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W.E.H.

Wellesley, Massachusetts
September 15, 1956

PREFACE

> To reconstruct a past world, doubtless with a view to the highest purposes of truth,—what a work to be in any way present at, to assist in, though only as a lamp-holder!
>
> *George Eliot*

It is over forty years since Lytton Strachey decided with a flourish that we knew too much about the Victorian era to view its culture as a whole. The truth was rather that in the full tide of reaction it was impossible to achieve a detached and broad perspective. Since then, and especially during the past decade, we have had a series of "period pieces" making the most of the picturesque and the eccentric, as well as some solid critical and biographical work, and a dozen or so extensive studies of the age. But for all this—to some degree because of it—the Victorian mind remains for us blurred and obscure. It appears as a bundle of various and often paradoxical ideas and attitudes. It is fragmentary and incoherent. It is not a mind. I do not mean that there is only one pattern; still less that the pattern is simple. So complex a thing may be looked at from different points of view, and its internal economy is intricate. But *some* point of view must be adopted because otherwise there is no understanding. The very attempt to describe a mind, whether of a person or a period, is an attempt to make it intelligible, and intelligibility is a system of relationships. The general "portraits" of Victorian England are good in their several ways, but they are limited in range or lacking in integration. We are still without an extended and rounded synthesis.

This is particularly the case at the fundamental level below that of formal doctrine and schools of thought. We know a good deal about Benthamism, Imperialism, Darwinism, and the other isms of the period; and while a larger book including them, and considering the impact of institutions like the Church, the Universities, the Inns of Court, or the Army, might have been written—and called *The Victorian Mind*—I have chosen a smaller scope (still quite large enough, and one which in any event will take some account of creeds and organizations). I have explored those general ideas and attitudes about life which Vic-

torians of the middle and upper classes would have breathed in with the air—the main grounds of hope and uneasiness which they felt, the modes of thought and behavior they followed, often spontaneously, the standards of value they held—in a word, the frame of mind in which they were living and thinking. Studies in this area have emphasized only a few characteristics, notably moral earnestness and optimism, to the obscuring of others, equally important, like enthusiasm and anxiety. Some have never been discussed except briefly here and there in other connections: rigidity, dogmatism, the will to believe. Strange as it may seem, there does not exist a single account as such of Victorian hero worship or Victorian love. And if everyone knows that our great-grandfathers were hypocritical, what is meant and why they were—if they were—no one can say. Above all, the major attitudes have never been interrelated, nor their simultaneous existence traced to the general character of the age.

The kind of inquiry here undertaken is the more important because to look into the Victorian mind is to see some primary sources of the modern mind. In the area of formal thought, this has now been recognized, and most historical discussions of democracy and socialism, of evolution, of Christianity and agnosticism, deal with Mill and Darwin, Newman and Huxley. But at the deeper level of character and temperament, the old notion of black and white contrast which grew up in the period of reaction continues to prevail. We still imagine that our frame of mind is as different from that of the Victorians as our clothes, and as obviously superior. We need to change the colors to grey and white: to realize that Victorian optimism is still a basic attitude, though the excitement has gone; that our "age of anxiety" suffers from many of the same fears that shook the optimistic surface of Victorian life; that our skepticism is merely a more radical form of the doubt which was even then mining the eternal verities; that the sense of loneliness and isolation we are so aware of was already felt and poignantly expressed by the Victorians; that in their age lie the immediate roots of our commercial spirit, our anti-intellectualism, our appeal to force; and that even the hurry and pressure under which we live is a century old, and Victorian leisure is a myth. I do not mean, of course, that there are not also some striking contrasts, particularly in the area of love and sex. But the very effort to answer the questions we are accustomed to ask, "How *could* the Victorians have been so prudish, or so hypocritical, or so rigid and dogmatic?" leads to some unexpected discoveries which force us to drop the superior tone. We see that there but for the grace of God—or Freud—go we; and that

our own candor, sincerity, and measured judgment, so far as we possess these virtues more than the Victorians, have been purchased at the loss of some valuable convictions. In short, to peer through the darkness of a hundred years and turn even a flashlight on the landscape of 1850 is to see our own situation a little more clearly.

