Nostalgic Teleology: Arnoldian Culture & Yeats' Byzantium

Peter Tuite

Abstract: Following publication of Matthew Arnold's *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1866), W.B. Yeats responded to Arnold's ideas in his essay *Celtic Element in Literature* (1897). Yeats' central contention was that the Irish imagination was not in any way incomplete, as Arnold attested, but could instead provide a gateway to a fuller, richer form of human imagination that was lost as a consequence of modernisation and the Industrial Revolution. His late poem 'Sailing to Byzantium' further developed this concept of an ideal culture by subtly linking his aspirations for Irish culture to a mythic Byzantium. The poem provides a work rich in contrasts with Arnold's polemic whilst retaining similarities to its idealism. Using these two works as windows into their contrasting *weltanschauungs* this paper will consider the strengths and weaknesses of their respective ideas on culture. It will also reflect on their contrasting attitudes to Ireland and Irish identity.

_____

'To know the Celtic case thoroughly, one must know the Celtic people; and to know them, one must know that by which a people best express themselves – their literature.'[1] From the outset of *On the Study of Celtic Literature,* Arnold propounds literary knowledge as the key to understanding a nation. 'The forms of its language are the only key to a people,' he writes. 'What it says in its language, its literature, is the great key, and we must get back to literature.'[2] Though one may doubt the perspicacity of Arnold's assertion, it nonetheless evinces a set of assumptions held by its author, assumptions, in turn, rooted in a world-view where culture takes precedence.

What can be said of this central role of culture in Arnoldian thought? And how is one to understand what Arnold means by culture? 'The snake that cannot shed its skin,' wrote Nietzsche, 'perishes. [And] likewise spirits which are prevented from changing their opinions; they cease to be spirits.'[3] Writing some years after the publication of Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), Nietzsche's comment captures something central to Arnold's concept of culture:[4] namely, the search for a kind of human perfection through an unceasing striving. It is an idea that forms perhaps the very essence of Arnoldian culture – a process of unfolding transformation 'where the individual may be perfected, that his activity may be worthy, [where] he must learn to quit old habits, to adopt new, to go out for himself, [and] to transform himself.'[5] In Arnold's view, this goal of perfection can only be reached through the transforming power of culture. As he put it, 'to reach this ideal, culture is an indispensable aid, and that is the true value of culture. Not a having and a resting, but a growing and a becoming, is the character of perfection as culture conceives it.'[6]

Foreshadowing both Arnold's and Nietzsche's idea of self-transformation lays the German concept of *Bildung*.[7] As with thinkers like Schiller and Heine, Arnold's idea of *Bildung* has far-reaching consequences; for the idea of linking criticism, education, culture and politics together places cultural concerns right at the very heart of debates on freedom, governance and the nature of society – and this is also a very continental idea. In Schiller's

---

[1] Matthew Arnold, 'On the Study of Celtic Literature,' *The Complete Works of Matthew Arnold*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), p. 24.

[2] *Ibid*. p. 85.

[3] F. Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 228.

[4] Nietzsche published *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality* in 1881; Arnold published *Culture and Anarchy* in 1869.

[5] Arnold, *The Complete Works*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960-8), Vol. 1.

[6] Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 36.

[7] These ideas of *Bildung* tie in to a whole tradition of German thought going back to at least the eighteenth century.

Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man (1794) for instance, there is a preoccupation with establishing a preeminent æsthetic education in order to create what he calls a rational political state. Surrounded by the turmoil of late eighteenth century Europe, Schiller concerned himself with 'that most perfect of all the works to be achieved by the art of man: the construction of true political freedom.'[8] The rational state is thus, for Schiller, an expression of an inner unified whole and this inner whole is in turn only properly achieved through *Bildung*. Though undoubtedly different in literary form, tenor and context, Schiller's concepts bear distinct resemblances to those found in Arnoldian culture: where Schiller speaks of beauty, Arnold speaks of Sweetness; where Schiller speaks of fragmentation, Arnold speaks of self-interest; what Schiller calls the aesthetic ideal, Arnold calls perfection. If literature is reflective of the inner life, which, in turn is reflective of the political state, Arnold's focus on Irish literature as the key to understanding Ireland is therefore not without foundation.

