

Chapter 1

Defining Knowledge

The Spread of Education

The Victorians invented education as we understand it today. We are accustomed, of course, to believing the opposite. The idea of the austere Victorian schoolroom figures as a contradiction of all that a modern educationalist stands for. Images of deprivation and hypocrisy come to mind – burnt porridge in Jane Eyre’s harsh school, or the grotesque parody of education in Charles Dickens’s *Nicholas Nickleby*:

Obedient to this summons there ranged themselves in front of the schoolmaster’s desk, half-a-dozen scarecrows, out at knees and elbows, one of whom placed a torn and filthy book beneath his learned eye.

‘This is the first class in English spelling and philosophy, Nickleby,’ said Squeers, beckoning Nicholas to stand beside him. ‘We’ll get up a Latin one, and hand that over to you. Now, then, where’s the first boy?’

‘Please, sir, he’s cleaning the back-parlour window,’ said the temporary head of the philosophical class.

‘So he is, to be sure,’ rejoined Squeers. ‘We go upon the practical mode of teaching, Nickleby; the regular education system. C-l-e-a-n,

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clean, verb active, to make bright, to scour. W-i-n, win, d-e-r, der, winder, a casement. When the boy knows this out of the book, he goes and does it.'¹

This is unforgettable, but it is also misleading. Victorian education was not simply a matter of victimized children and brutal schoolmasters. Much more often, it was a vision of hope, promising to transform the misery of impoverished minds into the prospect of a richer life for every child.

It was the Victorians who first conceived of education as a formal process that would be crucial to the life of the nation and all of its citizens, with prescribed courses of study, and outcomes measurable by examination. Our sense of what matters most in teaching and learning is shaped by legacies of nineteenth-century thought. This is true of many pedagogic conventions and traditions that we take for granted, but it is also true of the idealism that still animates our belief in education. Matthew Arnold, a major poet and also a professional educationalist, was among the most eloquent of those who argued for schooling of a kind that would amount to more than the means to economic advantage:

Now, all the liberty and industry in the world will not ensure these two things: a high reason and a fine culture. They may favour them, but they will not of themselves produce them: they may exist without them. But it is by the appearance of these two things, in some shape or other, in the life of the nation, that it becomes something other than an independent, an energetic, a successful nation – that it becomes a *great* nation.²

In 1996, Tony Blair signalled the modernity of his policies with a celebrated mantra: 'Education, education, education'. Nothing could have sounded a more authentically Victorian note. Whatever else might define the values of the Victorians, their commitment to systematic learning was unshakeable. Throughout Britain and its imperial possessions, they worked to extend its reach. Schools were

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founded or renewed – ragged schools, elementary schools, public schools, girls’ schools, board schools and night schools. In 1870, Forster’s Education Act laid the foundations of a system that would provide free and compulsory education for all children, funded, as Arnold had wished, by the state. What we would now call institutions of higher education proliferated, from colleges for the godless or the commercial in London and elsewhere, to the new civic universities in the industrial cities of the Midlands and North. Mechanics’ Institutes, local colleges and the University Extension Movement made education beyond the most basic level available to a much larger proportion of the population in 1900 than had been possible in 1837, when Victoria came to the throne. For the first time, significant numbers of British women had access to education at a serious and ambitious level. The Civil Service Reform Act of 1871 meant that competitive examination, rather than social connection, began to control access to influential posts in public administration. These were developments that amounted to a revolution, and they made the creation of a modern industrial society in Britain possible.³

Like most revolutions, this one was driven by divided and sometimes incompatible aspirations. Changing balances of power in social class, religious authority, gender and national identity meant that reformers’ motives were often distorted by concerns that had no part in the first impulse to act. One of the purposes of this book is to show how varieties of self-interest could intervene in the broader ambition to vitalize education. No matter how well-intentioned, Victorians found such partiality hard to recognize, and harder to contain – a problem that is not unfamiliar to our own educational policy-makers. Even Matthew Arnold, who worked tirelessly to make a richer education accessible to all children, was sometimes blind to the ways in which his advocacy of the classical ideal (deeply rooted in his memories of his father Dr Thomas Arnold, the innovative headmaster of Rugby) might in practice restrict opportunities for working-class children, and especially for girls. Matthew Arnold’s determination to expand education makes him representative of

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many social activists, though his contributions had more impact than most. But his principles were coloured by a very personal understanding of education, and here too he was characteristic of his generation. The Victorians transformed educational practice, but there was no generally agreed theoretical basis for their numerous plans for reform. Through political battles at local and national levels, vigorous arguments conducted in books and periodicals, religious altercations and campaigns to establish or modernize educational institutions, the Victorians never stopped debating the nature of good education and the right way to achieve it. The most far-reaching among the shifts in cultural authority that lay behind this push was the changing status of religion, as the dominance of the churches retreated before the pressures of science, scholarship and social change. Many of the controversies that I shall discuss were driven by anxiety about how far, if at all, education might take on the spiritual and imaginative work of faith, a question that we have not yet succeeded in answering. Quarrelling about educational principles and policy can feel like a peculiarly modern preoccupation, but our dilemmas remain stubbornly close to those that worried our predecessors.

Conflicts in Learning

The essential lines of opposition in matters of education are sharply articulated by the novelists, poets, historians and critics of the period, and it is through their work that I shall explore the conflicts that gave these debates their urgency. Victorian writers of every description were intensely interested in education. This was partly because it had transformed their own professional prospects, for the rapid expansion and changing tastes of a literate book-buying public offered huge possibilities for writers. Some literary figures of real distinction, particularly towards the end of the nineteenth century, would never have become writers at all without these new educational possibilities. The influence of Owens College, Manchester,

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was crucial in George Gissing's development as a major novelist. The poet and novelist Amy Levy would not have made her mark without the help of Brighton High School for girls, followed by Newnham College, in Cambridge, where she was the first Jewish woman to be admitted. Openings like these brought responsibilities. Should it be the business of writers to engage with matters of educational policy? Many thought that it should, and lively discussions about schooling figure in their works. But a still more fundamental doubt lay beneath this interest. Should literature, like religion or charity, take its own share in the work of teaching? And if so, what could it teach?

It was not uncommon for writers to have professional or institutional links with the work of education. But the culture of pedagogy was so prevalent that those with no such associations were often just as concerned with its potential. Tacitly sensed, or explicitly argued, the feeling grew that some measure of didactic purpose was a necessary part of an author's calling. In his brisk *Autobiography* (1883), looking back on an extraordinarily successful career as a novelist, Anthony Trollope is candid about the futility of the years he had spent at élite public schools (Harrow, Winchester) in the 1820s and early 1830s. The chief result of his own education had been to make him unhappy. But he insists that a novelist cannot avoid combining the need to give pleasure with the duties of a moral teacher – or, perhaps more surprisingly, a preacher:

The writer of stories must please, or he will be nothing. And he must teach whether he wish to teach or no. How shall he teach lessons of virtue and at the same time make himself a delight to his readers? That sermons are not in themselves often thought to be agreeable we all know. Nor are disquisitions on moral philosophy supposed to be pleasant light reading for our idle hours. But the novelist, if he have a conscience, must preach his sermons with the same purpose as the clergyman, and must have his own system of ethics.⁴

Few would have chosen to point to the parallel with Trollope's characteristic bluntness. It is not easy to think of the worldly

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Thackeray picturing himself as a sermonizer. Yet Trollope's view of the 'high nature of the work'⁵ was widely shared among writers of the period. This might seem simply the expression of a bid for respectability, and no doubt the wish to claim gentility had some part to play in such sentiments. Writers wanted to be seen as gentlemen, and ladies, and their work as paid entertainers made that identity precarious. This was particularly true for novelists, whose efforts were often seen as a shade vulgar beside the loftier productions of poets. But the roots of this aim lay deeper than an inclination to assert authorial dignity. Trollope's specific reference to 'the clergyman' is telling. If the church could no longer instruct and improve the population – and little in Trollope's ecclesiastical novels suggests that he believed that it could – then perhaps literature should assume some of those duties. And if religion was no longer up to the task, writers must seek another 'system of ethics'.

