need to look at the particular personal circumstances out of which, to some extent, the conviction grew.

The political excitement that Arnold had felt in the spring of 1848 had by 1849 been replaced by a studied skepticism about political action and the emotions it inspires. Arnold now finds the great people of the aristocratic world to which as Lord Lansdowne's secretary he had access both stupid and hard-hearted, but he trains himself to pity instead of hating these people because "I do not think any fruitful revolution can come in my time; and meanwhile, thank God, there are many honest people on earth, and the month of May comes every year." The young man who a year earlier had harangued mobs in Trafalgar Square now tries to avoid all newspapers and talk of current events. In September he asks Clough:

Why the devil do I read about Ld. Grey's sending convicts to the Cape, and excite myself thereby, when I can thereby produce no possible good. But public opinion consists in a multitude of such excitements. Thou fool—that which is morally worthless remains so, and undesired by Heaven, whatever results flow from it. And which of the units which has felt the excitement caused by reading of Lord Grey's conduct has been made one iota a better man thereby, or can honestly call his excitement a moral feeling?

Getting clear of the temptation of political commitment did not, however, mean that Arnold was comfortably settled into the poetic vocation. In fact, he continued to be afflicted by doubt as to whether his age afforded the right conditions for the creation of poetry. In the very month (February 1849) that The Strayed Reveller appeared he urged Clough to "reflect . . . how deeply unpoetical the age and all one's surroundings are." In the following month he thought himself getting "quite indifferent about the book" and gave away his only copy. His friends urged him to speak in his poems more from himself, which however he had "less and less . . . the inclination to do: or even the power." He was gladdened as well as irritated by complaints
in *Fraser's Magazine* for May 1849 that the subjects of his poems were uninteresting; for "as I feel rather as a reformer in poetical matters, I am glad of this opposition. If I have health & opportunity to go on, I will shake the present methods until they go down. . . ." But he knew, as he was later to write in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," that "for the creation of a master-work of literature two powers must concur, the power of the man and the power of the moment"; and he suspected that his own historical moment was not the right one: "My dearest Clough these are damned times—everything is against one—the height to which knowledge is come, the spread of luxury, our physical enervation, the absence of great natures, the unavoidable contact with millions of small ones, newspapers, cities, light profligate friends, moral desperadoes like Carlyle. . . ." A few weeks later, he told Clough he was thinking of doing voluntarily what his father had thought of forcing him to do ten years earlier: emigrating to Van Diemen's Land.8

The year 1849 was a time of Arnold's deepest involvement with, and also, in September, his final parting from, the French girl "Marguerite," whom he had met in Switzerland the year before. The "Switzerland" poems, composed for the most part in September, described not so much the love affair as the proof that its failure gave to Arnold of his coldness, of his isolation, of the imminent passing of his youth, and of his need for an ordered course of existence in the world. These discoveries about himself could not but affect Arnold's sense of his poetic vocation, for always his inquiries into the nature of poetry were also inquiries into the nature of life. More than ever before, as we have seen from his letters of this period, Arnold was convinced of the dismal, unpoetical quality of the world. But he had now discovered for himself what he had earlier preached to Clough: that "since the Baconian era wisdom is not found in deserts"—nor, he might have added, in Swiss mountains—and that "you should have some occupation . . . and you . . . need the world."9

Toward the end of the year Arnold composed a number of poems that tried to apply his new, if distressing, self-knowledge to the solution of his long-standing problem of the relation between his voca-
tion as poet and his role in the world. The longest of the group is "Stanzas in Memory of the Author of 'Obermann,'" begun in September and completed in November. Arnold had been attracted to Senancour, the author of Obermann, because he had had all his hopes destroyed by "the fiery storm of the French Revolution"—not, of course, the one that had so agitated Arnold the year before, but the "original" one of 1789—and in the wake of that destruction, tried from the perspective of a nearly perfect spiritual isolation, to see the world as it really was, to see it, as Arnold wrote two years later, "in its true blankness, and barrenness, and unpoetrylessness."¹⁰

In the poem that troubled outside world which we have seen Arnold trying to eject from his daily awareness at this time appears once again. Neither Wordsworth nor Goethe, the other great seers of modern times, can have quite the immediacy for Arnold that Senancour does because "Wordsworth's eyes avert their ken/ From half of human fate" and Goethe's youth (though not his manhood) was spent in a tranquil world. Arnold's generation, "brought forth and reared in hours / Of change, alarm, surprise," is more readily drawn to Senancour, who despite, or perhaps because of, his chilled feeling and icy despair, saw clearly the "hopeless tangle of our age."

Arnold now goes on to expand a paradox previously urged in "Resignation." Here as in the earlier poem we are told that the poet can see the world more clearly and fully as a detached spectator than as a committed participant; but here we are also told that only in solitude and isolation from the world can joy—the "glow" and "thrill" of life—be found; or rather, for Arnold states only the negative case, it is certain that joy is not to be found in the world or among men.

Ah! two desires toss about
The poet's feverish blood.
One drives him to the world without,
And one to solitude.

The glow, he cries, the thrill of life,
Where, where do these abound?
Not in the world, not in the strife
Of men, shall they be found.
He who hath watched, not shared, the strife,
Knows how the day hath gone.

(93–102)

Arnold therefore expresses the wish to join Senancour in his icy mountain solitude. But after several stanzas of imaginative ascent toward Senancour, Arnold suddenly dismisses the prospect of escape from the world into a (rather Tennysonian) realm of aesthetic contemplation as a deceptive dream and succumbs to what his recent experience of failure in love had led him to see as his fate: “I go, fate drives me; but I leave / Half of my life with you.”

What this poem tells us of Arnold’s life is that although he keeps referring to the compulsion of “Fate” or of “some unknown Power,” he entered “the world” imaginatively before the pressure of events—marriage and the need for subsistence—forced him into it. “I in the world must live,” he dolefully announces, but the example of Senancour himself—somewhat inconsistently, it must be said—suggests to him the possibility of preserving his soul intact even while functioning in the world. He imagines now a slightly more Christian version of what in March 1848 he had called the Indian distinction “between . . . abandoning practice, and abandoning the fruits of action and all respect thereto.”

Those who can embrace this Indian virtue of detachment even in the midst of practical life are “the Children of the Second Birth, / Whom the world could not tame”; and whatever their religion or social station or vocation, they are united by this bond, “that all have been / Unspotted by the world.” Armed with this determination, Arnold bids “a last farewell” to Obermann; and many have seen in this farewell to youth and emotion and joy a foreshadowing of Arnold’s more gradual and less dramatic farewell to poetry.

Before Arnold was literally forced into the world, then, he felt himself fragmented—“my poems are fragments . . . I am fragments”—by opposing impulses, conscious of diverse powers, uncertain of his direction and vocation, yet convinced that for every man there was a dominant impulse, a prevailing power, a correct path
and vocation. In "Human Life," probably written toward the end of 1849, Arnold wonders whether any mortal has ever at the conclusion of life been able to tell God without fear of contradiction: "I have kept uninfringed my nature's law; / The inly-written chart thou gavest me, / To guide me, I have steered by to the end" (4–6). Like the early Tennyson who was tempted by the life of luxuriance, rest, lotos-eating, Arnold confesses a desire to evade "too exact a steering" in hopes that he will be "lured" to "some fair coast." We see here that Arnold never really wavered from his father's conviction that for every man there was a special work to do; nor did he doubt that Fate would eventually direct him to his special work, for "Man cannot, though he would, live chance's fool." But his sense of what was sacrificed in being committed to a destined work at the expense of a free, open existence was already strong:

Even so we leave behind,
As, chartered by some unknown Powers,
We stem across the sea of life by night,
The joys which were not for our use designed;
The friends to whom we had no natural right,
The homes that were not destined to be ours.

(25–30)

An ordered course may be better than an unchartered freedom, but it is not granted except at a price.

Although he is later to speak of a best self and an ordinary self, of a buried life and a surface existence, Arnold is at the beginning of the new decade more likely to conceive of a multiplicity of selves and of the near impossibility of knowing consciously which one he was to adopt and become. "Self-Deception" sums up the quandary not only of Arnold but of the new professional middle class of the Victorian period, convinced it had a mission yet not knowing exactly where it lay. Arnold invents a myth according to which men, in a pre-existence, are allowed to outfit themselves with the powers they would like to wield in their earthly existence:
Long, long since, undowered yet, our spirit
Roamed, ere birth, the treasuries of God;
Saw the gifts, the powers it might inherit,
Asked an outfit for its earthly road.

(5–8)

Man causes some of his own trouble by trying to grasp every gift he sees instead of being prudently selective; but God seems almost to encourage man's confusion:

... alas! he left us each retaining
Shreds of gifts which he refused in full.
Still these waste us with their hopeless straining,
Still the attempt to use them proves them null.

And on earth we wander, groping, reeling;
Powers stir in us, stir and disappear.
Ah! and he, who placed our master-feeling,
Failed to place that master-feeling clear.

(17–24)

Arnold concludes with a cry of desperation, as if he knows not whether he will ever find any vocation or self, much less the right vocation and the right self: "Ah, some power exists there, which is ours? Some end is there, we indeed may gain?"

