

WORDSWORTH, ARNOLD, AND PROFESSOR LANE COOPER

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I MUST confess at once that it may properly be thought a show-man's trick to attract an audience to a humble performance by parading a trinity of great names. But some attention should be paid to an article which appeared in the *July Bookman*, and which came to my notice belatedly: Professor Cooper's attack upon Matthew Arnold's essay on Wordsworth. That article does little honour to Wordsworth, and misrepresents Arnold quite completely. True, it is in the fashion: attacks upon Arnold seem to be rather a professorial pose just now, like detective stories and bad language. Further, an Arnoldian cannot forget his master's injunction not to "strive or cry", and he will have no wish to suffer the fate of the unfortunate Bishops of Winchester and Gloucester who tried "to do something" for the doctrine of the Godhead. It may be well, nevertheless, to warn readers of the *Bookman*, who may be hypnotized by Professor Cooper's notable name, not to accept everything he says about Wordsworth and Arnold without due examination.

It is difficult to understand what may be the immediate cause of Professor Cooper's outburst. What new offence Arnold's essay has committed in 1929 I do not know, or what offence, if any, it can now commit that it has not been committing for fifty years. Besides, it has been attacked, or at least corrected, not a few times and long since. A. C. Bradley, to name only one corrector, was at pains in his Oxford Lectures to point out and make good some of the inadequacies of the famous essay. It looks as if Professor Cooper, after inhibiting wrath against Arnold for a generation, has allowed his Censor to go to sleep for an hour, with the result that his Suppressed Desires have armed him with a length of lead-pipe and pushed him, hot for destruction, through the unguarded hedge of his own teeth. I will not engage to defend the psychology or the anatomy of that rather terrifying image; it simply represents a strenuous effort to understand and excuse Professor Cooper's behaviour.

The fundamental causes of his irritation are, of course, easy enough to understand. He has merely joined the long procession

of people whom Arnold has made hot under the collar. Their feeling is not without its just reason. Arnold's little airinesses and superiorities are very annoying sometimes. Like the usual public-school Englishman of the present day, he has a capacity for calmly ignoring philosophers and scholars and other things that really do merit consideration. That half-pitying smile, as of a teacher in an idiot school, is still vastly insulting. The Elegant Jeremiah, the prophet of culture with his pouncet-box, still continues to make mad the philosophers and the Hotspurs of criticism. A long time ago, a friend of "dogma", to Arnold's great gratification, apparently referred to him, or to his kind, as "the degenerate plant of a strange vine bringing forth the grapes of Sodom and the clusters of Gomorrah". F. H. Bradley once emerged from his ethical vacuum to polish off Arnold in a way that Mr. T. S. Eliot has lately called "unanswerable". Even Leslie Stephen, not an irritable writer, and one who warmly admired Arnold in spite of suffering a little at his hands, says he often wished that he too had a little sweetness and light, that he might be able to say such nasty things of his enemies. I remind Professor Cooper of these commonplaces to comfort him for expressing an irritation of which, in cool after-thought, he cannot feel proud.

Besides, Professor Cooper is one of those touchy people known as the "fervent Wordsworthians"—the sort against whom we must, as Arnold says, be "on our guard". Wordsworth has the same extraordinary hold upon his cult—a most estimable lot—that Burns has upon the Scots. They will hear of no clay even in their idol's feet. Everything that he did or said, early or late, must be regarded as a product of plenary inspiration. It is lucky that Wordsworth societies, if there are such, do not give dinners as frequently as Burns societies do. For, as Arnold hints, such occasions would serve to keep alive, with a sort of sad pleasure, all the heavy and weary parts of Wordsworth, perhaps even the *Sonnets upon the Punishment of Death, in Series*. Professor Cooper apparently holds a brief for the Wordsworth of 1808 and onwards, but Arnold dares to be critical of the last states of that man. This is enough to set a devotee's blood aboil.

But it is one thing to be irritated, and another to let your irritation disorganise you. That is unluckily what has happened to Professor Cooper. One would gladly bestow upon his article the "brief praise" that he himself bestows upon the doomed Arnold. The article, like Arnold's, is a *causerie* or, in the professor's plainer term, "chat". But it is not chat that is "orderly and clear in the march of its thought"; it is sadly disturbed by irrelevancies, in-

accuracies of statement, misquotations, confusions in logic. This I am prepared to prove from every single paragraph except the first, and in that the author has not really got down to work.

