

Sweetness and Light – Sixty Years After

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(*The Tempo of Modern Life*, 1931)

Throughout life we always, I think, maintain a peculiar interest in the men and books that deeply influenced our earliest and most formative years. No later work, however influential or revolutionary in our thought, ever attains to quite the same intensity of reality as those which helped to stir our minds in boyhood, when the whole world was opening before us, when thought was the great adventure, and when prophets commanded whole-souled homage. As it chanced, my own first decade was that which is generally accepted as the turning point between the old and the new worlds of thought. In America the Civil War was scarcely less recent, in Europe the pregnant Franco-Prussian War was more so, than is the Great War to-day. Carlyle died when I was three, Darwin when I was four, John Richard Green and Karl Marx when I was five, Matthew Arnold and Sir Henry Maine when I was ten, Browning when I was eleven, and Cardinal Newman and Tennyson a few years later. Dickens was but eight years gone when I was born, and Thomas Huxley and John Ruskin were writing when I was in college.

I have barely touched my half-century, yet these names sound like a long-bygone age. In my boyhood, however, when I was keen on every new intellectual trail, their works were not classics or “required reading,” but living voices to which I listened with the same sense of contemporaneity with which to-day we read Eddington or Harvey Robinson, Einstein, O’Neill, or Aldous Huxley. The life, however, which has embraced both Darwin and Einstein, Thomas and Aldous Huxley, has straddled, as it were, two eras in thought and civilization. A straddle is generally considered to be neither a dignified nor a determined position, but if it entails certain discomforts it also offers certain advantages, certain piquancies of comparison. Just as a man who knows only one country cannot be considered to know even that, so a man who knows only one era cannot savor its peculiarities with the same biting relish as one who has been a wider traveler in time.

Time, however, in a busy life is apt to pass imperceptibly, and I confess that it was with a good deal of a shock that I happened to note, when engaged in the scholar's equivalent of big-game hunting, the glancing over of secondhand-book catalogues, that Matthew Arnold's most influential work, *Culture and Anarchy*, was published just sixty years ago. I had the sudden sense of being caught in the swift current of a river. I walked to my study window to look out and ponder.

In these present years of wanderings, my windows open on many scenes in many countries in the course of a twelvemonth, but at the moment my study overlooks Kensington Gardens, in which Arnold wrote one of his well-known poems:

*I, on men's impious uproar hurl'd
Think often, as I hear them rave,
That peace has left the upper world,
And now keeps only in the grave.*

If Arnold found "impious uproar" in 1869, the very mid-year of the Victorian reign, what would he find, I wondered, to-day? What change, if any, would he feel called upon to make to-day in his philosophy, and how has the world moved with reference to it in those sixty years gone? Dickens, Darwin, Huxley, Green, Maine, and some of the others have conquered. The world has moved in the directions indicated by them. How about Arnold, who seemed to the cultured youth of the late-Victorian period perhaps the greatest prophet of them all?

One recalls his simple and singularly lucid prognosis and prescription for his own age, an age that to us now looking back it seems itself singularly lucid and simple. One has to recall, however, a fact easily forgotten, that every age has its own "uproar." We have to be in it to hear it. Getting into an "age" is a good deal like getting into a railroad train. As we see it first approaching, far down the track, it seems very peaceful. There is no sound, no tremor, only the ease of swift motion. It is only when we are traveling in it ourselves that we feel the jolts and jars, hear the whistle shriek, the brakes

grind, the roar of the wheels, and the babel of unedifying conversation in the club smoker.

Even, however, if we are justified in conceding to our self-esteem that we have raised a good deal more of an uproar than was confusing the ears of Arnold, and that there may be more raving now than there was in 1860, it is to misconceive his philosophy to think of him as having given a simple solution for the problems of a simple age. His age was by no means as easy-gliding as the distant railroad train, by no means as stodgy and unstirred as the Georgian retrospect among the younger generation would make out. Arnold's doctrine, in spite of his emphasis on "sweetness and light," in spite of its being the mid-Victorian equivalent of "highbrow," was not intended for the scholar cloistered in an ivory tower, but for the man of action in the turmoil of a transition era.