As these remarks imply, the attitudes here under scrutiny are those which were conspicuous from about 1830 to 1870; which is to say that taken together and interrelated, they provide a definition of Victorianism. It is quite true that some historians insist on a division at 1850, and others think that no more than a decade can be treated as a unit. In fact, it is now smart to say that of course there was no such thing as Victorianism. But the literature of those years, while indicating shifts and changes of outlook and showing that there are clear distinctions between the frame of mind at the start and at the close of this period, nevertheless so constantly reveals the presence of the same fundamental attitudes in every decade and in every group—among High Churchmen and liberals, agnostics and Tories—that I cannot doubt there was a common culture for which the term Victorianism, though in a wider sense than it usually bears, is appropriate. After 1870, while many of its characteristics persist through the century (as is shown by the quotations occasionally given from writings—or memories—of the seventies and eighties), their dominance and their peculiar coherence were breaking down. Victorianism was dying, and a new frame of mind was emerging, a *late* Victorian frame of mind, which pointed forward to the postwar temper of the 1920's.

For my data I have turned to literature in the full faith that "if we hope to discover the inward thoughts of a generation," as Whitehead once remarked, "it is to literature that we must look." But literature in the broad sense that includes letters and diaries, history, sermons, and social criticism, as well as poetry and fiction. It is there that "the concrete outlook of humanity receives its expression." The wording is precise. If the end proposed, in Newman's words, "is that of delineating, or, as it were, painting what the mind sees and feels," we can do this fully and precisely only through what the mind expresses. That is why I have made extensive use of quotation. Attitudes are elusive. Try to define them and you lose their essence, their special color and tone. They have to be apprehended in their concrete and living formulation.

To rely on literature in this way means to rely on the artist; and by and large the witnesses called in this book are the men of letters—the major Victorian writers and the minor prophets like John Sterling,

W. R. Greg, John Morley, or Baldwin Brown. How far can we trust their view of the age? And, more important, how far can we assume that the ideas and attitudes they themselves adopt were widely held in the upper and middle classes? (The working class as such is not here under consideration.) These are complex questions which cannot be explored in a short preface, but one or two relevant factors may be mentioned.

Certainly the writers are not to be heard uncritically, and we have always to consider that what they say of society may be true only of their own literary circles, as is sometimes clearly the case. But to turn from *Sartor Resartus* and *Past and Present* to a popular handbook for Victorian Dick Whittingtons called *Self-Help* and discover almost every one of Carlyle's central ideas reappearing—however stripped of their "fiery poetic emphasis" in the plain prose of Samuel Smiles—is simply one instance of many to support the generalization made by Sir Leslie Stephen in 1876: "How is it that a tacit intellectual cooperation is established between minds placed far apart in the scale of culture and natural acuteness? How is it that the thought of the intellectual leaders is obscurely reflected by so many darkened mirrors?" But the process may also work the other way. The writer may 'find' his ideas already current in the society, waiting only for him to give them form and authority. Who shall say how much *In Memoriam* gave artistic embodiment to perceptions already operative, or created new ones that brought fresh awareness to the generation of the fifties? In some proportions it must have done both.

Today we tend to think of the intellectuals as a special class, ahead of their time perhaps and certainly out of touch with professional and business life; and though exaggerated, the notion has its foundation in fact. But this divorce between the artist and the public—which can be seen on the Victorian horizon—did not occur until the last decades of the century. In the years between 1830 and 1870 the sense of crisis at the very moment when the traditional authority of the church and the aristocracy was breaking down, impelled men of letters to focus on the contemporary scene more consciously, I think, than they had ever done before; and then, in the light of their analysis, to urge the adoption of one or another political, religious, or moral philosophy. Moreover, at a time when middle-class achievements in commerce, industry, and politics were so extraordinary, the artist-thinkers were more imbued with bourgeois ideals and more sensitive to bourgeois needs than was later the case. On the other side, a large public, living in an age of "doubts, disputes, distractions, fears," looked deliberately

to the literary prophets, and to the famous reviews through which they usually spoke, for guidance or reassurance; and the captains of industry, so long as their formal education was so limited, turned to men of letters for the culture which a rising class is eager to acquire. No doubt certain attitudes—optimism, moral earnestness, and the worship of force, for example—were more common among the men of action, while others like melancholia and enthusiasm were more often found among the intellectuals. But all exist, in varying degrees, in both groups. The intimate connection between literature and life is a significant feature of the Victorian age and one of its chief glories.