For example, what relation to the theme of Professor Cooper's essay—even a *causerie* may have a theme—has the statement that “Arnold received good pay for his article of July, 1879”? It is good to know that; one hopes it is true; and one also hopes that Professor Cooper got good pay for his article in the *Bookman*. Unluckily it is too much to hope that the latter essay can ever “reappear”, as Arnold's did, “judiciously amended”. Or again, in the third paragraph, the professor asks, “Is it true that Wordsworth did not think or talk of glory, or did not value it aright”? A cool reading of Arnold's exact words, as Professor Cooper himself quotes them, would have shown that Arnold never made any of the denials suggested by the question. He actually said:

Wordsworth... would certainly never have thought of talking of glory as that which, after all, has the best chance of not being altogether vanity.

It is surely futile to hurl the Wordsworth Concordance, with its one hundred and thirty-three references to “glory”, at a target that Arnold never set up. One might also instance the pathetic attempt to blacken Arnold the literary critic because of the sins of Arnold the editor of Wordsworthian texts, whom, of course, no one defends. It is much as if a professor's wild shots at golf should “raise a presumption” against the accuracy of his scholarship. On Arnold's famous image of Nature taking the pen out of the poet's hand, there is an amazing comment that, if one did not know who wrote it, would argue an utter inability to interpret figures of speech. But a little of this sort of thing is quite enough. It is obviously enough to exemplify the regrettable sort of criticism into which Professor Cooper has unguardedly fallen.

No one can be insensible of the debt which all Wordsworthians (even the non-fervent) owe to Professor Cooper. We are grateful to him for his *Concordance*, even when he uses it irrelevantly. I have read most of his writings on Wordsworth, I think, with pleasure and edification. Only this essay I draw the line at, as Arnold drew the line at the ill-starred “Vaudracour and Julia” (*Absit omen*). It does no good to Wordsworth “to be destructive” of Arnold who did so much for the poet's fame. Robbing Peter does not necessarily pay Paul. And it is precisely because Professor Cooper is authoritative as a Wordsworth scholar that his destructive aim must not go unnoticed. Although his missile falls far short, his motives are

confessedly homicidal, and he should be bound over to keep the peace.

In the 1879 essay, and the book of selections which it was written to preface, Arnold was trying to reveal what he thought was the great and essential Wordsworth to a larger body of readers than had previously enjoyed him. To this end he tried to remove certain obstacles which he believed stood in the way of a larger appreciation of Wordsworth: the "poetical baggage" with which the poet was encumbered, his method of classifying his poems, and the over-emphasis which expositors of Wordsworth had placed upon his "philosophy". His attempts, in all three cases, irritate Professor Cooper very much. I will examine these various irritations, and humbly try to assuage them.

Professor Cooper seems to find fault—one cannot be altogether sure that he really disagrees—with the opinion that "almost all of Wordsworth's best work was produced in the decade between 1798 and 1808". In this quotation he does really state Arnold's belief (and the belief of most men also) in a general sort of way, though Arnold's exact words have been slightly altered in their passage through the professor's mind. We must constantly be "on our guard" against his use and interpretation of words, and against his constant inaccuracy of statement. The date 1808, for a first and minor instance, is not a "mistaken allusion" to the volumes of 1807. Arnold, in his innocent way, has probably added ten to 1798 and got the correct result. But Professor Cooper proceeds to find it strange, in view of the opinion given above, that "a third of Arnold's selections are from work produced" after 1808, "some of it as late as 1835 and 1840". It is not only strange, it is not quite true. Arnold added some poems to his anthology after 1879 and withdrew others, so that the following figures, taken from the issue of 1897, will not be exactly correct of the original edition; but they are correct enough for practical purposes. Counting by titles, I find that some 44 of the total 171 selections are dated after 1808: that is, barely over one-fourth. And of the 44 pieces referred to, 32 are sonnets. If one reckons by quantity, one gets some 68 pages of later verse out of a total of about 320 pages that are not blank: more nearly a fifth than a third. All this is heavily pedantic, of course; but if Professor Cooper insists on accuracy, by all means let us have it. And now, suppose we correct the allegedly faulty opinion by reading "by far the greater part of the best work" instead of "almost all", and not even Professor Cooper, being a lover of poetry, can seriously object. After all, that is the way in which cool and decently equipped readers

of Arnold's essay and Wordsworth's poetry, including Arnold himself, have always interpreted the offending phrase. What is more, this general consensus of opinion expresses the truth.

