

Review Article

Reformers and Critics

TO BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING is, for most of us, to begin with a sense of sin. We are still, in Matthew Arnold's terms, more Hebraist than Hellenist. But so was Arnold. Without a sense of sin, who would be a critical reformer? The reformer can emphasize certain critical areas, but he cannot safely isolate them, and he must sooner or later—too soon or too late perhaps—find when they all begin in guilt or outrage, our sins or the sins of others.

Reformers are characterized by the questions they ask: What is wrong? What is right? How do we get from wrong to right? The Hellenist may be able to begin with what is right, with a view of perfection and a desire for emulation, but heirs of nineteenth-century British Hebraism, poor benighted heirs like me, have a nagging, angry, negative legacy, a hot seat in Zion that prevents us from taking our ease.

The questions are appropriate to all areas of reform—ethical, political, educational, religious, and literary, for example—though in each area subsidiary matters complicate the analysis while giving it meaning. Let Matthew Arnold be our guide, now that his *Complete Prose Works*¹ are spreading before us,

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1. *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*. Ed. R. H. SUPER. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press [Toronto: Ambassador Books]. Volume I: *On the Classical Tradition*, 1960. Pp. ix, 271. \$6.50. Volume II: *Democratic Education*, 1962. Pp. viii, 422. \$8.50. Volume III: *Lectures and Essays in Criticism*, 1962. Pp. viii, 578. \$9.00. Volume IV: *Schools and Universities on the Continent*, 1964. Pp. viii, 437. \$9.50. Volume V: *Culture and Anarchy*, 1965. Pp. xii, 567. \$9.50.
The Poems of Matthew Arnold. Ed. Kenneth Allcott. London and Don Mills, Ontario: Longmans [New York: Barnes and Noble], 1965. Pp. xxiv, 624. \$6.00.
Alexander, Edward. *Matthew Arnold and John Stuart Mill*. New York: Columbia University Press [Toronto: Copp, Clark], 1965. Pp. xi, 313. \$6.50.
Cockshut, A. O. J. *The Unbelievers*. London: Collins [Don Mills, Ontario: Collins of Canada], 1964. Pp. 192. \$4.75.
Hamburger, Joseph. *Intellectuals in Politics: John Stuart Mill and the Philosophic Radicals*. New Haven: Yale University Press [Montreal: McGill University Press], 1965. Pp. xi, 308. \$7.50.
Letwin, Shirley Robin. *The Pursuit of Certainty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press [Toronto: Macmillan of Canada], 1965. Pp. viii, 391. \$9.50.

meticulously and affectionately prepared by R. H. Super, and his *Poems*, equally meticulously and more affectionately edited by Kenneth Allott, join their resolute ranks.

Culture and Anarchy—we are drawn strongly to the positive first term, but Arnold would never have offered what Frederic Harrison wickedly called his pouncet-box of culture had he not felt the terrors of threatening anarchy. Inadequacy, imbalance, disorder he found in himself before he tried to cure them in the nation, and his own wrongs pointed the way to the nation's rights. In personal, if not literary terms, his poetry was a necessary step in the training of a reformer, for it directed his attention to a question not met by the casual complainer: how and where did I go wrong? Arnold had initially a sense of guilt and not of outrage; the fault was in him. His poetry was a self-analysis that, once he began to see himself as a representative man, led him out of self. In a well-known passage in which he compared himself to Tennyson and Browning, Arnold says: "My poems represent, on the whole, the main movement of mind of the last quarter of a century, and thus they will probably have their day as people become conscious to themselves of what that movement of mind is, and interested in the literary productions which reflect it." Edward Alexander, who quotes this and many other touchstone passages in his sympathetic and perceptive *Matthew Arnold and John Stuart Mill*, comments in another context "Just those things which [Arnold] condemned as a critic attracted him as a poet" (p. 123).

To simplify by compression, one may say that his own brooding, self-conscious romanticism stood in the way of a dutiful, coherent striving after perfection; as goes the typical man, so goes "the main movement of mind". A man more assured of his own virtues might be sanguine about the movement, but Arnold looked for new directions. Just how he found them is revealed more clearly than ever by the chronological order of the new edition. In the five volumes now published, we are taken on the path of discovery Arnold made for himself from 1853 to 1871. His professional work as Inspector of Schools blended into his literary criticism, both depending on an awareness of Continental trends and English insularity. His increasingly strong social criticism became better defined as it met resistance, and came to fruition in *Culture and Anarchy*, though his belief in equality is adumbrated rather than developed. In two of his four main critical areas, educational and social, this period includes nearly his full analysis, and his answers to the questions of wrong, right, and method. Of the other two areas, literary and religious, we see the beginnings of his major effort; his literary principles, indeed, are largely

stated. In all areas, particularly, divorce, stupidity are the enemy—in a word, anarchy. Perfect co-operation with the tendency for good in the universe is the goal. The means are humanization, civilization, right reason—in a word, culture.

