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Edited by L. C. Knights, H. A. Mason and F. R. Leavis

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Edited by

L. C. KNIGHTS

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F. R. LEAVIS

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VICTORIAN CRITICISM OF POETRY : THE MINORITY TRADITION

I.

MATTHEW ARNOLD'S critical pronouncements upon the romantic poets, whether or not they command assent, are usually considered surprisingly original and uncharacteristic of their period. Mr. Eliot in his *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, speaks of the famous judgment that 'the English poetry of the first quarter of this century, with plenty of energy, plenty of creative force, did not know enough' as one that must have seemed 'startlingly independent' when it first appeared. The quotation comes from the essay on *The Function of Criticism* first published in Bagehot's *National Review* in 1863, and first printed in book form in *Essays in Criticism*, 1865. We are accustomed to think of the 'sixties as a time when the reputation of the Romantic poets had reached its height and when both in criticism and in poetic practice the Romantic tradition was dominant. My aim in this paper is to bring together some evidence, chiefly from the main Victorian literary periodicals, to show that there was a fair body of opinion which shared, and to some extent anticipated, Arnold's dissatisfaction with the poetic tradition coming down from the Romantics and with the general tendencies of contemporary poetry. This dissatisfaction will be seen to be of different kinds, and different degrees of seriousness and to arise from varying preconceptions and assumptions about poetry and life in general: it will therefore perhaps be worth while to attempt some discrimination and classification of these examples of anti-romantic opinion with a view to estimating their significance.

Previous work on the material provided by Victorian reviews of poetry has to a great extent been conducted from a point of view *within* the general tradition of nineteenth-century romanticism and accepting the Victorian reputations as established and unshakable. The one instance that occurs to me of the kind of approach I have in mind, a balanced revaluation made in the consciousness of some inadequacy in the whole Victorian romantic tradition, is Morris Greenhut's essay on the criticism of George Henry Lewes, in *Review of English Studies* for January 1948.³ He calls it *George Henry Lewes and the Classical Tradition in English Criticism*, finding many anticipations of the ideas not only of Arnold but also of Mr. Eliot.

³XXIV, 126.

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If this is true of Lewes, I think it can also be shown that he was not alone.

I start, then, from the fairly widespread modern point of view that the poetry of the nineteenth-century had, besides its triumphs, its own particular failings and inadequacies, that these became more marked after the period of the 'great' Romantics, and that as the century went on the finer consciousness of the age tended less and less to find satisfactory expression in poetry. A restricted notion of the feelings proper to poetic expression, a suspicion of satire, wit, the play of mind, a confusion of seriousness with solemnity, a conception of poetic style which emphasized verbal melody and sonority at the expense of the vitality of the rhythms and tone of speech, a tendency to lean too heavily upon his Romantic predecessors,—all these made it difficult for the Victorian poet to bring effectively into his poetry the normal adult consciousness, if not directly, the concerns and interests, of the age. I say 'effectively'—there were of course a great many attempts, but it would probably be agreed that the Victorian poets attain their most characteristic successes where they turn away from their problems and difficulties to an ideal world of romantic beauty and glamour. The one obvious exception to all this is clearly Browning, who did at least break to a considerable extent with conventionally poetic style, though his example had little general effect upon the main stream of poetic development. He certainly brings into poetry the energetic and active side of his age, but to many to-day he seems too much at ease in his time—representative, no doubt, but hardly of its finer consciousness. This view has perhaps been most adequately stated by Santayana in his *Poetry and Religion*, but it had been anticipated by Arnold's severer judgment: 'Browning is a man with a moderate gift, passionately desiring movement and fulness, and obtaining but a confused multitudinousness'.

II.

