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978-0-521-11028-0 - Matthew Arnold and the Education of the New Order

Peter Smith and Geoffrey Summerfield

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

Such is the distinction which, in our own day, Matthew Arnold has achieved as a literary critic and poet, and such was the notoriety he won in his own day as a controversialist writer on social and religious topics, that his professional concern with education tends to be obscured. His work as a school inspector, and his writings which resulted directly from such work, have been neglected, or seen perhaps as some necessary but unfortunate drudgery which sustained him and his family while he was engaged in other and more auspicious labours. Such neglect has been unfortunate, for this work is central to the thought and ambitions of this educator, and is of a piece with much of his other writings. His social and, indeed, his literary criticism, and his educational writings are interdependent, are mutually illuminating, and both form part of a body of thought the terms of which are not always capable of exact definition, but which nevertheless possesses a real coherence.

In this volume we publish some of Arnold's educational writings, all of which resulted directly from his work as a school inspector. They demonstrate the extent and variety of Arnold's interest in, and concern for, the provision of public education in his own day; they also show a mind dealing with both the principles and the practice of education. In 'Democracy', for instance, Arnold is outlining the political philosophy which resulted from his conception of the contemporary educational needs, whilst in his *Reports* he is discussing the issues involved in the day-to-day functioning of the schools which he visited. But all of the writings we

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include form part of and enrich a body of thinking which is further expounded in his other, less obviously educational writings. In our Introduction we seek to outline, by reference to some of his other work, the attitudes and social and political philosophy which stemmed from Arnold's concern with the 'bad civilisation' of his own day.

Throughout his life, Arnold was deeply interested in the public affairs of his own day—'these are damned times', he wrote to Arthur Hugh Clough as early as September 1849; and proceeded in his letter to show his interest and condemnation of them.¹ The extent of his later disquiet may be judged from a letter he wrote to his sister, Mrs Forster, in which he linked the death of his son, Basil, 'with so much other "suffering in the flesh,"—the departure of youth, cares of many kinds, and an almost painful anxiety about public matters.'² Earlier, in November 1865, Arnold wrote a longer and more detailed exposition of his anxiety:

Whatever Mary [his sister] may say, or the English may think, I have a conviction that there is a real, an almost imminent danger of England losing immeasurably in all ways, declining into a sort of greater Holland, for want of what I must still call ideas, for want of perceiving how the world is going and must go, and preparing herself accordingly. This conviction haunts me, and at times even overwhelms me with depression; I would rather not live to see the change come to pass, for we shall all deteriorate under it. While there is time I will do all I can, and in every way, to prevent its coming to pass. Sometimes, no doubt, turning oneself one way after another, one must make unsuccessful and unwise hits, and one may fail

¹ *The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. H. F. Lowry (Oxford, 1932), p. 111.

² *Letters of Matthew Arnold*, ed. G. W. E. Russell (2 vols. 1895), 1, 382.

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after all; but try I must, and I know that it is only by facing in every direction that one can win the day.¹

This letter reveals more than his interest in and concern with contemporary affairs, for it also demonstrates his determination to work for some reformation in the lives of his fellow-countrymen. In his first prose work, *England and the Italian Question*, published in 1859, he made clear what was to become his purpose as a prose writer:

In attempting to fulfil it, [the forming of a clear judgement on the question of Italian independence] I have enjoyed peculiar opportunities for correcting myself of certain misconceptions current in England. I venture to hope that in endeavouring to record the lessons which I have learned, I may possibly be of some use to others.²

Writing with a modesty³ that disappeared as he warmed to his task, he stated what that purpose was to be: the correction of 'misconceptions current in England'. Had he needed to write his *Apologia*, Arnold might well have said with Newman, 'I begin to think I had a mission'. Certainly Fitzjames Stephen, a frequent opponent of Arnold's who complained of the moral enthusiasm of Rugby and its sons, was to say in his 'Mr Matthew Arnold and His Countrymen' that Arnold's 'self-imposed mission [was] to give good advice to the English as to their manifold faults'.⁴

¹ *Letters*, 1, 309–10. For his feelings about the representative significance of Holland, see *ibid.* 90–2.

² *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor, 1960–; 5 vols. published to date), 1, 65.

³ In a letter to his mother of 29 October 1863, he wrote: 'It is very animating to think that one at last has a chance of *getting at* the English public. Such a public as it is, and such work as one wants to do with it!' *Letters*, 1, 201.

⁴ *Saturday Review*, 3 December 1864, p. 683.