This is different from fiction's potential use in the transmission of factual knowledge, or to promote a political or social campaign, though some writers also attempt these roles. Trollope wants to teach the principles of moral discrimination, founded in the experience of his readers. His autobiography makes the point directly:

I have ever thought of myself as a preacher of sermons, and my pulpit as one which I could make both salutary and agreeable to my audience. I do believe that no girl has risen from the reading of my pages less modest than she was before, and that some may have learned from them that modesty is a charm well worth preserving. I think that no youth has been taught that in falseness and flashness is to be found the road to manliness; but some may perhaps have learned from me that it is to be found in truth and a high but gentle spirit. Such are the lessons I have striven to teach; and I have thought it might best be done by representing to my readers characters like themselves, – or to which they might liken themselves.⁶

Trollope's argument turns on the interiority of fiction. His quiet domestic stories offered readers a fictional mirror, in which they

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could see heightened versions of their own lives. Novels might help towards a fuller self-awareness, and perhaps also to better behaviour, within the clear-cut terms of what Trollope defines as good conduct. But this is necessarily a precarious exchange of values. No novelist, no matter how fastidious, can dictate the responses of the reader, who will sometimes be obstinately inclined to prefer flashiness to the charms of modesty. Worse still, the writer's own sympathies might ally themselves with the irresponsible and unworthy. For all the devout hopes of his autobiography, Trollope's work generates ambiguities that cannot be contained within the simple codes he describes. He must depend on a fluid reciprocity of the imagination, animating the moral intelligence of his readers. It is a creative response, not a passive one, drawing on the reader's own contribution. The ways in which this might work are unenforceable. The process readily backfires, and will sometimes fail entirely.

This difficulty leads to a point that I want to emphasize, for it lies behind many of the dilemmas that shape educational policies. The kind of teaching that Trollope's fiction offers cannot be regulated, or examined. Its outcomes are unpredictable. It is tempting, therefore, to think that it can play no real part in education. Perhaps it would be better to define schooling as the transmission of solid information, or knowledge – which can be seen as disinterested and communal, not personal and solitary. This is safer ground. After all, the impartiality of knowledge can also be seen as a moral asset. Its solid disciplines guard against the indulgences of invention, or the seductions of uncontrolled emotion. It can be objectively measured. If education is to be funded from the national purse, then it must be accountable and formal and open examination is surely the only just way of assessing its efficiency. As more public money was invested in schools, this became an influential line of argument. Robert Lowe, as Vice-President of the Education Department, was primarily responsible for the introduction of the Revised Code in 1862, which provided for a carefully prescribed annual examination in schools funded by the state: '... we are about to substitute for the vague and indefinite test which now exists, a definite, clear, and precise

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test, so that the public may know exactly what consideration they get for their money.’⁷

There is a laudable clarity of intention in Lowe’s position, and such thinking is a useful safeguard against the hazards of wasted public resources. Information, and the assessment of its acquisition, is essential to any large-scale educational system funded from general taxation, and will remain so. But the economic argument can become repressive, if its ascendancy is so complete and exclusive that it leaves no room for less readily testable forms of mental development. For all their indeterminacy, these different kinds of growth are also indispensable, in personal and social terms. Fiction can highlight some of the differences in perception that are key to these debates. The unassuming loyalty of Esther Summerson in Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1853), or Johnny Eames in Anthony Trollope’s *The Small House at Allington* (1864), or Dorothea Brooke in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871–2) is tried by suffering, compromised by circumstances, and finally rewarded with maturity. Their perplexities, and the uncertainty of our response, are inseparable from the kind of fictional education that Trollope describes. For all Dickens’s labours on her behalf, plenty of readers find nothing more than priggishness in Esther Summerson’s modest goodness. Dorothea Brooke’s self-effacing story is a disappointment to many, while Johnny Eames’s dogged devotion strikes others as simply ridiculous. We can learn from these characters, or we can find them tiresome: it is up to us, and our reaction is not to be measured against a fixed yardstick of correctness. The novelist takes the risk, and the result cannot be guaranteed. The educative potential of such figures depends on the fact that they are not exceptional or glamorous. Nor are they especially clever. They recall the untold numbers evoked by George Eliot, in the closing words of *Middlemarch*, of those ‘who lived faithfully a hidden life’. Dorothea’s unobtrusive influence is not to be dismissed simply because it cannot be counted, being ‘incalculably diffusive’.⁸ We might, as Trollope claimed, see a finer version of ourselves in such subdued histories. These provide fictional models that can be rewardingly studied. Not every such text

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will be a Victorian domestic novel: poetry, science fiction, fantasy, drama, adventure stories, travel writing, biographies and autobiographies – they all have their distinctive contribution to make. The value of reading and producing what is oddly called ‘creative writing’ (as if all writing were not creative) is part of the case I want to make here. But this is not the whole point. What I want to suggest is that these works remind us that worthwhile knowledge is not always a matter for impersonal certainty. Schools, colleges and universities are necessarily central to teaching we offer our children and young people. But we must acknowledge that quantifiable outcomes cannot be the only end of education, or the process of measurement will stifle the balanced expansion and growth that it is designed to assess.

This is not simply an intellectual dilemma. It has practical consequences, as the Victorians were aware. Learning that can be readily tested assumes a disproportionate significance if it becomes the primary route to the qualifications which allow entry to secure employment. In the satirical novel *Gryll Grange* (1860), Thomas Love Peacock’s acerbic Doctor Opimian is scathing on the relentless spread of competitive examinations:

I saw the other day some examination papers which would have infallibly excluded Marlborough from the army and Nelson from the navy. I doubt if Haydn would have passed as a composer before a committee of lords like one of his pupils, who insisted on demonstrating to him that he was continually sinning against the rules of counterpoint; on which Haydn said to him, ‘I thought I was to teach you, but it seems you are to teach me, and I do not want a preceptor,’ and thereon he wished his lordship a good morning . . . Ask a candidate for a clerkship what are his qualifications? He may answer, ‘All that are requisite – reading, writing, and arithmetic.’ ‘Nonsense,’ says the questioner. ‘Do you know the number of miles in direct distance from Timbuctoo to the top of Chimborazo?’ ‘I do not,’ says the candidate. ‘Then you will not do for a clerk,’ says the competitive examiner.⁹

For all their egalitarian virtues, national systems of examination worried many Victorian observers. If knowledge becomes nothing

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more than a pile of unconnected facts, its liberating potential will be lost. Matthew Arnold, with many years as an inspector of schools behind him, asks his readers to consider the possibility that ‘of education what is called *information* is really the least part.’¹⁰

These divergences were widely debated. The primacy of information as the basis for education was both a reassurance and a threat, especially for those brought up as confident Christians. As the intellectual authority of theology faltered, there was a commonly felt need for evolving forms of faith that might take its place. Writers were divided in their reaction, often forthright in their support for the expansion of education, but voicing uneasiness at what might be excluded from knowledge-based models for learning. This was as true for poets as it was for novelists. Alfred Tennyson, with his unfailing instinct for the issues that most troubled his audience, moved between the poles of cultural value represented by faith and knowledge throughout his long career. He was among those who believed that the extension of learning was both admirable and necessary. *The Princess* (1847), a poem which advocates the education of women, describes popular scientific instruction as it happens on the lawn of a stately home:

There moved the multitude, a thousand heads:
The patient leaders of their Institute
Taught them with facts.¹¹

Tennyson approves of this work, but the poetry persistently withdraws from it. In fact his refusal is more absolute than anything we might find in Trollope or George Eliot, for it denies the claims of social obligation of any kind. The resolute good sense of *The Princess* is undercut by the irresponsibilities of feeling, creating a strange dissonance of grief within what could be described as Tennyson’s most politically engaged poem, and certainly the poem most specifically concerned with the benefits of education:

Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,
Tears from the depth of some divine despair

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Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,
In looking on the happy Autumn-fields,
And thinking of the days that are no more.¹²

This pensive lyric in the midst of *The Princess* is disquietingly distant from any celebration of knowledge, but it is just as far from any history of feeling that could possibly serve as a basis for teaching. Tears are subject to neither logic nor investigation. 'I know not what they mean', says Tennyson, and this is the source of their authority.