Coming back to Arnold, then, many of us to-day think him justified in feeling that there was something wrong with the general tendency of poetry in his time, and we are disposed to take seriously his suggestion that the fault goes back, at least in part, to the previous generation and to the Romantics themselves. Before going on to consider possible anticipations of this view it may be as well to remind ourselves of the main points of Arnold's case. In its first form it appears in the preface to the poems published in 1853. It would generally be agreed, I think, that the sense of something wrong, and the attempted diagnosis, of this preface are more interesting than the rather dubious prescription. The two most important later pronouncements are mainly diagnostic. The first, from *The Function of Criticism*, I have already mentioned: it is the suggestion that the powers of the great Romantic poets were partially wasted because they lacked a sufficiently lively intellectual background, a current of fresh thought, intelligent and alive, like that which

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animated the creative power in the age of Sophocles in Greece or the age of Shakespeare in England. 'This' he says 'makes Byron so empty of matter, Shelley so incoherent, Wordsworth even, profound as he is, yet so wanting in completeness and variety'. The other key passage which occurs in the *Essay on Heine*, shifts the emphasis slightly, though it is still concerned with the play of ideas and the intellectual substance of poetry. In the English literary movement of the beginning of the century, he says, there was no successful application of modern ideas and the modern spirit. Byron and Shelley attempted it, but failed: the best literary creation of that time in England proceeded from men who did not make the same bold attempt as Byron and Shelley.

'What in fact was the career of the chief English men of letters, their contemporaries? The greatest of them, Wordsworth, retired (in Middle-Age phrase) into a monastery. I mean, he plunged himself in the inward life, he voluntarily cut himself off from the modern spirit. Coleridge took to opium. Scott became the historiographer-royal of feudalism. Keats passionately gave himself up to a sensuous genius, to his faculty for interpreting nature; and he died of consumption at twenty-five. Wordsworth, Scott and Keats have left admirable works; far more solid and complete works than those which Byron and Shelley have left. But their works have this defect, they do not belong to that which is the main current of the literature of modern epochs, they do not apply modern ideas to life; they constitute, therefore, *minor currents*, and all other literary work of our day, however popular, which has the same defect, also constitutes but a minor current.'

Lack of intellectual substance is here linked with the poet's failure to show, in his poetry, that he is completely alive in his own time. These passages will be found, I think, to cover the main reasons Arnold gives for dissatisfaction with the poetry of his own century. Later essays on individual poets vary the relative positions slightly, but the general attitude is perhaps sufficiently clear: one can see why Arnold should have had no very high opinion of Tennyson.

III.

In an earlier article in this journal,⁴ dealing with the attitude of the *Reviews* to the literature of the period up to about 1830, I tried to show that while it derived from an eighteenth-century concern for Good Sense and the social virtues, it was not merely an obstinate repetition of neo-classic shibboleths. The *Quarterly* and Blackwood's show a gradual acceptance of Wordsworth and even something of the critical influence of Coleridge, but there remains, in the 'twenties, a certain uneasiness about contemporary poetic tendencies. Even the *London Magazine*, founded in 1820 with the express aim of

⁴June, 1937: Vol. VI, p. 2.

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interpreting the spirit of the age, and usually a champion of the younger writer, is not altogether satisfied with the way things are going:⁵ Hunt shows us a 'smallness of soul': Shelley is 'a visionary with a weak head and a rich imagination': Byron is 'forever playing tricks with himself and the public'. The age tends to be effeminate, with 'a propension to the soft and the beautiful in preference to the strenuous and the sublime', and there is a tendency to undervalue thought in poetry. The review (of Darley)⁶ which makes this last complaint has an interesting discussion of rhythm, asserting that the modern cultivation of the 'merely auricular melody' of lyric verse leads to the neglect of that power of numbers which 'modulates the mind in which they are repeated'.

After 1830 a similar uneasiness continues. I find that the most frequent charge brought by early Victorian reviewers against the poetry of their time is a lack of thought. Under this heading may be grouped a series of complaints which range from objections to the poetic style and method of the prevailing tradition as failing to maintain a balance between the sensuous and emotional effects of language and its logical meaning, to the more general objection that contemporary poets were lacking in intellectual strength and profundity. At the beginning of the 'thirties the *Edinburgh* was noting some of the dangers of the current emphasis on feeling: the reviewer of Wright's translation of Dante (April, 1833)⁷ remarks that modern readers of poetry seem to be either mystics or time-killers and that neither class is much concerned with sense. In the next volume (October, 1833)⁸ the reviewer of *A Rhymed Plea for Tolerance* describes the essence of the poet's art as the bringing to bear on one point of many impressions and asserts that these may be either emotional or intellectual:

'... as there is nothing poetical in the exercise of the reasoning powers alone, so neither is the exercise of those powers inconsistent with poetry. If, for instance, a writer can infuse pathos or brilliancy into his arguments, his arguments may be no less poetical than his descriptions; and if they be just and true, their truth and justice will not diminish, but will add greatly to the fervour or power with which their strictly poetical qualities are conceived or expressed.'