Now all this is the opposite of dogmatic, and it is Arnold's non-dogmatic progeny who keep returning to him for guidance in times of trouble. The very vagueness of his prescriptions—except in education—seems guarantee enough of flexibility, while his strength in the face of doubt is a healthy reminder that lack of certainty does not entail lack of faith.

As Professor Alexander shows, there are long roads on which John Stuart Mill and Arnold both travelled, Mill—at least chronologically—some-what ahead. But Mill was on the whole much more specific than Arnold in his proposals for reform, though he also plunged deep into forests of abstraction and political bogs that Arnold avoided. Still his sceptical habit (which I would call fair-mindedness in another context) made him a begetter of our age of qualification, when every affirmation means a denial and every strength a weakness. It is odd, then, to find him stigmatized increasingly in a recent criticism as a dogmatist, an ideologue, and a doctrinaire. Joseph Hamburger's *Intellectuals in Politics*, a carefully documented and intelligent analysis of the Philosophic Radicals from their triumph in 1832 to their dissolution in the late 1830s, seizes on Mill in his most vulnerable period, and pummels him more vigorously than charity and justice would condone.

The issue between Mill and Professor Hamburger reflects the difference between British and American political experience, between an era of compromise and an era of consensus, and between a period of promising democracy and one of threatening mediocracy (or, to use a McLuhanism, media-ocracy). Mill certainly had doctrinaire leanings at the time: moving from his twenties to his thirties, he was fierce without much force, passed quickly from hope to disgust, and had not yet reconciled, as he was later to do, theory and practice. What is not so evident is that, in his degree and kind, and at that time, he was wrong to be doctrinaire. I had better attempt to duck the round-house right Professor Hamburger is probably throwing at my political naïveté, by asking what else Mill should have been at that time. By what standard of political or moral rectitude are we to judge him wrong?

This is a question for authors in so far as they are critics; it is more justifiable, or at least more common, however, for them to concentrate on one question, What is wrong? *Intellectuals in Politics* is a knowledgeable and careful analysis of what went wrong for the Philosophic Radicals, and could be

justified simply by the wealth of information found in the notes (which blessedly are at the foot of the page). If it does not answer all the relevant questions, it is at least, like Professor Alexander's book, inside its subject. Much less can be said for A. O. J. Cockshut's *The Unbelievers*, which contains slight essays on Mill, Arnold, Clough, Huxley, George Eliot, Spencer, Butler, "and others." The shortcomings and difficulties of these "agnostics" are summarily treated, as by Strachey's left hand, and while some interesting and even sprightly things are said, the tone is generally that of the following comment: "It is probably true to say that few of the men mentioned in this book would have understood what [Ibsen's] *Rosmersholm* was about" (154). Shirley Robin Letwin's *The Pursuit of Certainty*, made up of extended sections on Hume, Bentham, Mill, and Beatrice Webb, is very much better, though the sections are too isolated to justify the title. Nothing very new is added to previous studies of the separate authors, except Beatrice Webb, and some odd remarks on Mill point to a slighter acquaintance than that of Professors Alexander and Hamburger. But the sense of rights and wrongs and passages of strenuous intellectual analysis make this a valuable book.

Suggesting how, in my view, wrongs might be righted in Professor Super's *Collected Prose Works of Matthew Arnold* is really pointless now that about one-half of the edition has appeared. In an attempt to emulate the Hellenic spirit, I should focus on its many virtues. The full presentation of texts, many awkward to come by and some never printed before, the splendidly informed annotation, the careful treatment of textual matters, all these leave us greatly indebted. The opportunity of discovery provided by the chronological arrangement, and the multi-dimensional effect of finding essays on disparate subjects side by side are of obvious worth to those who read the volumes as they appear. There will now be little excuse for confusion about Arnold's views, though some of us may on occasion want to plead that little excuse. The virtues far outweigh the defects.

My own bias—call it Hebraic if you will—leads me to mention some of these defects. It is hard to reconstruct the text and follow the allusions when both sets of notes are at the back of the volume, and this arrangement also makes necessary the unsightly line numbers on the pages of text. Despite what is said above about the chronological order, the volumes would be easier to use, some confusions could have been avoided, and the volume titles made more accurate, if the items had been grouped by approximate subject. The passion for chronology is carried to an un-Arnoldian extreme when prefaces, usually written after the works which they preface, are printed *after* the works;

Professor Super's argument for this procedure runs a poor race against tradition and common sense. (It might be added that since, very properly, the last version that Arnold may have altered is used as copy text, very often the preface was written before the version here given.) Since this is a "complete" edition, I cannot understand why Arnold's General Reports on British schools are not included; many salient passages are quoted in the notes, but the full texts are in many ways as important as his reports on Continental schools. The external appearance of the volumes is not worthy of the enterprise, and there are a few fiddling matters of editing that are annoying rather than damaging. But enough! There are here enough lessons in emulation to occupy our striving hours, and we sinners are not yet perfect reformers.

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