Three years later, Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, the long and ambitious elegy which in 1850 served as his qualification to become the nation's Poet Laureate, broods on these difficulties. It affirms the transcendence of faith, though its definitions of what that might mean are always tentative and elusive. But it also honours the expansion of knowledge, in a double assertion of value carried on eddying currents of thought:

We have but faith: we cannot know;
For knowledge is of things we see;
And yet we trust it comes from thee,
A beam in darkness: let it grow.¹³

Most of Tennyson's readers, anxious to commend enlightened learning without conceding any corresponding danger to religion, would have agreed. Nevertheless, the growing influence of knowledge can seem menacing as we encounter it in his work. For all its potential benefits, it might become a destructive power. Tennyson wants to keep it in its place. *In Memoriam* is outspoken on the matter:

Who loves not Knowledge? Who shall rail
Against her beauty? May she mix
With men and prosper! Who shall fix
Her pillars? Let her work prevail.

But on her forehead sits a fire:
She sets her forward countenance

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And leaps into the future chance,
Submitting all things to desire.

Half-grown as yet, a child, and vain –
She cannot fight the fear of death.
What is she, cut from love and faith,
But some wild Pallas from the brain

Of Demons? fiery-hot to burst
All barriers in her onward race
For power. Let her know her place;
She is the second, not the first.¹⁴

Knowledge is seen in these stanzas as petulantly immature – a selfish child, badly in need of teaching, rather than the reliably useful product of education. This is a startling outburst, with its suggestion that knowledge might become demonic, driven by desire and a burning hunger for domination. Described in this way, it has lost the virtues of cool impartiality. It is all too emotional, driven by wilful passion. Tennyson's language here is provocative, but it formulates an anxiety that shadowed the minds of many Victorians, both those who taught and those who learned. The spread of education founded on knowledge was welcomed, but the applause was qualified by a sense that its triumph might bring costs alongside benefits. Other values might be lost, harder to identify or quantify, but still necessary. They are still needed now.

Poetry and Teaching: Wordsworth

The fear that the wrong kind of learning might destroy the right kind of feeling was not invented by the Victorians. It can be identified as one of the most durable strands in British Romantic thought, and at this point I want to consider some of its more significant points of origin. William Wordsworth is a seminal presence here, as he often is in the thinking that bridges Romantic and Victorian culture.¹⁵ Commonly identified as a teacher, he was nevertheless hostile

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to the idea that his writing could in any straightforward sense be an advocacy of what can be learned from books. The lessons that he tells us matter most are not to be found in schools, or even within the bounds of language itself.

Wordsworth contemplated the problem in the ‘Reply to “Mathetes”’, published in *The Friend* in 1809. ‘Mathetes’¹⁶ had asked Wordsworth to identify himself as a teacher for his generation, a reassuring source of authority who would protect the ‘youthful spirit’ from the consequences of rash enthusiasm:

Here then is the power of delusion that will gather round the first steps of a youthful spirit, and throw enchantment over the world in which it is to dwell. – Hope realizing its own dreams: – Ignorance dazzled and ravished with sudden sunshine: – Power awakened and rejoicing in its own consciousness: – Enthusiasm kindling among multiplying images of greatness and beauty . . . Now as this delusion springs not from his worse but his better nature, it seems as if there could be no warning to him from within of his own danger.¹⁷

Such a spirit needed the ‘living Teacher’ from outside. That teacher was to be Wordsworth, whose name calls up to many ‘the recollection of their weakness, and the consciousness of their strength’.¹⁸ But in his reply Wordsworth explicitly refuses to become a moral teacher, explaining that learning gained in that way will not provide what is really needed. What he has to teach is that Mathetes must do without teaching, if the knowledge he acquires is to be alive:

There is a life and spirit in knowledge which we extract from truths scattered for the benefit of all, and which the mind, by its own activity, has appropriated to itself – a life and a spirit, which is seldom found in knowledge communicated by formal and direct precepts, even when they are exalted and endeared by reverence and love for the Teacher.¹⁹

The way to the actively realized knowledge that Wordsworth values must be circuitous and uncharted, and it will involve the individual

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comprehension of mistakes, for there can 'be no confirmed and passionate love of truth for him who has not experienced the hollowness of error.'²⁰ In this sense, no teacher can protect or even guide the developing mind, for each must take his own hard road:

Nature has irrevocably decreed that our prime dependence in all stages of life after Infancy and Childhood have been passed through (nor do I know that this latter ought to be excepted) must be upon our own minds; and that the way to knowledge shall be long, difficult, winding, and often times returning upon itself.²¹

A sense of a fruitful return is a recurrent motif in the writing of those who reflect on these issues in terms of the living connection with the past that history or memory might allow.

For Wordsworth, this is not always a matter of simply learning from the past – sometimes it is a helpless repetition, an uncanny haunting from which others may learn, but not those who have been unable to escape their own histories. Martha Ray, the betrayed mother in Wordsworth's radical poem 'The Thorn', published in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), has only one thing to say, and her helplessly repeated cry is neither beautiful nor intellectually distinguished:

Oh misery! Oh misery!
Oh woe is me! Oh misery!²²

In his 'Note to "The Thorn"', published in 1800, Wordsworth justifies his position:

Words, a Poet's words more particularly, ought to be weighed in the balance of feeling, and not measured by the space which they occupy upon paper. For the Reader cannot be too often reminded that Poetry is passion: it is the history or science of feelings: now every man must know that an attempt is rarely made to communicate impassioned feelings without something of an accompanying sense of the inadequateness of our own powers, or the deficiencies of language. During such efforts there will be a craving in the mind, and as long as it is

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unsatisfied the Speaker will cling to the same words, or words of the same character. There are also various other reasons why repetition and apparent tautology are frequent beauties of the highest kind. Among the chief of these reasons is the interest which the mind attaches to words, not only as symbols of the passions, but as *things*, active and efficient, which are of themselves part of the passion. And further, from a spirit of fondness, exultation, and gratitude, the mind luxuriates in the repetition of words which appear successfully to communicate its feelings.²³

The expression or communication of knowledge is a very long way from the point of poetry as Wordsworth conceives it in this odd and challenging note. The real business of poetry is not with reason, nor beauty, but with emotion – ‘passion, or the history or science of feelings’. Repetition may be the most potent means of conveying the intensity of feeling that Wordsworth claims as the purpose of the poet. The logical power of language falls away in the face of the disturbing inner pressures that impel poetry and its readers. Deprived of the intellectual substance of language, we grow attached to the consoling material of the words themselves – not as abstract signs but, in Wordsworth’s definition here, ‘*things*, active and efficient’. The words ‘thing’, or ‘something’, recur repeatedly in Wordsworth’s early poetry at moments of its greatest intensity, as he withdraws from what writing can do in the presence of ‘something’ greater than writing, beyond the definitions of thought. Such moments are likely to be associated with the passive suffering of those who are excluded from fully articulate speech, because they are poor, or very old, or very young, or because their lives have driven them, like Martha Ray, to the edges of a human community. The reader might learn from Martha, but Wordsworth does not make a teacher of her.

Such convictions did not prevent Wordsworth from writing prolifically and often didactically throughout his long life as a poet. But they did prompt him to qualify his teaching with repeated denials that the exercise of didacticism can have any lasting authority. This is an insistent element in the thinking of *Lyrical Ballads*, where Wordsworth’s advocacy of the educational energy of feeling rather

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than the authority of textual knowledge takes an especially uncompromising form. The old Cumberland beggar, the most ignorant of all his lonely travellers, and the most in want, is another provocative example of what Wordsworth defines as the redemptive power of suffering. The beggar's repeated circuits as a traveller, supported by the charity of the households who know him, seem to be a peculiarly bleak expression of the 'way to knowledge' – 'long, difficult, winding, and often times returning upon itself'. Yet Wordsworth defiantly claims that the intellectual and physical destitution that this inarticulate beggar represents might be seen as the true source of the moral energy of poets, or even of his own poetry. The insight that distinguishes poets,

lofty minds
And meditative, authors of delight
And happiness,²⁴

derives from those, like the beggar, who have not themselves been instructed, and are perhaps incapable of instruction:

. . . from this solitary being
This helpless wanderer, have perchance received,
(A thing more precious far than all that books
Or the solitudes of love can do!)
That first mild touch of sympathy and thought,
In which they found their kindred with a world
Where want and sorrow were.²⁵