That doctrine may easily be condensed to two chief points – the eternal contest between Hebraism and Hellenism, and the mediating function of culture, of "sweetness and light." The final aim of both Hebraism and Hellenism Arnold found to be the same, man's perfection or salvation, in spite of the fact that they approach the problem by utterly diverse routes. Hebraism lays the whole stress on doing, on the importance of the act, on religion, on strictness of conscience. On the other hand, Hellenism stresses knowing rather than doing, the whole rather than a part, spontaneity of consciousness. The "uppermost idea with Hellenism is to see things as they really are; the uppermost idea with Hebraism is conduct and obedience." Ideas of action and conduct fill the space of the Hebraist's mind. "He is zealous to do battle for them and affirm them, for in affirming them he affirms himself, and that is what we all like." The Hellenist, on the other hand, tries to apprehend the whole of life, to let no part of it slip, to stress no part to the exclusion of the others. He insists upon a flexible activity of mind, and so attains to that clearness and radiancy of vision, that intelligence and tolerance, which Arnold called "sweetness and light." Nothing, he states, can do away with the ineffaceable difference between these two approaches to the problems of life.

Both of these disciples, as we may call them, Arnold saw were necessary for the development of man. If the tendency of unimpeded Hellenism was toward rather a weakening of the moral fibre, that of Hebraism was no less inevitably toward an extreme hardening and narrowing of man's whole nature. Man's only salvation from swinging helplessly between these two poles was to be found in culture, which should not be a mere dilettante toying with art, but a disinterested aiming to see things as they really are, the effort to cultivate the best in all sides of man's nature. I do not think it has ever been noted that, whether Arnold was aware of it or not, his doctrine was exactly that of Kant, who in his philosophy placed the æsthetic consciousness at the centre to mediate between reason and will. Feeling, however, that in his own time the whole tendency was to stress the Hebraic side, the side of unthinking action, Arnold stressed the other, the side of "sweetness and light," and throughout his life in one form and another preached his doctrine of the saving grace of a mediating and all-embracing culture.

Amid the complete confusion of our present-day social, intellectual, and spiritual life it is certainly not necessary to bring out in any great detail the evidence that Arnold, unlike some of the more fortunate Victorian leaders of thought, did not point in the direction in which the world was immediately to move. Thanks largely to America, where the forces of the modern world have had their freest sphere of influence, Hebraism has conquered Hellenism with an appalling completeness for the time being.

Arnold clearly saw and constantly preached the essential difference between the machinery of life and life itself. It was not that he merely questioned the utility of physical machinery, although it is easy enough to do so. We may well ask, for example in what lies the great advantage of being able to travel thrice as fast as our grandparents if, arrived at our destination, we do not know how to occupy the time "saved" to as great advantage as they did? It was rather that Arnold saw all the institutional life of our time as machinery – our state constitutions, our churches, universities, libraries, and organizations of every sort. All these he found, of course, essential to

life, but merely the tools of life, valuable only for their results, and not for themselves.

In this respect we have obviously gone directly counter to his teaching. We have come to worship our social machinery as an end in itself. Not only is every possible activity organized, which perhaps is to some extent unavoidable in our great modern masses of population, but, what surely is avoidable, we have come to lay more stress on the machinery than on the product, on the means than on the end.

Perhaps we may consider the five great educative influences for the life of the spirit to be one's daily toil, social intercourse, travel, education in its more technical sense, and religion. What of these to-day?

One's daily toil has always of course had for a main object the earning of a living, but it should have an addition an interest in itself. It is a mistake to think that such an interest can be aroused only by intellectual and not by manual work, but, in order that it should be, the worker must feel that he is creating something which he can see grow and develop as a result of his toil. In this respect there was never before, perhaps, a period in which work had less spiritual value for most people than it has today. The worker himself has been lost in the complicated machinery of production, and in our worship of efficiency the machinery has come to be considered somehow such a desirable good in itself as to warrant any sacrifice in its name.