The poetry of the last thirty years, says the reviewer of Henry Taylor's drama, *Philip van Artevelde*, in October 1834,⁹ 'resembled a luscious delicacy rather than a food':

'Its attractions were certainly numerous. It had exuberant and brilliant imagery, striking appeals to sensibility and passion, energy, sweetness, all that was felicitous in language, and all that was melodious in versification. But these attractive qualities

⁵On *Blackwood's Magazine*, Nov., 1820: II, 509.

⁶Dec., 1824: X, 571.

⁷LVII, 412.

⁸LVIII, 307.

⁹LX, 1.

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were unsubstantial and evanescent: partly because they were too exclusively addressed to the excitabilities (if we may so speak) of our nature: partly because they were not sufficiently founded on truth.

Byron, for example, 'has added little or nothing to our knowledge of the human heart. What he has introduced is a more extensive and familiar use of the vocabulary of passion' providing formulas which make it easy 'for inferior writers to convey in words what they cannot feel'. The reviewer goes on to praise Taylor for appealing to the understanding and not merely to the emotions. The influence of Shelley seemed to the *Edinburgh* even more dangerous than that of Byron. One finds several references to his predilection for the mystical and the vaporous. The article on Alford's poems, in January 1836,¹⁰ comments:

'Early youth appears to take a peculiar pleasure in seeing language float along like an exhalation: nor is it at that age less liked because in this condition it is a better medium for communicating colours than ideas. This defect has been encouraged by the schoolboy popularity of Shelley: whose language is often too yielding and aerial, of too delicate and gossamer-like a texture to be the vehicle of so earthly a thing as substantial thought. Doubtless Shelley always had his meaning; but it was not always as strong and definite a meaning as critics, intrusted with the rights of others, are bound to insist on having.

Alford seems to the reviewer to show more intellectual strength than the best known of the young Cambridge poets, Mr. Tennyson, but 'there is room', he declares, 'for them all to mend'.

Similar preoccupations appear in the *Quarterly*. Henry Taylor himself, writing on Wordsworth in November 1834,¹¹ thinks that a new kind of 'poetic diction' is springing up, more insidious than that of the eighteenth century:

'If we look through some volume of current poetry for one of those words which seem to be considered eminently poetical at the present day—the adjective 'wild' for example—and consider it closely in the many situations in which it will be found to recur, we shall in general find it to be used, not for the sake of any meaning, definite or indefinite, which it can be supposed legitimately to bear, but—in a manner which Mr. Wordsworth's prefaces will be found to explain—for the sake of conjuring up certain associations somewhat casually connected with it. It has been originally, perhaps, employed with propriety, and with distinguished success, in some passages conceived in the same mood of mind, and pointed to the same effects which are aimed at by its subsequent employers; the word takes, as it were, the colour of these original passages; becomes a stock-word with those who have more of the feeling of poetry than of dis-

¹⁰LXII, 297.¹¹LII, 317.

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crimination in the use of language, and is employed thenceforward with a progressively diminishing concern for its intrinsic significance, or for the propriety of the applications which are made of it. The adjectives *bright*, *dark*, *lonely*, the nouns *light*, *dream*, *halo*, and fifty other words, might be instanced, which are scattered almost at random through our fugitive poetry, with a sort of feeling senselessness, and convey to the congenial reader the sentiment of which they are understood to be the symbols, without either suggesting to him any meaning, or awakening him to the want of it.'

The *Quarterly's* continued insistence on the primacy of thought led to something of a campaign against contemporary poetic tendencies in the late 'sixties and the 'seventies. An article on *Modern English Poets* (1869)¹² finds a want of thought in the work of Arnold himself. A discussion of *The State of English Poetry* in 1873¹³ objects to the growing notion that the true poetic use of language is an imitation of painting or of music—noting 'a tendency to treat language, which ought to be the living vehicle of thought, as the mere inanimate matter of style':

'Look where we may find little besides word-painting, alliteration, the revival of old forms, the construction of new metres, and it seems to be generally believed that any thought, however mean, can be transmuted into poetry in the crucible of style'.