The true complement to "Self-Deception" in the 1852 volume of poems is not "The Buried Life," which offers a more optimistic version of the creation myth, but "Self-Dependence," which purports to answer the questions raised throughout the volume by means of the nature images that had already done service in this effort in the earlier volume. The poem begins with the speaker's expression of disgust with his own dilemma of indecision:

Weary of myself, and sick of asking
What I am, and what I ought to be,
At this vessel's prow I stand, which bears me
Forwards, forwards, o'er the starlit sea.

(1–4)
He then looks, as he has done since childhood, to the stars for calm and for guidance. The message that their seemingly lawful and ordered course conveys to him may seem curiously anachronistic for 1850, when Tennyson was telling everyone, in *In Memoriam*, how his faith in any kind of universal order had been undermined by the well-authenticated rumor that the stars “blindly run,” but it is at least consistent with the message the stars had given to Arnold in “Quiet Work” (and to Ruskin in “The Lamp of Obedience”):

> In the rustling night-air came the answer:  
> "Wouldst thou *be* as these are? *Live* as they.  
> "Unaffrighted by the silence round them,  
> Undistracted by the sights they see,  
> These demand not that the things without them  
> Yield them love, amusement, sympathy.  
> "And with joy the stars perform their shining,  
> And the sea its long moon-silvered roll;  
> For self-poised they live, nor pine with noting  
> All the fever of some differing soul.  
> "Bounded by themselves, and unregardful  
> In what state God's other works may be,  
> In their own tasks all their powers pouring,  
> These attain the mighty life you see.”

(15–28)

The stars embody an ordered nature in which is inherent not merely the peace that seemed to be its “secret” in “Resignation” but even the true Wordsworthian “joy,” a quality that Arnold will soon demand from literature; and they do so by being free of consciousness, both of themselves and others, and by living, as Arnold had previously (in “Religious Isolation”) urged Clough to do, by their own light.

The famous concluding stanza of the poem, which in editions from 1854 to 1881 was separated from the rest of the text by extra spacing or asterisks, is Arnold's version of Carlyle's message in *Sartor Resartus*. In that work Carlyle, through the mouth of Professor
Teufelsdröckh, had vowed to reject "the folly of that impossible Precept, Know thyself; till it be translated into this partially possible one, Know what thou canst work at." Arnold now translated this wisdom into a compelling injunction to himself:

O air-born voice! long since, severely clear,
A cry like thine in mine own heart I hear:
'Resolve to be thyself; and know that he,
Who finds himself, loses his misery!'

(29–32)

Arnold’s imaginative apprehension of a “Fate” determining his destiny in disregard of his will, of a Power forcing him to desert the life of art and emotion for the prison of “the world,” went well in advance of the pressure of actual circumstances in his life. So too did the imaginative resolution of this dilemma in the form of injunctions to “be thyself” precede any approach to a resolution in actual life. In one sense, of course, both the problem and its solution as they are conceived in Arnold’s imagination, extend beyond any apparent analogues in his life. But if we are to understand the crisis in Arnold’s life that was leading him toward a decisive turning point in 1853, we must try to see where and how the realms of imagination and of life had begun to impinge on each other.

In the sub-poetic world one widely recognized means of bringing order into a fluctuating existence is to marry; and in June 1851 this is precisely what Arnold did. He had been courting Frances Lucy Wightman throughout 1850, until August when Justice Wightman forbade further communication between his daughter and Arnold until the young man could offer some guarantee of his ability to support a wife. Arnold’s sources of income were still his secretaryship (to a man nearing the end of his career) and a fellowship that would end with his marriage; and we may suppose that the extreme reluctance with which Arnold had committed himself to “the world” was visible to some others besides himself. By 21 December, however, Arnold was able to inform Miss Wightman that Lingen, his old tu-
tor at Oxford, was advising him about inspectorships and how to use Lord Lansdowne's influence in obtaining one of them.\textsuperscript{14}

By January of the new year, then, Arnold sensed what worldly fate was in store for him, although his appointment as inspector of schools would not come until April and the marriage did not take place until June. In January he wrote to his sister Jane, who had herself been recently married, a moving and revealing acknowledgement of his simultaneous resistance and resignation to his worldly destiny:

How strong the tendency is, . . . as characters take their bent, and lives their separate course, to submit oneself gradually to the silent influence that attaches us more and more to those whose characters are like ours, and whose lives are running the same way with our own, and that detaches us from everything besides, as if we could only acquire any solidity of shape and power of acting by narrowing and narrowing our sphere, and diminishing the number of affections and interests which continually distract us while young, and hold us unfixed and without energy to mark our place in the world; which we thus succeed in marking only by making it a very confined and joyless one. The aimless and unsettled, but also open and liberal state of our youth we must perhaps all leave and take refuge in our morality and character; but with most of us it is a melancholy passage from which we emerge shorn of so many beams that we are almost tempted to quarrel with the law of nature which imposes it on us.\textsuperscript{16}

The gloomy predictions of Arnold's poems of 1849-50 were now in process of being fulfilled, and his recognition of the similarity between the fate he had feared and the one that was now being realized led him, out of consideration for the young woman who seemed to be the innocent instrument of that fate, to postpone their publication until 1852.\textsuperscript{18} Although Arnold's brother found it "very difficult to fancy the 'Emperor' married," Stanley reported that Arnold was "greatly improved by his marriage—retaining all the genius and no-
bleness of mind . . . with all the lesser faults pruned and softened down.” But Arnold knew that his new life could never be more than a mocking reflection of the imaginative order he had sought in his poetry; and one of the best proofs of the disparity between the resolution he had now found in life and that toward which his poetry had been striving is to be found in the famous conclusion to “Dover Beach.”

The poem was probably composed in late June 1851, two weeks after Arnold’s marriage, although it was not published until 1867. Like many of Arnold’s poems, it has the form though not the substance of a dramatic monologue, and insofar as it is permissible to identify poetic characters with actual persons, we may say that the woman addressed by the speaker is Arnold’s bride. Viewing the great panorama that is the glory of Dover, including as it does the beach, the cliffs, the sea, and the lights of Calais, the speaker calls his companion to the window to share with him the audible pleasures of the ebb and flow of the tide. Thus far all is well. But he then returns imaginatively, as Arnold was often to do in these years, to a phenomenon of the distant past that affords a prototype of the modern spiritual state:

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegaean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

(15–20)

The thought that the movement of the sea suggests to Arnold is that of the retreat of religious faith and its various subsidiary faiths:

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

(21–28)

The beauty and the music of nature have proved to be illusion and discord, just as the Sophocles who in "To a Friend" "saw life steadily, and saw it whole" now hears only sadness and sees in his mind's eye only misery. The comfort Arnold had so often in earlier poems sought in nature is now withdrawn; he deplores, much as in "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse," the loss of his religious faith and conceives of the loss as a deprivation of those very qualities that had been ascribed to nature when she had been invoked as a substitute for supernatural sanction:

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain. . . .

(29–34)

Finding himself in a world that lacks not only those qualities he had in many poems celebrated in nature—"neither joy . . . nor peace"—but all other qualities that rest on faith, Arnold turns briefly for consolation to that terrestrial embodiment of an ordered existence, his beloved wife. But he knows that the hope of finding truth in personal relations, in "love," must be vain in a world that destroys the very conditions that could endow love with meaning. If such poems as "Self-Dependence" and "Stanzas in Memory of the Author of 'Obermann'" seem to point ahead to Arnold's resignation to the world, even to his marriage, then "Dover Beach," written so soon after that marriage, expresses his continued resistance to the idea that stoical submission to one's worldly fate can bring peace and even joy.
In the final statement of the poem, which will cease to move us as a description of our own plight only when the joys of Utopia shall have made us indifferent to the trivial pleasures derivable from poetic melancholy, Arnold forgets all notions of consolation and resignation, perceives himself deserted by faith and by nature and stranded in the midst of that troubled modern world he had been trying to flee or to resist since late in 1848. The revolution of 1848 and the siege of Rome by the French in 1849\(^\text{19}\) now join in Arnold’s consciousness with Thucydides’ famous image of the “night-battle” to produce what Dwight Culler has called “the central statement which Arnold makes about the human condition”:\(^\text{20}\)

> And we are here as on a darkling plain  
> Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
> Where ignorant armies clash by night.

\((35-37)\)

In 1851 the loss of religious faith, as “Dover Beach” proclaims, was afflicting others besides Arnold. Tennyson had publicly expressed his quandaries in the previous year, and in the month before Arnold wrote “Dover Beach,” John Ruskin was writing to his friend Henry Acland: “You speak of the Flimsiness of your own faith. Mine, which was never strong, is being beaten into mere gold leaf, and flutters in weak rags from the letter of its old forms; but the only letters it can hold by at all are the old Evangelical formulae. If only the Geologists would let me alone, I could do very well, but those dreadful Hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses—. . . . ”\(^\text{21}\)

The causes that undermined Ruskin’s religious faith were different from those that disturbed Arnold. Ruskin’s faith still rested on the idea of factual and historical accuracy in the Bible, and so he could become wild with impatience at exactly the characteristic of Scripture that Arnold relished: its poetry. The poetry of the prophecies, the mysterious manner of revealing doctrines, tormented him: “I don’t want poetry there. I want plain truth—and I would give all the poetry in Isaiah and Ezekiel willingly, for one or two clearer dates.”\(^\text{22}\) Rus-
kin was also able to retain a living belief in the divinity of that "other" book of revelation, the natural world, long after the religious dimensions of Arnold's naturalism had evaporated.

