

The Scientific Temper and the Faith Of Men of Letters

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Toward the end of the 1850's the progress of science in England had unmistakably shaken traditional Christianity at its foundation. In fact, for many Englishmen the validity of all religious experience was destroyed at the appearance of the *Origin of Species* (1859). Not that Darwin's book alone effected this revolution in men's thinking; for earlier in the century Lyell's *Principles of Geology* and Chambers' *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* had produced what was felt to be substantial support for the theory of man's "progressive development" as opposed to the Genesis account of man's beginnings. German historical criticism of the Bible had also been playing its part in undermining the older faith. But it was Darwin's book, appearing at a time when there was much speculation in the air, that drove home to men generally the significance of the evolutionary teaching, making it impossible for them to reconcile the findings of science with the major tenets of revealed religion.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the effects of the new theory upon Victorian men of letters. Herbert Spencer and, for a moment, Tennyson were representatives of those who voiced unrestrained enthusiasm for the new knowledge. The one envisioned man as by some fantastic law of nature progressing of *necessity* toward perfection; the other sang of the day of social brotherhood toward which all the world was moving, of the "parliament of man" and the "federation of the world." But the laureate's optimism was short-lived. Caught between science and belief he was soon to embark on a dark voyage of doubt that was to last for many long years. In the end he was to resolve his difficulties

by adopting a position of compromise in which, while accepting the animal origin of man's body, he was to insist that man nevertheless was essentially soul having his beginning and ending in God.

For another eminent Victorian, however, there could be no middle-of-the-road satisfaction. Matthew Arnold, against the counsels of his better nature, rejected in the light of the new knowledge his earlier Christian teachings. His poetry is haunted by that "eternal note of sadness," which is the direct consequence of this yielding in the interests of the scientific temper. It has been alleged that Arnold held as calamitous this loss of Christian faith simply because for him Christianity was a "translation into temporal and historical terms of eternal truths which could not be allowed to perish."¹ Arnold feared, so it goes, that when men began to discover that the book on which they had grounded their faith was a fallible human record, the product of an age of ignorance, they were in danger of throwing out not only the book but the truth which it so crudely expressed. But the loss which Arnold sustained involved something more personal than this explanation suggests. Consider, for instance, the poet's "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse." Arnold is visiting the chief monastery of the Carthusians high in the French Alps. Wistfully he describes the monastery, its silent courts, the chapel, the library, the garden. His heart yearns for the faith that possesses the simple "anchorites." In this mood he reveals the cause of his present spiritual predicament:

¹ Robert Shafer, *From Beowulf to Thomas Hardy*, Vol. II, p. 475.

For rigorous teachers seized my youth
And purged its faith and trimmed its fire,
Showed me the high, white star of truth,
There bade me gaze, and there aspire.

The poet then compares himself to a Greek standing mournfully before the Runic remains of his former faith. He sees himself as

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born,
With nowhere yet to rest my head.

Few lines in literature are so charged with spiritual anguish as these he now silently addresses to the monastery and the monks:

Oh, hide me in your gloom profound,
Ye solemn seats of holy pain!
Take me, cowed forms, and fence me round
Till I possess my soul again.

Other unequivocal expressions of the poet's grief at the loss of personal faith are contained in *Dover Beach*, *Self-Dependence*, *The Buried Life*, and *The Scholar Gypsy*.

The poetry of Arthur Hugh Clough, Arnold's close friend, also echoes the despair not only of an age bewildered by the new teachings but of a man sick at heart. This stanza is from Clough's "Where lies the land?"

Where lies the land to which the ship would go?
Far, far ahead, is all her seamen know.
And where the land she travels from? Away,
Far, far behind, is all that they can say.