Chapter 1

CHARACTER OF THE AGE

In 1858 a Victorian critic, searching for an epithet to describe "the remarkable period in which our own lot is cast," did not call it the age of democracy or industry or science, nor of earnestness or optimism. The one distinguishing fact about the time was "that we are living in *an age of transition.*" [1] This is the basic and almost universal conception of the period.[2] And it is peculiarly Victorian. For although all ages are ages of transition, never before had men thought of their own time as an era of change *from* the past *to* the future. Indeed, in England that idea and the Victorian period began together. When John Stuart Mill in 1831 found transition to be the leading characteristic of the time—"mankind have outgrown old institutions and old doctrines, and have not yet acquired new ones"—he noted that this had been recognized by the more discerning only "a few years ago," and that now "it forces itself upon the most inobservant." [3]

To Mill and the Victorians the past which they had outgrown was not the Romantic period and not even the eighteenth century. It was the Middle Ages. They recognized, of course, that there were differences between themselves and their immediate predecessors, but from their perspective it was the medieval tradition from which they had

1. "The Progress and Spirit of Physical Science," *Edinburgh Review, 108* (1858), 71. The writer (who was kindly identified for me by Professor R. D. Altick) was Sir Henry Holland. The article was reprinted in his *Essays on Scientific and Other Subjects Contributed to the Edinburgh and Quarterly Reviews*, London, 1862.

2. The specific words "transition" or "transitional" are used by Prince Albert, Matthew Arnold, Baldwin Brown, Carlyle, Disraeli, Frederic Harrison, Bulwer Lytton, W. H. Mallock, Harriet Martineau, John Mill, John Morley, William Morris, Herbert Spencer, Hugh Stowell, J. A. Symonds, Tennyson, and no doubt many others.

3. *The Spirit of the Age*, p. 6, and cf. p. 1. Here and throughout the present work the particular edition used for cited and quoted works, if not identified in the note, will be found in the Bibliography.

irrevocably broken—Christian orthodoxy under the rule of the church and civil government under the rule of king and nobility; the social structure of fixed classes, each with its recognized rights and duties; and the economic organization of village agriculture and town guilds. That was "the old European system of dominant ideas and facts" which Arnold saw dissolving in the nineteenth century.[4] But the process had begun much earlier, starting with the Renaissance and the Reformation, gaining momentum, quietly but steadily, through the next two centuries of philosophic rationalism and expanding business, until it finally broke into the open when the French Revolution of 1789 proclaimed the democratic Rights of Man and the atheistical worship of the Goddess of Reason. That was the first overt manifestation, in Mill's opinion, that Europe was in a state of transition.[5] But it was not realized at the time, not in England. There it was not until the rising agitation for a reform bill (finally successful in 1832), the passage of Catholic Emancipation, the attack on the Church by Whig liberals and Benthamite agnostics, together with the outbreak of the 1830 revolutions abroad, that men suddenly realized they were living in an age of radical change.[6] Then they began to say that "old opinions, feelings—ancestral customs and institutions are crumbling away, and both the spiritual and temporal worlds are darkened by the shadow of change."[7]

For "old" and "ancestral" we may read "medieval" or "feudal." When Arnold observed that many people thought it possible to keep a good deal of "the past," his next sentence defined the term: the extremists, indeed, hoped "to retain or restore the whole system of the Middle Ages."[8] "Until quite recently," wrote Baldwin Brown in his important lectures of 1869–70, *The Revolution of the Last Quarter of a Century*, ". . . our modes of thought and speech, our habits of action, our forms

4. "Heine," *Essays in Criticism, First Series*, pp. 186–7.

5. *The Spirit of the Age*, p. 67. Cf. Carlyle, "Signs of the Times," *Essays*, 2, 82.

6. See Mill, "The Claims of Labour," *Dissertations and Discussions*, 2, 188; and George Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 1, chap. 3, pp. 66–7.

7. Edward Bulwer Lytton, *England and the English* (1833), p. 281. This passage may have been written by Mill: see his *Autobiography*, chap. 6, p. 168.

8. "Democracy" (1861), *Mixed Essays*, p. 22. Robert Vaughan began *The Age of Great Cities* (1843) with a section "On the Conflict between Feudalism and Civilization in Modern Society" in which he noticed (pp. 5–6) a reactionary movement that would "diminish everything commercial and civic, so as to place the military and the feudal in its old undisturbed ascendancy" and would "restore the power of the Christian priesthood in much of the form and greatness which distinguished it during the middle age."

of procedure in things social and political, were still feudal."[9] To Carlyle and Ruskin and Thomas Arnold, the period is one of decaying or dying feudalism.[10] This was not an abstract idea. Victorians like Thackeray who had grown up in the 1820's felt they had lived in two distinct worlds:

> It was only yesterday; but what a gulf between now and then! *Then* was the old world. Stage-coaches, more or less swift, riding-horses, pack-horses, highway-men, knights in armour, Norman invaders, Roman legions, Druids, Ancient Britons painted blue, and so forth—all these belong to the old period. I will concede a halt in the midst of it, and allow that gunpowder and printing tended to modernise the world. But your railroad starts the new era, and we of a certain age belong to the new time and the old one. We are of the time of chivalry as well as the Black Prince of Sir Walter Manny. We are of the age of steam.[11]

From a mere glance at the title page of Carlyle's *Past and Present*, any Victorian might have guessed that the book was a comparison of the Middle Ages with the nineteenth century.

By definition an age of transition in which change is revolutionary has a dual aspect: destruction and reconstruction. As the old order of doctrines and institutions is being attacked or modified or discarded, at one point and then another, a new order is being proposed or inaugurated. Both tendencies were apparent by 1830. After his description of the breakup of timeworn landmarks, Bulwer Lytton continued: "The age then is one of *destruction!* . . . Miserable would be our lot were it not also an age of preparation for reconstructing."[12] Twenty years later at the center of the Victorian period, what new construction had emerged? Or rather—for this is the important question for getting at the temper of the age—what did men think distinguished their time

9. *First Principles of Ecclesiastical Truth*, p. 273. The lectures are on pp. 209–364. For their date see p. vii.

10. Thomas Arnold and Carlyle are quoted below, p. 4; for Ruskin, see *The Crown of Wild Olive, Works, 18*, Lecture 4, p. 494. Cf. Dowden, quoted below, note 14.

11. "De Juventute" (1860), published in the *Roundabout Papers, Works, 12*, 232. For the tendency to idealize the prerailroad world of the early century, see Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, pp. 102–9, where Thackeray's essay is quoted.

12. *England and the English*, p. 281; but see note 7. Cf. Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, Bk. III, chap. 7, p. 244.

most significantly from the past? What did they think was peculiarly Victorian about "the state of society and of the human mind?" [13]

1. *The State of Society*

By the late nineteenth century it was clear that the feudal and agrarian order of the past had been replaced by a democratic and industrial society.[14] The emergence of democracy meant not only the transference of political power from the aristocracy to the people, mainly by the successive Reform Bills of 1832, 1867, and 1884, but also the arrival of what is often termed a democratic society. The latter, indeed, was so striking that Mill once called the distinguishing feature of modern institutions and of modern life itself the fact "that human beings are no longer born to their place in life . . . but are free to employ their faculties, and such favourable chances as offer, to achieve the lot which may appear to them most desirable." [15] This breakdown of the old conception of status owed something to democratic ideas about the rights of man, but its primary cause was economic. The development of commerce, drawing men off from the land and opening new and independent careers to talent, had been the main instrument in dissolving the feudal nexus of society.[16] In politics, too, the Industrial Revolution underlay the democratic revolution. What Thomas Arnold had in mind when he remarked, on seeing the first train pass through the Rugby countryside, that "feudality is gone for ever," [17] is made explicit by a passage in *Sartor Resartus*, written on the eve of the Reform Bill of 1832: "Cannot the dullest hear Steam-Engines clanking around him? Has he not seen the Scottish Brassmith's IDEA (and this but a mechanical one) travelling on fire-wings round the Cape, and across two Oceans; and stronger than any other Enchanter's Familiar, on all hands unweariedly fetching and carrying: at home, not only weaving Cloth; but rapidly enough overturning the whole old system of Society; and, for Feudalism and Preservation of the

13. These are Mill's categories in *The Spirit of the Age*, pp. 2, 6.

14. Cf. Dowden, "Victorian Literature" (1887), *Transcripts and Studies* (London, 1896), p. 159: "Society, founded on the old feudal doctrines, has gone to wreck in the storms that have blown over Europe during the last hundred years. A new industrial and democratic period has been inaugurated."

15. *The Subjection of Women*, chap. 1, p. 445. Cf. Brown, *First Principles*, pp. 274–9.