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The seriousness of his concern and the consequent missionary zeal are essential parts of Arnold's thought and intrinsic to much of his prose writing; they also stem from an analysis and appraisal of contemporary society which, though they were never stated in their entirety in any one piece of work, may be gathered from his various writings. Writing in the early part of the second half of the nineteenth century when rioting and political disturbance were common, and when the 1867 Reform Act was to complete the enfranchisement of the middle class begun by the Reform Act of 1832, Arnold was constantly referring to his own age as an epoch of change, 'an epoch of dissolution and transformation'. (Cf. W. E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, pp. 1-8.) In his essay on Heine, he explained what he felt was happening:

Modern times find themselves with an immense system of institutions, established facts, accredited dogmas, customs, rules, which have come to them from times not modern. In this system their life has to be carried forward; yet they have a sense that this system is not of their own creation, that it by no means corresponds exactly with the wants of their actual life, that, for them, it is customary, not rational... To remove this want of correspondence is beginning to be the settled endeavour of most persons of good sense. Dissolvents of the old European system of dominant ideas and facts we must all be, all of us who have any power of working; what we have to study is that we may not be acrid dissolvents of it.¹

To recognise this change, that his was an era of dissolution and transformation, was to Arnold the prime need of the contemporary Englishman; indeed, he

¹ Super, III, 109-10.

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maintained that such recognition and consequent adaptation was all that could be asked of him:

Perfection will never be reached; but to recognise a period of transformation when it comes, and to adapt themselves honestly and rationally to its laws, is perhaps the nearest approach to perfection of which men and nations are capable.¹

Compare the following extract from Dr Thomas Arnold's *Englishman's Register (Miscellaneous Works, p. 116)*:

England cannot remain what it has been; and the endeavour to detain a state of things which is passing away is, at the best, a waste of those efforts which might be better employed in preparing for the approaching and inevitable change, and in making the passage from the old system to the new as easy and imperceptible as possible.

Society was changing and one section that was becoming less important was the aristocracy. Although it continued to administer, Arnold considered it an anachronism, the days of which were numbered. As early as March 1848, after the riots in Trafalgar Square, he wrote to his mother:

It will be *rioting* here, only; still the hour of the hereditary peerage and eldest sonship and immense properties, has, I am convinced, as Lamartine would say, struck.²

Many years later, Arnold gave, in his essay 'Equality', his explanation of the original function of the aristocracy:

Their reason for existing was to serve as a number of centres in a world disintegrated after the ruin of the Roman Empire, and slowly re-constituting itself. Numerous centres of material force were needed, and these a feudal aristocracy supplied. Their large and hereditary estates served this public end.

¹ *Ibid.* II, 29.

² *Letters*, I, 4.

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The owners had a positive function, for which their estates were essential.¹

That time was an 'epoch of concentration', as was the period which followed the French Revolution, when the aristocracy fulfilled its function splendidly and led and unified the effort of the whole nation in combating the aggression of Napoleonic France. In *Friendship's Garland* one of Arnold's 'foreign friends' makes the following comments upon the English aristocracy in that era of concentration, comments which we can accept as Arnold's own views:

This aristocracy was high-spirited, reticent, firm, despising frothy declamation. It had all the qualities useful for its task and time; Lord Grenville's words, as early as 1793: 'England will never consent that France shall arrogate the power of annulling at her pleasure, and under the pretence of a pretended natural right, the political system of Europe,'—these few words, with their lofty strength, contain, as one may say, the prophecy of future success; you hear the very voice of an aristocracy standing on sure ground, and with the stars in its favour. Well, you succeeded, and in 1815, after Waterloo, you were the first power in Europe.²

By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, the aristocracy had outlived its purpose. Despite certain qualities it possessed, which Arnold was ready to acknowledge and respect, he considered not only that it was inadequate to deal with the contemporary situation, but also that it had a pernicious and stunting effect on society. Democracy, Arnold urged, was the living force, and, although in England it had been slow in developing itself, yet the English people, he maintained,

becomes more and more sensible to the irresistible seduction of democratic ideas, promising to each individual of the

¹ *Mixed Essays*, in *The Works of Matthew Arnold* (Edition de luxe, 15 vols. 1903-4), x, 84.

² *Super*, v, 14.

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multitude increased self-respect and expansion with the increased importance and authority of the multitude to which he belongs, with the diminished preponderance of the aristocratic class above him.¹

This spread of democratic ideas he saw as inevitable and irresistible. In 1861, in the introduction to *The Popular Education of France*, he wrote:

Life itself consists, say the philosophers, in the effort to *affirm one's own essence*. . . Democracy is trying to *affirm its own essence*; to live, to enjoy, to possess the world, as aristocracy has tried, and successfully tried, before it. . . So potent is the charm of life and expansion upon the living; the moment men are aware of them, they begin to desire them, and the more they have of them, the more they crave.²

Arnold recognised the spread of democracy, and conceived the modern spirit as 'the motion, as we say, of making human life more natural and rational,—or, as your philosophers say, of getting the greatest happiness for the greatest number'.³ For the aristocracy, however, the increasing importance of such ideas was creating a situation with which it was completely incompetent to deal. It was incompetent—and this is a celebrated judgement of Arnold's—because of its incapacity for ideas:

It is the old story of the incapacity of the aristocracy for ideas,—the secret of their want of success in modern epochs . . . Themselves a power reposing on all which is most solid, material, and visible, they are slow to attach any great importance to influences impalpable, spiritual, and viewless.⁴

Already Arnold saw this intellectual poverty of the aristocracy as resulting from the extent of its posses-

¹ *Ibid.* II, 13.