Like many of the poems of the *Lyrical Ballads*, this states an extreme position. The learning that matters to poets has to do with sympathy. It is kindred with want and sorrow, rather than with formal learning – 'all that books . . . can do' – or even, Wordsworth suggests, personal affection – 'the solitudes of love'. The returning presence of the pitiful beggar is a remembered obligation, a lesson beyond anything that can be written, though we encounter it in a written text. Its implications are not limited to poets, or those who are characterized

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by any exceptional capacity for a high purpose. It reaches 'yet further',²⁶ as Wordsworth tells us. The habit of giving compelled by the beggar's absolute need expands the humanity of the poor, not just the rich, or the literate:

... man is dear to man; the poorest poor
Long for some moments in a weary life
When they can know and feel that they have been
Themselves the fathers and the dealers out
Of some small blessings, have been kind to such
As needed kindness, for this single cause,
That we have all of us one human heart.²⁷

These are poems that challenge the easy assumption of those who habitually read poetry: 'Gentlemen, persons of fortune, professional men, ladies, persons who can afford to buy or can easily procure books', as Wordsworth describes them, are inclined to believe that 'human nature and the persons they associate with are one and the same thing'.²⁸ The lessons of the *Lyrical Ballads* insist on a common humanity, rather than creating or reinforcing distinctions between the prosperously literate and the impoverished and untaught. Wordsworth's point has to do with a community of feeling, but his unsettling argument also has a measured political force.

The culmination of these recurrent moments in *Lyrical Ballads* is located at the heart of Wordsworth's 'Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey', where this most sophisticated and articulate of the collection's poems withdraws into the resistant indefiniteness of its great climax:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,

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A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.²⁹

Here the collapse of language becomes its triumph. The poet can only gesture towards experience of a kind that poetry cannot touch. Yet such experience remains, as Wordsworth understands it, the true concern of poetry. Wordsworth's writing moves beyond rational argument, or literary debate. 'A motion and a spirit, that impels/All thinking things, all objects of all thought,/And rolls through all things' – what does it mean? In one sense, it means nothing. But its repudiation of exactitude gives this poetry a comprehensive emotional intensity that haunted Wordsworth's Victorian successors.

Wordsworth's example defines an aesthetic that rests on the education of feeling, rather than the transmission of fact. His close association with the landscape of the Lake District added a further dimension to his authority, suggesting that the authenticity of emotion could be identified with a natural environment, distinct from the contaminations of industrial urbanization. Many saw Wordsworth in vague terms as the unassailable advocate of the priority of the imagination; others were more precise in their acknowledgement of his power. In his *Autobiography* (1873), John Stuart Mill describes the youthful depression from which his sophisticated powers of analysis could not retrieve him, for it was a paralysis of feeling that had stopped his life in its tracks, rather than an intellectual crisis. His extraordinarily ambitious and wide-ranging education had resulted in alienation, from his friends and from himself. Reading Wordsworth revived him:

What made Wordsworth's poems a medicine for my state of mind, was that they expressed, not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of beauty. They seemed to be the very culture of the feelings, which I was in quest of. In them I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings.³⁰

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Mill, who knew himself to be truly exceptional, felt that he had been rescued from despair by Wordsworth's reminder that he was also like other men, 'for we have all of us one human heart'. He points out that such perspectives were not incompatible with the knowledge on which his philosophy was built, for

the imaginative emotion which an idea, when vividly conceived, excites in us, is not an illusion but a fact, as real as any of the other qualities of objects; and far from implying anything erroneous and delusive in our mental apprehension of the object, is quite consistent with the most accurate knowledge and most perfect practical recognition of all its physical and intellectual laws and relations. The intensest feeling of the beauty of a cloud lighted by the setting sun, is no hindrance to my knowing that the cloud is vapour of water, subject to all the laws of vapours in a state of suspension; and I am just as likely to allow for, and act on, these physical laws whenever there is occasion to do so, as if I had been incapable of perceiving any distinction between beauty and ugliness.³¹

But he had come to believe that the reality of active understanding must include the imaginative emotion that Wordsworth had authorized for him. In this he was representative of many Victorians in their effort to incorporate all that Wordsworth stood for within the subsequent development of education and letters.

Imagination and Fact

Deeply influenced by their Romantic predecessors but often uncertain about the consequences of that legacy, the Victorians were preoccupied by the point of conjunction between the private energies of the imagination and the public standing of verifiable fact. This difficult association was seen to be as crucial to the disciplines of the historian as to the scientist, philosopher or novelist. Victorian thinkers came to think of themselves as the products of history, in what John Stuart Mill defined as the 'dominant idea' of the age.³²

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History was no fantasy, but the product of reality. Thomas Carlyle, whose intellectual energies as a historian defined many of the terms of these arguments for those who came after him, was famously scornful of the claims of poetry, or fiction, beside those of solid reality. The work that established his reputation, *The French Revolution* (1837), declares its grand narrative to be immovably grounded in actuality. ‘For life is no cunningly-devised deception or self-deception: it is a great truth that thou art alive, that thou hast desires, necessities; neither can these subsist and satisfy themselves on delusions, but on fact.’³³ And yet historical fact was never quite enough in itself, for only the resources of the imagination, delusory or not, could represent its densities. The men and women who were the subjects of historical study had evidently not been animated by facts alone, and their lives could not be fully understood without some acknowledgement of the passions that had motivated them. Carlyle’s historical writing is vividly Romantic, and draws heavily and persistently on the strategies of literature. In his ‘Thoughts on History’, he sees the matter as predominantly one of formal method. The historian must find a way of embracing events that were not simply ‘*successive*’, as a simple linear chronicle might suggest, but ‘*simultaneous*’.³⁴ In order to unpick the interwoven substance of the past, the historian must make connections and suggest patterns of causality and consequence. The representation of fact is expanded into the nuance of fiction. Readers are drawn into the life of the past through a cluster of images, for the simultaneity of what the eye perceives can qualify the linear succession of a simple historical narrative. Carlyle is strikingly visual in his methods as a historian. For him, as for Tennyson, ‘knowledge is of things we see’.

In *Past and Present* (1843), Carlyle’s clearest statement of historical method, its visual elements are repeatedly asserted: “‘House and people, royal and episcopal, lord and varlets, where are they?’ “Why *there*, I say, Seven Centuries off; sunk *so* far in the Night, there they *are*; peep through the blankets of old Night, and thou wilt see!”³⁵ This visuality is finally a work of the imagination, for the study of history might be best understood as looking into ‘a pair

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of eyes deep as our own, *imaging* our own'.³⁶ Fact – 'pure, crude fact' as Robert Browning was to call it, 'secreted from man's life' – could only be fully formed and realized in the mind's eye.³⁷ The historian J. A. Froude, Carlyle's most influential and popular follower and later his biographer, understood the ruptures in Carlyle's position, and knew that they were productive. The eye is a creative organ, and it does not imagine as the camera records. Writing in 1854, Froude concedes that it 'is not questioned that if we *could* arrive at a *full daguerrotyped objective* account of things, such an account would be of profit to us'. But this is neither possible, nor altogether to be wished, for the most rigorous depictions of historical fact 'must first be alloyed with fiction'.³⁸ Like Carlyle, Froude gave his readers versions of historical narrative that shared some of the developing sophistication of the novel, the form that dominated the literary landscapes of the nineteenth century. History could teach, and both Carlyle and his interpreter Froude intended that it should. But the work could not be done without the reciprocation of creative vision. This was a fertile dynamic, but for historians as for novelists and poets it could also be a troublesome one.

Such concerns were not confined to British culture. Many of the most sharply felt controversies were bound up with consonant developments in Continental thought, which were also responsive to educational change. Revisionary theories of history were perhaps the most pervasive of the stream of German ideas that energized the intellectual life of nineteenth-century Britain. They reached a high level of intensity in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche. His early essay 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life' (1874), published in *Untimely Meditations* (1873–6), confronts the issues directly. Though the essay was not widely read in Britain on first publication, its preoccupations reiterate some of those that I have been discussing in British thinking of the period. Debating legacies of German Romanticism that became a potent presence in Victorian educational strategies, Nietzsche characteristically identifies the culture of knowledge with the culture of historicism. Nietzsche is not inclined to underestimate what history can do for us. But he is certain that

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it cannot do everything. Before historical knowledge can be truly useful, it must be more than a matter of a body of information, acquired as a means of insulating the self from its own needs. It must connect the imagination with the world, as an inward resource that will express itself in action, and allow for growth.

