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978-0-521-14249-6 - The Idea of the Clerisy in the Nineteenth Century

Ben Knights

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

DESPERATE LOYALTY

The idea of the clerisy, of the intellectuals as a distinct and socially beneficial group, has been an active one in this century. Characterisation of 'the intellectuals' has been considerably influenced by instances of political intervention – the Dreyfus case, the Spanish Civil War, the Vietnam War and so on. But the inclusive idea of the clerisy as a body whose field of competence was no less than the life of the mind in general has fallen victim to that very specialisation which was to have been one of its own tasks to overcome. The influence in England in the 1930s and 1940s of Mannheim's prescriptive theory of the social role of the intelligentsia was a case of residual attraction.¹ Yet Mannheim's is a less heroic, less nostalgic account than we find in Julien Benda's *La Trahison des clercs*, where there are still affinities of tone and aspiration with the nineteenth-century theorists. Probably, few would hold Benda's ideas today. If we seek a type of the intellectual speaking to the world today we tend to go to the technical scientist, or the economist. But I believe that ideas akin to Benda's still have an attenuated currency in the hinterland of contemporary educational and social thinking. I have undertaken these historical studies as a contribution to critical thinking about the idea and its implications. It is not the least of reasons for interest on the part of one who teaches English Literature that literary criticism inherited its own share of nineteenth-century arguments for the clerisy. Leavis's *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* has a pre-history that would be obscured if we thought that Matthew Arnold's 'criticism' could only be glossed as 'literary criticism'.

Early in the nineteenth century, the idea of the educated man became problematic. That is to say, those who thought about such things ceased to be able to rely upon the available structures of thought to provide a place for those whose characteristic occupation was cultural. Neither 'clergyman' nor 'man of letters'

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provided quite the right category. The discussion about the character of the highly educated man and his relationship to his society is basic to the matter of this book. Explicitly or implicitly all the writers dealt with here were concerned with the educated man as a social being and one whose very education (in a society where such education was the prerogative of a few) implied social responsibilities. Thus they contribute to a larger discussion – not in itself my subject here – of the educational or moral role of the governors, a discussion which may be amply evidenced from the debates on the Reform Bills of 1866 and 1867. Plato had suggested that perhaps the only thing for a philosopher to do in the Athens of the early fourth century B.C. was to take refuge from the storm and cultivate his own mind. Tempted as they sometimes were, the writers with whom this study is concerned preferred to work upon society, though not, it is true, directly in politics or social movements. Here Benda is well in the tradition. The intellectual should work indirectly: as an M.P., Mill – like the philosophic radicals before him – clearly regarded his political activities as simply an expression of his intellectual work. Thus our writers seem at first to adumbrate the separate worlds of Weber's *Politics as a Vocation* and *Science (Wissenschaft) as a Vocation*. But in fact they do not, since at the root of the theory of the clerisy was a conviction not merely that there was no discontinuity between the life of the mind and the practical life of society, but that the latter was vitally affected by the former. So the acceptance of Weber's contention that 'scientific' pleading on behalf of practical stands 'is meaningless in principle because the various value spheres of the world stand in irreconcilable conflict with each other'² would be a terrible defeat. The educated man's field of operation is the national intellect and culture, and he is a member of a fraternity whose education gives it a common intellectual nourishment, and which is enabled to grapple with all problems by virtue of its mental training. I shall examine the notion of liberal education in chapter 6. Here I would merely point out that in the nineteenth century liberal education was quite normally seen as leading to social position. It is significant that a number of writers claim the rank of 'gentleman' for the man of liberal education. Here is an extract from a letter from Coleridge to James Gillman (the son of his host at Highgate).