But Arnold was even more accurate, in reality, than I have suggested in the preceding paragraph. It is true, as Professor Cooper is right in pointing out, that he admires and prints a considerable amount of later work, small though the amount is relatively. Indeed, he read all of Wordsworth, except one piece, "with pleasure and edification", and he selects for his anthology five of the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, instead of four, as Professor Cooper states. Nevertheless, on returning to the troublesome opinion, we find that the professor has not read Arnold's words in the light of their whole context, and that in consequence he presents them in a significantly garbled paraphrase. Arnold's exact words are as follows:

It is no exaggeration to say that within one single decade . . . between 1798 and 1808, almost all his *really first-rate* work was produced.

The words I have italicised are significant, as everyone knows who has read Arnold's essay coolly and steadily and wholly. He makes a clear distinction between Wordsworth's "great body of good work" and his "really first-rate work". "His good work itself", Arnold says, "his work which counts, is not all of it, of course, of equal value. Some kinds of poetry are in themselves lower kinds than others. The ballad kind is a lower kind; the didactic kind, still more, is a lower kind". To both of these lower, but still good, kinds Arnold gave a place in his selections. Again, after speaking of poems of "peculiar and unique beauty" (the *really first-rate*), he says that there are, besides, "very many other poems, of which the worth, although not so rare as the worth of these, is still exceedingly high". Now, by Wordsworth's "really first-rate work", Arnold literally meant what he said: he had in mind the poems which send you away in a "high-wrought mood"; work that is "as inevitable as Nature herself"; work "unique and unmatched", of "bare, sheer, penetrating power", of "plain, first-hand, almost austere naturalness". He has examples ready to hand: *Resolution and Independence*, *Michael*, *The Fountain*, *The Solitary Reaper*. From this "unique" group, he would exclude even *Laodameia* and the *Ode on Immortality*, admirable and great as he finds them. Not all of Arnold's Anthology, then, is of that high quality, nor does he contend that it is. Besides the numerous pieces of peculiar and unique beauty, there is other good and

characteristic work that Arnold thinks will aid rather than obstruct the reading of the really first-rate. But it is his main object to disengage these latter from their "poetical baggage". And it is literally true that he finds *almost all* of them in the work of "*one single decade... between 1798 and 1808*". As a matter of fact, he might have said 1806 without much danger. It is the right of Professor Cooper or of lesser people to disagree with Arnold's critical judgments. But it is surely the first business of a scholar to set down what Arnold actually said, and to make a reasonable effort at finding out what he meant when he said it.

Rather more definitely than usual, Professor Cooper complains about Arnold's arrangement of his selections, and his appeal to the Greek categories of poetry as against Wordsworth's. Arnold did object to the latter. Because of their employment, he says, "Poems are separated one from another which possess a kinship of subject or of treatment far more vital and deep than the supposed unity of mental origin which was Wordsworth's reason for joining them with others". This is precisely true, witness the separation of the great group of Lucy poems in the Hutchinson edition. Why "an effective artist in landscape" should have broken that group, is a mystery. Even if it were not, one would suppose that their juxtaposition would have served purposes more relevant to poetry than is landscape gardening. "It is strange" that Professor Cooper did not present the better, though still unsatisfactory, case for Wordsworth's arrangement which he must have learned from Mr. Arthur Beatty. All this may be a matter of opinion. But it is not correct to say, as Professor Cooper does, that Arnold "does not classify his selections by the methods he recommends". The Greeks, so far as I have heard, did not write sonnets, and to these Arnold gives a separate division. But they did write narratives, lyrics, odes, elegies; and they either supplied the name for each category or gave the hint for its invention. That accounts for four of Arnold's categories. The remaining one, the ballad, Professor Cooper may attribute to "Christianity, the Troubadours or the Germanic poets" as his learning bids him. The point is that this category is of the same order as the others which Arnold uses. What is meant by the remark that "to a surprising extent Arnold follows Wordsworth's own arrangement", it is impossible to make out. Possibly Professor Cooper means that Arnold usually follows Wordsworth in printing the sonnets in chronological order. In general it is nearer the truth to say that it is more surprising when one finds the two arrangements actually in agreement. Certainly Arnold's order is simple, convenient, and adequate

for a small book of selections. A complete Wordsworth for the "fervent" may require landscape-gardening, but that is irrelevant to the discussion.

