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Intellectuals and the Politics of Style

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Abstract This article addresses the characteristic styles and modes of self-presentation used by such Victorian public moralists and intellectuals as William Morris, John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold in both their writing and in their appearances as public lecturers: these were all interventions that were aimed at provoking an audience into intellectual consideration and self-reflection. The article examines how questions about the style of these figures have shaped the response to their work both at the time and in the years since their deaths; thinking about why, in Raymond Williams's words, they have produced 'mixed feelings of respect and suspicion'. It considers how their versions of the combination of intellectual and public life could be thought about in our post-financial crisis present, at a moment when late nineteenth century debates about 'the elites and the masses' are re-emerging, but where also the figure of the intellectual is taking on a renewed interest as one possible point of encounter between these forces.

Keywords Public moralists · Intellectuals · Intellectual history · Cultural history · Literary history · Financial crisis · Neoliberalism · Audiences · Ethics · History of reception

In an essay in his 2008 book *Common Reading*, Stefan Collini reflected on the tendency in British culture to return nostalgically to a certain earlier moment in the life of the nation, that represented by an idea of Victorian culture as a time and place where seriousness and openness could be practiced together, before the incursion of the divisions represented by the arrival of mass culture on the one hand and modernism on the other, and where the intellectual would not be imagined as either imprisoned or majestically superior in the ivory tower. This is an image that we keep coming back to as, according to Collini, 'the Victorian man of letters, or at least that multiform character's 'best self', has enjoyed a vigorous afterlife as a convenient way to figure the desire, necessarily frustrated but necessarily recurrent, summarized in the notion of "the general intellectual"' (Collini 2008: 220). The attitude of Collini's essay is critical of this tendency to idealisation, thinking of it as a way to insinuate a criticism of the present by

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suggesting a falling away from such high standards but also implicitly forming a lament for the arrival of a more democratic, more equal—albeit more specialised—world in the twentieth century. And yet, the desire for 'the general intellectual' represented by the Victorian man of letters is, according to Collini, 'necessarily frustrated but necessarily recurrent.' So, there is a kind of return to the Victorian period which is allowable, even if it is a desire that keeps coming back but that can never be satisfied, as it might involve some distinctly overstated views of our own importance. It may be the case that Collini is thinking of himself here, with his own career as a polemicist and intellectual, with particular relation to his writings on higher education.[1] And yet, if this return, either to the Victorian man of letters or to other intellectual figures in the history of Britain or of other countries, is inescapable, then perhaps we need to think about this more thoroughly, to understand what we think was present at those moments, but absent now, both in the person of these figures and in the contexts in which they were at work. This article will, in particular, try to recreate ideas about the life and work of prominent Victorian 'general intellectuals' such as William Morris, John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold, both as they were thought about at the time and the ways in which they have been re-figured subsequently, in order to think about what kind of model for intellectual life that they represent and how that might influence us now in our present discontents. In hindsight, 2008—the year of the financial crisis, which has come to operate as an horizon of our present—seems an ominous but challenging frame for re-thinking the relationship between intellectuals and society. My argument is that these figures can seem much closer to us now in a post-crash world, in that, in their differing ways, they communicate a sense of drama and urgency in their attempt to think through social, cultural and political life, a sense of drama and urgency which is felt by many contemporary citizens, but which has struggled to find the points at which it could express itself. At the same time, the period since Francis Fukuyama's announcement of 'the end of history' in 1989 has, in some ways, as Fukuyama predicted, been 'a very sad time' and specifically for writers and intellectuals in that it has suggested an increasingly technocratic understanding of knowledge: 'the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands' (Fukuyama 1989: 18). What the crash has suggested is that 'the endless solving of technical problems' has not, in fact, turned out to be endless: problems such as the tendency of late capitalism to produce chronic inequality (as well as environmental crisis) have not been solved, notably in the Anglophone world, where attempts to rile back the state have been the most successful. At the same time, the entrenching of a market-technocratic model of knowledge in the period since 1989 has made it more difficult for alternative accounts to emerge: if British academics, a privileged group with time and occasions to think and write, are obliged to be more concerned with 'grant capture' on the one hand and 'the student experience' on the other, it is unsurprising if they are not thinking about how they, their colleagues and their students could be fuller citizens, intent on building the 'good'—or at least the 'good enough'—'society'. So, if one does want to find such approaches, it can be helpful to withdraw from our own period and look at moments from the past, not as examples of a better world, but as other worlds which can throw our own world into sharper relief. This article will particularly focus on figures who we would now tend to think of as 'literary' (whilst their interests were extremely various and could be broadly grouped as occupied, as Raymond Williams put it, with 'culture and society'), and yet their distance from the apparent certainties of hard science (where technocratic understanding may look at its most secure) may suggest something distinctively revealing. As the educationalist Tom Steele has written of the then Conservative-led British government's decision to allow university fees to rise to £9000 per year from 2012, as a result of cutting the direct grant by 80 %, with 'consequent commodification of courses and a drastic narrowing of the curriculum': 'of course this hits the Arts and Social Sciences hardest and it's no accident that these are the areas in which most critical and imaginative thinking are to be found' (Steele). That is true, but perhaps one first step back is not to foreground such literary figures as 'literary' but as practitioners of the 'most critical and imaginative thinking', even as we think through their problems and limitations.