Social intercourse in the same way has succumbed to the machinery ostensibly provided for it. Clubs and organizations of all sorts for bringing people together are legion, but conversation has almost as completely disappeared as has letter writing between friends. We are so busy and wearied in rushing from one meeting to another that our minds themselves have almost entirely ceased to meet. It is not only in the hurry of great cities that there is no longer opportunity for friendly communion. For the inhabitants of innumerable Main Streets throughout the country, Monday night is for Grange, Tuesday the Red Men or Daughters of Pocahontas, Wednesday the Junior Mechanics or the Eastern Star, Thursday the Masons, Friday the Lions, Saturday the Rotary, to mention only a few of the provisions for social intercourse that have ended by destroying all real intercourse itself. There

is no genuine depth or value to such gatherings – merely a sense of physical proximity to one’s kind. For the life of the spirit they are utterly useless.

Travel, again, as its means have become multiplied and more accessible to all, has largely ceased to have the educational value it once had. Because one can make two hundred miles a day in a motor, people make it. Because one can cross to Europe and pass through half a dozen countries and back in a month, people do it. Let it not be thought that I am exaggerating. Ask any number of people what sort of motor trip they had, and all too frequently the answer will be, “Fine! We did a hundred and eighty miles the first day, two hundred the second, and so on. No trouble. We were gone only two weeks, and covered nearly twenty-five hundred miles!”

An excellent guidebook to London, lying before me on my desk as I write, tells how one may see the city in one day. In the morning one is to go to the National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery, Houses of Parliament, Westminster Abbey, London Museum, St. James’s Park, and four other places. One is to lunch near Piccadilly. In the afternoon one goes to the Royal Academy, Wallace Collection, British Museum, St. Paul’s Cathedral, the Law Courts, and drives through two parks and three important thoroughfares. If the traveler intends to remain overnight, the guide continues, he should visit the Embankment and attend a theatre.

This is not a joke. It is intended as a serious guide for present-day travelers in search, presumably, of education and culture. Comment would be superfluous, but it is evident that the end of travel, the broadening of our minds, the development of our natures, has become lost to sight in the mere machinery of travel – that is, the physical transporting of our bodies from place to place.

Is not the same transfer of stress on, and interest in, the end to the mere means shown daily in our educational and religious systems? If one drops in to see a clergyman and inquire about his work, is not one, nine times out of ten, immediately shown over the “plant” – the new parish house, the gymnasium and the swimming pool, the men’s clubroom – or offered statistics? If one goes to a college, one is shown with pride the new “J. Jefferson Jones” dormitory or the “Simeon Smith” laboratory, or the new

stadium or business college building. If we turn to the teaching from desk or pulpit, we find the same immersion in the machinery of life rather than in life itself. The body, the “plant,” is superb, but one too often looks in vain for the spirit of either Christ or culture.

Is not the reason for all this the fact that in taking the road that Arnold pointed out would surely lead to destruction, to anarchy, we have lost, with the loss of Hellenism, the power to see life steadily and see it whole? We see only parts, the physical part, the machinery part, and have failed to see the end of all these things, the full rounded life of the spirit for the growth of which alone these other things have any validity or value. Of what possible use is a machine, whether it be a dynamo or a university, unless it is to produce something of essential value for human life? Why waste that life on tending machines that produce nothing? Why travel sixty miles an hour if one sees nothing of the landscape, towns, or people on the way? Why go to five picture galleries, two museums, and two cathedrals in a day if one adds nothing to one’s spiritual impressions – as one cannot – by doing so?

In seeking the reason of Arnold’s failure more to influence his time and ours, I think we may trace it to the extraordinarily rapid increase in the influence of one force in the modern world to which he paid curiously scant attention – science, with its offshoot, modern business theory and practice. It is true that Arnold stood only at the threshold of the changes that science was to bring. In *Culture and Anarchy*, at least, he, in striking contrast to Tennyson, seemed wholly oblivious of the dangers threatening from a new quarter.