However, Arnold's linkages to German thought do not stop there. As Stone writes, 'in Heine [too], Arnold found an intellectual and literary model … connecting past and present with the future.'[9] Arnold's distinction between the Hellenistic and the Hebraic was undoubtedly inspired by Heine.[10] For Heine, most of the history of western civilisation was characterised by an oscillation between these two tendencies and it is these very ideas which Arnold seizes upon to build into one of the cornerstones of his thinking on culture. As with Schiller, Heine too connects what is an outlook on life with firm political consequences and central to the thinking of all three – Heine, Schiller and Arnold – is the idea of *Bildung*.[11] It is therefore only through a transformation of the self by means of art and education, a continual expansion of one's outlook, that the forces of philistinism can be overcome. Only then can politics and society be changed for the better. Arnoldian culture is therefore at once personal and political, ancient and modern. It contains what Behler elsewhere terms a kind of 'nostalgic teleology'; that is, where an idealised image of Ancient Greece supports a critique of a problematic present – a present which might nonetheless be overcome through some final, future chimerical stage of history – and Behler's term thus illustrates something of the Janus-like character of such enterprises.[12] Arnold's consideration of literature from Ireland's past is for him a key step in grappling with its futurity.

Though the word 'culture' is rich with meaning, for Arnold its manifold resonances are actually not his principal concern; rather it is through culture's actions and effects – in short, its content as he defines it – which most interests him.[13] In Arnold's view, culture is therefore something which (though acquired in different ways) has as a destination, our inner selves. It is from our inner self that our outward actions originate. As such, culture's province is both the public and the private sphere of human experience – spheres which hold great consequences for the individual and the society which he inhabits. Outwardly, 'culture may with advantage continue to uphold steadily its ideal of human perfection; [but] that this is [nonetheless] an inward spiritual activity, having for its characters increased sweetness, increased light, increased life, increased sympathy.'[14]

As Arnold's cultural and educational agenda is inextricably tied in with the political and societal health of the nation as a whole, what can one ascertain of his particular political views? Moreover, how do those views sit with his ideas on culture and perfection, and the problems of both in relation to Ireland? Arnold's engagement with the problem of Irish independence within the British Empire, presents an interesting answer to this problem which

[8] F. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, ed. and trans. by E.M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 7.
[9] Donald D. Stone, 'Matthew Arnold and the Pragmatics of Hellenism,' *Poetics Today*, Vol. 19 No. 2, (1998), p. 188.
[10] See H. Heine, *Ludwig Borne*: A Memorial, trans. by Jeffrey L. Sammons, (Rochester: Camden House, 2006).
[11] Donald D. Stone, 'Matthew Arnold and the Pragmatics of Hellenism,' *Poetics Today*, Vol. 19 No. 2, (1998), p. 181.
[12] C. Behler, *Nostalgic Teleology: Friedrich Schiller and the Schemata of Aesthetic Humanism*, (Bern & New York: Peter Lang, 1995), p. 2.
[13] *Ibid*. p. 120.
[14] *Ibid*. p. 48.

was really both cultural *and* political. Between the unprecedented actions of the Fenians and the anxious conservatism of the Establishment, attempts were made to find a middle ground of reform to the problem of Irish Autonomy. For Irish Nationalists however, this was unacceptable. As William Harcourt puts it, 'the *via media* of conciliation [was] impossible [as] there was no alternative between separation and coercion.'[15] Arnold, an opponent of Irish Home Rule, sought, however, precisely such a *via media* and this is especially apparent in his book, *On the Study of Celtic Literature*. Here, Arnold's solution for the governance of Ireland is, as David Lloyd stipulates, 'an eschewal of specifically political solutions and an appeal instead to the harmonisation and mediating power of culture.'[16] In short, Arnold attempts to transcend politics by using culture to produce political effects. His argument is a curious concoction of on the one hand admirable idealism and on the other lamentable prejudicial stereotyping. Nonetheless, it illustrates much in terms of his vision for the Empire and indeed the world generally in how culture might be used to deal with conflicting values and solve complicated political problems.