The new historical criticism of the Bible was undoubtedly responsible for George Eliot's turning agnostic. Report has it that this sensitively-religious woman, while translating Strauss' *Das Leben Jesus*, became ill with dissecting the beautiful story of the Crucifixion; yet she fell so under the power of the book that she had to abandon the faith of her fathers. Other major writers who at this time repudiated Christianity were George Meredith and Thomas Hardy. The one, in exchanging his faith for nature-worship, felt the need of a new and different morality; the other, in the absence of a steadying faith stoically abandoned himself to a despairing pessimism which possessed him till the last.

Hardy came to be a truly tragic figure in English letters, distrusting not only the voice of revelation, but subsequently that of reason itself. The characters in his novels are all in the end crushed either by the force of nature, by cruel chance, or by their own misguided impulses.

The Victorians were pessimists for the most part. They gave in too easily, if reluctantly, to some of the claims of science. It has been said that man can endure all manner of deprivation and suffering, all kinds of moral and physical shock, and his faith will not waver; but when he permits the leaven of pseudoscience to work in his life he becomes a moral coward. And to corroborate this conclusion we are invited to consider the lot of man in fourteenth-century England. The hundred-years war was then in progress, devastating Europe; the Black Death had swept in three successive waves over the Western World, slaying from a third to a half of the population; both church and state, moreover, were in a condition of moral and spiritual decay. Yet, it is pointed out, in those dreadful days when men were terrified by all these visitations, Chaucer retained his sanity and good humor. Had the story-teller of the middle-ages belonged to the modern age, he would no doubt have developed an incurable case either of melancholia or cynicism, or both.

In spite of Mr. Huxley's brilliant and popular expositions of the new doctrine the Victorians were by no means quite convinced. It has been intimated that Tennyson at last found spiritual relief from his long struggle with doubt. His position was now akin to that of F. W. Robertson and other leaders of the Broad Church Movement—one of conciliation between the established faith and the current trends in science and scholarship. Concerning Tennyson's mediatorship, Gladstone spoke to the point when he said that the poet had done much "to harmonize the new draught of external power with the old and more mellowing faith, self-devotion, loyalty, reverence, and discipline."²

² Mims, Edwin: *Great Writers as Interpreters of Religion*. p. 165.

The staunchest adherent to traditional Christianity was Robert Browning. Bishop Westcott, a leading Victorian churchman acknowledged Browning as one of his three principal teachers. The others were St. John and Origen. Dr. Berdoe, an eminent London physician, and author of *The Browning Encyclopedia* attributed to reading Browning's poetry his conversion from agnosticism to Christianity. It has become fashionable for modern critics to make out an interesting case to support the notion that Browning lacked Christian faith. "He strengthened in many readers the faith that he did not himself possess," they say. This point of view is subscribed to by the author of *English Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, who has this to say about Browning's Christianity:

"He (Browning) held perhaps, that though, religion as presented by the orthodox was faulty and incredible, yet the alternative of no religion was much much farther from a true philosophy The primary dogmas of Christianity . . . were no doubt a human attempt to impress the Infinite . . . but they were the nearest man could get to truth, and in affirming them . . . one was nearer to the truth than in denying them . . ."³

Surely, none was more certain of the Christian experience than was Robert Browning, the clearest, strongest voice of faith in his day. He did not hold lightly the discoveries of science, but his poetry makes clear his disillusionment in the efficacy of science as a guide in matters pertaining to the soul. Like George Eliot, he came under the influence of Strauss, but seeing the vulnerability of the German critic's position, he answered him with "*A Death in the Desert*," which contains these lines:

I say the acknowledgment of God in Christ
Accepted by the reason, solves for thee
All questions in the earth and out of it,
And has so far advanced thee to be wise.

The poet rebukes those who look to reason as a guide to ultimate values. In "*Bishop Blougram's Apology*" he shows the insecurity of the man who thinks him-

self secure in his rationalized atheism or agnosticism:

Just when we're safest, there's a sunset touch,
A fancy from a flower-bell, some one's death,
A chorus-ending from Euripides,—
And that's enough for fifty hopes and fears
As old and new at once as Nature's self,
To rap and knock and enter in our soul,
Take hands and dance there, a fantastic ring,
Round the ancient Idol, on his base again,—
The grand perhaps! We look on helplessly,—
There the old misgivings, crooked questions are—
This good God,—what He could do, if He would,
Would, if He could — then must have done long
since!