The important link between Ruskin's crisis of religious faith and Arnold's is that Ruskin's religious convictions for a time afforded him the kind of armor against excessive sensibility to the world and its suffering that Arnold sought in stoicism, whether in its Hindu or Christian form. At the beginning of the new decade, Ruskin was as yet not only not a committed social reformer, but took great care to separate himself from those scientific men who had given up all thought of a future life and set their hearts upon efforts to improve this world: "To believe in a future life is for me the only way in which I can enjoy this one, and that not with a semi-belief which would still allow me to be vexed at what occurred to me here, but with such a thorough belief as will no more allow me to be annoyed by earthly misfortunes than I am by grazing my knee when I am climbing an Alp."28 Ruskin was already fearful of jeopardizing his happiness by staking it on the outcome of his own worldly strivings or on efforts to improve the worldly happiness of others; but unlike Arnold he did not allow this fear to become the very subject of his work, and did not set himself the task of elaborating a stoical code that would allow him to be in the world yet not of it.

While Arnold in 1849 and 1850 was engaged in a subjective exploration of the meaning of his failure in love, Ruskin was in Venice, ignoring his wife, oblivious of his personal failure as a husband, and entirely engrossed in studying the stones of Venice. He began his work on the new book within a few months of publication of The Seven Lamps because he felt that, once again, his subject—Venice—was itself rapidly disappearing, and because the present condition of England convinced him that in the stones of Venice lay a necessary lesson for his countrymen. Like the Arnold of 1849-50 he was obsessed with the question of the relation of art to society and of the workman to his work; but his published work, unlike Arnold's poetry, looked outward toward the public aspect of these questions instead of translating them into questions of the writer's own destiny.
The stones in the title of *The Stones of Venice*, the first volume of which appeared in March 1851, had, over and above their literal significance, the meaning of touchstones, magical detectors, of the sort Arnold was later to seek for poetry, of the presence or absence of quality: “And if I should succeed, as I hope, in making the Stones of Venice touch-stones, and detecting, by the mouldering of her marble, poison more subtle than ever was betrayed by the rending of her crystal . . . I believe the result of the inquiry may be serviceable for proof of a more vital truth than any at which I have hitherto hinted.” Writing at one of the many periods in history when a crude utilitarian progressivism makes concern with the contemporary the necessary sign of seriousness in artistic and intellectual work, Ruskin must justify his retreat to the past by producing a lesson for the present: “Since first the dominion of men was asserted over the ocean, three thrones, of mark beyond all others, have been set upon its sands: the thrones of Tyre, Venice, and England. Of the First of these great powers only the memory remains; of the Second, the ruin; the Third, which inherits their greatness, if it forget their example, may be led through prouder eminence to less pitied destruction.”

In *The Crown of Wild Olive* (1866) Ruskin said that in *The Stones of Venice* he had “from beginning to end, no other aim than to show that the Gothic architecture of Venice had arisen out of, and indicated in all its features, a state of pure national faith, and of domestic virtue; and that its Renaissance architecture had arisen out of, and in all its features indicated, a state of concealed national infidelity, and of domestic corruption.” The first volume of *The Stones of Venice* is primarily devoted to an analysis of “the best structure of stone and brick building,” but its introductory chapter already announces the great principle of “the relation of the art of Venice to her moral temper . . . and that of the life of the workman to his work.” Yet the explicit application of the lesson of Venetian history to the condition of Victorian England does not come until 1853, in the famous central chapter on “The Nature of Gothic.” At the beginning of *The Stones of Venice* Ruskin is content merely to sketch a brief history of the nation whose “secret spring” of exertion has always been her com-
commercial instinct and to leave his readers to draw their own analogies. He divides the history of the Venetian states into two periods. The first, when they were governed "by the worthiest and noblest man whom they could find among them," lasted 900 years and included the rise of Venice and her noblest achievements. The second lasted 500 years, included the central epoch of the life of Venice, from the middle of the thirteenth century to the beginning of the fifteenth century, but also the commencement of her fall in 1418.

Both the art and the power of Venice, Ruskin now asserts—proof is largely to come later—derived from her religious faith. Ruskin's readers (who in 1851 were very few) might have read a warning to England in his observation that "the most curious phenomenon in all Venetian history is the vitality of religion in private life, and its deadness in public policy." For when the strength of individual religion waned both prosperity and the arts also failed. The history of the ducal palace is the physical embodiment of the history of Venice and of the religious conflicts occurring there. As Ruskin the geologist had read in rocks the history of whole species, so now he tried to read in the stones of Venice a segment of European history. In the decline of the Roman Empire, he claims, two opposed forces, the Lombards and the Arabs, brought revivifying energy to the corpse of Christianity:

The work of the Lombard was to give hardihood and system to the enervated body and enfeebled mind of Christendom; that of the Arab was to punish idolatry, and to proclaim the spirituality of worship. The Lombard covered every church which he built with the sculptured representations of bodily exercises—hunting and war. The Arab banished all imagination of creature form from his temples, and proclaimed from their minarets, "There is no god but God." Opposite in their character and mission, alike in their magnificence of energy, they came from the North and from the South, the glacier torrent and the lava stream: they met and contended over the wreck of the Roman empire; and the very centre of the struggle, the point of pause of both, the
dead water of the opposite eddies, charged with embayed fragments of the Roman wreck, is VENICE.27

But Ruskin claimed to see more than history in these stones of Venice. "A strange, unexpected, and I believe, most true and excellent Sermon in Stones—" was Carlyle's description of his gift copy of the first volume of *The Stones of Venice*. For Ruskin asserted that all art was a reflection of the religious and moral ethos of the society that produced it. Thus the contrast between the Venetian painters Giovanni Bellini and Titian is not a mere aesthetic difference explainable by reference to different kinds of formal choices; neither is it a difference in their natural characters. Rather, it is owing to the fact that Bellini was born in 1423 and Titian in 1480, and that "between the years of their births the vital religion of Venice had expired." That formalism lingered on in the absence of faith is evident from Titian's picture of the Doge Antonio Grimani kneeling before faith in the ducal palace. "The figure of faith is a coarse portrait of one of Titian's least graceful female models."28 No matter where Ruskin explores Venice, in the ducal palace, in paintings, in tombs, he finds evidence of a downward turning point after 1423. Nor is this true only of Venice. Foscari became doge in that year, "and in his reign the first marked signs appear in architecture of that mighty change . . . to which London owes St. Paul's, Rome St. Peter's, Venice and Vicenza the edifices commonly supposed to be their noblest, and Europe in general the degradation of every art she has since practised."29

In his reading of Venetian history in Venetian art, Ruskin seemed to have found the solution to his conscientious qualms of the previous decade. By becoming an art-critic rather than a clergyman, and then by writing of architecture while Europe was embroiled in revolutions, Ruskin believed that he had to some extent been selfishly indulging his own most pleasurable impulses in disregard of moral and social responsibility. His uneasiness about this apparent irresponsibility was revealed in the awkward justification he offered in *The Seven Lamps*, for diverting men's attention from more pressing matters into the consideration of what states of moral temper are neces-
sary to the production of good architecture. Now, in *The Stones of Venice*, he argued that criticism of art was nothing other than criticism of society and morality. The art of a country was of necessity the index of its moral temper and also of its social and political virtues; and the fate of nations was, and is, determined by their moral and religious temper. This being so, the critic of style is also, and inevitably, a critic of society and of morality, and even a religious prophet as well. His chief occupation, the perception of beauty, far from being selfish sensual indulgence, is eminently moral because it is a process of measuring the quality of emotional life in the artist and in the civilization that produced him. It is related to immediate questions of character and conduct because it helps living men to discern the moral and religious patterns of history and so save themselves from the fate of their impious predecessors. By, for example, comparing simple Gothic tombs with elaborate Renaissance monuments, they will be enabled to see how a decline in taste resulted from an increased fear of death, that is, from a decline in religious faith.

Ruskin was making his most ambitious attempt yet to reconcile the occupation of art critic with the demands of utilitarianism and religion. In the second volume of *Modern Painters* where, as we have seen, he was very conscious of the utilitarian outlook, he had distinguished between the utilitarian functions of the senses and those that "answer not any purposes of mere existence" but "are an end in themselves." But in Venice in 1849–50 Ruskin found his "aesthetic" senses overwhelmed by beauty and so, as John Rosenberg has pointed out, averted the spell the city had cast over him by plotting its moral decline in the Renaissance. In any event, the first volume of *The Stones of Venice* shows Ruskin trying to have it both ways. He does not plunge into direct criticism of contemporary English society, but indulges his love of beauty at extravagant length; yet he makes the whole enterprise subservient to utility and religion. Charlotte Brontë remarked that "his earnestness even amuses me in certain passages, for I cannot help laughing to think how utilitarians will fume and fret over his deep, serious and (as they will think) fanatical reverence for Art." Better yet, *The Church of England Quarterly*
Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, and the Modern Temper

paid particular tribute to Ruskin for having eschewed the ready temptation to become yet another member of the class of idle rich, in order to dedicate art to the glory of God: "We cannot conclude our notice of this remarkable volume without expressing our delight in the contemplation of one with all the allurements to idleness, and the profitless pleasures of fashionable life, which beset the path of a man in his known position, devoting his early and best energies to the illustration and advancement of art, and making all things subservient to the glory of God, dealing out his censures with severity, chiefly on those who have mistranslated the works of the Great Artificer. . . ."