For Arnold, the idea of difference is a great problem as it is tied in directly to the Schiller-like fragmentation of society as a whole.[17] Depending heavily on ethnic oppositions, Arnold's first step is to identify certain essential characteristics allegedly inherent in the Celts and the English. Whereas the latter are characterised as practical, if somewhat dull and lacking in imagination, the former are 'half barbarous' and 'ineffectual in politics' though impressively 'sentimental'.[18] Arnold's agenda is ultimately one of growth and expansion and he argues, therefore, that despite their fundamental differences in character, the Celts and the English have 'beyond perhaps any other nation, a thousand latent springs of possible sympathy with them.'[19] He thus proposes that the Celts assimilate more into the Empire becoming more English-like in character, and similarly, that the English become more Celt-like. In sum, he advocates a kind of melting pot, in which each essence benefits from its opposing other. Arnold's key assumption throughout is that the Empire will continue on unabated, with Westminster remaining the seat of centralised political power. The resulting people of this mixed cultural heritage would only then be capable of producing a culture of imaginative reason, a term which he uses in *Culture and Anarchy* to describe the essence of the cultivated disposition.[20] As Lloyd puts it, 'an æsthetic notion of the telos of historical evolution thus governs Arnold's ethnography insofar as it is directed from the start towards the production of such a state of culture.'[21]

Yet, how pragmatic was such a proposal and more pertinently, how effective? Although many aspects of Arnold's study of Celtic Literature were later discredited especially following Irish Independence, it illustrates something important in Arnold's thinking of the relationship between culture, values and politics. Nonetheless, despite its obvious shortcomings, it is also clear, that Arnold's key enemy is not one race or another, but rather provincialism and fragmentation. In his view, these are simply emblematic of a narrowness of mind, an anti-cosmopolitanism which stifles growth and prevents the proper flourishing of culture and perfection. The Irish problem is thus, for Arnold, a primarily cultural and educational one. It is about a myopic nationalism which prevents a proper world embrace of knowledge and experience.

---

[15] Letter of William Harcourt: Quoted in William Robbins, 'Matthew Arnold and Ireland,' *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 1, (1947), p. 61.

[16] David Lloyd, 'Arnold, Ferguson, Schiller: Aesthetic Culture and the Politics of Aesthetics,' *Cultural Critique*, (1985-86), p. 141.

[17] F. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, ed. and trans. by E.M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).

[18] Arnold, 'On the Study of Celtic Literature,' *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), p. 392.

[19] *Ibid.* p. 395.

[20] Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), Chapters II-III.

[21] David Lloyd, 'Arnold, Ferguson, Schiller: Aesthetic Culture and the Politics of Aesthetics,' *Cultural Critique*, (1985-86), p. 148.

Interestingly, what Arnold does not address is the issue of power and control. Rather, he assumes that when a people are long on the path to perfection, when they carry culture in their hearts, the issue of political power will naturally and peacefully take care of itself. It is a huge assumption to make and yet not without some foundation in that it assumes a high degree of rationality on behalf of the populace, echoing Schiller's rational state. On the other hand, that the Irish would rationally choose Westminster for the centre of political control seems to Arnold almost obvious, perhaps reflecting his own provincialism in this regard. However, Arnold's ideas on the problem of Irish Independence do highlight the idealism of his cultural agenda and it is in this very idealism that both its strengths and weaknesses lie.

Yeats clearly differs from Arnold in his estimation of Ireland's cultural character, yet shares aspects of his idealism. He too believes that ancient literature is the key to understanding a nation, but he also believes in its revivifying capabilities. 'Literature dwindles to a mere chronicle of circumstance […] unless it is constantly flooded with the passions and beliefs of ancient times,' he writes, 'and of all the passions and beliefs of ancient times […] the Celtic alone has been for centuries close to the main river of European Literature. It has again and again brought the vivifying spirit of excess into the arts of Europe.'[22] Responding directly to Arnold in his essay *Celtic Element in Literature*, Yeats likens literature to religion, as it possesses the same kind of power and ability to both reflect and change a culture. 'The arts […] have become religious, and are seeking […] to create a sacred book. They must, as religious thought has always done, utter themselves through legend.'[23]

As with Arnold, Yeats' aspirations for the future are fuelled by a vision of the past, another instance of nostalgic teleology. But whereas Arnold situates his utopic vision in a balance between the ancient Hellenic and Hebraic cultures, Yeats looks to the city of Byzantium before its ignominious fall in 1453. Yeats' linking of an ancient literature to a whole way of life strongly emerges through his engagement with Byzantine culture. For Yeats, Byzantium and its culture served as a model not only for artistic expression, but for society itself; a society unified through its religious, artistic and political life.