If so, when, where, and how? Some way must
be.—

Once feel about, and soon or late you hit—
Some sense, in which it might be, after all
Why not, "The Way, the Truth, the Life?"
"What think ye of Christ, friend? When all's
done and said,

Like you this Christianity or not?
It may be false, but will you wish it true?
Has it your vote to be so if it can?"

If it is urged that Browning's dramatic poems cannot be taken as expressing the poet's own faith, citation might be made of the poet's epilogue to "*Dramatis Personae*" where Renan, represented as saying that the star of Bethlehem has vanished from the heavens, is answered by Browning himself in these words:

That one Face, far from vanish, rather grows,
Or decomposes but to recompose,
Become my universe that feels and knows.

Concerning these lines Browning is recorded as saying to Mrs. Sutherland Orr, his biographer, "That's the way I feel Christ."

The Victorian Age, notwithstanding the variety and excellence of its poetry, was predominantly an age of prose. And it was in this guise that the defense of the old against the new became most violent. Thomas Carlyle, viewing with horror England's sacrifice of spiritual values, cried out against the machine with a fierceness reminiscent of the Hebrew prophets. France, he warned, suffered the tragedy of a revolution because she exalted reason at the expense of revelation. England was selling her soul for Jeremy Bentham's hol-

³ Somerville, D. C. *English Thought in the Nineteenth Century*. pp. 155-6.

low economic theory—"the greatest happiness of the greatest number"—a theory calculated to bring about some kind of earthly millenium. Religion alone, Carlyle preached, must furnish the basis for a brighter future. Unorthodox as he was in his religious belief, this prophet of the spiritual clearly foresaw the folly of building for the future according to a program of scientific materialism. The record of his own grim struggle from doubt and despair to hope and faith is found in *Sartor Resartus*, Book II, where the "Everlasting No" represents the spirit of skepticism, denying all life-values and crushing all man's aspirations; and where the "Everlasting Yea" expresses the final outcome of the contest when unbelief is vanquished by victorious faith.

Like Carlyle, Ruskin too despised the Mammon-worship of the age. Turning in mid-career from the criticism of art to the criticism of society, he waged for the rest of his life a bitter fight against the political economy of Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill which, he felt, was destroying the souls of Englishmen. To the capitalists of his day, lost in their worship of the "goddess of Getting-on," Ruskin preached what was fundamentally a Christian social gospel. As evidence of a right relationship with God, he urged upon them a return to the Gothic style of architecture in building. It is in this form, Ruskin believed, that man's feeling for the Infinite best expresses itself. Those anonymous builders of Gothic churches labored with a conscientiousness that made their work perfect. But England, he groaned, was chiefly concerned with building railroad mounds vaster than the walls of Babylon, and railroad stations vaster than the temple of Ephesus. Although some of the changes which Ruskin advocated seem quite fantastic, the record shows him in many respects to have lived in advance of his times. For this "dreamer" proposed among other things old-age pensions, vocational guidance, universal education, fixed minimum wages, and government-created jobs for the unemployed. His Christian social emphases was the outcome of a deep conviction that God was at the heart of the universe. He too remained

undisturbed by the damaging religious implications of the new science.

Some of the clearest thinking of the age is to be found in the prose works of John Henry Newman, another defender of the faith. While at Oxford, Newman came for a time under the influence of the liberalistic views of the famous Dr. Thomas Arnold, whose little group of admirers, Newman somewhere describes as "an intellectual circle, afflicted with the pride of reason." The leader of the Oxford Movement reacted strongly against the increasing secularization of life, with its glorification of the intelligence of man. It was his task, he felt, to keep the church from being liberalized. Newman reminded his generation that Christian faith is founded, not upon reason, not upon the subjective experience of the individual, but upon Biblical revelation. To him liberalism was the fallacy of subjecting to human reason those beliefs which are in their nature beyond and independent of it. Rather than see the liberal view prevail, Newman believed that the church would gain even if it were "vastly more superstitious, more bigoted, more gloomy, more fierce in its religion, than it now shows itself to be."