When he began work on the second volume of The Stones of Venice, Ruskin was more than ever before convinced of the social utility and religious value of his enterprise. Ironically, he commenced working on the volume that was to become famous for its indictment of the English industrial and commercial system and its celebration of Gothic architecture on the very day that the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations opened in the Crystal Palace:

May 1st, 1851. DENMARK HILL. Morning. All London is astir, and some part of all the world. I am sitting in my quiet room, hearing the birds sing, and about to enter on the true beginning of the second part of my Venetian Work. May God help me to finish it to His glory, and man's good.

The 13,000 exhibits of the Great Exhibition were divided into four groups: raw materials, machinery, manufactures, and fine arts. By far the most popular section, however, was the Machinery Court, to which Queen Victoria herself was attracted by a machine that produced fifty million medals a week and by the electric telegraph that enabled her to address her subjects in Edinburgh and Manchester. The purpose of the Exhibition was "to present a true test and living picture of the point of development at which the whole of mankind has arrived . . . and a new starting point, from which all nations will be able to direct their further exertions." But some perversely chose to look backward rather than forward; and for these men there
stood, apart from the rest of the Exhibition, "looking dark and solemn," Pugin's Medieval Court "for the display of the taste and art of dead men." 

We can hardly doubt that Ruskin had the Great Exhibition much in mind as he worked on the second and third volumes of The Stones of Venice. Two days after he had begun to work, the Times of 3 May deplored the absence of a Turner from the year's Academy exhibition: "We miss those works of INSPIRATION!" Ruskin's response indicates his awareness of the Great Exhibition and his estimate of its value:

_We_ miss! Who misses? The populace of England rolls by to weary itself in the great bazaar of Kensington, little thinking that a day will come when those veiled vestals and prancing amazons, and goodly merchandise of precious stones and gold, will all be forgotten as though they had not been; but that the light which has faded from the walls of the Academy is one which a million Koh-i-noors could not rekindle; and that the year 1851 will, in the far future, be remembered less for what it has displayed, than for what it has withdrawn.

The contrast between the care and expense being lavished upon the Crystal Palace and its contents, and the indifference with which his contemporaries witnessed the destruction of the glories of Venetian painting and architecture exacerbated Ruskin and intensified his sense of mission:

In the year 1851, when all that glittering roof [of the Crystal Palace] was built, in order to exhibit the paltry arts of our fashionable luxury—the carved bedsteads of Vienna, and glued toys of Switzerland, and gay jewellery of France—in that very year, I say, the greatest pictures of the Venetian masters were rotting at Venice in the rain, for want of roof to cover them, with holes made by cannon shot through the canvas.

There is another fact, however, more curious ... namely, that at the very period when Europe is congratulated on
the invention of a new style of architecture, because fourteen acres of ground have been covered with glass, the greatest examples in existence of true and noble Christian architecture are being resolutely destroyed. . . .

Not long after setting to work on the second volume of The Stones of Venice, Ruskin discovered that it would be necessary for him to make another extended visit to Venice. He completed a pamphlet on behalf of the Pre-Raphaelites in July and set off for the Continent with Effie in August, vacationing in Switzerland before starting work in Venice in September. Although he still considered that The Stones of Venice was but an interruption of his main work and spent much time enjoying Venetian society with Effie, Ruskin had all of his heart and head in this book. It was, after all, work that he instinctively liked, and not—as would be the case with Unto This Last and Munera Pulveris—work forced on him by a sense of duty: "... There is the strong instinct in me which I cannot analyse to draw and describe the things I love—not for reputation, nor for the good of others, nor for my own advantage, but a sort of instinct like that for eating or drinking. I should like to draw all St. Mark's, and all this Verona stone by stone, to eat it all up into my mind, touch by touch."

He continued to separate himself from "a different species from me—men of the world, caring for very little about anything but Men."

Ten years later, in the midst of his economic controversies, he could recall with nostalgia the times when he had been working in Venice "from six in the morning till ten at night, in all the joy of youth."

Yet the period from September 1851 to June 1852, during which Ruskin felt so deeply the joy of creation, was not without its distresses, distresses that would express themselves indirectly through the great sixth chapter of The Stones of Venice, "The Nature of Gothic." Ruskin's fury at the Great Exhibition and its immense popularity affords one illustration among many of his growing sense of isolation, much like Arnold's at this time, from the course of modern English civilization. In January, Ruskin told his father, "The more I watch the world, the more I feel that all men are blind and wandering." He felt helpless to dissipate the ignorance and stupidity that seemed to him the
main causes of misery because "braying in a mortar with a pestle will not make the foolishness depart out of the world. . . ." 39

Joyous as he was in his work at this time, Ruskin already had the fear, later confirmed, that the further he pressed his discoveries, the more clearly he understood and articulated their practical consequences, the greater would be his isolation from his fellows. Whether he wrote on Turner or on Venice, Ruskin was already convinced that he was a man who knew what others did not know and felt what they could not feel. In February he wrote to his father about his habit of being "in advance of the mob" that "in all things now—I see a hand they cannot see; and they cannot be expected to believe or follow me: and the more justly I judge, the less I shall be attended to." 40

The other occasion of Ruskin's distress during the generally exuberant period of composition of *The Stones of Venice* was the bad state of English society. In November of 1851 he was much struck by reading in *Galignani* three news stories incompatible with, yet oddly explanatory of, each other. Readers of Arnold's "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" or of Carlyle's *Past and Present* or, indeed, of Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* will know that in Victorian times newspaper stories had an almost magical way of arranging themselves in significantly paradoxical groups; and Ruskin was now the beneficiary of one of these revealing coincidences:

I was rather struck yesterday by three paragraphs in *Galig­nani*—in parallel columns—so that the eye ranged from one to the other. The first gave an account of a girl aged twenty-one, being found, after lying exposed all night, and having given birth to a dead child, on the banks of the canal near (Maidstone, I think—but some English county town); the second was the fashions for November, with an elaborate account of satin skirts; and the third, a burning to death of a child—or rather, a dying after burning—because the surgeon, without an order from the parish, would neither go to see it nor send it any medicine. 41

Ironically, the Ruskin who during the "hungry forties" succeeded pretty well in keeping his mind hermetically sealed against awareness of
the plight of the poor, now, in the prosperous, complacent fifties, began to take some interest in economic questions.

The first result of this new interest was not "The Nature of Gothic" but three letters written to the *Times* on taxation, representation, and education. Though addressed to the paper, they were—like all of Ruskin's writings at this time—submitted first to John James Ruskin's censorship; and they did not pass the censor: "I shall see to letters for *Times* on my return, as you so wish it. My feelings of attacks on your books and on your newspaper writing differ from yours in this way. I think all attacks on your books are only as the waves beating on Eddystone Lighthouse, whereas your politics are Slum Buildings liable to be knocked down; and no man to whom authority is a useful engine should expose himself to frequent defeat by slender forces."42

From the first letter, we can see that despite the link that he had forged in the first volume of *The Stones of Venice* between art and society, Ruskin still felt uneasy about his unworldly vocation and under some obligation to justify it: "Neither my circumstances nor my health admit of my entering into public life—and having little sympathy with the present course of English policy, and less power to resist it, I am forced, while my own country is multiplying errors and provoking dangers, to pass my days in deciphering the confessions of one which destroyed itself long ago."43 Nevertheless, a system of taxation that paralyzes commerce at the same time that it inflames the populace obliges him to break his silence. The voice that emerges from this silence, after uttering one or two gratuitous anti-Semitic remarks, proposes a luxury tax, a graduated income tax, and a property tax. The second abortive letter, less "radical" in its proposals, stresses the importance of weighing as well as counting votes: since it is no longer possible to keep the common people from thinking about governments, the question is how to give the people no more than their proper weight in the state.

The third letter, the only one printed in Ruskin's lifetime, was devoted to the Principles of Education and was incorporated, as an appendix, in the final volume of *The Stones of Venice*. That Ruskin cared deeply about its subject is clear from a letter of 26 April 1852 to
his father: "I have not any more notice—in any of your letters, of the last on education, which you seem at first to have been much pleased with. I liked that, myself—and some time or other I must recast it in some way, for I want to have at our present system—I don't know any thing which seems to me so much to require mending." The existing system of classical education is blamed by Ruskin for mistaking erudition for education. Ruskin holds that the education of every man should teach him three things: "First, Where he is. Secondly, Where he is going. Thirdly, What he had best do, under those circumstances." Ruskin finds that the existing European system either ignores or despises all three branches of knowledge. It despises Natural History, and promotes the study of words above the study of things; it despises Religion, preferring theology, or talk about God, which loosens the elements of religious faith, to the binding or training of men to God's service; and finally, and most important, it despises Politics, or "the science of the relations and duties of men to each other."

The turmoil of 1848 might have receded into the background of Ruskin's awareness during the intervening four years, but it had not vanished. He now called upon the educational system to forestall further revolution by teaching every schoolboy "the impossibility of equality among men; the good which arises from their inequality; the compensating circumstances in different states and fortunes" and, in general, the virtues of a hierarchical class system. While Ruskin himself still luxuriated in the glories of the Venetian past, he called upon English educators to teach their pupils of the Peninsular as well as the Peloponnesian War, of modern Italy as well as of old Etruria; in short, to instruct them in contemporary history and present duty.