² *Ibid.* 7. This introduction was later published as the essay 'Democracy'.

³ *Friendship's Garland*, Super, v, 17–18.

⁴ 'Democracy', Super, II, 11.

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sions, and when he wrote *Culture and Anarchy* he emphasised the fact:

But the aristocratic class has actually, as we have seen, in its well-known politeness, a kind of image or shadow of sweetness; and as for light. . . it is not that it perversely cherishes some dismal and illiberal existence in preference to light, but it is lured off from following light by those mighty and eternal seducers of our race which weave for this class their most irresistible charms,—by worldly splendour, security, power, and pleasure.¹

Thus the aristocracy, as a result of its inherent limitations, could neither appreciate the situation when new ideas were stirring among the masses nor, consequently, adapt itself to deal with the democratic challenge as a governing class. Arnold realised that the coincidence of the two facts was to weaken further the power of the aristocracy, and wrote: ‘At the very moment when democracy becomes less and less disposed to follow and to admire, aristocracy becomes less and less qualified to command and to captivate.’² And, despite the closing paragraph of *England and the Italian Question*, where Arnold foresaw, a little doubtfully perhaps, the possibility of the aristocracy ruling the new world as it had done the old, by 1861 he was reiterating the opinions expressed in his letters in 1848 and 1856: ‘The time has arrived, however, when it is becoming impossible for the aristocracy of England to conduct and wield the English nation any longer.’³

In contrast to the fine, albeit ineffective, style of the aristocracy, Arnold saw the working class—or, as he called it in his ‘new. . . and convenient division of

¹ *Super*, v, 140.

² ‘Democracy’, *ibid.* II, 15.

³ *Ibid.* II, 6. See also *Letters*, I, 4, and I, 50.

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English society', the Populace—as a body of immature men, brutalised by the squalor in which they lived and depressed by the social inequalities which existed in England. In the urgent times of 1867 he wrote:

But that vast portion, lastly, of the working class which, raw and half-developed, has long lain half-hidden amidst its poverty and squalor, and is now issuing from its hiding-place to assert an Englishman's heaven-born privilege of doing as he likes, and is beginning to perplex us by marching where it likes, meeting where it likes, bawling what it likes, breaking what it likes,—to this vast residuum we may with great propriety give the name of *Populace*.¹

Excluded from political power and brutalised though this class was, Arnold was yet perspicacious enough to realise that this 'vast residuum' was ultimately to possess great political power. Soon after he had become a school inspector he wrote to his wife:

I think 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.²

Despite the restless times in which he was living, Arnold retained, unlike Carlyle for instance,³ his belief in democracy and in the possibility of transforming the 'lower Classes'. And the agent for the civilising, the transforming of this potentially great political power was to be the middle class.

The Reform Act of 1832 had enfranchised half the middle class and the Act of 1867 was to ensure that it was to govern. As a result of his estimate of the worth

¹ *Culture and Anarchy*, Super, v, 143.

² *Letters*, 1, 17.

³ For Carlyle's response to the problems of reform, see 'Shooting Niagara: and After?', *Macmillan's Magazine*, xvi (August 1867).

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and effectiveness of the aristocracy and the working class, the middle class was, in Arnold's eyes, in a pivotal position. In 1864 he had great hopes of this class and to Cobden he wrote:

At the same time there is undoubtedly just now a ferment in the spirit of the middle class which I see nowhere else, and which seems to me the greatest power and *purchase* we have; and all that can be done to open their mind and to strengthen them by a better culture should I think be done; we shall then have a real force to employ against the aristocratic force and a moving force against an inert and unprogressive force, a force of ideas against the less spiritual forces of established power, antiquity, prestige, and social refinement.¹

In the same month he wrote to his mother about his sending, and Cobden's receipt of, the articles which were to be published as *A French Eton*:

From Cobden I had an interesting letter, written on the receipt of the articles, before he read them, to say that he should certainly read them and was prepared to be interested, but that his main interest was in the condition of the lower class. But I am convinced that nothing can be done effectively to raise this class except through the agency of a transformed middle class; for, till the middle class is transformed, the aristocratic class, which will do nothing effectively, will rule.²

For Arnold, then, the middle class was doubly important—first because, at the time, it was the only possible effective political force since the aristocracy was incompetent, and the working class raw and underdeveloped; and secondly because it had to fulfil the function of civilising the masses, who were, he felt sure,

¹ W. H. G. Armytage, 'Matthew Arnold and Richard Cobden in 1864. Some recently discovered letters', *Review of English Studies*, xxv (1949), 252.

² *Letters*, I, 224. For a statement of similar views, see Arnold's 'Ecce, Convertimur ad Gentes', *Irish Essays and Others, Works*, xi.