In this respect, Yeats was heavily indebted to Morris, who saw Byzantinism as having the capacity to absorb other traditions – something Classicism was incapable of achieving as it sought to be distinct and dominant over its environment.[24] Morris built a kind of East meets West theory of Art where the East stood for colour, intricate design and mystery, and the West for discipline, structure and what he called natural fact. Byzantine Art was, in Morris' view, a combination of the two: it was the unification between two visions of the world.[25] Morris was convinced that the fragmentation and separation of Art and religion from daily life really began in fourteenth century Europe and culminated in the modern problems of alienation and soullessness. Byzantium was therefore a kind of utopia where there was a unity between the spiritual, cultural and daily life of the city and its art, simply a natural, spontaneous expression of this state of affairs. For Yeats, therefore, Byzantium was much more than simply a place to escape to; it was bound up with his vision for an ideal, future world.

In addition to this, Yeats longed for a land where a popular art (similar to the one he imagined Byzantine artists once enjoyed) evolved and flourished. As he observed in 1930 (the same year he wrote the poem 'Byzantium'), 'I wished through the drama, through a commingling of verse and dance, through singing that was also speech, through what I called

---

[22] Yeats, 'Celtic Element in Literature,' *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats*, eds Richard J Finneran and Edward Bornstein, Vol. IV, (New York: Scribner, 2007), Section IV.

[23] *Ibid*. Section IV.

[24] This is not to suggest or prove that Josef Strzygowski (who propounded a similar idea and was also an influence on Yeats) was himself directly influenced by William Morris' writings; though it is, of course, eminently possible this may have been the case.

[25] There are of course interesting implications here when considering Morris' views in light of Edward Said's *Orientalism* – where the East, for example, is often portrayed as passive, colourful, mysterious and absorbing, as opposed to the West which is forthright, assertive and dominant.

the applied arts of literature, to plunge it back into social life.'[26] He quite consciously cited the ancient sagas of Ireland as examples of the kind of popular art he had in mind; a popular art connected to the spiritual and cultural life of the nation and which echoed the achievements of the Byzantine artists.[27] It was, as he put it, a literature that 'never ceased to be folklore even when it was recited in the courts of kings.'[28] As such, Yeats' ideas on Byzantium were inextricably bound up with aspirations for Ireland and a possible futurity under the right leadership.

It is clear that Yeats conceived of an 'Irishness' at once both idealistic and yet somehow resistant to the utilitarianism and empiricism that were such hallmarks of the modern industrialised world. Like Arnold, Yeats was highly critical of the society in which he lived. However, unlike Arnold, Yeats saw in Ireland a special, mysterious place which had, at that time, yet to undergo the enormous transformations that had engulfed Western Europe. It was a place that had largely skipped the industrial revolution and its philosophical accoutrements and had retained, therefore, something of its ancient character; a place unspoilt and un-ravaged by the modern capitalist project. Part of the attraction to Byzantium therefore, was that it presented a unique model for the kind of place Ireland could become, an alternate route to the evident disasters of industrialisation.

These attitudes to Byzantium are evident in the first draft of his poem 'Sailing to Byzantium'. The original title for this first draft was 'Toward Byzantium'. Here Yeats emphasizes his personal voyage to the ancient city. According to William Empson, Stallworthy argues that the poem had its genesis in a page of personal reflections written earlier that year; reflections that are very intimate in tone.[29] Indeed the tone in the first draft is undoubtedly private and confessional. It is only in the second draft that Yeats attempts to introduce greater distance between his own personal thoughts and feelings on Byzantium and the reader. In this second draft, Yeats invents and introduces the character of Tieg, who in a sense stands in place of Yeats and thereby brings some necessary distance. Tieg is some medieval, probably Irish poet, making this trip from Ireland to Byzantium, and thereby echoing some of Ireland's history as a place of saints and scholars during the pre-medieval and early medieval period. It also echoes the links (political as well as personal) Yeats saw between Ireland and Byzantium. Yeats' second draft duly emphasizes these ancient qualities of Byzantium and speaks in a more generalised way about the city.[30] Despite these changes, however, he was still somehow unhappy with this version. In the third and final draft he decided to revert back to the poet as originally envisaged. However, in this final draft, Yeats finds a balance between the intimate, confessional note of the first and the more distant, generalised, antique note of the second. In some respects, this is what gives the poem its shimmering tension between the æsthetic opposites described earlier. It is personal, yet impersonal, modern, yet ancient, specific, yet general.

It is important to distinguish the poetic idealised vision of Yeats' poem from the more explicitly practical agenda of Arnold's essay. Both operate within different forms and therefore manifest their ideas in different ways: where Yeats poeticises, Arnold polemicises. Yet, both are also expressions of *weltanschauungs* deeply held by their authors. Indeed both, despite their differences, carry the sheer force of these convictions and evince powerful idealistic aspirations.