These affirmations are repeated in an article on *Wordsworth and Gray* in 1876,¹⁴ where the attempt to emulate painting and music is called a degradation of the poet's art. By this time, of course, the influence of Arnold's ideas may be seen, but there was a strain in *Quarterly* criticism to which they were obviously congenial.

The demand for thought in poetry appears equally in the *Westminster*, a notable example being Mill's comparatively favourable notice of Tennyson in 1835 (actually in the *London Review* which amalgamated with the *Westminster* after four numbers)¹⁵ with the same insistence on the dangerous influence of Shelley:

'Where the poetic temperament exists in its greatest degree, while the systematic culture of the intellect has been neglected, we may expect to find, what we do find in the best poems of Shelley—vivid representations of states of passive and dreamy emotion, fitted to give extreme pleasure to persons of similar organisation to the poet, but not likely to be sympathised in, because not understood, by any other persons: and scarcely conducing at all to the noblest end of poetry as an intellectual pursuit, that of acting upon the desires and characters of mankind through their emotions to raise them towards the perfection of their nature. This, like every other adaptation of means to ends, is the work of cultivated reason; and the poet's success in it will

¹²CXXXVI, 328.¹³CXXXV, I.¹⁴CXLI, 104.¹⁵I, 402.

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be in proportion to the intrinsic value of his thoughts, and to the command which he has acquired over the materials of his imagination for placing those thoughts in a strong light before the intellect and impressing them on the feelings.'

An article on the philosophical tendencies of Wordsworth, Shelley and Coleridge in 1836¹⁶ notes Wordsworth's frequent lack of an adequate subject and the absence of progression in Shelley's thought, 'reminding us of those pyrotechnic exhibitions where fresh fire is perpetually rushing from a hundred jets, but the same flaming and solitary word stands unchanged before us'. Similar criticisms of Shelley appear in a not unfavourable article in 1858:¹⁷ his poetry, says the reviewer, is the expression of the imagination unmodified by experience: he never anchored his imagination to anything, 'hence his weak, shadowy drawings, his want of substance, an absence of reality'.

Blackwood's Magazine, like the heavier reviews, was complaining in 1830 that 'in the poetry of our own age we miss the principle of intellectual strength'.¹⁹ In 1839 the writer of *A Prosing upon Poetry*²⁰ insisted on the close connection between poetry and 'intellectual industry, and with moral as well as mental advancement'. 'Modern poets', says the review of Bailey's *Festus* in 1850²¹ 'grow to have a horror of distinctness of thought. They shrink from examining their own ideas, lest these should turn out to be no ideas at all, or perhaps very good and sensible ideas but shockingly true and commonplace'. And an article on *American Poetry* in 1851²² says of Lowell:

'He revels with Keats in that poetic imagery and language which has a tendency to separate itself too widely from the substratum of an intelligible meaning which ought always to be kept at least *in sight*.'

Fraser's Magazine yields the same kind of complaint, most notably in an article of 1853²³ on *Alexander Smith and Alexander Pope*, which speaks of 'the style in which almost everyone has been trying to write [poetry] since Pope and plain sense went out and Shelley and the seventh heaven came in':

'The real cause of this modern vagueness is rather to be found in shallow and unsound culture, and in that inability, or carelessness, about seeing any object clearly, which besets our poets just now. . . .'

Even the new weeklies, which tended to be on the whole more favourable to the younger poets, show the same emphasis on the intellect. The *Athenaeum* in 1834²⁴ praises Taylor's serious con-

¹⁶XXV, 1.²⁰XLVI, 194.²³XLVII, 452.¹⁷N.S. XII, 97.²¹LXVII, 415.²⁴1834, p. 484.¹⁹XXVII, 833.²²LXIX, 513.

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ception of poetry and his insistence on sense: in the following year we find it warning the Browning of *Paracelsus* against the influence of Shelley's mysticism.²⁵ The *Spectator*, which rather backed Alexander Smith for a time, nevertheless warns him against too much imitation of Keats, Shelley and Tennyson: 'let him think more, learn more facts, care more about what objects are in themselves and less about the amount of pleasure they are capable of giving him, and we venture to hope that he may be among England's great names'. A later review of Bailey's *The Mystic* in 1855²⁶ adjures the Spasmodics in general:

'... let them remember that thoughts are the representatives of things, and that sentences which yield to no analysis the smallest residuum of meaning will not constitute human speech, much less poems, which are the consummate flower of human speech.'