And what is a liberal Education? That which *draws* forth and trains up the germ of free-agency in the Individual, Education, quae *liberum* facit, and

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the man, who has mastered all the conditions of *freedom* is *Homo Liberalis* – the classical rendering of the modern term, *Gentleman* – because under the feudal system the *men of family* (Gentiles, *generosi, quibus gent erat, et genus*) alone possessed these conditions.³

In this study we shall be concerned with what men of letters have to say about themselves, with how they imagine and justify their activity. We shall necessarily be concerned with the character they desire for themselves or project on behalf of the ideal man of letters, so in examining these projective characters we are not straying far from our subject. The man of letters inherits, then, the title of gentleman. But what is the new *liber homo* free from? The answer is that he is to some extent freed from the pressures of historical necessity. The intellectual's attempt to make himself feel that he is not conditioned began in the nineteenth century and survived in Mannheim's paradoxical belief in the potentialities of the unattached intelligentsia. For reasons that I shall try to explain later, conditioning by the blind forces of society and history is identified with threatening pressures within the self, so that self-knowledge and the mastery that is believed to arise from it are seen as the road to freedom. Coleridge's letter continued:

For believe me, my dear young Friend: It is no musty old Saw but a Maxim of Life, a medicinal Herb from the Garden of Experience . . . that He alone is *free* & entitled to the name of a Gentleman, who knows himself and walks in the light of his own consciousness.

And in a note on the brutality and political untrustworthiness of 'the people', he remarked that 'He alone is entitled to a share in the government of all who has learned to govern himself.'⁴ We shall see that the ideal held out for the man of letters is one of inner balance, the *Tüchtigkeit* that Arnold sought. Carlyle (his selfhood more in danger, perhaps, than Arnold's) carried the idea even further – into a fascination with renunciation, with *Selbsttödtung*, the mortification of the flesh. 'Deny thyself; whatsoever is *thyself*, consider it as nothing.'⁵ This is important, for the thread we are tracing leads us to the ideal of purity (conceived as the renunciation of the sensible world) that was one of the great secularisations achieved on behalf of culture by nineteenth-century theorists. Whether you are to discover or to preserve man's spiritual goods, you must be pure – so said Coleridge, Carlyle and Matthew Arnold; Mark Pattison, too, preaching in Lincoln College Chapel on the necessary connection between philosophy and asceticism. In arguing for the transcendent

allegiance of culture, the theorists of the clerisy put forward a model both of the transcendent (the realm of order and security) and of the worldly (the chaotic, the sensual, the determined) that – if we still find it even partially acceptable – we should learn to question. The link with character may be illustrated from Matthew Arnold's 'best self' as applied both to the individual and to the state. We might well query the relationship between *Tüchtigkeit* and that best self 'which is not manifold, and vulgar, and unstable, and contentious, and ever-varying, but one, and noble, and secure, and peaceful, and the same for all mankind.'⁶ There is a considerable affinity of aspiration between the men of letters who mapped out ideals for the social role of the educated man. This is the ground for the theory of the literary elite. Before we come to the theory itself, however, we must look briefly at the matrix of thought within which it was typically articulated.

The idea of the clerisy emerges from the aftermath of the French Revolution, a fact of dual significance for its history. Its exponents were as apt as Tory propagandists to assert the values of order and of social stability. Further, the Revolution had attracted attention to the social activities of intellectuals, since it was already a commonplace that they had played a substantial part in bringing it about. An interest in the social implications of literary activity gave rise to a rudimentary sociology of culture and knowledge. I am alluding to a tendency to see literature, including philosophy, and history, as being shaped by the period and social circumstances in which it was written, as well as exerting its own influence on the social character. A social approach to literature is evidenced in Isaac D'Israeli's 'Essay on the Character of the Literary Man' (1795), and is apparently quite acceptable by the time Bulwer wrote his *England and the English* in 1833. Comparable assumptions lie behind Arnold's theory of the conjunction of the man and the moment, and similar ideas behind Mill's discussions about the suitability of certain periods to philosophical or poetic writing.⁷ A corollary to this tendency of thought is the claim that the clerisy helps create the conditions in which alone literature can be vital. Existing in unhappy equilibrium with this aspect of the historicism of the age is a set of related beliefs – more an order of aspiration than formulated theory – concerning hierarchy, order, and the 'real' or transcending nature of values. I shall examine these subjects in some detail later, and here should merely say that they represent a constellation of notions about the