Science, which from one standpoint may almost be considered a traitor in the Hellenistic camp, would seem to have deflected the world toward Hebraism in two ways. In the first place, through the products of applied science, and business, it has provided man with an infinity of things of all sorts. Whatever may be the ultimate result, the dream that control over the forces of nature would at once make life easier for man and increase his leisure for the things of the spirit has to a great extent been proved wrong. It is true that in very many cases the mere physical labor entailed

in an occupation has been lightened by the new inventions. On the other hand, however, man has been overwhelmed by the very multiplicity and variety of his new goods. These new goods differ in one marked respect from the old range. The old goods, such as enjoying the beauty of nature, reading, expressing one's self in one's work, "making things," playing music, conversing intelligently, looking at pictures or statues, studying, friendship, love, social intercourse, could all be had for little or no money, in civilized communities. The new goods, however, those provided by applied science and business, can only be had in exchange for money.

The consequence is that whoever turns from the old goods to the new at once increases enormously his need for money, and the financial pressure upon the individual becomes so great as in most cases to result in his complete absorption in providing the mere means for living, the accumulating of the things that belong to the machinery of life. So far from increasing the leisure for thought, feeling, and emotion, not only has the time for leisure been greatly decreased, but with the abnormal condition of exhausting one's energies in preparation to live and enjoy, instead of actually living, comes an abnormal mental condition which finds relief only in an excitable activity instead of a normal savoring and enjoyment of existence.

Aside from the new inventions, such as motors, aeroplanes, and so on, of which the prime object is speed, the pressure of modern life due to science and business working hand in hand has greatly increased the whole tempo of life. We used to measure the hours. Now we live by the second hand. The spirit, however, cannot be hurried. We may get more quickly to the Grand Central and the 4.50 by the subway, but not to Heaven. Quiet and time are essential for the fruits of the spirit, whatever a Burbank may do with bulbs. I think it was Daniel Webster who once said that the most valuable thoughts he had ever had came to him while jogging on his nag from place to place on his court circuit. No such deep reflections could come to a modern judge covering the same distance in a tenth of the time at sixty miles an hour in a high-powered car. It has recently been well said of our age that it is "restless, wide-ranging, enjoying pleasure and novelty, but moving in space rather than in time, dwelling on the surface rather than in the depth

of things.” These characteristics we can trace, I think, clearly enough to that applied science that disturbed Arnold so slightly.

In another and equally important way science has deflected us from that Hellenistic attitude which, in one of Arnold’s definitions, is the effort to see things as they really are. To do this is precisely what, until almost the present day, science has claimed for itself, and what even to-day most people think it does. The now deeply ingrained belief that not only has science a peculiar validity, but it gives us the entire truth regarding all aspects of the universe, has acted as a corrosive upon a very large part of the content of culture and the things that have contributed to man’s highest life – literature, art, and religion. Much of all this has come to seem mere moonshine fancies when contrasted with the “facts” of science, of which not only the validity, but the completeness, is not to be questioned whatever happens to any side of man’s nature or whatever in that nature they leave unaccounted for.

A whole vast range of beliefs and values that were essentially human were wiped off the slate in the name of science. It is needless to catalogue them. The Hellenistic effort to see life steadily and see it whole on the human plane was replaced by an effort to follow a dance of atoms on the scientific plane. Human values became an irrelevant phantasmagoria. The universe was reduced to pure act. In place of the old dangerous error at the upper end of the Hellenistic scale of “art for art’s sake,” we reached the no less dangerous one at the lower end of the Hebraic, the “act for the act’s sake.” Hebraism, always more potent among the mass of men than Hellenism, has thus found itself since Arnold’s day strengthened to a remarkable degree in both the practical and the theoretical spheres. Not only have the Hebraistic battalions been heavily reenforced, but in science, in the eyes of the public, they have apparently gained a recruit from the Hellenistic camp. The whole scene has shifted since Arnold. And yet was he not right? Is not culture, in its best and broadest sense, our only salvation? Can the present materialistic welter of confusion, if unchecked, lead eventually to anything but that anarchy that formed the half of Arnold’s title for his work? If so, what of the future?