As some of these examples will have shown, complaints of feebleness of thought shade off easily into complaints of lack of moral strength and of the elements of greatness. The *Edinburgh* reviewer of Henry Taylor's 1849²⁷ volume approaches Arnold's 1853 preface when he says:

'It is a mistake to cram poetry with many thoughts; for it is not their multitude but their gravity that makes poetry truly intellectual. It is a still greater mistake to wander in search of originality.'

The *Quarterly* article on Wordsworth and Gray in 1876, already mentioned, sees obvious moral deficiencies in modern poetry:

'Let those who complain of our criticism reflect on the old characteristics of our poetry, its manly vigour, its healthy tone, and the simple dignity of its language. Let them compare with these qualities the softness and sentimentality of modern verse, its distorted representations of nature and unsocial views of life, its inclinations to scepticism and sensuality, the luxurious effeminacy of its thought, the foppish singularity of its diction, and then say what effect this kind of art . . . is likely to produce on the health of those who are constantly indulging in it.'

Blackwood's, in an article of 1856 on *Modern Light Literature—Poetry*²⁸ censures the morbid heroes of Tennyson (in *Maud*) and the Spasmodics, and sees poetry becoming a mere accomplishment. *Fraser's* contemplating *The Past and Present Condition of English Poetry* in 1846,²⁹ sees a general mediocrity of level, and the reviewer of Arnold's *Strayed Reveller* in 1849³⁰ censures its inadequate morality ('not more helpful than Tennyson's Lotus Eaters').

²⁵1835, p. 640.²⁶1855, 1163.²⁷LXXXIX, 352.²⁸LXXIX, 127.²⁹XXXIII, 713.³⁰XXXIX, 571.

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IV.

Some of these comments are already approaching the second main count against Victorian poetry by reviewers—that it is out of touch with contemporary life. The complaint takes a number of forms: at its most judicious it approaches Arnold's demand for the application of modern ideas and the modern spirit: at its crudest it demands the kind of superficial 'setting the age to poetry' which Arnold rejected in the 1853 preface. At one end of the scale were those who thought that poetry could and should express the modern consciousness but was failing to do so adequately; at the other those who thought that the contemporary world and its interests were intractable material, essentially unpoetical:—and of these, again, some regretted the situation, while the more Utilitarian thought that poetry being of little real importance anyway it was quite reasonably employed in providing a holiday dream world.

The *Edinburgh's* review of Henry Taylor in 1834, mentioned earlier, has some general warnings about the seductions of Romantic poetry as an escape from life.

' . . . It is true that the temporary pleasure derived from poetry of this kind is great—that it transports us into another sphere, and we feel a glad sense of emancipation in quitting for a while, in fancy, the dull realities of common life. But this mental intoxication, though it gratifies for a time, can no more increase our permanent stock of pleasurable resources, than can the degrading vice to which it is in some sort analogous.'

The fullest statement of the issue is probably that by the *Edinburgh* reviewer of Southey's *Poetical Works* in 1839:³¹

'What are the subjects of thought on which the minds of most men now love to expend that surplus energy which is not absorbed by the ordinary duties and exigencies of their station?—the favourite stuff of our day-dreams? The dominion attained by man over the elements; the wonderful changes in commerce and communications; and all the relations of life depending on them, which are beginning to open upon society. These are topics which warm and exalt the spirits, and render them peculiarly susceptible to rhetorical exaggeration; but they are scarcely poetical . . . The star of the engineer, we suspect, must be on the decline, before that of the poet can culminate again.'

The reviewer is not really as pessimistic as this, however, and looks forward to the day when 'spirits will arise which will so assimilate the mechanical temperament of the age to their own genius, that it shall furnish a new and rich fountain of poetry'. In the *Quarterly* we find John Sterling, in a review of Tennyson's 1842 volume³² much concerned with the ferment of life and mechanical progress

³¹LXVIII, 354.³²LXX, 385.