

John P. Farrell

Matthew Arnold: The Carlyle Connection

In his developing years, Matthew Arnold read and absorbed a great deal of Carlyle whom he could describe, early in 1848, as “the beloved man.” He then rather abruptly withdrew his affections; by September, 1849 he was grouping Carlyle with the age’s “moral desperadoes.” Arnold held rather firmly to this second opinion. But Carlyle’s influence had indelibly marked him and although Arnold may even have made an effort to conceal the extent of the influence, there are two unmistakable forms in which Carlyle is intertextually present in his work. First, in both Arnold’s poetry and critical prose there are very evident echoes of Carlyle. For example, the famous lines in Arnold’s “Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse” that describe how modern man is “Wandering between two worlds, one dead,/The other powerless to be born” clearly derive from the passage in Carlyle’s “Characteristics” in which he proclaims that “the Old has passed away: but, alas, the New appears not its stead” (*Works* 28: 32). Secondly, and more subtly, Carlyle shapes Arnold’s work dialectically for Arnold, in constructing his identity as a critic, depended on Carlyle’s discourse to act as the instructive opposite of his own values and style. Arnold consciously repudiated Carlyle’s polemical fireworks as he determined “to speak without a particle of vice, malice or rancour” (*Letters*: 1: 183-84).

Matthew Arnold, son of the renowned educator Dr. Thomas Arnold, established himself as a poet in the late eighteen-forties and early fifties. Though a less gifted poet than his contemporaries, Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning, he remains a pre-eminent figure whose poetry voices the disillusionments and discontinuities that wracked so many thoughtful Victorians. Arnold’s own disillusionments extended even to the writing of poetry. After publishing his *Poems* in 1853, he gradually abandoned his vocation as poet and dedicated himself to literary, social, and religious criticism. His critical work takes on a particular fervor because at its core is an impassioned effort to redefine the nature of criticism itself; and behind this impassioned effort is his conviction that a deepened critical intelligence was a necessary prelude to the renewal of poetry.

Arnold fashioned his suave critical prose and his piercing but generous criticism in direct opposition to what he saw as a culmination in Carlyle of the worst faults in the native British tradition of critical writing: muddled ideas, bludgeoning rhetoric, politicized argument, and provincial affiliations. However, as several scholars, including Kathleen Tillotson and David J. DeLaura, have shown Arnold’s thorough assimilation of Carlyle means that his writing can be tinged with Carlylean colors at almost any point. The watershed work in Arnold’s career, his drama *Empedocles on Etna* (1852) is an illuminating case in point. The first act of the play is dominated by Empedocles’ protracted variations on Carlylean doctrines (e.g., “Make us, not fly to dreams, but moderate desire”). However, in the second act Empedocles reveals that he cannot himself accept the Carlylean dismantling of desire that he has been advocating. His longings and self-consciousness overwhelm him. Thus, Arnold mirrors in the poem the conscious history of his own relationship to Carlyle. Complicating this picture, however, is the instinctive way that Arnold reached back to Carlyle in order to explain to his astonished readers in 1853 why he was omitting *Empedocles* from a new edition of his *Poems*. In the new volume’s “Preface” he describes his poetic tragedy as one from which no poetical enjoyment can be derived since the situations it represents are too painful. “They are those in which the suffering finds no vent in action.”

There can be little doubt that Arnold drew this aesthetic principle in the first place from Carlyle's remarks to the same effect which occur, most fully, in his 1838 essay on Sir Walter Scott. There he addresses the emotional texture of The Sorrows of Young Werter which, he says, "attempted the more accurate delineation of a class of feelings, deeply important to modern minds . . .; they are feelings that arise from passion incapable of being converted into action" (Works 29: 59). Evidently, Arnold found in Carlyle's analysis of modern feeling a cogent explanation of the emotional experience that had originally prompted his counter-Carlylean drama.

The conditions of modernity that Arnold portrayed in his poetry remained the central subject of his prose criticism. Like Carlyle, Arnold attempted to define a legitimate basis for religion while accepting the importance of modern skepticism. Again like Carlyle--and Coleridge before him--Arnold used his critical voice as a medium for articulating a high argument on the problems and possibilities of modern democracy. And, like both Carlyle and Coleridge, Arnold was deeply concerned with the role of poetry and, more generally, of literary institutions in modern cultural life. But Arnold had his distinctive, far-reaching ideas on all of these subjects. He borrowed much from Carlyle at the level of diagnosis but he rejected Carlyle's evocations of evangelicalism, his elaborate negativism, his views of heroes and heroism, his proto-Nietzscheanism, and, most particularly, his denigration of aesthetic consciousness.