It seems to me that our civilization may take either of two courses. The first may be indicated by a suggestion made to Arnold by an American sixty years ago. This was that “we should for the future call industrialism culture, and the industrialists the men of culture”; and then of course, as Arnold ironically adds, “there can be no longer any misapprehension about their true character; and besides the pleasure of being wealthy and comfortable, they will have authentic recognition as vessels of sweetness and light.” We must confess that to a great extent our leaders in religion and education have seemingly chosen to follow this suggestion in their teaching of the American people. The Christian spirit has got so mixed up with “drives” and gymnasiums, and culture with cost accounting and business English, that it takes a wise young man indeed to disentangle them in the face of the strenuous and muddle-headed efforts of his elders.

In many directions at present, however, we are getting suggestions which are not put forward by business men, clerics, or professional educators, and which for that reason, and because they are clothed in a semi-scientific language, may claim more consideration from many. Thus a few weeks ago the noted French architect, Le Corbusier, speaking of bridges, steamships, and other engineering works, said they once provoked æsthetically a “violent antagonistic feeling. They were deemed ugly. Yet these works to-day are acclaimed as admirable. A miracle has been accomplished, a spiritual revolution – ‘the spirit of the age becoming conscious of itself.’” Others suggest that art is an affair of the whole organism and that the art of any age is intricately bound up with the nervous organization of the people of the age. Others, again, hold that the essence of art is one thing and the form another, and that for the future the essence may be permanently passing from pictures, poems, and statues to engineering works.

There is no reason why an engineering work or any other utilitarian one should not be beautiful. They frequently have been in the past, from kitchen pots to bridges. But one cannot help the feeling, in reading such suggestions as that the age is becoming conscious of itself in the sense of admiring its own works, that their authors are unconsciously engaged less in finding new beauty than in condoning our lack of it, though the suggestions are worth

pondering. A friend of mine claims not only that a finely made carpenter's tool has a beauty of form of its own, which is true, but that he can get as much pleasure out of studying it as he can out of a Rembrandt. Our race has behind it a long history and a far longer development. From the days of the Quaternary epoch in Europe we have been making both pictures and tools, but it has remained for our own epoch to claim that a tool, however beautifully made, has the same spiritual value as a picture. It is true that the populace of Athens enjoyed spending its leisure in listening intelligently to a play by Æschylus, Sophocles, or Euripides, whereas the populace to-day prefers the horseplay or sentimental slush of the movies, but I do not think the way out of the difficulty is to say that watching a slice of pie jump across the screen, or kisses in a close-up, is as culturally or æsthetically valuable as the unrolling of fate in Greek drama.

The fact would seem to be that for the time we have lost our scale of æsthetic values, because we have lost our scale of values for the whole of life itself. An age which cares only for the speed of its locomotion and nothing for its purpose or destination is not likely to distinguish between a gasoline station and the Parthenon. We obviously cannot have a scale of values unless we consider the whole of life, consider all the possibilities of man's nature, and reckon one against the other; unless we attain to that perfection which Arnold considered the end of culture – which is “an harmonious expansion of *all* the powers which make the beauty and worth of human nature, and is not consistent with the over-development of any one power at the expense of the rest.”

Of course, the anarchy suggested by Arnold as the final outcome of a democracy devoted to a philosophy of doing, not of being, of action rather than of thought, of developing only one side of man's nature at the expense of all the rest, is not impossible. It has overtaken mankind many times before, and in our busy lives immersed in intense activity we need not believe that what has been can never be again. We cannot rely too blindly upon a moderate distribution of baby bonds, savings deposits, and a share or two of stocks among the populace. It is conceivable, in a civilization based

on tensions between its members, resulting from trying to secure each for himself the largest share of material goods possible, that as the gap between salary or wage earners and billionaire proprietors increases it may some day, in an economic debacle, prove too wide to be bridged even by a baby bond.