In the foreword to his essay, Nietzsche begins with a quotation from Goethe:

‘In any case, I hate everything that merely instructs me without augmenting or directly invigorating my activity.’ These words are from Goethe, and they may stand as a sincere *ceterum censeo*,³⁹ at the beginning of our meditation on the value of history. For its intention is to show why instruction without invigoration, why knowledge not attended by action, why history as a costly superfluity and luxury, must, to use Goethe’s word, be seriously hated by us – hated because we still lack even the things we need and the superfluous is the enemy of the necessary. We need history, certainly but we need for reasons different from those for which the idler in the garden of knowledge needs it, even though he may look nobly down on our rough and charmless needs and requirements. We need it, that is to say, for the sake of life and action, not so as to turn comfortably away from life and action, let alone for the purpose of extenuating the self-seeking life and the base and cowardly action. We want to serve history only to the extent that history serves life.⁴⁰

Historical knowledge is necessary, but it is not the only necessity. Wrongly characterized, it could also be the enemy of what Nietzsche elsewhere in this essay calls ‘a sound and whole inwardness’.⁴¹ It could replace living intelligence with dead material. This, in Nietzsche’s argument, was the process that had paralysed education for his generation:

Examine with this in mind the literature of our higher school and educational system over the past decades: one will see with angry astonishment that, all the varying proposals and vehement contentions notwithstanding, the actual objective of education is everywhere

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thought of as being the same; that the outcome of education hitherto, the production of the ‘educated man’ as he is at present understood, is unhesitatingly assumed to be the necessary and rational foundation of all future education. The uniform canon is that the young man has to start with a knowledge of culture, not even with a knowledge of life and even less with life and experience itself . . . His desire to experience something himself and to feel evolving within him a coherent living complex of experiences of his own – such a desire is confused and as it were made drunk by the illusory promise that it is possible to sum up in oneself the highest and most noteworthy experiences of former ages, and precisely the greatest of former ages, in a few years.⁴²

Nietzsche’s position is provocative, but its grounds are clear. His argument represents the culmination of the anxieties about divisions between letter and spirit that shadow educational thought throughout the nineteenth century.

Poetry and Schooling: Matthew Arnold

Though they were more conciliatory than Nietzsche’s stark interpretation of this conflict, the literary discourses of education that developed in the mid-Victorian period often struggle with internal splits of the kind that Wordsworth had described. Some found the political consequences of this divided ideology impossible to sustain. Matthew Arnold is an example of a poet who chose to renounce the attempt to hold such tensions together and instead devoted himself to the development of a liberal educational practice sponsored by the state. His poetry is deeply rooted in his close and extensive reading of Wordsworth, whose reputation had a peculiarly personal weight in his life, partly through his family’s connections with the Lake District. For Arnold, the august older poet came to represent the unreachable confidence of his father’s generation, a strength of understanding and purpose that could not be maintained in his own

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corrupted age. Arnold's poetry happens in dark and solitary places, beyond the reach of knowledge, and unconsolated by the sympathetic engagement with common feeling that had restored Mill's creativity. Unlike Wordsworth, Arnold hardly believes that the inner life can be reached at all:

And long we try in vain to speak and act
Our hidden self, and what we say and do
Is eloquent, is well – but 'tis not true!⁴³

The memorial verses that Arnold wrote on Wordsworth's death in 1850 lament the loss of an earlier confident aesthetic of feeling, crushed by what had come to seem an enfeebled culture 'of doubts, disputes, distractions, fears'.⁴⁴ Wordsworth is described as the 'last poetic voice'.⁴⁵ No succession is possible. Instead, we are given a comfortless but obstinately explicit diagnosis of a modern disease. A connoisseur of the pleasures of deprivation, Arnold outlines the situation of his beleaguered age with unhappy relish:

But where will Europe's latter hour
Again find Wordsworth's healing power?
Others will teach us how to dare,
And against fear our breast to steel;
Others will strengthen us to bear –
But who, ah! who, will make us feel?⁴⁶

Arnold's sense of estrangement from his own creativity found sombre expression in his 'Empedocles Upon Etna', where the tormented philosopher-hero's extended deliberations on the loss of the life and freedom finally lead to self-immolation in the mouth of the volcano. In what feels like a particularly comprehensive enactment of Nietzsche's claim that annihilation is the final goal of knowledge, this forbidding poem contends that intellectual growth has come to seem a denial of life, rather than its affirmation. Empedocles's fragmentation is reflected in his language, as he turns on himself:

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But no, this heart will glow no more; thou art
A living man no more, Empedocles!
Nothing but a devouring flame of thought –
But a naked, eternally restless mind!⁴⁷

Arnold's Empedocles gives the reader a peculiarly embittered and self-lacerating image of what a life of thought might amount to:

I have lived in wrath and gloom,
Fierce, disputatious, ever at war with man,
Far from my own soul, far from warmth and light.⁴⁸

Withdrawing this poem with a dramatic flourish from his 1853 collection, Arnold describes what had come to seem its disabling weakness. It could make no worthwhile contribution to knowledge:

We all naturally take pleasure, says Aristotle, in any imitation or representation whatever: this is the basis of our love of poetry; and we take pleasure in them, he adds, because all knowledge is naturally agreeable to us; not to the philosopher only, but to mankind at large. Every representation therefore which is consistently drawn may be supposed to be interesting, inasmuch as it gratifies the natural interest in knowledge of all kinds. What is *not* interesting, is that which does not add to our knowledge of any kind; that which is vaguely conceived, and loosely drawn; a representation which is general, indeterminate, and faint, instead of being particular, precise, and firm.⁴⁹

'Empedocles on Etna' had failed, Arnold declares, because it had not been educational in the right way. It had not communicated the helpful knowledge that he identifies as the chief value of poetry. Poems which can give no 'enjoyment' are 'those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done'. This might seem close to what Wordsworth had described in *The Lyrical Ballads*. But Arnold had lost sight of Wordsworth's understanding

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of the unyielding strength which can derive from suffering. He identifies Empedocles as the voice of defeat, an ancient prefiguring of the rootless generation which could not rise to the challenge that Wordsworth had left behind. A mountain was not, for Arnold, an image of spiritual growth or even of sublimity, but a place of consuming self-destruction.

The family business of education offered an alternative to the futility of the contemporary 'darkling plain', ringing with the confusions of its 'ignorant armies'.⁵⁰ Not only did Matthew Arnold become one of the most influential educational theorists of the nineteenth century, as an inspector of schools he immersed himself in the day-to-day business of teaching and learning as it was supported and directed by the state. His dedication is located in the work of the classroom, and it amounted to more than a mundane substitute for the higher satisfactions of poetry. He found that the public activities of education could provide him with a rewarding place in the world. Arnold never underestimated the substance that a vocation could give to a life. But he was not just an effective public servant. He was committed to values that were more than simply practical. The imaginative needs of a faltering generation could be addressed through the literature of the past, as a way of tempering the distresses of the disordered modern mind. Though Arnold was compelled to abandon Wordsworth's sober conviction that the individual could be steadied and nourished by a repeated connection with the life of feeling, he did not renounce the Wordsworthian notion that the cultivated memory, returning to moments of insight, must be the foundation of education.