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way in which the universe is ordered and the conditions under which it becomes intelligible. We must explore the connection between legislating at a theoretical level for the conditions of intellectual life and the emphasis on form, limitation, and control, on order seen not as emerging from but as preceding the creative act. Socrates countered the Sophists on the grounds that ideas were real, had an existence beyond the words that labelled them and beyond the historical conditions in which they happened to be manifested. The enterprise of saving certain values, principles, and metaphysical concerns in a world felt to be hostile to the concerns of the mind was essentially similar. Truth – especially moral truth – it could be argued, is not dependent on temporary historical conditions or on the development of natural science. It is a paradox which we should be aware of today that necessary claims for the continuity of experience with the past (even if they no longer appear to depend on metaphysics), and equally necessary claims for the cultural importance of tradition should so easily fit into a constellation of ideas that emphasises a normative order and a hierarchy of values which is seen as beyond historical alteration.

We are now the heirs of a degree of specialisation unknown to (even if dreaded by) the nineteenth-century theorists of the clerisy. I do not mean what a glance at, say, the *Edinburgh Review* or *Westminster Review* during their great years would disprove – that a variety of subjects were unknown to readers of the period. Rather, I would suggest that the sophisticated affairs of the mind were seen as vitally interrelated, and as bearing directly upon the social health – the morality indeed – of the nation. Culture and morality were finally one. Therefore the guardians of culture were the guardians of morality, an assertion which amply accounts for the seriousness with which the proponents of the literary elite took their task. All our writers could have agreed, in some sense, with the assertion of Saint-Simon's followers that 'For us, religion, politics, morality, are only diverse names for the same thing.'⁸ We run the risk of a lack of historical sympathy unless we see that to discuss literature, ethics, or the life of the mind as separate from each other already implies a discontinuity where our writers (without consciously attempting a synthesis) saw a continuity. From Coleridge to the younger Arnold, our writers took for granted that morality – the rules for a viable social life – and the healthy, disciplined life of the intellect were but aspects of the same acceptance of form and order.

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The danger inherent in their attitude (as in that of their successors) is that the belief in order easily turns into a legitimization of the existing order on the grounds that at least it is an order.

I have touched very briefly on the mental landscape in which we find proposals on behalf of a clerisy. I shall now sketch the salient proposals, warning that we shall find nothing approximating to an exact programme shared by all our writers. We start from the common position that the powers that be in society are not really powers at all, but are engaged in a mere mime of government. They do not know society's true needs and are consequently, at anything but a superficial level, impotent. The partiality or incapacity of the established powers is a theme on which all our writers play variations. The corollary – that there has historically been or that there ought to be a group in society which sees more clearly, describes the permanent and truly important behind the ever-shifting, untrustworthy phenomena, and consequently knows society's needs better than its ostensible rulers – becomes the central assertion of the clerisy argument. There is undoubtedly some truth here: indeed it is presumably a truism that in any state of society there will be some who understand more profoundly than others, whose proposals (even if met with general incomprehension) are more radical. But it is a bigger step from here than is often assumed to the proposition that we can say prescriptively of whom such a group is likely to consist, and what the nature of its operation in society will be. Our nineteenth-century writers argue the importance to social health of a spiritual power identified (as, more recently, Professor Northrop Frye has done) with the literary and philosophic class.⁹ To be sure, its members were not to be philosopher-rulers; indeed, they felt that politics were only of secondary importance. They were to work on that substance of national life upon which political institutions were based – its opinions, its language, and its conceptions of ethical action. We may be reminded here of Shelley's assertion that the 'great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause'. But mention of Shelley's claims for poetry illuminates by contrast an important point: the theorists of the clerisy are not talking about creative writers as such, or, except incidentally, about the imagination in its relation to the disposition of human energies in society. True, they were inclined to agree with Carlyle's version of Schiller that 'genuine literature includes the essence of philosophy, religion, art; whatever