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[1] These are collected in (Stefan Collini 2010, 2012), *What Are Universities For?* See also his more general polemic on forms of arguing in contemporary life, *That's Offensive! Criticism, Identity, Respect.*

One telling example of the ambivalent feelings experienced towards these figures is provided by Raymond Williams—a twentieth-century version, perhaps, of these kinds of writers, in that he was a novelist and dramatist as well as a critic, a practitioner as well as a commentator—in *Culture and Society* (1958). Williams is at the point in his narrative when he turns his attention exactly to the twentieth century and away from the nineteenth-century tradition of writing about culture that he has outlined until this point, and the change of emphasis is immediately apparent. He is discussing what the death of William Morris appeared to represent:

> Yet, he belongs, essentially, with the great Victorian rebels, sharing with them an energy, an expansion, a willingness to generalize which marks him, from our own period of critical specialism, as an historic figure. The life went out of that kind of general swearing and homily soon after Morris's death, and we look at it now post-mortem with mixed feelings of respect and suspicion (Williams 1961: 165).

'Mixed feelings of respect and suspicion' characterise Williams' attitude to these figures: respect —and perhaps more than respect—for their kind of dynamism and preparedness to 'generalize', which distinguishes them from the intellectual world of Williams' present. In turn, this mode was indebted to a direct continuity with religious traditions of moral instruction, which provided both a sense of certainty (which provides the framework for the 'homily' or the sermon) and allows for a definite vehemence of tone: it is not clear whether the 'swearing' referred to in this passage is of the form that is on the Bible or of the form that takes religious doctrine in vain, but, in either sense, it describes a speaker who really means what he says. But now, this mode is dead (at some point after Morris's own death in 1896), and Williams cannot get back to either the generalizing or the moralizing. Feelings of 'suspicion' would suggest that he would not want to: he shares a twentieth-century tendency to see Morris et al. as potential moral tyrants, an accusation perhaps most importantly made in Ernst Cassirer's account of the consequences of Thomas Carlyle's 'hero worship' in *The Myth of the State* (1946), part of a broader trend whereby charismatic figures were seen as potential forerunners of totalitarianism, the most striking example of which is H.F.C. Grierson's direct tracing of influence in his *Carlyle and Hitler* (1933). Cassirer's account is more measured, but he does speak of Carlyle's attack on the Enlightenment as characterised by 'an increasingly fanatic hatred' and, more generally argued that, 'in his imagination, the imagination of a puritan, history became a great religious drama—the perpetual conflict between the powers of good and evil' (Cassirer 1946: 220–1). Cassirer is clearly opposed to the blindness and potential for violence that may be at stake in such straightforwardly moralised attitudes.

However, what is also at stake here is a story about professionalisation in the years after Morris's death: as the critic and novelist Ford Madox Ford would write in his 1909 essay 'The Passing of the Great Figure', the great figures of the Victorian period, from Tennyson to

Darwin, had been replaced by 'the specialist', but this meant—in Ford's account at least—that the public stage was abandoned to less compelling, more limited figures. Ford's account chimes with elements of the historical record in the sense that some of the generalising habits of the nineteenth century were in the process of being divided up into disciplinary boundaries. When the original Fellows of the British Academy were appointed in 1902, according to Collini himself, it was clear that 'intellectual distinction was becoming increasingly a matter of 'scholarship', and scholarship was becoming increasingly an academic activity' (Collini 1991: 23).[2] As W.G. Collingwood, friend and first biographer of Ruskin, would write in 1904, Ruskin was 'the last of the sages, lingering on into the age of the specialist' (Collingwood 1903: 271). Hence Williams' mixed feelings: to be a rebel is to be a kind of hero and the speech and writing of these figures therefore had a life that is denied to later contributors (Williams implicitly includes himself in this). The swearing and the homily obviously involve a palpable design on their audience: swearing could be an attempt to make an audience react by going beyond the bounds of decency, whereas homily is a short sermon that comments on scripture, but which also instructs its listeners on how to think about their moral conduct. As such, both forms involve a necessary confrontation with an audience. *Culture and Society*, too, does end by giving a kind of sermon on what culture could mean in a democratic society, where it is 'our common business to keep the channels of growth clear', but Williams is not quite confident about his sermonising, and swearing is almost wholly expelled (Williams 1961: 322).