Professor Cooper is no safer guide as a critic when he comes to comment on the much vexed question of Wordsworth's philosophy and of Arnold's attitude to it. As before, he bases his remarks on a misquotation. "We cannot do him (Wordsworth) justice," he makes Arnold say, "until we dismiss his philosophy." It is a pity that a scholar should have omitted the word "formal" before "philosophy", even if it made no difference, as in this instance it does. Arnold does not mean, and he never meant, any disrespect to philosophy, formal or otherwise, as such. He does mean that, until we can dispense with the *formal* philosophy, we cannot do justice to his poetry as poetry. This is true, and it needs to be repeated even more emphatically to-day than in 1879. And by "formal philosophy" Arnold means, as he makes very clear in the very paragraph from which Professor Cooper misquotes, what Leslie Stephen referred to as Wordsworth's "scientific system of thought," his "ethical system . . . distinctive and capable of exposition"—the sort of thing, as Arnold is always insisting, it is not the business of poetry to give even if it could. He even seems to anticipate that there would be Professor Coopers among his critics, for he guards against them in a parenthesis, which I have italicised, immediately following the quotations already given: "His poetry is the reality, his philosophy,—*so far, at least, as it may put on the form and habit of 'a scientific system of thought', and the more that it puts them on,—is the illusion*". Again, it is quite possible to disagree with what Arnold says, but it is the function of a leader in scholarship to state what an author says and to find out what he means when he says it,—certainly when he explains the meaning himself.

It is indeed possible to disagree with Arnold, but it is usually dangerous. He makes errors of a superficial kind in every chapter, every page if you like. But his main doctrines have an uncomfortable habit of exhibiting the most indefeasible good sense. His objections to "scientific systems of thought" in poetry are very simple, but quite unanswerable. Poetry, because of its very nature, cannot present such systems, although this does not imply that poetry has not profound and thorough truth of substance. Besides, "systems of thought and belief" have their day and pass to the dust-heap, while poetry, in some way or other, survives the discarded "system" that may perhaps have suggested it. This is not only simple, it is platitude; but it is also the fact. Arnold was not

fortunate enough to live to study Professor Arthur Beatty's elaborate display of Associationist Philosophy in the works of Wordsworth, though Professor Cooper seems to find fault with him for not doing so. Certainly the brand of Wordsworthian "philosophy" which Arnold "dismissed" in his day would be rejected now by Mr. Beatty. It is surely unfair to blame Arnold for not emphasizing a system of thought which Professor Cooper, if he really agrees with the contemporary whom he cites, must also dismiss as inadequate or untrue.

As for Mr. Beatty's book, it is not relevant to discuss it now. Although it is being subjected to very damaging fire, all Wordsworthians have found it very interesting and valuable. I shall venture just one remark: if Wordsworth's "truth of substance" is to depend mainly on David Hartley's associationism, there is little hope for the poetry: for, of all "systems", surely Hartley's is about the most completely exploded. Another example of what happens to "scientific systems of thought"! And another proof that a reader of Wordsworth's poetry in its essential form, if, as Arnold thought, it has one, must learn to "dispense with his formal philosophy".

After all, Arnold is no foe of "philosophy" in poetry, in so far as it bears the "character of poetic truth": poetry is superior to history, he believes, in possessing a higher truth and a higher seriousness. Those hackneyed words from *The Study of Poetry* were suggested to Arnold by a passage in Aristotle's *Poetics* which Arnold does not "quietly borrow", as Professor Cooper delicately hints he is quite capable of doing, but loudly and exactly quotes. To these words Arnold harks back, in one form or another, again and again with that well-known and often tiresome insistence of his. In this very essay on Wordsworth he lays even too much stress on the "moral ideas" of English poetry in general and Wordsworth in particular. He points out, it is true, that some of the poet's doctrines have no "real solidity", and he might not have disagreed with other objections, that of Mr. Aldous Huxley, for instance, who apparently finds that Wordsworth's "philosophy" of nature fails to work in the tropics. But he does find in a large body of Wordsworth's poetry that "noble and profound application of ideas to life" that is the "most essential part of poetic greatness". This certainly sounds like an interest in "philosophy", such philosophy at any rate as has any bearing whatsoever upon poetic value. Nor would Arnold have any objection to finding out what a poet's "philosophical connections really were", at Professor Cooper's bidding; or any other relations which, in Arnold's

own phrase, "count to us historically". These are indeed important. But a critic must not stop there: Arnold would have him master such relations, and render himself able to "dispense" with them.