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speaks to the immortal part of men. The daughter, she is likewise the nurse of all that is spiritual and thus exalted in our character',¹⁰ and the poets were included in the literary and philosophic class, but they get no special attention as the forgers of the uncreated conscience of their race. Indeed, in the world of the theorists we find a surprisingly general uneasiness towards the creative writer, ranging from Arnold's proposed moratorium on creative literature, to the ambivalence of Carlyle and Mill towards 'fictions'. Who, then, was the clerisy to comprise? We are used to a situation in which intellectuals are specialists, where they first of all fall on one side or the other of that division between the humanities and the natural and mathematical sciences which has been an effective barrier for a century. But the spiritual power as identified with the intellectual class is made up of those capable of passing the boundaries of specialisms and of achieving insight into their various claims 'transmuting and integrating all that the separate professions have achieved in science or art – but, with a range transcending the limits of professional views or local or temporary interests applying the product . . . to the strengthening and subliming of the Nation itself'.¹¹ Such men would thereby achieve something that Comte in France and Mill in England had hoped sociology (based upon a suitable philosophy) would achieve – the integration of specialisms within a comprehensive and practical study of the human world. Whether seen as established or as self-constituted, the clerisy was to comprise those who had the capacity to assimilate particular sciences to the study of men in relation both to the transcendent and to each other.

What we are observing is the creation of an ideology for the intelligentsia, comprising an ideal character and an ideal role in relation to society as a whole. This may be a mediating role (like that of Coleridge's clerisy), a challenging role (as with Mill), or a renewing and conserving role (as with Arnold). There is thus a common insistence that, while the intellectuals stand apart from the existing classes and preoccupations of society, their activity is a precondition of social health. In no case do our writers (themselves members of a remarkably unalienated intellectual class, a class that never seems to have felt totally at war with the established order in its society) approach a concept like Marx's: 'The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas. . . . The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same

time over the means of mental production.’ And it never seems to have crossed their minds that thinkers ‘make their chief source of livelihood the perfecting the illusion of the (ruling) class about itself’.¹² Once again, there is a striking parallel with Mannheim’s free-floating intelligentsia.

There are more elements of the theory of the clerisy. One of these was a theory of mind, or, more exactly, a disposition towards a theory, the disposition being supported and satisfied by those impulses that had been regularised into an epistemology by Kant, and whose appropriation by philosophy was regarded by many of Kant’s followers as his central achievement. I mean the disposition to regard the mind not as a passive recipient for sensation, but as active, working upon and imposing its own modes upon the chaotic phenomenal world. With varying degrees of explicitness, proponents of the clerisy proposed epistemological doctrines suggested by this kind of insight. They quoted Proverbs to the effect that ‘Without vision the people perisheth’, and we should understand that vision was a creative and ordering vision, the imposition of meaning upon the chaos of experience. The clerisy was to do for society something that society, unaided, could not do for itself. It was to render susceptible of comprehension the raw matter of experience under the headings of transcendent principles. Thus the clerisy was to act as the active mind of society. Even when the claim was not as overt as this, the clerisy was still conceived as the link between the sensuous understanding – for which it was true that *nihil in intellectu quod non prius in sensu* (there is nothing in the mind which is not previously in the sense(s)) – and the realm of reason.