The changing of modes in this period at the turn of the twentieth century will bear greater examination. We can amplify the issues at stake by looking at an account of the life of Ruskin, this time from the economist J.A. Hobson, in his *John Ruskin: Social Reformer* (1898). He is discussing the relationship of Ruskin to his audience in a general sense, but it is noticeable that his immediate tendency is to imagine a 'real' audience of listeners and not a group of readers in their own private spheres:

> He knew that the first duty of the teacher is to catch his hearer. The professor in his lecture-room, addressing students who have voluntarily devoted themselves to the continuous following of a narrowly marked line of study, is in a very different position from the self-elected teacher who wishes to seize the reluctant crowd and compel them to come in. His just instinct led him to understand that quite the first duty of such a teacher is to keep the minds of his listeners open and alert, and not to deaden the sensitive apertures of their minds by a constant monotony of dull instruction. […] So, sometimes by dogmatising, sometimes by suggestion, by pathetic or humorous appeal, by quick and close research into the meaning of words, by minute logic-chopping, taking every instrument of rhetoric and reasoning as it came to hand, never forging it by artifice, but always finding it, he played upon the mind of his public with multiform effect (Hobson 1904: 318–9).

What is at stake in Hobson's characterisation? Clearly, he wants to distinguish Ruskin's characteristic mode from that of 'the professor in his lecture-room', arguing that the variety of Ruskin's methods create an experience that is more stimulating and engaging than 'a constant monotony of dull instruction.' The metaphor that he reaches for is that of a conductor, who 'played upon the mind of the public with multiform effect', and one assumes that the variety in his voice and in his methods is paralleled in Hobson's mind with the various elements present in an orchestra and forms a contrast with the ‘monotony’ of the other imagined professor. We could say that this aspiration towards music was characteristic of the late nineteenth century: as the critic Walter Pater had written, ‘all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music’, but the difference here is that Hobson, unlike Pater, does not want a mode where all the content has been taken out and where we are left with just form (Pater 1902: 135). In Hobson’s mind, the creative and playful qualities in Ruskin’s style are not just a good in themselves, but they are features necessary for the creation of a democratic politics. In 1893, Hobson had published a very critical essay on ‘The academic spirit in education’ in *The Contemporary Review*, where he had argued for the need for ‘the democratic university’ to educate ‘the citizen-student’, but where he found that, as currently practiced in contemporary English universities, ‘the “academic” spirit is an exclusive one’: ‘the elasticity, the spirit of thoughtful yet bold experiment, required for educating heterogeneous masses of workers, is repugnant to the prim conception of academic order’ (Hobson 1893: 246). So, the task was to bring this spirit of experiment to the experience of education, and by doing so to produce a society less marked by class differences.

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[2] This account emerges in Collini's discussion of the foundation of the British Academy in the early twentieth century.

How accurate is Hobson’s interpretation of Ruskin’s characteristic mode as a writer and speaker? If we examine the ways in which Ruskin’s own lecturing was received by contemporaries, we can find a mixed—to use that word again—interpretation. ‘He tried strange things’, as one witness of his lectures as Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford described them (Kitchin 1904: 157). One telling example is given by the poet and classicist A.E. Housman, writing home as an Oxford undergraduate after seeing Ruskin lecture in 1877:

> This afternoon Ruskin gave us a great outburst against modern times. He had got a picture of Turner’s, framed and glassed, representing Leicester and the Abbey in the distance at sunset, over a river. He read the account of Wolsey’s death out of Henry VIII. Then he pointed to the picture as representing Leicester when Turner had drawn it. Then he said, “You, if you like, may go to Leicester to see what it is like now. I never shall. But I can make a pretty good guess.” Then he caught up a paintbrush. “These stepping-stones of course have been done away with, and are replaced by a be-au-tiful iron bridge.” Then he dashed in the iron bridge on the glass of the picture. “The colour of the stream is supplied on one side by the indigo factory.” Forthwith one side of the stream became indigo. “On the other side by the soap factory.” Soap dashed in. “They mix in the middle—like curds,” he said, working them together with a sort of malicious deliberation. “This field, over which you see the sun setting behind the abbey, is not occupied in a proper manner.” Then there went a flame of scarlet across the picture, which developed itself into windows and roofs and red brick, and rushed up into a chimney. “The atmosphere is supplied—thus!” A puff and cloud of smoke all over Turner’s sky: and then the brush thrown down, and Ruskin confronting modern civilisation amidst a tempest of applause, which he always elicits now, as he has this term become immensely popular, his lectures being crowded, whereas of old he used to prophesy to empty benches (Housman 2007: 21–22).

This is perhaps the opposite of ‘the academic spirit in education’ attacked by Hobson. Instead, what we have is a kind of aggressive, ironic play where Ruskin dramatises his own despairing sense of the costs of industrial-capitalist society by performing an act of apparent—although only apparent—sacrilege on the artist that he most revered, J.M.W. Turner. There is a kind of spirit of experiment here that actually recalls developments in modern art—from James MacNeill Whistler’s contemporary ‘Nocturnes’ that Ruskin himself attacked to Jackson Pollock’s innovations within Abstract Expressionism—as well as popular forms of artistic expression such as graffiti, the writing on the wall that can be the voice of the repressed as well as the voice of judgment. And, of course, the play that we see here is, in a sense, a protest against the absence of play in the world that it describes, a protest about the enclosed, privatised world of capitalist accumulation lamented by the poet John Clare, where 'childhood's play, green memories once so blest …/ Are overwhelmed in waters of despair' (Clare 1996: 200). At the same time, Ruskin's mode is part of the modern world which it sets out to criticise: his own fame allows him to stage this confrontation, as well as having afforded him the possibility of becoming the Slade Professor in the first place. It could even be argued that there is a kind of histrionic trivialisation of the issues here: Ruskin may be aiming at the provocation of his audience here, with the aim of making them think, but he may have ended up just putting on a good show. This was the opinion of the London newspapers that sent reporters up to Oxford to witness Ruskin's lectures, with the hope that he would do something outrageous. And yet, the technique seems to have worked with Housman at least, who has recalled this lecture in such detail and whose own writing can be marked by the sense of 'malicious deliberation' that he finds in Ruskin. As for Ruskin himself, he was, in Leslie Stephen's terms, 'a brilliant partisan in a random guerrilla warfare', fighting against the spirit of the age, where unique occasions could be turned into the opportunity of a rapid, unexpected assault (Stephen 1874: 692). The problem was that could sometimes seem a solitary endeavour, both for Ruskin himself and in terms of the kind of message that he was trying to promote: the tendency of all his social thought is to promote individual, moral reform, that is implicitly at a distance from the collective action of class politics (even as Ruskin's thinking was one factor in preparing the way for the growth of collectivist thought in the second half of the nineteenth century).

What we can be left with here—and it is one of the things that troubles Williams when thinking about William Morris—is the image of the troubled, socially minded bourgeois as a kind of heroic failure, still haunted by the chivalric figure of the knight, who has to save everyone. From his early career, Morris was also formulating a 'Crusade and Holy Warfare against the age' but was always fearful that this campaign demonstrated his own alienation rather than ended it (MacKail 1901: 63). It will be worth considering at further length the sources of this fraught independence. The primary source is economic: Ruskin, as we know, was not dependent on the market in terms of sales of his books, nor was he dependent on any professional commitment (such as the Slade Professorship at Oxford, although the cultural capital derived from this role was, of course, important). The inheritance derived from his father's career as a sherry dealer was sufficient to protect him against these other kinds of obligation, which in themselves may have produced positions of subservience. This position of financial independence—derived from the work of others—was a provoking one for Ruskin's critics in the Victorian period. For liberal periodicals like the *Saturday Review* in the 1860s, it made Ruskin a figure that could be patronised for his critique of political economy, for his overstatement of the importance of art and for his logical inconsistencies, but it also made him a dangerous opponent, whose lack of self-restraint paralleled their fears of mass democracy. Other Victorian 'rebels', such as Thomas Carlyle, Morris and Matthew Arnold, were less explicitly free in economic terms than Ruskin, and yet, they all worked to obtain and guard a position of independence. As Arnold said, on turning down a position on the Taunton or Schools Inquiry Commission in 1865, 'I myself have always held but one language—that, from the unpopularity of my notions real or supposed, I should compromise the Commission somewhat with the public, and had better not be on it . .' (Tollers 1988: 113). Holding 'but one language' is not an option for those in positions of subservience or obligation, and yet, for

Arnold, it is the basis of his entire project as a critic of both culture and society, whilst for his critics, it was the sign of his undeserved haughtiness. The question always was: why do you think you have the right to speak in this way? Figuring him as an 'elegant Jeremiah'—'this high-priest of the kid-glove persuasion' as the *Daily Telegraph* called him—was one way of taming him, a way of picturing the holding of only one language as a kind of dandified class consciousness, for those who don't want to get their hands dirty (Dawson and Pfordresher 1979: 19).