Such broad hopes meant that schooling had to allow room for something other than instruction. Arnold was impatient with mechanical methods like those introduced by Robert Lowe's 1862 Revised Code, in which the financial aid given to schools depended on the attainment of the pupils as determined by the examination of visiting state-appointed inspectors.⁵¹ Such a system – 'payment by results', as it came to be called – could not allow for the moral and spiritual training that he thought should be the final goal of

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any educational institution. Arnold's protests, published in *Fraser's Magazine* in March 1862, were immediate and sharp. Like his fellow reformer James Kay-Shuttleworth, he felt that the new scheme was demeaning for teachers, pupils, and inspectors alike, reducing schools to the status of purely commercial or industrial establishments. It was a practice, he argued, that would turn 'the inspectors into a set of registering clerks, with a mass of minute details to tabulate, such a system as must, in Sir James Shuttleworth's words, "necessarily withdraw their attention from the religious and general instruction, and from the moral features of the school"'.⁵²

Lowe's unrelenting plans, widely disliked on their introduction and later significantly moderated, were designed to quantify the literacy and numeracy produced by public money. In a modified form, their objectives have returned to our own debates on the management of education – yet another reminder of how our thinking on education moves in circles. Performance-related pay is a contemporary version of payment by results, and it too must rely on the constant assessment of teachers alongside their pupils. Comments from senior members of the teaching profession have echoed Lowe's views: 'Teachers cannot expect something for nothing. Poor performance cannot be subsidised. In future pay will be linked to performance at the individual class teacher level.'⁵³ Now, as in the nineteenth century, reformers' motives are honourable, for children's opportunities to learn may be damaged if teachers are apathetic. The propagation of literacy and numeracy matters. Arnold was fully aware of its importance, but he argued that it should be a starting-place for education, and not its final objective. Twenty years after his quarrel with Lowe, he defined the wider purposes of learning in 'Literature and Science', an address delivered to an American audience as a revised version of his Cambridge Rede lecture of 1882. Education should not simply equip the young with weapons for the Darwinian struggle for existence. Taking issue with T. H. Huxley's 'Science and Culture', a lecture given in Birmingham three years previously, Arnold denies that an education focused on what Huxley terms 'the stores of physical science' would be a sufficient basis for a

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‘criticism of life’.⁵⁴ On the other hand, a ‘superficial humanism, mainly decorative’ would be equally inadequate for the task.⁵⁵ Arnold is at his most engaging in his steadfast claims that education must satisfy both intellectual and imaginative needs. ‘We experience, as we go on learning and knowing – the vast majority of us experience – the need of relating what we have learnt and known to the sense which we have in us for conduct, to the sense which we have in us for beauty.’⁵⁶ Knowledge of the material world cannot wholly satisfy these needs. His response echoes John Stuart Mill’s remarks on watching a sunset. No matter how much we learn from scientists, no matter how useful such learning might be, ‘still it will be *knowledge* only which they give us, knowledge not put for us into relation with our sense for conduct, our sense for beauty, and touched with emotion by being so put.’⁵⁷

Arnold’s turn of phrase here echoes the famous definition of religion in his *Literature and Dogma* (1873): ‘The true meaning of religion is thus not simply *morality*, but *morality touched by emotion*’.⁵⁸ A measure of continuing internal division is revealed in the language: ‘morality touched by emotion’ suggests that morality and emotion are distinct and separate, rather than aspects of the same imaginatively apprehended whole. Yet it remained true, for Arnold, that knowledge or morality untouched by emotion cannot supply our deepest needs. Arnold’s suspicion of the natural sciences, more clearly evident in ‘Literature and Science’ than in his earlier educational polemics, resolves itself in the feeling that the humanities will allow for a more engaged imaginative life, knowledge that could locate itself in the history of the emotions, and the desire for beauty.

If then there is to be separation and option between humane letters on the one hand, and the natural sciences on the other, the great majority of mankind, all who have not exceptional and overpowering aptitudes for the study of nature, would do well, I cannot but think, to choose to be educated in humane letters rather than in the natural sciences. Letters will call out their being at more points, will make them live more.⁵⁹

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The central problem, as far as Arnold is concerned, was that the meanness of contemporary culture could not supply these emotional and imaginative needs. The hungry mind, eager to live more, must be fed by the literature of a better-regulated past, and especially by the wider horizons opened by the classical worlds of ancient Greece and Rome. The education to be found in the study of letters reaches its highest point where it began, in the 'high symmetry' of Greek culture. 'If the instinct for beauty is served by Greek literature and art as it is served by no other literature and art, we may trust to the instinct of self-preservation in humanity for keeping Greek as part of our culture. We may trust to it for even making the study of Greek more prevalent than it is now.'⁶⁰ Here Arnold's ambitious educational programme succumbs to wishful thinking. Classical civilization as he defines it could not represent a disinterested body of wisdom and beauty, equally accessible to all. It had also come to function as the mark of a scholar and a gentleman, and at this point Arnold's aspirations are caught in the snares of social divisions.

Despite Arnold's hope that 'women will again study Greek, as lady Jane Grey did',⁶¹ it was clear that the traditions of nineteenth-century England meant that there could never be any prospect that a classical education would be widely accessible to women, even if they were to choose to apply themselves to the study of classical literature in large numbers, which was not probable. It was also unlikely that anything other than a minority of working men would become competent classical scholars, or indeed that many would rush to master Greek and Latin, if tuition were made available. Such study would have meant more than the contention with practical difficulties. It would have entailed a transformation of identity, of a kind that was never going to be universally feasible, or attractive. Few girls or labourers would choose to acquire the accomplishments of middle-class male gentility. The study of science, seen by Arnold as a distinctly second-rate pursuit, was more readily within the social compass of ambitious working-class students. It is equally true that contemporary literature, particularly fiction, was more likely to be attractive to women or working men than the classics, or even those

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English authors (like Milton) whose work grew directly out of the classical tradition. Arnold's dismissal of the study of natural science, as he belittlingly quotes Darwin's 'famous proposition that "our ancestor was a hairy quadruped furnished with a tail and pointed ears, probably arboreal in his habits"',⁶² makes depressing reading now. So too does his indifference to fiction by women, together with his unstated assumption that the ambitions of girls will be secondary to those of men.

The real limitation of Arnold's position lies in his insistence that the intellectual freedom that literature could provide was largely confined to the poetry of the past, particularly the classical past, and more particularly still the Hellenic past. Recent poetry and fiction could not measure up. Neither women nor industrial working populations could easily locate themselves within that strand of a grandly retrospective tradition. What Arnold wants to present as a universal experience was in practice socially exclusive, and it was bound up with the hierarchical structures of status implied in the identities of gender and class. Sydney Smith, among many others, had long since made the point: 'Classical quotations are the watchwords of scholars, by which they distinguish each other from the ignorant and illiterate; and Greek and Latin are insensibly become almost the only test of a cultivated mind.'⁶³ Despite his extensive work in schools throughout the country, which fired him with a genuine wish to make education a matter of imaginative liberation, Matthew Arnold's concept of education loses some of the comprehensive reach that had characterized Wordsworth's position.

Fiction and Memory: Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens, with his popular appeal, his confidence in the energies of fiction and his suspicion of the social complacencies that sometimes characterized Matthew Arnold's thought, might seem to be Arnold's natural opponent. Arnold thought Dickens irredeemably vulgar; Dickens had no time for Arnold's cool classicism. Nevertheless,

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they have much in common. They shared an unshakeable conviction that education could transform the lives of the poor, and create a richer and more generous nation. Both were uneasy about the public regulation of its energies, and neither was content to see the teaching of children confine itself to matters of fact. Disquiet about the role of public education bit deeply into the mind of Charles Dickens, the novelist whose work defined and to some extent initiated many of the changing directions of the period's literature. There is a moment that every reader remembers towards the end of *A Christmas Carol*, a hugely popular story that focuses many of the concerns of Dickens's early fiction with particular force. The newly chastened Scrooge is shown two dreadful phantoms by the Ghost of Christmas Present – 'yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish'.⁶⁴ The Ghost explains who they are. 'This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased.'⁶⁵ Erasing the fatal writing on the brow of Ignorance is a persistent aspiration in Dickens's work, and it is one of the concerns that marks his voice as one of those that characterize the period. *A Christmas Carol* appeared in 1843, a moment when political and economic instability meant that alarm about the potentially disastrous consequences of ignorance was beginning to run high. Dickens was among those who were urging the expansion of education as the most effective safeguard against insurrection. In 1844, he made a rousing speech in Birmingham: 'If you would reward honesty, if you would give encouragement to good, if you would stimulate the idle, eradicate evil, or correct what is bad, education – comprehensive liberal education – is the one thing needful, and the one effective end.'⁶⁶ There was nothing ambivalent in such views, and certainly nothing indecisive. And yet the processes of education made Dickens uncomfortable. It is characteristic of his doubleness that the ghost's portentous prophecy should speak about education in terms of erasing writing, as though writing, the product of education, were also part of the problem. The erasure of writing is in fact a persistent preoccupation in *A Christmas Carol*. The climactic moment of the story might

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be identified in Scrooge's agonized desire to 'sponge away' the words 'Ebenezer Scrooge' from the tombstone revealed by the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come,⁶⁷ while the name of the condemned Jacob Marley is 'never painted out'.⁶⁸

The 'needful' education that Scrooge profits from in *A Christmas Carol* is theatrical, almost cinematic – a matter of image and emotion, rather than textual instruction. Scrooge must enter fully into the lessons of his own past, which is what the first of the visiting spirits has to teach him. His memories must be internalized, felt and seen, and not simply a source of instruction and record. Scrooge's schooling, like almost every other process of formal education described in Dickens's fiction, had been alienating. He had been taught in the dismal surroundings that Dickens habitually associates with schools, in 'a mansion of dull red brick', its rooms 'poorly furnished, cold, and vast'.⁶⁹ Taken by the phantom to revisit the dreary old form-room, Scrooge is led into the restorative recesses of his own frozen memories.