On the whole, however, I do not think this is the direction in which we are going to travel, though I trust to neither the applied scientist nor the business man to divert us from it, useful as are the functions which each otherwise performs. It seems to me, however, that there are not a few signs in the social heavens that the times are changing and that Arnold's doctrine may come into its own at last.

For one thing, the constant stream of self-criticism that arises from the vocal and more thinking part of the American people at present, morbid as it may seem from one point of view, does indicate a deep dissatisfaction with life as it is now being lived by us. There is a widespread feeling that there is something radically wrong with that life, which feeling appears to centre in the demand that we should have more scope for the development of our own individuality, that we should somehow, vaguely as people may yet apprehend it, have a chance to be something rather than eternally to be *doing* something, whether for ourselves, posterity, or the Lions Club. In many households this is taking the form of refusing any longer to be dragooned by advertising and high-powered salesmanship into buying every new device that promises even the least contribution to amusement or efficiency. The very activity of the inventor and the business man may itself help in time to bring about our salvation.

For a while we lost our heads. The novel goods offered by the wonders of applied science have been like the glass beads and red cloth offered to savages. We have bestirred ourselves to unwonted exertions in order to get something to trade for them. But we are not savages. We have a long cultural history behind us. We have deep in us desires and cravings that cannot permanently be satisfied with beads and cloth; and there is a limit beyond which we cannot and will not work. If in the future applied science spawns out purchasable goods which business offers us at a rapidly accelerating rate, we shall, instead of trying to have every new thing that

comes along, begin to exercise choice. Once we have discovered that among such a multiplicity of objects choice is inevitable from all standpoints, such as capacity or willingness to work, room space, or even time to enjoy them, we shall become more individual, use our minds again, and once more take pleasure in expressing our own personalities. In trying to choose, in deciding what we really want, we shall discover that a great many things worth having are those that do not cost anything to speak of, such as reading, making our own music, conversation, and other old-fashioned things of the mind. Once the strike is on against working to the limit in order to buy to the limit, we shall begin once more to try to see life steadily and see it whole. With the dawn of that day, the pendulum will begin to swing again toward Hellenism.

Intellectually, also, I believe the way will be made easier by a better understanding both among scientists and among the public of just what scientific truth is as an interpretation of the whole of the universe. That understanding, as I have recently said elsewhere, is making rapid headway among many leading scientists, although the public may be long in following their lead. Once, however, the way is open for the reinstatement, not only in a human world but in the universe, of the purely human values, the door toward Hellenism will be swung wide. We shall once more see life whole after a dark night of the spirit.

In that day Matthew, or some new Arnold with more contemporaneity of reference and style, will become our prophet, for as I turn from his works to glance at the books on my shelves on economics, sociology, psychology, and science, with their sprinkling of Freuds, Watsons, and Heaven knows how many other "modern" voices, I cannot see that there is, after all, any saner doctrine being preached to-day for the salvation of society or the inner peace of the individual than that preached by the apostle of culture sixty years ago. That doctrine is simply that if democracy is to be saved from anarchy it must be permeated through with "sweetness and light," understood as intelligence and tolerance; that this can be attained only by culture, and not by ceaseless economic activity; and that, eventually, people will not consider that life worth living or that society worth saving which does not allow them to live normally and fully with all sides of their being.

Arnold believed his doctrine worth fighting for through a lifetime. It is assuredly worth fighting for today, with far better chances of success, as I see them, from the probable trend of thought and history in the next sixty years than in those which Arnold faced. But if our leaders – our clergy, our educators, our industrial captains, our statesmen, and our writers – continue to preach the contrary one, that our satisfaction and salvation are to be found in busyness and things and a unilateral warping of our nature, then Arnold will indeed have been a prophet, for the second half of his title and thesis will have come to pass.