As we can see in these remarks, ideas about economic independence were explicitly linked to more obviously political and cultural matters. A crucial element in this was the relation to Protestant ideas about dissent: a central forming influence for both Carlyle and Ruskin (although less immediately so for Morris and Arnold). If there was one thing that the Calvinist inheritance passed on to these partially secularised thinkers, it was the idea that provocation could be instruction and that the incitement to self-awareness was an incitement to moral reform. As R.W. Emerson had written in 'The Divinity School Address', 'truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul' (Emerson 1990: 56). But, dissent also meant a necessary distance from English establishments of any kind and also linked Carlyle and Ruskin to the Scottish 'democratic intellect' celebrated by the philosopher and intellectual historian George Davie, a form of intellectual life that gave precedence to both the philosophical and the moral but linked these attributes to the histories of particular societies. This form was opposed to the specialising tendencies of education in Oxford and Cambridge: Ruskin was a student at Oxford, but we still see a strong Enlightenment element in the encyclopaedic desires of *Modern Painters* and much of his subsequent work; in that sense, Ruskin was clearly in the tradition that Davie describes, where he ascribes to the Scots 'their inherited ideal of a culture in which the general should take precedence over the particular and the whole over the parts' (Davie 1961: 4). For Davie, Edinburgh, even after the 1707 Act of Union, 'still remained a sort of debatable land where rival spheres of influence, English and French, British and Continental, might conflict with one another' (Davie 261). Scotland, in this account, was a country of contested, uncertain significance, whilst at the same time, it was a country that was characterised by *debate*, and that maintained its contacts with Enlightenment, even revolutionary thought on the continent, and, especially, maintained a connection with the ongoing debate about equality that had informed and characterised the American and French Revolutions. For Davie, equality is a pedagogic question as much as a political one, and he praises the 'catechising system' in Scottish universities in the nineteenth century, where the Professor's lecture would be followed by 'examination hours in which, without detriment to his authority, he met the students more on a level, and, in the course of questioning them round the class on the subjects of the lecture, might himself become involved in argument' (Davie 15). Here, debate is a necessary condition of education, where authority is—to a degree—shared and where the Professor may become 'involved in argument', with all of the unknown consequences of that.

A further reason that this mode could come into existence was that its practitioners received their cultural formation largely before the biologising of social theory that took place in the years after the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859. One consequence of this change was the tendency to see the human race as not—even potentially—a society of equals, but as an essentially divided entity, characterised by differing levels of ability or capacity. The more extended end of this argument can be found in the work of figures like Francis Galton, in his formulations in *Hereditary Genius* (1869), but these ideas can be found everywhere: even figures like H.G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw—progressive, even socialist thinkers—

could perhaps struggle to imagine themselves as equals of the audiences to whom they were trying to communicate, because they were always concerned that there was—at least potentially—a missing element in their capacities. In Raymond Williams' characterisation, Shaw's technocratic, post-Darwinian elitism led to his alliance with Fabianism, where 'regeneration is something that would have to be done *for* mankind' (Williams 1961: 181). In comparison with this mode, Victorian social criticism—with all its presumptions of authority—comes to be seen as, comparatively, enlightened, utopian and egalitarian. This was also, of course, related to the progress of democracy in the nineteenth century: fears of the enlarged franchise and the coming day of one man, one vote provided as much of a challenge for liberals and socialists as conservative thinkers. For Morris himself, those degenerationist arguments, where the fear was that British culture was already characterised by 'centuries of degradation' (Thompson 1955: 879) were already there, but they were overridden by his belief in the possibility of revolutionary change, where mankind could start again.