Though Yeats would neither agree with Arnold on his commingling of ethnic essences nor on the practical issues surrounding Irish Independence, it is nonetheless likely he would endorse Arnold's idea of *Bildung* and the evolution of the self. For Arnold, the principal goal

---

[26] W.B. Yeats, *Explorations*, (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p.300.
[27] T. McAlindon, 'The Idea of Byzantium in William Morris and W.B. Yeats,' *Modern Philology*, Vol. 64, No. 4, (1967), pp. 309-11.
[28] W.B. Yeats, *Explorations*, (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 5.
[29] William Empson, 'Yeats and Byzantium,' *Grand Street*, Vol.1, (1982), pp. 67-95.
[30] A.N. Jeffares similarly traces the evolution of Yeats' drafts for 'Sailing to Byzantium' in his article, 'The Byzantine Poems of Yeats,' *The Review of English Studies*, (1946).

of culture was the perfection of the human being and therefore, of human society. Though one could charge Arnold with elitism and intellectual snobbery, it is important to bear in mind that the whole project of Arnoldian Culture was ultimately meant as a project for everyone. In this way, and others, Arnold differs radically from a thinker like Nietzsche (who saw high culture as something only for the few). Arnoldian culture is actually closer to Yeats and his ideas on 'Popular Art' and on Irish Culture as a place where everyone can therefore meaningfully participate in the highest of artistic endeavours. As Arnold wrote, 'one's business in life was, first, to perfect oneself by all the means in one's power, and, secondly, to try and create in the world around one an aristocracy, the most numerous that one possibly could, of talents and characters.'[31] Arnold's goal is thus the achievement of an ideal state, where a synthesis between his many, often seemingly incongruous elements can take place: a place not too dissimilar in fact to Yeats' Byzantium; a kind of democracy of aristocrats, or rather, an aristocracy of democrats.

In conclusion, what is most concinnous between Yeats' Byzantium and Arnold's place of culture is the impossibility of their realisation. Where Arnold hopes for a kind Empire made up of Indo-European people dedicated to a culture of *Bildung*, Yeats hopes for a myth-like semi-historical place which can serve as both an answer to the post-industrialised world as well as to Ireland's future. It seems clear from these two texts that neither is terribly concerned with the practical problems of day-to-day politics nor of proffering any kind of realistic solutions for Ireland, Irish Culture or Irish nation-hood within the British Empire. In this way, both Arnold and Yeats are really cultural idealists. Though their ideas on Irishness differ, their central belief in the power of culture to solve all political problems are strikingly similar, echoing Schiller's sentiment that 'if man is ever to solve that problem of politics in practice, he will have to approach it through the problem of the æsthetic, because it is only through beauty that man makes his way to freedom.'[32]

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Arnold, Matthew, *The Complete Works,* Vol. 1, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960-68.

----- *Culture and Anarchy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

----- *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962.

Schiller, Friedrich Von, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, ed. and Trans. by E.M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967.

Yeats, W.B., 'Celtic Element in Literature', *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J Finneran and Edward Bornstein, Vol. IV, New York: Scribner, 2007.

----- *Explorations,* New York: Macmillan, 1962.

----- *The Tower*, London: Scribner, 1928.

---

[31] Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 94.
[32] F. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, ed. and trans. by E.M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, (Oxford: Clarendon University Press, 1967), p. 9.

Secondary Sources

Behler, Constantin, *Nostalgic Teleology: Friedrich Schiller and the Schemata of Aesthetic Humanism*, Bern & New York, Peter Lang, 1995.

Empson, William, *Yeats and Byzantium*, Grand Street, Vol.1, 1982, pp. 67-95.

Harcourt, William, (Quoted in William Robbins) 'Matthew Arnold and Ireland,' *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1947.

Jeffares, A.N., 'The Byzantine Poems of Yeats,' *The Review of English Studies*, 1946.

Lloyd, David, 'Arnold, Ferguson, Schiller: Aesthetic Culture and the Politics of Aesthetics,' *Cultural Critique*, 1985-86.

McAlindon, 'The Idea of Byzantium in William Morris and W.B. Yeats.' *Modern Philology*, Vol. 64, No. 4, 1967.

Nietzsche, Friedrich: *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.