They went, the Ghost and Scrooge, across the hall, to a door in the back of the house. It opened before them, and disclosed a long, bare melancholy room, made barer still by lines of plain deal forms and desks. At one of these a lonely boy was reading near a feeble fire; and Scrooge sat down upon a form, and wept to see his poor forgotten self as he used to be.

Not a latent echo in the house . . . but fell upon the heart of Scrooge with a softening influence, and gave a freer passage to his tears.⁷⁰

These tears, freed by 'thinking of the days that are no more', are not associated with memories of the instruction that made an effective businessman of Scrooge, but with images of the vivid characters conjured by his solitary childhood reading. For Dickens, as for Carlyle, education is a matter of vision:

Suddenly a man, in foreign garments: wonderfully real and distinct to look at: stood outside the window, with an ax stuck in his belt, and leading by the bridle an ass laden with wood.

'Why, it's Ali Baba!' Scrooge exclaimed in ecstasy.⁷¹

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It is fiction, not fact, that begins to thaw his mind. These are the images that begin the process of reclaiming Scrooge's lost links with human sympathy.

This is certainly a narrative intended to teach, and it reminds us that Scrooge's first and most valuable lessons, the lessons that made his reanimation possible, were derived from books. But they are story-books, rather than textbooks. The tales that helped the boy Scrooge were those that gave him models for the endurance of loss, loneliness, and betrayal, as Crusoe and Ali Baba do. Yet in *A Christmas Carol* Scrooge is not taught by the printed page; though we, as Dickens's readers, can only experience the lessons of his story in that way. Like the heroes who delighted him in his neglected boyhood, he confronts and defeats his own isolation. In Dickens's hands, the image of Scrooge has joined those of Ali Baba, or Robinson Crusoe, among the cast of fictional characters who embody a national sense of imaginative identity. Reflecting as he does the redemptive power of memory, Scrooge has never been forgotten. He has become one of the channels through which the creative divisions in Victorian thinking about education have been carried deep into our culture.

Dickens believes in the extension of learning, but when it has the nature of programmed schooling he starts to get anxious. Ignorance dehumanizes children, and can make them threatening. But so too can the wrong kind of instruction. Dickens repeatedly warns his readers of the consequences of the sort of education that removes the child from the imaginative resources of feeling, or from the bonds of family affection. The doomed Paul Dombey, the unhappy pupils of M'Choakumchild, or the miserable victims of Dotheboys Hall are aspects of an uneasy pattern in his work, as he returns to the disastrous operations of misguided schooling over and over again. It is not a coincidence that the children Dickens sees as made actively dangerous by inhuman teaching practices are boys. In *Hard Times* (1854), the novel in which Dickens is most openly and polemically preoccupied with educational issues, Sissy Jupe suffers as a consequence of Gradgrind's wrong-headed educational theories. But she finally emerges unscathed, while the ruthless Bitzer does not. Louisa

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Gradgrind has her life ruined, but it is Tom Gradgrind who threatens to ruin the lives of others. The pathetic but sinister figure of Ignorance in *A Christmas Carol* is a boy, while the sufferings of Want are represented by a girl. Dickens was not inclined to deny the primacy of masculine intelligence. But for him, as for many of his contemporaries, it was girls, associated as they were with values of emotion and nurture, who could most fully represent the work of a complete education.

In *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), another novel persistently concerned with education, Lizzie Hexam's most significant acts of reading are her interpretations of images in the fire, while her educated brother Charlie can only make destructive use of his newly acquired literacy. Lizzie's reading is prefigured in that of the furnace-keeper in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–1), where the gentle child Nell is told of the kind of literacy that is possible for the neglected poor. Like Lizzie, the furnace-keeper patiently reads the fire:

‘It’s like a book to me,’ he said – ‘the only book I ever learned to read; and many an old story it tells me. It’s music, for I should know its voice among a thousand, and there are other voices in its roar. It has its pictures too. You don’t know how many strange faces and different scenes I trace in the red-hot coals. It’s my memory, that fire, and shows me all my life.’⁷²

Humanized by his elemental reading, the furnace-keeper is among those who help Nell and her grandfather on their hard journey. The fire has taught him to translate his memory of loss, as he recalls his father's death and his loneliness as a child, into compassion: ‘when I saw you in the street to-night, you put me in mind of myself, as I was after he died, and made me wish to bring you to the old fire. I thought of those old times again, when I saw you sleeping by it. You should be sleeping now. Lie down again, poor child, lie down again!’⁷³ The ignorant workman, instructed only by his wordless but warming book, has received the moral education necessary to take on a nurturing role in Nell's friendless life.

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When we do – rather rarely – encounter generous teaching in Dickens’s fiction, it is likely to come from a girl, and to take place in the setting of domestic warmth. Florence helping her brother Paul with his doleful studies in *Dombey and Son* (1848), or Biddy, a teacher of whom Dickens wholly approves, patiently teaching Pip and Joe to read in *Great Expectations* (1860–1) are representative examples. Here is the kind of education, motivated by compassion rather than duty or ambition, that Dickens favours. This is the loving tuition that the other untaught Jo, Jo the crossing-sweeper in *Bleak House* (1852–3) who functions as a meeker and more engaging version of the scowling Ignorance glimpsed by Scrooge, never receives. Women who teach in schools in any kind of professional capacity often get short shrift in Dickens’s fiction. *Dombey and Son*’s Miss Blimber is an image of the unsexing that seemed to Dickens to be imposed on women who teach in an institutional setting:

There was no light nonsense about Miss Blimber. She kept her hair short and crisp, and wore spectacles. She was dry and sandy with working in the graves of deceased languages. None of your live languages for Miss Blimber. They must be dead – stone dead – and then Miss Blimber dug them up like a Ghoule.⁷⁴

The miniaturized and frustrated Miss Peecher in *Our Mutual Friend* provides a late example of his dismay at new national systems of teacher training as they affected women. Emma Peecher, hopelessly in love with her fellow teacher Bradley Headstone, is

A little pincushion, a little housewife, a little book, a little workbox, a little set of tables and weights and measures, and a little woman, all in one. She could write a little essay on any subject, exactly a slate long, beginning at the left-hand top of one side and ending at the right-hand bottom of another, and the essay should be strictly according to rule.⁷⁵

Dickens habitually approves of smallness in women – the virtues of Little Dorrit, or Little Nell, are closely associated with their

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diminutive stature. But here tininess has become a sign of limitation rather than courage. The undersized Miss Peecher is identified as the product of the pupil–teacher apprenticeship system established by James Kay–Shuttleworth in 1846, which allowed for certification of competence in teaching by government examination. Kay–Shuttleworth described his expectations of his newly certificated teachers: ‘We hoped to inspire them with a large sympathy for their own class. To implant in their minds the thought that their chief honour would be to aid in rescuing their class from the misery of ignorance and its attendant vices.’⁷⁶ These are precisely the objectives that one might have expected Dickens to applaud. But the disciplined teacher training systems instituted by Kay–Shuttleworth have transformed what should have made Miss Peecher a modest and loving Mrs Headstone into a clockwork travesty of a teacher. When she remarks approvingly to her favourite pupil Sally Anne that ‘You are forming an excellent habit of arranging your thoughts clearly’, the moment is seen as comic.⁷⁷ Sally Anne and her teacher have their minds firmly fixed on Headstone at the time, and his obsessive attachment to Lizzie Hexam. Their thoughts, the reader is asked to understand, are anything but clearly arranged.