I fear very gravely, as I have suggested above, that Professor Cooper is a bit confused on this philosophical question. Which of Wordsworth's philosophies would he have us admire? We may dismiss any doctrines that the poet held before 1798 as irrelevant to our purpose. But what of the philosophy of 1798-1808 (or 1807 if Professor Cooper wishes) as compared with that of, say, the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*? There is some chat in the professor's article about Christianity and Neoplatonism in Wordsworth—about a "more distinctly Christian note" that Sainte Beuve heard in a sonnet of 1802, and an easy "Neoplatonic verse that the crowd will enjoy, and Arnold will accept". He tells us that Wordsworth "ultimately" (just when was that?) got out of the "side-current" of Neoplatonism into the "main stream" of English poetry, which is "Christian". It is interesting to put against this some sentences from Professor G. M. Harper:

If we know nothing except what was originally revealed to us through our senses, then he (Wordsworth) assumed we have no use for a supernaturally revealed religion. . . . And there can be no reasonable doubt that Wordsworth's poetry prior to 1805 is consistently that of a man who has renounced orthodox Christianity with all its special dogmas and symbols. . . . There is no use trying to blink the fact: Wordsworth, in the period when he wrote his most original and most beautiful poetry, held such views as would keep a man from being received into most of our churches, or allowed to testify in some of our courts, or permitted to teach in many of our schools, or even, perhaps, passed by our immigration authorities. . . . He actually did worship Nature, because he worshipped nothing else. . . . He is the poet of Nature, not just because he wrote about the green linnet. . . . but because he undertook to proclaim and celebrate, in his hieratic office, the identity of Nature and God.

All this may or may not be Neoplatonism, but it is certainly not Christianity. After reading it, one's apprehensions come in crowds at Professor Cooper's touch—as no doubt they are bound to do at all great teaching. Just where does he really find the "distinctly Christian note" in Wordsworth before 1805? How distinctly does he find it even in the noble poems (1806-07) that are more than touched with recantation? What is Professor Cooper's idea of a distinctly Christian note? Does he really prefer the *Excursion*, in which the later and "Christian" views are plainly developing,

and the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, where they are hardened into fixity, to the *Prelude*, or a great many other pieces of 1798-1808? Does the verse of the latter period belong to the "side-current"? And does the *Excursion* belong to the "main stream"? If so, so much the worse for the main stream, and so much the better for the eddies. One last "apprehension"; does Professor Cooper really think that Thomas Arnold and Dean Stanley "had more in common" with the main stream of English poetry than Matthew Arnold had? If, after reading Dean Stanley's *Life and Correspondence of Thomas Arnold*, he really does think that,—well, we must remember him in our prayers.

I hope readers of the *Bookman* will review Professor Cooper's article along with the essay which it "destroys". It will be a good critical exercise, though rather disturbing to one's faith in human nature and in scholarship, to note all the peccant humours of the article; and it will be refreshing to get in touch again with the ordered and illuminating sanity of Arnold. There is nothing really unsympathetic in the great essay, except where Arnold is bound as a critic to sift wheat from sand. Of course, it does not give a complete view of Wordsworth and his interests. No brief study could possibly do that, though Professor Cooper seems to think otherwise. As for the remark that it "affects to be" the "final utterance", only one thing can be said: it is not true. Nor is there much in Arnold's essay that is misleading to anyone who reads in good temper, and with mental equipment that is brought into play. And, finally, there is not one significant word in the essay that is false. So much for Professor Cooper's explicit charges. What Arnold actually effected was this: he set Wordsworth criticism on a proper course, he put his finger on the great and unique significances of Wordsworth's poetry, and he expressed them in unforgettable phrase. Somehow this is not an empty service for a critic to render to a poet.

Anyone who may honour my advice to compare the two essays again will surely be surprised at Professor Cooper's general tone. A very clever young student sometimes writes this sort of thing, in a transient and amiable mood of revolt. One can imagine how the professor would deal with the case. He would call it "an interesting performance"; he would praise it for its refusal to bow down idolatrously before authority; he would give it an A. Then, he would gently rebuke its little laxities, chief among them being its characteristically youthful neglect to verify references; and at last, wondering if the full point of the allusion would be seized, he would bid the student to go and sin no more.

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