At the same time, we could say that the more specialised culture that was emerging at the turn of the twentieth century, with its experts on every social question, was both the beneficiary of the ethical culture of the nineteenth century and the means by which that culture could be turned into the practical reforms of the New Liberals and the later emergence of the welfare state: Hobson himself was involved in the 'reformist milieu' (to use Pierre Rosanvallon's term) that emerged around the South Place Ethical Society in the 1890s, but whose debates were in part being turned into state policy with the election of the Liberal government in 1906 (Rosanvallon 2013: 182). The problem was that in this society, the individual artist or social reformer could sometimes fear his own insignificance, that the particular project in which he was engaged ran the risk of disappearing. For the narrator of Henry James's 1894 story 'The Coxon Fund' (the tale of a public lecturer who doesn't turn up to his own lecture), the concern, for the protagonist and his friend, is this:

> Out of proportion to everything else on earth had come to be this wagging of the tongue. We were drenched with talk—our wretched age was dying of it. I differed from him here sincerely, only going so far as to concede, and gladly, that we were drenched with sound. It was not however the mere speakers who were killing us—it was the mere stammerers (James 1964: 126).

The movement towards mass democracy and the mass culture to which it gave rise were cultures of talk: more parliamentary debates, more public lectures, more newspapers, more magazines, more political rallies and more writers writing very long books. At the same time, it produced a desire for less of all of these things: from the 1880s, attempts began to curtail the length of parliamentary debates, with the introduction of 'the guillotine' in 1887, and at the same time, modernist writing began to show the desire to cut things down, to use less, to be more precise (Rush 2001: 71). As Joseph Conrad wrote in the preface to *The 'Nigger' of the Narcissus*, the work of art 'should carry its justification in every line' (Conrad 1963: 11). If this was the case, then fewer lines could well be necessary: art should say less and suggest more. At the same time, with the arrival of the new century, there was a decline in the prestige of the Victorian period and the styles of writing and arguing associated with it. Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) may stand as the characteristic example of the newly caustic attitude towards their predecessors, where each of the figures that he describes—Florence Nightingale, Cardinal Manning and General Gordon—is revealed as hypocritical careerists operating under the banners of altruism and public service (Strachey 1948: *passim*). The charge of hypocrisy was particularly telling in relation to sexual matters: tales of Victorian repression and modern emancipation could be used to legitimate ideas of necessary cultural change. More broadly, the Victorian moralist faced a general accusation of heaviness, weightiness, tedium: when the Library Edition of Ruskin's works was published under the editorship of E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn in the early years of the twentieth century, Cook's own biographer described it 'as a monument indeed but one under which Ruskin is buried' (Grimble 2004: x): we also remember the death of Leonard Bast—the earnest reader of Ruskin—in E.M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910), under 'a shower' of books (Forster 1910: 324). Alongside this, we can pose the reduction in power of the non-conformist conscience and the styles of arguing that went with it, along with a change from the radical politics of mass intellectualism in the 1870s and 1880s described by Eugenio Biagini to the more conformist political culture of the party system as we move into the twentieth century (Biagini 1992: *passim*).

Figures like Ruskin were therefore, unsurprisingly, problematic: on the one hand, boring perpetrators of an outdated moralism and, on the other, dangerous forerunners of charismatic authority, encouraging intellectual tyranny or a cultish following. In another sense, they were increasingly viewed as un-English: Ruskin had always been seen as a kind of priest-like figure, his focus on art evidence of a dangerous proto-Catholicism, whilst Arnold was often pictured as a cosmopolitan, a sophisticate. In general, they were too free with their opinions and too dictatorial in their manners, too, to use the word of W.G. Collingwood, 'unafraid'. In short, they took up too much space, and it is very easy to see why their mode should have ended with the end of their own careers: disintegrating like the vision of the fireflies that Ruskin imagines on the last page of his autobiography *Praeterita*, written in 1888, just before his final breakdown and the end of his life as a writer. But, is there a particular reason why we should be interested in them now? Perhaps there is. The financial crisis from 2007 to 2008 has had the effect of puncturing the notion of the end of history with the final victory of liberal capitalism that Francis Fukuyama announced. The idea that the market revolution would produce and maintain prosperous, relatively equal, relatively stable societies appears to be over. Everywhere, there is increasing documentation of the rise in inequality in the years since the late 1970s, with its consequent impact on all aspects of human life, from rates of mental illness and obesity to levels of political participation (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009: *passim*). We have, in one sense, returned to the world of the nineteenth century, a world of the elites and the masses, but one without 'the reformism of fear' that a growing industrial working class brought about (Rosanvallon 2011). The implicit question of this article is: does engagement with these kinds of writing (which were often, initially, lectures) constitute us (temporarily) as a public and remind us of the possibilities of citizenship? Is this quality especially relevant to us now where the divide between the elites and the masses has become more apparent and the possibility of a shared political space more of an urgent necessity?