It is not to be wondered at that in the unsettlement of the traditional faith there developed in England in the latter part of the nineteenth century a species of intellectual and literary freedom wherein everybody wrote much as he pleased. In seeking the golden mean between science and faith, all kinds of writers were making all kinds of appeal to "philosophical reason." Yet in spite of the dictum, credited to Matthew Arnold, that true reason is "always and everywhere the same," everybody's proposed solution for leading men out of the wilderness was being challenged by everybody else. While reason made all views plausible it could prove none of them. As a reaction to the general confusion of these later years Christianity, especially in the form of Roman Catholicism, experienced a significant revival. Many sought and found rest from "this strange disease of modern life" in a complete surrender to the authority of Mother Church.

hunger for spiritual values. Poetry also gives evidence of a change now in progress. Two of the greatest living poets, T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden, have repudiated with strong affirmations of faith the strong negative criticism of society and religion that characterized their earlier verse; other important poets who have recently reversed their point of view are Stephen Spender and C. Day Lewis. Eliot, who exchanged his American citizenship in 1927 to become a British subject, is now the recognized voice of the Anglo-Catholic Communion. He has travelled far from the days of "The Wasteland," a long, unintelligible poem which shows the frustration and emptiness of human existence in the period between the two wars; and from the days of "The Hollow Men," in which he brings a fearful indictment against the Church, represented as a hippopotamus "wrapped in the old miasmal mist." On the other hand, plays like *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Rock*, and poems such as "Ash Wednesday" and "A Song of Simeon" attest to the revolutionary change that has taken place in Eliot. In *The Rock*, for instance, the poet insists that our modern society has

Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
 Knowledge of Words, and ignorance of the Word.
 All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,
 All our ignorance brings us nearer to death.
 But nearness to death no nearer to GOD.
 Where is the life we have lost in living?
 Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

After establishing himself as a poet in Britain, Auden came to live in this country a few years ago. As in the case of Eliot, Auden's acceptance of the Christian faith came as a surprise to most people. Turning his back on the sharp social satire of

his earlier verse he sought and found in Christianity certain positive values which he sets forth in what is now regarded as one of the foremost poems of our day, the Christmas oratorio, *For the Time Being*. Here Auden makes King Herod play the part of a scientific liberal. To Herod, the theory of the Incarnation is a stupid regression from an age of culture to an age of ignorance. But the aged patriarch, Simeon, joyfully pronounces the "Nunc Dimissas": "Now lettest thy servant depart in peace for mine eyes have seen thy salvation." And this is the kind of thing that astonishes old admirers of Auden. When Simeon sees in the Incarnation the interpretation of history and the redemption of man he expresses the poet's own position.

The writer has attempted to show that with the spread of scientific knowledge in the last half of the nineteenth century, many English men of letters believed themselves to be living in the twilight of Christianity. The Darwinian hypothesis did inestimable damage to England's literati. Of those who refused to yield wholly to the philosophy of secularism, some held valiantly to the old lines, some caught in the whirlwind resigned themselves to the authority of the Church, some remained in a state of unrelieved sadness. In our century, that twilight has merged into nighttime. Our men of letters have been living spiritually in "the dark night of the soul." Perhaps the voices of men like Eliot on the other side of the Atlantic and Auden on this side are heralds of the dawn. These voices at least suggest that some of our literary leaders, utterly disillusioned with our civilization and unable longer to trust reason to guide them to a better life, have thrown themselves back on faith—and they seem to be thriving on it. Men cannot always live in the void.

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