Headstone, just as frustrated as Miss Peecher and far more destructive, represents some of Dickens’s deepest fears on what can happen when the processes of education go seriously wrong. The industrious and highly qualified Headstone might seem to be a legitimate response to the ghost’s warning. But his pedagogy is motivated by rigid ambition. Headstone’s nature has been poisoned by the mechanical processes that have made him an educator, and the teaching he gives and receives ends in death and disgrace. As an aspiring teacher, he has become the living embodiment of the grim headstone that haunts *A Christmas Carol*. He cannot compete with the lazy but always sexually vital Wrayburn, who emerges victorious in the contest for the love of Lizzie Hexam. The moment when Rogue Riderhood compels the tormented Headstone to write his name on the blackboard is a dark reversal of Scrooge’s wiping away his name on his tomb. Riderhood himself reinforces the point:

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'I ain't a learned character myself,' said Riderhood, surveying the class, 'but I do admire learning in others. I should dearly like to hear these here young folks read that there name off, from the writing.'

The arms of the class went up. At the miserable master's nod, the shrill chorus arose: 'Bradley Headstone!'

'No?' cried Riderhood. 'You don't mean it? Headstone! Why, that's in a churchyard.'⁷⁸

Headstone's corrosively disciplined identity can only bring about the destruction of his happiness. The fear that unbending systems of education could undermine the kind of modestly contented domesticity that Dickens saw as indispensable to social order made him deeply uncomfortable with the institutionalized movements from which Bradley Headstone and Miss Peecher had emerged. When the educated Headstone looks into the fire, it is cold destruction, not the warmth of charity, which claims him:

Rigid before the fire, as if it were a charmed flame that was turning him old, he sat, with the dark lines deepening in his face, its stare becoming more and more haggard, its surface turning whiter and whiter as if it were being overspread by ashes, and the very texture and colour of his hair degenerating.⁷⁹

Like Arnold's Empedocles, Bradley Headstone is annihilated by his pursuit of knowledge precisely because it is really a desire for something else. But Dickens sees his incineration as a matter of wilful self-destruction, not of tragedy.

In *The Haunted Man*, a supernatural fable published in 1848 as the last of the series of five Christmas books that he had begun with *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens gives explicit voice to his fear that knowledge could exist without feeling, or even replace it. Redlaw, the haunted man of the title, is Dickens's only fictional representation of a university teacher. Gloomy and isolated, he is far from encouraging as an example of the profession. Redlaw is a chemist who has dedicated his life to research. In a reversal of Scrooge's visitation by the ghost of memory, Redlaw is tempted to make a bargain with a

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malevolent visiting phantom, who offers him the false comfort of oblivion. He will lose nothing of his scientific learning, the ghost promises, but he will forget the people he has known, loved, and lost. Misguidedly renouncing memories of grief and injustice in order to be free of their pain, Redlaw finds that their erasure leaves him scarcely human. Worse still, the phantom has endowed him with the power to obliterate the memories of others. To his dismay, he finds that his presence spreads a spirit of callous discontent wherever he goes. Scrooge is liberated by the supernatural agency of his three visiting phantoms, but in Redlaw's case, the uninvited phantom that troubles his solitude is an evil *doppelgänger*, a projection of his own willed withdrawal and bitterness. No mysteriously otherworldly philanthropy can rescue him from his self-constructed misery. He is at last led to better things by Milly, an uneducated but maternal woman of the kind who carries Dickens's moral values throughout his fiction. Like Redlaw, Milly's representative status removes her from any kind of realism. She is simply the embodiment of self-effacing domestic affection, as Redlaw is the reflection of its loss. The dismal figure of Redlaw implausibly combines contemporary science in his pioneering chemistry with the image of the traditional scholar in his 'solitary and vault-like' library.⁸⁰ We are told that he is 'a teacher on whose lips and hands a crowd of aspiring ears and eyes hung daily', who has made his home in 'an old, retired part of an ancient endowment for students'.⁸¹ Redlaw's status as a forward-looking practising chemist must be taken on trust, for it is his connection with the moribund relics of forgotten learning that Dickens chooses to underline. Like Scrooge, whose association with the modern world of competitive capitalism is improbably coupled with dusty dilapidation in his living quarters, Redlaw lives among the lifeless shadows of the past, 'remote in fashion, age, and custom; so quiet, yet so thundering with echoes when a distant voice was raised or a door was shut, – echoes, not confined to the many low passages and empty rooms, but rumbling and grumbling till they were stifled in the heavy air of the forgotten Crypt where the Norman arches were half-buried in the earth.'⁸² These are not

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the life-giving ‘latent’ echoes that connect Scrooge with his own past, when he is conducted into the memories of his schoolroom. Instead, Redlaw is surrounded by memories of dead learning. The identification of masculine learning with death and decay, a persistent image in the literature of the period, is here rendered with Gothic intensity. Redlaw must learn to defer to the different authority of Milly’s feminine generosity: ‘... he put his arm though hers, and walked beside her; not as if he were the wise and learned man to whom the wonders of Nature were an open book, and hers were the uninstructed mind, but as if their two positions were reversed, and he knew nothing, and she all.’⁸³

Published at the end of a year in which political insurgency briefly seemed an immediate threat to the stability of England, *The Haunted Man* is a particularly forceful example of widely shared misgivings about the limits of education. Unusually insistent, even for Dickens, in its advocacy of feminized domesticity as the strongest and safest repository of social value, *The Haunted Man* strenuously rejects the public processes of education as a trustworthy means of resisting social disorder. Without the emotional resources of memory, and without the courage to accept the pain that is inevitably part of its action, Redlaw becomes a destructive force who loosens the bonds that should properly connect all those he encounters. It is not, Dickens tells his readers, the publicly authorized memory of history, but the personal recollection of love and duty and a different sort of knowing, that can avert the danger of revolution. Dickens’s troubled thinking about what teaching should be, as he tries to negotiate between competing ideals of communal and domestic models for education, reflects some of the deepest questions that the Victorians were asking themselves about the direction their culture should take.

This is not simply a matter of social conservatism versus liberalism – progressives advocating efficient education for all, conservatives fearing the social consequences of giving too much liberating information to the poor. Its origins are more complex than that, and older too. They extend into the deepest foundations of modern

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thinking about the functions and limitations of learning. Aristotle, the champion of the disciplines of education, had claimed that poetry was stronger than history in its understanding of moral truth, because its imaginative reach was not constrained by the boundaries of fact. Plato had worried that the authority of memory would be eroded by the priority of written text. For Dickens, it is living memory above all that is the source of moral identity and purpose. Sissy Jupe is safeguarded by the tender memory of her lost father, who might return for his nine oils, just as Lizzie Hexam's loyalty to her father protects her from the misguided ambition that devastates her brother Charlie. It is the painful process of reconnection with his own memories of love and loyalty that can deliver Scrooge from his spiritual death.

Dickens's concerns were endlessly disputed in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. The consequences of these debates for national policy were surprisingly various and, like Dickens's thinking on the matter, often contradictory. They were grounded in the most intense conflicts of the period, to do with religion, the role of the state in national life, social class and social mobility, and changing constructions of gender and sexuality. There was no consensus as to what education was *for* – or who should get it, what should be taught, how it should be taught. On the one hand, it seemed clear that an educated population would be likelier to resist the forces of disruption or violence. The literate and well-informed would be less susceptible to drunkenness and riot, less ready to listen to rabble-rousing demagogues, generally inclined to be more respectable, hard-working and manageable. On the other hand, education might make people ambitious or discontented in ways that could disrupt social stability. Women would no longer be satisfied with marriage and motherhood; indispensable manual workers might want to abandon their ploughs and lathes and hammers. These were obstinate political and cultural problems, of a kind that we have hardly yet succeeded in resolving. As far as scholarly Victorianists have been concerned, they are largely a matter of social history, and many have done invaluable work in tracing the twists and turns on the path to

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universal free compulsory schooling at the end of the nineteenth century. But we should also attend to the complex resonances of the story as they were perceived among those Victorians who, seeking to heal the divisions, worked towards the spread of serious and well-informed factual training, while also reaching for the liberation of feeling and imagination that would represent a complete education.