There is another, more particular aspect to this. It has become clear that the professional culture of Britain in the twentieth century—to be found in universities, in the civil service, in central and local government, in schools, in the NHS, in the BBC and elsewhere—and all of which grew out of older, Enlightenment and nineteenth century ideas about altruism and public service as well as out of bureaucratic necessities and state power,[3] has not, in itself, been able to defend the public against the rise in inequality. It is almost certainly a category mistake to think that it ever could. But, to consider this briefly, neither university lecturers nor concerned bureaucrats have been able to successfully combat these changes (although, of course, every agent in society is capable of doing their best to mitigate these changes and, intellectually, to keep other, different narratives alive). Can we be surprised then if—in the particular instance of higher education—that we should be described as existing in a 'blighted landscape'? In the terms of a recent essay in the *London Review of Books* by Perry Anderson, 'how should the failure of the English academy as a whole to put up any serious resistance to its degradation, by Conservative and New Labour regimes alike, be described? 'Spineless', offered an Irish colleague' (Anderson 2014). Extended mea culpas are not very interesting in this connection, but what the longer-term effect of the financial crisis is having the effect of doing is to make many scholars rethink the relationship between their particular expertise and the larger social world that lies beyond.[4] In the terms of this article, this is not just a question about content, about working on important, engaging, issues. It is actually all about style, in the sense that style is concerned with the relationship between the writer or speaker and the audiences or readers with whom they are trying to communicate. It seems to this writer that we do need to think about the challenge that Hobson proposed in the late nineteenth century and the need for democratic intellects that demonstrate the 'elasticity' and 'spirit of experimentation' that he recommends. If we are to attempt to reconstruct the 'society of equals' recently proposed by Rosanvallon, then these are exactly the virtues that we will need to practice, which will only come with a certain fearlessness. But, we also should remember that such styles will bring with them their own complexities. As Matthew Arnold would write in a letter of 1867:

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[3] On this transition from the Victorian to the modern, see (LeMahieu 1988), *passim*.

> I see more and more what an effective weapon, in a confused, loud-speaking, clap-trappy country like this, where every writer and speaker to the public tends to say rather more than he means, is *irony*, or according to the strict meaning of the original Greek word, the saying rather less than one means. The main effect I have had on the mass of noisy claptrap and inert prejudice which chokes us has been, I can see, by the use of this weapon; and now, when people's minds are getting widely disturbed and they are beginning to ask themselves whether they have not a great deal that is new to learn, to increase this feeling irony is more useful than ever (Arnold 1998: 196).

One of the consequences of irony is to put the listener or reader in a position of uncertainty. What do they mean? And putting people in this position of uncertainty can seem like a hostile act. But, in Arnold's mind, this position is the one that enables us to use the free creative intelligence that constitutes our best self. And so irony is an aspect that calls something out of both the person that produces it and the listener who receives (and who, of course, may decide to send that irony back, with an example of their own). We do not have to agree with what Arnold says, in terms of its content, but this mode does seem to allow for the deeper civic conversation that we need; as Rosanvallon has written of Emerson, 'government actions must be questioned constantly: such questioning is the essence of constructive democratic politics' (Rosanvallon 2008: 164). In this sense, recollections of these figures can actually foreshadow a more critical species of thinking, rather than be thought of as examples of a reactionary nostalgia (and, of course, nostalgia itself is always the imagining of a better world). For the art critic Jonathan Jones, 'what is so moving about all these passionate Victorians is the scale of their thinking, the radicalism of their ambitions, the intensity of their engagement with art and society' (Jones 2011). As with Williams in the 1950s, the sympathy is with the combination of thought and feeling, which in itself is a kind of seriousness. And this desired figure is now turning up in apparently unlikely places: in the last days of the referendum campaign in Scotland in 2014, according to one columnist, you could ‘hear the echoes of Thomas Carlyle in the stirring rhetoric on the evils of materialism and neoliberalism’ (Bunting 2014). The anachronism here—Carlyle’s views on neo-liberalism are not known—is not the point: instead, the point is the desire for and, hence, the possible existence of ‘stirring rhetoric.’ As Rosanvallon has said, ‘the citizen has the peculiarity of being both actor and spectator of the political, both subject and object’ (Rosanvallon 2008: 309). We can listen to people talking like Thomas Carlyle, we can be people who talk like Thomas Carlyle, and we can decide not to talk like Thomas Carlyle. Politics is both a spectacle, to be looked at, and a species of everyday life, to be participated in, just as writing is both exposition—a medium through which we see things—and expression, where every line and word colour those things that we see. The desire for Carlyle is the desire for exposition and expression together, but with those elements being brought together for the purpose of some larger ethical and social vision—however much we agree or disagree with Carlyle’s particular emphases and analysis. In the terms of the writer Dan Hind, in his recommendations for media reform, whereby a percentage of the BBC’s licence fee is to be made available for programmes commissioned by the public via voting, ‘as we establish our opinions through debate and the exercise of commissioning power, we break from the silent, if restive, ranks of an audience and become members of a public’ (Hind 2010: 191). The crucial element for Carlyle is that he acted as if he was enfranchised, that he was not confined to the audience and that he was a member of the public, even, perhaps, a citizen. After the end of history, there was a tendency to think that we could do without these kinds of voices and to focus instead on Fukuyama’s ‘endless solving of technical problems.’[5] But, when the consensus has been shown to have failed, then analysis changes, and we think back (and forward), perhaps more with ‘respect’ than suspicion.