Once again, as we have seen him do in private letters, Ruskin dissociates himself from those among his contemporaries who seek perfection of the earthly city as a substitute for the heavenly one in which they no longer believe. But to recognize that earth can never be heaven is not to admit that it can never be made better than it is:

For though I have not yet abandoned all expectation of a better world than this, I believe this in which we live is not
so good as it might be. I know there are many people who suppose French revolutions, Italian insurrections, Caffre wars, and such other scenic effects of modern policy, to be among the normal conditions of humanity. I know there are many who think the atmosphere of rapine, rebellion, and misery which wraps the lower orders of Europe more closely every day, is as natural a phenomenon as a hot summer. But God forbid! There are ills which flesh is heir to, and troubles to which man is born; but the troubles which he is born to are as sparks which fly upward, not as flames burning to the nethermost Hell.  

Ruskin expresses sympathy with the movement to educate the lower classes. But for them as for other classes, education has to mean not the acquisition of a body of knowledge but instruction in what will fit them to do their work and to be happy in it. Finally, anticipating Arnold's concerns of the sixties, Ruskin urges a system of national education, because it is the duty of the state to educate as well as to clothe and feed every child. "But in order to the effecting this, the government must have an authority over the people of which we now do not so much as dream; and I cannot in this place pursue the subject farther."

Matthew Arnold, in March of 1852 when Ruskin wrote this letter, was no longer at leisure merely to deplore the existing educational system and then drop the subject. For Arnold was by this time employed as one of Her Majesty's inspectors of schools. He had been appointed to the position in April of the previous year, but did not begin work until October. On September 1 he and Fanny Lucy embarked on a honeymoon trip through France, Italy, and Switzerland. They were in Verona and Venice at the same time as the Ruskins, but traveled in a very different sphere of society. Fanny Lucy wrote to her sister of the excitement of seeing at a distance the Austrian emperor and Marshal Radetsky; the Ruskins were invited to a reception for the first and were themselves the object of courtly attention by the second. By October, while the Ruskins continued to enjoy masked
balls and gala nights at the opera and private parties in honor of royalty, the Arnolds had returned to England where Matthew began the dreary and vexatious work of school inspection.

Outwardly, there could be few more striking contrasts than that between Arnold and Ruskin in the fall of 1851 and the subsequent winter. While Ruskin pursued his artistic work with greater joy in creation than he had experienced, and grudged losing a single day to extraneous concerns, Arnold found himself beleaguered by an existence that required almost incessant travel and that seemed spiritually as well as practically incompatible with the creation of poetry.

Like Ruskin's, Arnold's political awareness had been dormant since 1848 but not dead; and like Ruskin, Arnold now saw the political significance of education in an era of revolutionary transition. "I think," he wrote after starting his work, "I shall get interested in the schools after a little time; their effects on the children are so immense, and their future effects in civilising the next generation of the lower classes, who, as things are going, will have most of the political power of the country in their hands, may be so important." For all his poetic speculation about entering the world, Arnold was as yet hardly aware of how irrevocably he had done so. Within a few days of beginning the job he was to hold for thirty-five years, he was anticipating retirement from it: "We shall certainly have a good deal of moving about; but we both like that well enough, and we can always look forward to retiring to Italy on £200 a year. I intend seriously to see what I can do in such a case in the literary way that might increase our income. But for the next three or four years I think we shall both like it well enough." 49

As late as 1886 Arnold could tell A. J. Mundella, a former vice president of the Committee of the Privy Council on Education, about his "routine work" as an inspector that "the permanent officials know I cared little about my performances." His irritation with the routine was apparent from the first. "I have had a hard day," he writes to his wife in December 1851. "Thirty pupil teachers to examine in an inconvenient room and nothing to eat except a biscuit, which a charitable lady gave me." Later in the month when Clough was thinking
of applying for a position at the Education Office, Arnold described the occupation as “hard dull work low salary stationariness, and London to be stationary in. . . . ”

We have already seen how, at this time, the fear of passing youth and of growing isolation from the course of modern English society had tinged Ruskin’s general cheer with some apprehension, but far from troubling his work on *The Stones of Venice* was leading him to a new awareness of society that was to enrich the second volume of that work. Given the new circumstances of Arnold’s existence in 1851–53, it is hardly surprising that the same fears should have moved to the center of his consciousness. But, perhaps because he worked in poetry and not prose, he found greater difficulty than Ruskin in making these fears the means of discovering new materials for imaginative exploitation.

G. M. Young once concluded a description of the new literary generation growing up in 1850 by saying that “over them all droops the fading youth of Matthew Arnold, in the full decrepitude of twenty-eight.” The image, comical as it is, gives an accurate picture of Arnold’s own idea of himself at the time of his entry into the world. He had already, as we have seen, said farewell to his youth in bidding farewell to Marguerite and to Senancour. But “what a difference there is between reading in poetry and morals of the loss of youth, and experiencing it! And after all there is so much to be done, if one could but do it.” “How life rushes away, and youth. One has dawdled and scrupled and fiddle faddled—and it is all over.”

Arnold hears the injunction from the Gospel of St. John, filtered through the voice of Carlyle, to “Work while it is called Today, for the Night cometh, wherein no man can work.” He urges Clough to “be bustling about it; we are growing old, and advancing towards the deviceless darkness; it would be well not to reach it until we had at least tried some of the things men consider desirable.” There is so much to be done if one could but do it! But Arnold now feels that he cannot. When *Empedocles on Etna*, the volume of poems that had for the most part been written before he actually entered the world, appears in October 1852 Arnold is “fighting the battle of life as an In-
spectator of Schools." He greets the newly published volume with the grim "Caution to Poets":

What poets feel not, when they make,
A pleasure in creating,
The world, in its turn, will not take
Pleasure in contemplating.

He sees now where the poems are all wrong, which he did not see the year before, only "I doubt whether I shall ever have heat and radiance enough to pierce the clouds that are massed round me. Not in my little social sphere indeed, with you and Walrond: there I could crackle to my grave—but vis à vis of the world. . . ."53

Part of the "wrongness" of the poems consisted precisely of their clarity of vision into the modern world: "Woe was upon me if I analysed not my situation: and Werter[,] Rene[,] and such like[,] none of them analyse the modern situation in its true blankness and barrenness, and unpoetrylessness."54 Arnold, like Ruskin, found that the disinterested effort to see things as they really are and then to describe what one sees causes the disinterested seer to become isolated from his fellow men. This was the price that had been paid by the hero of the title poem of the unsatisfactory volume in question, Empedocles.

In his analysis of Empedocles' character, Arnold writes:

He sees things as they are—the world as it is—God as he is: in their stern simplicity. The sight is a severe and mind-tasking one. . . . But he started towards it in hope: his first glimpses of it filled him with joy; he had friends who shared his hope and joy. . . . But his friends are dead: the world is all against him, and incredulous of the truth: his mind is overtasked by the effort to hold fast so great and severe a truth in solitude: the atmosphere he breathes not being modified by the presence of human life, is too rare for him.

In February 1853 Arnold tells Clough that "congestion of the brain is what we suffer from—I always feel it and say it—and cry for air
like my own Empedocles.” The rarity of an air unbreathed by his fel­low men now seems to freeze Arnold’s spirits and to paralyze his pen: “I am past thirty, and three parts iced over—and my pen, it seems to me is even stiffer and more cramped than my feeling.”

As Arnold’s sense of isolation, of passing youth, of the paralysis of his feeling and his art grew more intense, he began to reconsider his earlier view of the nature of the poet and the function of poetry. In June, commenting on the latest episode in Clough’s interminable quest for a suitable occupation, Arnold recognizes, sadly, that great careers are hardly possible in modern times, even when one is willing to sacrifice “repose dignity and inward clearness” in the search for them. He complains, again like his own Empedocles, that the world now caters to the masses at the expense of the naturally gifted individual. But here he reverses what has begun to sound like a Carlylean lament for heroic times, and adds that “it is as well perhaps that it should be so—for hitherto the gifted have astonished and delighted the world, but not trained or inspired or in any real way changed it—and the world might do worse than to dismiss too high pretensions, and settle down on what it can see and handle and appreciate.” The air of present times does lack nourishment, and men like Arnold and Clough may well see themselves as gifted Romans in a declining Em­pire: “Still nothing can absolve us from the duty of doing all we can to keep alive our courage and activity.”

In the midst of his deepest despair the once carefree son of Dr. Arnold begins to embrace his father’s code of duty and social respon­sibility. The world has not been made to please poets; at least it has not been made to please Empedoclean poets. This being so, Arnold must reconsider the aesthetics of detachment that pervaded the 1849 volume; and in the very same letter where he laments how much there is to be done and how little time remains in which to do it, Arnold reverses his earlier condemnation of poets who fancy themselves reformers, and of poetry that puts moral and religious considerations above aesthetic ones by trying to guide life instead of merely accom­panying it: “Modern poetry can only subsist by its contents: by be­coming a complete magister vitae as the poetry of the ancients did:
by including, as theirs did, religion with poetry, instead of existing as poetry only, and leaving religious wants to be supplied by the Christian religion, as a power existing independent of the poetical power."