In a Notebook entry for February, 1831, Carlyle puzzled over "the true relation of moral genius to poetical genius; of Religion to Poetry." He asks: "Are they one and the same different forms of the same [sic]; and if so which is to stand higher, the Beautiful or the Good" (Two-Notebooks 188). But Carlyle ultimately began treating poetry (except for the work of an occasional world-historical genius like Dante or Goethe) as little more than poppycock. Arnold puzzled over the same question, but came to celebrate poetry as having, among other things, an affinity with religion. In fact, in his religious writing, Arnold emphasized the poetic contours of religious consciousness. He assigned poetry an "immense future" in part because he believed it would supply some of the human needs that could not be met by religion in a post-theological age. Meanwhile, Carlyle continued to speak the language of a defunct spiritualism in works as late as Past and Present and Latter-Day Pamphlets. Arnold was certainly exasperated by Carlyle's persistent mining of this vein and even more exasperated, one suspects, by the later Carlyle's refusal to acknowledge any privileged place for the aesthetic in general and the poetic in particular.

In 1869 Arnold published his most famous work, Culture and Anarchy, in which he attempts to define the relationship between the imperatives of Victorian democracy and the play and place of aesthetic, intellectual, and moral values. Carlyle, though mentioned only a few times, is a significant figure in Arnold's book. As DeLaura points out, the very word "anarchy" in Arnold's title inevitably echoes Carlyle's patented representation of the perils of modernism. Moreover, Arnold was writing a work that stood in the same tradition as Carlyle's famous manifestoes of the 1830's such as "Signs of the Time," "Characteristics," and the social text in Sartor Resartus. Both writers try to show the very age and body of the time its form and pressure, and they invoke, in response to their representations a semi-sacralized structure of enlightenment. Of course, Carlyle, in Arnold's eyes, had been driven beyond his early and inspiring cri de coeur to the much darker broodings that he published between 1840 and 1850. His apocalyptic scenarios, repeated in Shooting Niagara:

And After? (written during the same eventful year as Arnold's book), would inevitably become associated in the minds of contemporary readers with the threatening "anarchy" of Arnold's title. Arnold's idea of building a humanizing "Culture" was thus formed in some degree as the dialectical alternative to Carlyle's nightmare of modernism. Arnold re-circulates Carlylean images of means prevailing over ends, philistines coming to power, and obstreperous individualism unraveling communal connections. But Arnold suffuses his discourse with his faith in the native virtues of intelligence, moral clarity, and the aesthetic sense. His humanism, firmly grounded in an idealized but very appealing image of classical Greece, completely--and complexly--dominates the Carlylean gloom that collects in the underground of Culture and Anarchy.

Of the personal relationship between the two men there is, unfortunately, too little known. It is quite possible that they met when Arnold was young since Dr. Arnold visited Carlyle several times. We do know that Arnold was very pleased to learn that Carlyle thought well of his essay "My Countrymen" (1866). The essay would eventually become part of Arnold's most Carlylean book, Friendship's Garland (1871) which has some of the same satire, irony, and narrative method as Sartor Resartus. Arnold must have occasionally called at the Carlyles since in May, 1877 he mentions taking his daughter Eleanor to visit: "We sat with Carlyle more than an hour; he was very easy to get on with, and very kind to Nelly" (Letters 2:160-161). But in the year Carlyle died, Arnold remarked to a French correspondent that he "never much liked Carlyle." As for Carlyle, he is reported, perhaps apocryphally, to have said: "Poor Mat! He thinks that God Almighty might try very hard, but He could never make another Matthew Arnold" (DeLaura, PMLA 125)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Matthew Arnold. Letters. 2 vols. London: Macmillan, 1895.

Thomas Carlyle. Two Note-Books of Thomas Carlyle ed. Charles Eliot Norton (New York: Grolier Club, 1898).

David J. DeLaura. "Arnold and Carlyle." PMLA 79 (1964): 104-129.

_____. "The Future of Poetry: A Context for Carlyle and Arnold." Carlyle and His Contemporaries: Essays in Honor of Charles Richard Sanders. Ed. John Clubbe. Durham: Duke University P, 1976. 148-80.

John P. Farrell. Revolution as Tragedy: The Dilemma of the Moderate from Scott to Arnold. Ithaca: Cornell, 1980.

Lawrence J. Starzyk. "Arnold and Carlyle." Criticism 12 (1970): 281-300.

Kathleen Tillotson. "Matthew Arnold and Carlyle." Proceedings of the British Academy 42 (1956): 133-53.