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[4] This process is well under way: see, for example, the various contributions of figures like David Graeber, Wolfgang Streeck and Danny Dorling—alongside the polemics of Joseph Stiglitz and Paul Krugman—as well as the most obviously high-profile case of Thomas Piketty.

It may be helpful to end on a specific note. E.P. Thompson, the New Left historian and intellectual, was, in many ways, a twentieth-century inheritor of the public moralist tradition described in this essay: like Raymond Williams and like William Morris, he wrote in various ways, in his case not only as a social historian, but also as an essayist and a poet. He addressed matters of public importance but related them to detailed historical and theoretical analysis. It is also noticeable that he, like Williams and also like Morris, Arnold and Ruskin, was greatly involved in the long movement to provide adult education in Britain, from the working men’s colleges in the nineteenth century to the Workers’ Educational Association in the twentieth century. This experience may have taught him ‘the spirit of thoughtful yet bold experiment’ in teaching that Hobson thought was necessary for the creation of democratic politics. At the same time, adult education encouraged in both Thompson and Williams a desire to reflect self-critically on the positions that they took up and not to regard themselves as the final reposes of authority, whilst they taught adults who had their own experience of labour history: at the same time, they did not deny their own authority. For Thompson, this mixed position of both authority and listening to others was perhaps one of the reasons that he became such a sharp critic of hardened dogmatisms in Marxist thought: as he would say, in relation to Engels’ suspicion of Morris as part of a general Marxist tendency towards ‘positivism and determinism’, ‘I should not need, in 1976, to labour the point that the ensuing lack of moral self-consciousness (and even vocabulary) led the major Marxist tradition into something worse than confusion’ (Thompson 1977: 786). ‘Moral self-consciousness’ may come from various sources, but identifying with it shows the connection between Morris and Thompson. In our current landscape, as Wendy Brown has written, ‘in letting markets decide our present and our future, neoliberalism wholly abandons the project of individual or collective mastery of existence’ (Brown 2015: 221). Moral self-consciousness—the awareness of one’s own self as at least partly another, whose ethical commitments one is able to reflect on—is perhaps a first response to the crisis that Brown describes. As the psychoanalyst Paul Verhaeghe has written:

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[5] My argument here is influenced by Engelen et al. (2011), ‘Misrule of experts? The financial crisis as elite debacle.’

> We *are* the system that we complain about. Protesting by voting for the ultra-left or ultra-right won’t alter this state of affairs. It is not simply a question of making the ‘other’ change; the painful truth is that we, too, will have to change. Instead of being merely consumers, we must once again become citizens–not just in the voting booth, but above all in the way in which we lead our lives (Verhaeghe 2014: 236).

It can be awkward to make such claims. In academic settings, we are not used to seeing issues put in such explicit terms, even though ethical undercurrents may be at stake all the time: when political theorists or literary critics criticise neo-liberalism, they are, of course, employing an ethical register—against privatisation, for the public interest. But these are large terms as Raymond Williams wrote, this kind of thinking can slip back into justifications for ‘a society run by experts for an abstraction called the public interest’ (Williams 1989: 17). What is striking about the kinds of writing and thinking that link Ruskin, Arnold and Morris is that they focused on the points where the ethical and the political were brought together: they thought about how society should react, in a general sense, but they also thought about how they, as individuals, should react to the crises that surrounded them. It is not a question of agreeing with them: it is a question of framing our own responses to the kinds of questions that they propose.

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