Poetry, if it is to survive at all, will have to look outside of itself and forge an alliance with religion and morality in the effort to direct modern life.

Arnold wrote this letter in the same month (October 1852) that Empedocles on Etna appeared; and Arnold found himself in the awkward position of having before the public a volume of poems to which he himself had the strongest principled objections. By 1853 he was casting about for new directions to follow in his life and in his poetry. In March he found inspecting "peculiarly oppressive" and told Lucy how he had been daydreaming about a diplomatic appointment to Switzerland, "and how different that would be from this incessant grind in schools." In May he confessed to Clough that "I catch myself desiring now at times political life, and this and that. . . ." Coincident with his deepening dissatisfaction with his occupation and his poetry was a new kind of moralistic reaction to literature. Villette struck him as a disagreeable novel because it reflected a disagreeable mind that "contains nothing but hunger, rebellion, and rage, and therefore that is all she can, in fact, put into her book."
The cause of Miss Brontë's failure was just the cause of the failure of Renaissance architects according to the author of The Stones of Venice: she had lost her religion and had not yet found a substitute for it. "No fine writing can hide this thoroughly, and it will be fatal to her in the long run." Bulwer's My Novel pleased Arnold somewhat better, but "Bulwer's nature is by no means a perfect one either."

Arnold had begun to read literature as a reflection of the moral life of its creator. For how can literature be a religious director of life if it is not written by religious men and women? But where were such men and women to be found in the 1850s? Charlotte Brontë's case, Arnold knew, was a representative rather than an isolated one: "Religion or devotion or whatever it is to be called may be impossible for such people [as Miss Brontë] now: but they have at any rate not found
a substitute for it and it was better for the world when they comforted themselves with it.” Among “such people now” was Arnold himself. In September, a few months after berating Charlotte Brontë for her irreligious rage, he admitted that artists who had discarded religious dogmas could now produce excellent work only if they could love “passionately enough” what was intrinsically beautiful and compelling. “As it is, we are warm only when dealing with these last—and what is frigid is always bad. I would have others—most others stick to the old religious dogmas because I sincerely feel that this warmth is the great blessing, and this frigidity the great curse—and on the old religious road they have still the best chance of getting the one and avoiding the other.”

Having asserted that art must be a director of life, and that artistic success depends upon the moral and religious character of the artist, Arnold was forced by his own predicament to go a step further and say that artistic success is not entirely a matter of the will and capacity of the individual artist but also a function of the culture that produces him. Throughout 1853, as Arnold felt his own creative powers more and more fettered by his circumstances—“I am nothing and very probably never shall be anything—but there are characters which are truest to themselves by never being anything, when circumstances do not suit”—he was attracted to the idea that pervades The Stones of Venice, of a historical and cultural determination of formal characteristics in art. Himself troubled by problems of composition in Sobh­rab and Rustum, he noticed that English painters also failed in compo­sition though they excelled in genius, and wondered whether in poetry it is not “to be expected that in this same article of composition the awkward incorrect Northern nature should shew itself?” When Clough questioned Arnold’s idea that the Reformation caused the Elizabethan literature, Arnold replied that he meant only to say that “both sprang out of the active animated condition of the human spirit in Europe at that time.” He then briefly sketched a deterministic the­ory of European cultural history to support the conclusion that the shortcomings of art and literature are usually the shortcomings of the cultures and nations from which they spring: “I think there never yet has been a perfect literature or a perfect art because the energetic
nations spoil them by their illusions and their want of taste—and the nations who lose their illusions lose also their energy and creative power.” While working on his new poems, Arnold thought of arranging them by historical periods—“Antiquity—Middle Age—and Temps Moderne”—and he concentrated on the works of the poet who for him represented a higher spiritual order than that in which he himself was obliged to function: “I read Homer and toujours Homer.”

All this fermentation was brought to a head, according to Dwight Culler, by Arnold’s visit during an inspection tour of Wales to his old friend J. A. Froude. In 1849 Froude had expressed irritation with *The Strayed Reveller* because he did not see what right Arnold had “to parade his calmness and lecture us on resignation when he has never known what a storm is, and doesn’t know what he has to resign himself to—I think he only knows the shady side of nature out of books.” By 1853 Arnold was at least beginning to learn what he would have to resign himself to, and he was also beginning to know the difference between reading about the loss of youth and experiencing it. But now again Froude was one step ahead of Arnold. The young man who had endured so much grief and been riven by so many doubts, was now much changed:

I should like you to see Froude—quantum mutatus! He goes to church, has family prayers—says the Nemesis ought never to have been published etc. etc.—his friends say that he is altogether changed and re-entered within the giron de l’Eglise—at any rate within the giron de la religion chrétienne: but I do not see the matter in this light and think that he conforms in the same sense in which Spinoza advised his mother to conform—and having purified his moral being, all that was mere fume and vanity and love of notoriety and opposition in his proceedings he has abandoned and regrets. This is my view. He is getting more and more literary, and vise au solide instead of beating the air. May we all follow his example!

One part of that example was, no doubt, Froude’s hindsighted conclusion that *The Nemesis of Faith*, his sensational 1849 novel about
92  Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, and the Modern Temper

religious doubt, which had been publicly burned in Exeter Hall, "ought never to have been published." For Arnold now decided that precisely the same was true about his own public confession of religious doubt, "Empedocles on Etna." He returned home and wrote a Preface—his first published prose—to the new volume of *Poems* in which he explained why he had withdrawn the title poem of the 1852 volume and what his idea of the nature and function of poetry was.

Arnold's Preface to his 1853 *Poems* and Ruskin's "The Nature of Gothic" were published within months of each other and are now recognized to have been decisive turning points in the careers of their respective authors as well as landmarks in Victorian literature. Dwight Culler has said that Arnold's rejection, in the Preface, of "Empedocles" in particular and of morbid, self-conscious literature in general, was his attempt to move from subjectivity to objectivity, and that Ruskin had already made the same move "in turning from mountains and painting to architecture and society." Culler also maintains that Arnold was embarrassed by the contrast between the gloom of "Empedocles on Etna," which ends with a suicide, and the fact that the rest of England "was strolling through the Crystal Palace," "Newman was publishing his serene and balanced lectures on the *Idea of a University*, and Ruskin was bringing out his most mature and luminous work, *The Stones of Venice.*"  

These points of contact between Arnold's Preface and Ruskin's *Stones* are truly and wittily stated, but we must also remember that Arnold and Ruskin did not merely reflect a certain atmosphere of the fifties; they helped to form it. If we want to know what that atmosphere was, we need to keep in mind the individual as well as the social circumstances that had led each man to reconsider the relations between art and morality at this time.

Thomas Carlyle, in so many ways the teacher of Arnold and Ruskin, had called the pleasure principle of the Benthamites "the pig philosophy" and declared its obsession with happiness the most disgraceful feature of the modern mind. Yet Wordsworth in his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* had celebrated the pleasure principle as that by which we know and live and move, and asserted that the single
obligation from which the poet could not be freed was the obligation to give pleasure. Both Arnold and Ruskin, in seeking an extra-aesthetic principle by which to judge works of art, now resorted to Wordsworth's test, but applied it in different ways.

Arnold, we recall, had in 1852 quoted for Clough "an oracular quatrain . . . terribly true" which said that

What poets feel not, when they make,
A pleasure in creating,
The world, in its turn, will not take
Pleasure in contemplating.

He did not therefore feel obliged to wait for the world's reaction to "Empedocles"—he withdrew it from circulation before fifty copies had been sold—before he justified its suppression in the Preface on the grounds that it had failed to give pleasure. It is not enough, asserts Arnold, for a poem to be an accurate and therefore interesting imitation of life. Poetry must fulfill a moral as well as an aesthetic obligation; and for a poem to be morally and socially adequate "it is demanded, not only that it shall interest, but also that it shall inspirit and rejoice the reader."

"Empedocles on Etna" fails to give joy to the reader because its subject is a situation of prolonged mental distress in which "there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done." Arnold claims that such subjects cannot, when represented in poetry, give enjoyment because they are painful, not tragic. By insisting that poems which represent suffering that finds no vent in action cannot be pleasurable, Arnold has caused much confusion among his readers. Since Empedocles does indeed act, but kills himself in the process, and since Arnold had in earlier and would again in later writings use "action" as a pejorative term, we must conclude that Arnold had in mind a very special kind of action that would save intellectuals from Empedocles' fate and enable them to live, as Arnold was himself now doing, in the practical world. Arnold was now deliberately confusing art with life, and applying to aesthetic problems the strategies he had already
adopted for moral problems. Earlier in the year he had accused Clough of "morbid conscientiousness—you are the most conscientious man I ever knew: but on some lines morbidly so, and it spoils your action."  

Ruskin, in "The Nature of Gothic," noted that "the mass of society is made up of morbid thinkers, and miserable workers." Yet, he argued, it was only by work that thought could be made healthy, and "only by thought that labour can be made happy."  

Like Arnold, he was going beyond art for a standard by which to judge art; and like Arnold, he found that standard in the happiness that was linked with the best kind of work.