Many efforts were made to characterise the group whose responsibilities were of this kind. Thus, it was not just of its time, the victim of contemporary needs. It was a trans-historical group of *lumières*. Carl Becker has pointed out the ‘uses of posterity’ for the *philosophes* of the eighteenth century: the judgment of the court of history provided a kind of secular immortality for those who had worked long and earnestly to further the good of the human spirit.¹³ Those nineteenth-century intellectuals who theorised about their own role also needed to be remembered, needed to be able to project the approval of their sub-group into the future, and to console themselves with the thought that (however little acclaim they might receive in their generation) they would be remembered as those who had in their day had charge of the light:

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To whom, then, do we owe our ameliorated condition? To the successive few in every age (more indeed in one generation than another but relatively to the mass of mankind always few) who by the intensity and permanence of their action have compensated for the limited sphere within which it is at any time intelligible, and whose good deeds posterity reverence in their results.¹⁴

There is an important sense in which all who write feel the need for an enduring community of understanding. Goethe, to whose example so many looked in the nineteenth century, had registered this need, and by the time Brougham gave his Rectorial Address at Glasgow in 1825 the notion of the secular immortality of great spirits had become a commonplace. It is clear that the later positivist calendar of saints is merely a development of an existing trend, attacked by Newman in his onslaught on Peel and Brougham.¹⁵ Behind the aspirations that led to such doctrines was the haunting possibility that you might work unseen and misunderstood, unable to look forward to posterity's rectifying judgment on your work – the predicament of the unknown Therasas of the preface to *Middlemarch*.

The community of spiritual endeavour connects past, present, and future. The stress on the importance of continuity and tradition to the well-being of the national culture asked that attention be paid in turn to those who had preserved and handed on philosophy and literature. As we hope to be remembered so should we remember, and Coleridge noted that one effect of the preponderance of the commercial spirit was the neglect not only of the 'austerer studies', but also of the old philosophers. In return for this piety, those who had gone before provided an essential term of our cultural continuity, became an aristocracy of spirit –

the kings of thought
Who waged contention with their time's decay,
And of the past are all that cannot pass away –

without whom memory in individual and history in collective consciousness would be void and without form. We shall see that this is a major theme in the articulation of the intellectual's self-consciousness, and, further, that it is connected with that earnestness which is such a salient feature of the clerisy of the period. For those who are truly concerned with spirit bear a great burden. Matthew Arnold copied a saying of Bunsen's into his Notebook: 'The aim is to understand myself and the age, to apprehend what is the prime need of

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each, and to minister according to our ability to that need.¹⁶ All the proponents of the clerisy, obsessed (like so many of their contemporaries) by history, and drawing from their recognition of the need for continuity the lesson of the value of tradition, asserted earnestness as an intellectual imperative.

From asserting the historical community of meaning to describing the group responsible for that community was no long step. But, that group once postulated, a common form of discourse was necessary so that the guardians could discuss the problems of society without mistaking the essential affinities of the problems under discussion. It is clear that during the nineteenth century the concept of the 'disciplines' became increasingly problematic: you could not but be aware of the fissiparous tendencies of the world of mind, of the fact that not only the natural sciences but also economics, historical science, philology, philosophy, even theology, were showing an alarming tendency to march off from the core of moral concerns that had long been assumed as an intellectual centre, and to set up as semi-autonomous 'subjects' with a technical language of their own. Much of the work of the advocates of the clerisy was in a sense a last-ditch defence of an idea of wisdom as based upon integrally related studies, an idea with its roots deep in renaissance humanism.¹⁷ But the need for unity had only come to be discussed because fragmentation was well advanced. Thus the common centre of training in letters, the Greek and Latin classics (the model for philosophy and history as literature), had to be supported just because its claims to centrality were being called in question. The Erasmian unity of study and application was slowly and painfully giving way to the recognition of a plurality of worlds of discourse, as the members of the Metaphysical Society were to find in the 1860s and 1870s. The change was naturally alarming to those for whom the moral continuity of the life of the mind with the practical life of society was a deeply held conviction.

The proponents of the clerisy started from the premise that community and culture were in serious danger. They articulated a sense that the possibility of a single structure of values was in doubt; that while natural science was extending the realm of the ethically meaningless, and historical science implying that convictions and values were but relative, knowledge was becoming so vast as to exclude a personal grasp on more than a fraction of it. The point may perhaps most economically be made by setting alongside each