Only, whereas Arnold made the happiness of the audience (reader or spectator) the primary test of a work of art, Ruskin tested the moral adequacy of a work of art by asking whether the artist himself was happy while making it. This theme had already been sounded in The Seven Lamps when Ruskin said that the right question to ask, respecting all architectural ornament, was simply: "Was it done with enjoyment—was the carver happy while he was about it?" But then aesthetic criteria still dominated Ruskin's outlook. Now, in The Stones of Venice, he explicitly (at least in theory) subordinates aesthetic to moral criteria. In our factories, he says, we have instituted something called division of labor, but is really division of men; and he acidly comments on a famous passage in The Wealth of Nations that the human intelligence has now had to be fragmented into whatever crumbs of ingenuity are small enough to make the points of pins or heads of nails. This evil can be met "not by teaching or preaching" but by making all classes understand "what kinds of labour are good for men, raising them, and making them happy; by a determined sacrifice of such convenience, or beauty, or cheapness as is to be got only by the degradation of the workman. . . . "  

The audience, which comes first in Arnold's moral aesthetic, is not left out of Ruskin's formulation. It is just sanguinely assumed by him that the enjoyment of the worker who produced the work of art must be "the source of the spectator's pleasure. . . . " Whereas Arnold puts the weight of moral obligation on the artist, Ruskin, in the third
volume of *The Stones of Venice*, places it on the spectator, who
ought to take pleasure in artistic imperfections because they are a
sign that the work was done as a recreation rather than a business.
"It is not its own merit so much as the enjoyment of him who pro-
duced it" that is supposed to give pleasure to the spectator.11

The moral obligations laid upon the beholder of works of art in
the third volume of *The Stones of Venice* are but outgrowths of those
laid down for the consumer of products in "The Nature of Gothic." The
consumer is to judge products not by their convenience or beauty
or cheapness but by the signs they give that their creator enjoyed mak­
ing them; and he is to encourage the joy of the worker and the artist
(whose kinship Ruskin assumes) by refusing to purchase, or even to
take pleasure in, articles that lack invention, or that have received an
exact finish for its own sake, or that are mere imitations.

The basis of the moral aesthetic that Arnold and Ruskin tried to
establish in the 1853 Preface and *The Stones of Venice* is a theory of
history which assumes that at some time in the past art was united
to religion and was conducive to joy. The technique of contrasting
past and present for propagandistic purposes was already highly de­
developed by 1853. The use of the Middle Ages as a social example had
been widespread since Cobbett employed it and had been given great
currency in the late thirties and early forties by Pugin and Carlyle.
Arnold could never share in the enthusiasm of the Gothic Revival,
but he had been schooled by his father in admiration for another past,
that of Periclean Athens, and he needed no schooling in hostility to
the poetryless present.

After Arnold has completed the practical work of his 1853 Preface
—explaining the suppression of "Empedocles"—he says that he has
taken the trouble of offering an explanation of so trivial a matter in
order to make it clear that "Empedocles" is being excluded not be­
cause it is not "modern" enough but because it is "exclusively mod­
ern." Arnold takes issue with "many critics of the present day" who
object to subjects chosen from past times and countries or to any sub-
jects but modern ones, assuming that only these are interesting and
relevant. The insistence on contemporaneity is for Arnold always
the sign of self-fascination. The critic who demands it assumes that the human action he himself witnesses is inevitably grander than the human action of a thousand years before. The poet who craves it believes that the resources of his own art are capable of transforming the dross of the most trivial subject into gold.

To these critical demands for contemporaneity Arnold replies that subjects are interesting not by virtue of their modernity or of their antiquity but by virtue of their appeal to "the great primary human affections: to those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time." An inherently great human action a thousand years old, he maintains, is a fitter subject for poetic representation than a trivial action of one's own time. Anticipating the objection that modern readers simply are more interested in petty modern subjects than in grand ancient ones, Arnold treats it as Ruskin does the possibility that spectators may not derive joy from imperfect work that was joyously created, by telling them that they have no right to be so. Invoking the Platonic and Shelleyan distinction between externals and essentials, between transient and eternal feelings, Arnold says that "transient feelings and interests . . . have no right to demand of a poetical work that it shall satisfy them."72

But Arnold is not content to disabuse the moderns of their predilection for contemporary subject matter. The ancient Greeks represent the standard to which modern literature should aspire not only because, unlike modern poets, they subordinated expression (isolated thoughts and striking images) to the overall action, and were more concerned with the total impression made by the whole poem than with single lines and passages, but because they actively avoided subjects drawn from contemporary life. They did so because they understood the difficulty of seeing things close at hand in true perspective, of disentangling the transient and accidental from the eternal and universal; and because they appreciated the religious and therapeutic function that they were expected to perform for their audience:

The terrible old mythic story on which the drama was founded stood, before he entered the theatre, traced in its bare outlines upon the spectator's mind; it stood in his
memory, as a group of statuary, faintly seen, at the end of a long and dark vista: then came the poet, embodying outlines, developing situations, not a word wasted, not a sentiment capriciously thrown in: stroke upon stroke, the drama proceeded: the light deepened upon the group; more and more it revealed itself to the riveted gaze of the spectator: until at last, when the final words were spoken, it stood before him in broad sunlight, a model of immortal beauty.

The Greek critic demanded this and the Greek poet produced it because the first was not inflated with the arrogant belief in the supreme importance and greatness of his own time, and the second was not afflicted by subjectivism. The modern poet goes astray in choice of subject matter and in emphasis of expression at the expense of action not only because he gets bad critical advice but because he loves himself more than his art. Whereas the ancient poet tried to efface himself and his personal peculiarities from his art, the modern poet is likely to believe that his ideal subject is nothing other than the state of his own mind.

Arnold's recommendation of a particular past as a standard against which to measure the present was in 1853 a recommendation made primarily to poets rather than the general public. But it carried within it the seeds of a whole social philosophy, for it offered a means of judging society as well as style: “The present age makes great claims upon us: we owe it service, it will not be satisfied without our admiration. I know not how it is, but their commerce with the ancients appears to me to produce, in those who constantly practise it, a steadying and composing effect upon their judgment, not of literary works only, but of men and events in general.” Like all eager converts to classicism, Arnold now believed that he had found an absolute and fixed position from which to view not just the aesthetic aberrations of romantic artists but the otherwise bewildering phenomena of a changing society.

We have already seen how, in the first volume of The Stones of Venice, Ruskin had asserted the relevance of the Venetian past to the English present. If England did not heed the warning uttered by the
stones of a once proud empire, she would be "led through prouder eminence to less pitied destruction." Ruskin intended that the second and third volumes should show how the rise and fall of the Venetian builder's art depended on the moral temper of the Venetian state and how the relation of the life of the workman to his work in medieval times established the standard that should obtain in all times. Like Arnold, Ruskin dwelt in the Mediterranean and Adriatic past yet insisted on its immediacy to the English present. Now, in "The Nature of Gothic," he wanted to articulate the practical lesson that Victorian England might learn from the contemplation of Gothic, for—again like Arnold—he believed that aesthetic preferences were but the external aspect of moral choices.

The "characteristic or moral elements" of Gothic architecture, by Ruskin's definition, are Savageness, Changefulness, Naturalism, Grotesqueness, Rigidity, and Redundance. We hardly need inquire further into the meaning of these terms to know that Ruskin is deliberately trying to outrage classical and modern canons of taste by praising in "the so-called Dark Ages" precisely those rude, uncouth, barbarous characteristics that had earned the contempt of the neoclassical writers and those nourished on them. Arnold himself, we may recall, had in this very year explained poor composition in English art as the result of "the awkward incorrect Northern nature." Ruskin now argues that the "savageness" of Gothic architecture is doubly noble: as an expression of brotherhood between cathedrals and mountains, and as an index of religious principle. For he seeks to prove that it is both more natural and more Christian than all other architectural styles.

There are, he continues, only three types of architectural ornament. In Servile ornament the execution of the inferior workman is entirely subject to the intellect of the higher workman; in Constitutional ornament, the inferior worker is partially emancipated, but must still obey the higher workman; in Revolutionary ornament "no executive inferiority is admitted at all." Within the first type Ruskin distinguishes between the Greek and the Egyptian schools. The Greek master workman, greatly the superior of the Egyptian in knowledge
and power, could not endure imperfection in anything and so allowed his workmen to execute only geometrical forms, "which could be executed with absolute precision by line and rule, and were as perfect in their way, when completed, as his own figure sculpture." The Egyptian school, less concerned with accuracy, allowed its inferior workmen to sculpt figures, lowered standards for their sake, but then trained them so that they could not fall below that lowered standard. In both systems the workman was enslaved.75

It is only in the medieval, or Gothic, or—and this is Ruskin's point—Christian system of architectural ornament that servility is abolished and the ordinary workman allowed to express himself as he likes. Christian architecture, like Christianity itself, recognized both the value and the necessary imperfection of the individual soul: "It is, perhaps, the principal admirableness of the Gothic schools of architecture, that they . . . receive the results of the labour of inferior minds; and out of fragments full of imperfection, and betraying that imperfection in every touch, indulgently raise up a stately and unaccusable whole."76 Paradoxically, then, the secret of artistic success is the placing of moral and religious concerns above artistic ones.

But what has all this to do with the England of 1853? One way of fathoming Ruskin's answer to this question is to view it through the eyes of Matthew Arnold. In 1883, many years after "The Nature of Gothic" had made its way into the popular consciousness, Arnold, lecturing on "Literature and Science" before a New York audience, made one of his very rare excursions into architectural criticism. The English, he said, suffered greatly from lacking the admirable symmetry of the Greeks. This absence of symmetry damaged all English art, but showed itself most glaringly in English architecture:

Striking ideas we have, and well-executed details we have; but that high symmetry which, with satisfying and delightful effect, combines them, we seldom or never have. The glorious beauty of the Acropolis at Athens did not come from single fine things stuck about on that hill, a statue here, a gateway there;—no, it arose from all things being perfectly
combined for a supreme total effect. What must not an Englishman feel about our deficiencies in this respect, as the sense for beauty, whereof this symmetry is an essential element, awakens and strengthens within him! what will not one day be his respect and desire for Greece and its symmetria prisca, when the scales drop from his eyes as he walks the London streets, and he sees such a lesson in meanness as the Strand, for instance, in its true deformity! But here we are coming to our friend Mr. Ruskin's province, and I will not intrude upon it, for he is its very sufficient guardian.\(^7\)

By briefly intruding on "Mr. Ruskin's province," Arnold was helpfully reminding his audience of the fact that both he and Ruskin had, in their different ways, developed the technique of judging societies past and present by the style of their art, and trained their readers to believe in an inevitable correspondence between the character of a society and the character of its art. But he was also being somewhat disingenuous; for to imply that Ruskin would accept the opposition between the Greek and the English character, or that he would applaud Greek symmetry, or praise the ideal of perfection at all, was grossly to misrepresent him.

In "The Nature of Gothic" Ruskin states it to be a law of art that "no good work whatever can be perfect, and the demand for perfection is always a sign of a misunderstanding of the ends of art." He takes imperfection, irregularity, deficiency, to be signs of both life and beauty; and charges those who would banish imperfection from art with trying "to destroy expression, to check exertion, to paralyze vitality." For Ruskin the Greek system of architectural ornament is a warning and not a model. The Greek system enslaved the workman because it denied him the expression of his personality in his art; it confined him to the composition of geometrical forms and symmetrical foliage, that is, to a kind of activity in which Ruskin can see no human faculty expressed. The medieval or Christian system, on the other hand, recognizing man's inherent weaknesses, also recognized the value of the individual soul and encouraged its expression in art. Ruskin's quarrel with his countrymen arises from the fact that they have chosen the pagan over the Christian system:
The modern English mind has this much in common with that of the Greek, that it intensely desires, in all things, the utmost completion or perfection compatible with their nature. This is a noble character in the abstract, but becomes ignoble when it causes us to forget the relative dignities of that nature itself, and to prefer the perfectness of the lower nature to the imperfection of the higher. And therefore, while in all things that we see, or do, we are to desire perfection, we are nevertheless not to set the meaner thing, in its narrow accomplishment, above the nobler thing, in its mighty progress; not to esteem smooth minuteness above shattered majesty; not to prefer mean victory to honourable defeat.

Ruskin’s creed of imperfection is a naturalistic one like the creed that he had set forth in *The Seven Lamps*. But whereas in the earlier work the essence of the natural had been conceived of as obedience to order and law, it is now made equivalent to change and imperfection: “Nothing that lives is, or can be, rigidly perfect; part of it is decaying, part nascent. And in all things that live there are certain irregularities and deficiencies which are not only signs of life, but sources of beauty.” Wheat, because it is of a nobler nature than the wild grass which consistently grows well and strongly, is liable to a bitterer blight. In “The Lamp of Obedience” he had argued that “exactly in proportion to the majesty of things in the scale of being, is the completeness of their obedience to the laws that are set over them.” But now he says that if judged by the standard of perfect obedience to the laws of nature, “brute animals would be preferable to man, because more perfect in their functions and kind,” and consequently one must distinguish between the perfectness of lower natures and the imperfectness of the higher. Aware that he had departed from the emphasis on law that pervaded *The Seven Lamps*, Ruskin insisted, later in *The Stones of Venice*, that he still held by what he had said in 1849 but that he now saw the need to distinguish between laws that can be reduced to form and system and those that are inscribed only in the heart, and to recognize that as men rise above the state of animals and children, “they become emancipated from this
written law, and invested with the perfect freedom which consists in
the fullness and joyfulness of compliance with a higher and unwritten law; a law so universal, so subtle, so glorious, that nothing but
the heart can keep it."81

Although Ruskin labels his creed of imperfection Christian, it is
also recognizable as the romanticism Arnold attacked in his 1853
Preface. If in 1853 Arnold and Ruskin used essentially the same tech-
nique for relating art to morality, and for contrasting past and present,
they sought to discover very different virtues and to enforce near-
ly opposed values. Whereas Arnold praised in Greek art the example
of subordination of the parts to the whole and of the artist to his art,
Ruskin saw in the conditions of modern industrial work the very im-
age of that servile subordination of part to whole, of inferior to su-
perior workman, that for him characterized Greek architecture. Con-
sequently, Ruskin's ideal past was not ancient (and pagan) Greece
but medieval (and Christian) Europe.

By a strange leap of historical imagination Ruskin saw in the con-
ditions of modern industrial production a continuation of the ethos of
Greek architecture. Like Arnold in the 1853 Preface he too was seek-
ing to apply Carlyle's social and psychological doctrine of work in the
realm of aesthetics. Arnold did this by asserting that a poem could not
give pleasure if it had as its subject a state of mental distress that
found no vent in action; in so asserting, he was transferring Carlyle's
notion of work as a psychological anodyne, a way of preventing men-
tal paralysis, to the realm of art. Ruskin, on the other hand, used Car-
lyle's doctrine of work not as a way of escaping from the hesitation
that came from excessive thought but as a means of judging works by
the quality of labor that had produced them. Ironically, it was Ruskin,
the supposed disciple of Carlyle, rather than the Arnold who had in
1849 called Carlyle a moral desperado, who came close to subverting
the master's doctrine of work by insisting that the truly important
question was what kind of work men did:

Understand this clearly: You can teach a man to draw a
straight line, and to cut one; to strike a curved line, and to
carve it; and to copy and carve any number of given lines or forms, with admirable speed and perfect precision; and you find his work perfect of its kind: but if you ask him to think about any of these forms, to consider if he cannot find any better in his own head, he stops; his execution becomes hesitating; he thinks, and ten to one he thinks wrong; ten to one he makes a mistake in the first touch he gives to his work as a thinking being. But you have made a man of him for all that. He was only a machine before, an animated tool.\textsuperscript{82}

G. K. Chesterton, exercising his unparalleled gift for the epigrammatic statement of falsehood, has stated that Matthew Arnold "reminded us that Europe was a society while Ruskin was treating it as a picture gallery."\textsuperscript{83} We have seen how in 1853 both men were seeking an extra-artistic standard by which to judge works of art, and were finding it in the question of whether the work gave pleasure to the great masses of men. Yet Ruskin was already having difficulty in conceiving of the question solely in terms of the production and reception of works of art. In "The Nature of Gothic" he leaves the framework of architectural inquiry to tell his readers that the foundations of European society are being shaken—not because men are ill fed, but because "they have not pleasure in the work by which they make their bread, and therefore look to wealth as the only means of pleasure." The solution to the modern industrial problem lies in a true understanding of, and a return to, those conditions of free and independent labor that built and ornamented the Gothic cathedrals.

We must not suppose that by 1853 Ruskin had transformed himself from an aesthete into a social critic; "The Nature of Gothic" is but a single chapter in a long three-volume work, and in 1854 Ruskin expressed some uneasiness about printing it separately lest it be thought the work of a mere pamphleteer.\textsuperscript{84} He had, however, shown that the problems of modern industrial society were sufficiently compelling to distract him from the work he naturally loved and to move him deeply, even violently.

Modern problems are a major concern of Arnold's 1853 Preface,
but they are the psychological problems of doubt, discouragement, "the dialogue of the mind with itself." Social problems appear only as one of the many modern forces that threaten to distract the poet from his true calling and one obligation. That obligation is not to praise the modern age but "to afford to the men who live in it the highest pleasure which they are capable of feeling." If the artist is told that to do this great service for his contemporaries he must deal with contemporary subjects, he is obliged to ask what special fitness the present age has for supplying the great actions that are requisite to great poetry. If he is told, as Arnold is sure he will be, that "it is an era of progress, an age commissioned to carry out the great ideas of industrial development and social amelioration," he must reply that with all this he can do nothing.⑧⁵

It is important to see that in 1853 Arnold does not merely share Ruskin's hostility to modern society; he believes that, to survive, the artist must not only not descend to praise that society, he must not descend to quarrel with it: "He will not . . . maintain a hostile attitude towards the false pretensions of his age: he will content himself with not being overwhelmed by them. He will esteem himself fortunate if he can succeed in banishing from his mind all feelings of contradiction, and irritation, and impatience; in order to delight himself with the contemplation of some noble action of a heroic time, and to enable others, through his representation of it, to delight in it also."⑧⁶ Polemic and great art do not mix.

By 1853 Arnold had come to share Ruskin's desire for a moral aesthetic derived from the art of a particular past, and to feel deeply the moral obligations of the artist. But unlike Ruskin he still firmly believed that the artist best fulfilled this obligation as an artist rather than as a reformer or social critic. Arnold was in 1853 abandoning but a single poem, and so he could still believe that the resolution of his problem might lie in a reform of current poetic methods; it was not until he was faced with the abandonment of poetry altogether that he saw the resolution of artistic problems as inseparable from the resolution of social problems.