16. Brown, pp. 280–1, and cf. Mill, "Democracy in America," *Dissertations*, 2, 62–71.

17. A. P. Stanley, *Life of Thomas Arnold*, appendix D, p. 723 n., with the journal entry for August 4, 1839.

Game, preparing us, by indirect but sure methods, Industrialism and the Government of the Wisest?" [18]

Whether wisest or not, the bankers and manufacturers who rose to political power through the revolutionary legislation of 1828–1835—the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, the Municipal Reform Act, and above all, the Reform Bill—owed their victory to the financial and psychological power they acquired from the Industrial Revolution. Both factors are seen in Disraeli's analysis of the capitalist mind in *Coningsby*. Mr. Millbank is discussing the English peerage: "I have yet to learn they are richer than we are, better informed, wiser, or more distinguished for public or private virtue. Is it not monstrous, then, that a small number of men, several of whom take the titles of Duke and Earl from towns in this very neighbourhood, towns which they never saw, which never heard of them, which they did not form, or build, or establish,—I say, is it not monstrous that individuals so circumstanced should be invested with the highest of conceivable privileges, the privilege of making laws?" [19] Those are the social forces, wealth and outraged pride, which demanded the Reform Bill. And once the middle class attained political as well as financial eminence, their social influence became decisive. The Victorian frame of mind is largely composed of their characteristic modes of thought and feeling.

But far more striking at the time than democracy was the tremendous industrial development that came with the use of new machines for manufacturing and communication.[20] The great inventions date from the later eighteenth century; and in the early decades of the nineteenth the introduction of more canals, macadam roads, railways, and steamboats hastened the growth of large-scale production by making possible a vast expansion of commerce. This development revolutionized the economic life of England. The old system of fixed regulations, which paralleled that in fixed social relations, was abandoned for the new principle of laissez-faire, on which the manufacturer bought his materials in the cheapest market and sold them in the highest, and

18. Bk. II, chap. 4, p. 118. The Scottish Brassmith is James Watt.

19. *Works*, 12, chap. 26, p. 225. Cf. Brougham's speech in the House of Lords advocating the Reform Bill, quoted in A. V. Dicey, *Lectures on the Relation of Law and Public Opinion in England*, pp. 184–5.

20. Cf. T. H. Huxley, "The Progress of Science, 1837–1887," *Method and Results*, p. 42: "The most obvious and the most distinctive feature of the History of Civilisation, during the last fifty years, is the wonderful increase of industrial production by the application of machinery, the improvement of old technical processes and the invention of new ones, accompanied by an even more remarkable development of old and new means of locomotion and intercommunication."

hired his labor wherever he liked, for as long as he pleased, at the lowest wages he could pay. In Southey's *Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society* (1829) and Macaulay's fighting review of it (1830), the world of big business and unlimited competition was debated by the old conservatism and the new liberalism.

To live in this dynamic, free-wheeling society was to feel the enormous pressure of work, far beyond anything known before. When new and more distant sources of supply and demand were constantly being opened up by the railroad and the steamship, the battle for new markets became intense. To neglect them could mean ruin. So could failure to take advantage of the latest invention or adapt one's business methods to the most recent developments. Disraeli's Coningsby is startled to learn from Mr. Head, who is building a new mill at Staleybridge, that Manchester is already gone by. "If you want to see life," he says, "go to Staley-bridge or Bolton. There's high-pressure." Only the Manchester Bank has kept up with the times: "That's a noble institution, full of commercial enterprise; understands the age, sir; high-pressure to the backbone." [21] The masters had to work almost as long hours as their hands—the Messrs. Carson, for example, who did not become acquainted with their agreeable daughters until their mill was burned down: "There were happy family evenings now that the men of business had time for domestic enjoyments." [22] The same pressure was felt in the professions. "The eminent lawyer, the physician in full practice, the minister, and the politician who aspires to be a minister—even the literary workman, or the eager man of science—are one and all condemned to an amount and continued severity of exertion of which our grandfathers knew little." [23] That was due as much to the social system as to business conditions. When class lines broke down and it became possible as never before to rise in the world by one's own strenuous efforts, the struggle for success was complemented by the struggle for rank.[24] Even apart from personal ambitions, the very existence of hundreds of objects, once unknown or within the reach of few, now made widely available and therefore desirable, increased the size of one's expenses and the load of his work.[25] More-

21. *Works, 12,* chap. 24, p. 210. The date is 1844.

22. Mrs. Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (first ed., 1848; London, 1911), chap. 6, p. 67.

23. W. R. Greg, "Life at High Pressure" (1875), *Literary and Social Judgments,* 2, 272.

24. This is discussed below, Chap. 8.

25. Cf. Mark Pattison, "The Age of Reason," *Fortnightly Review,* 27 (1877), 357: "To live at all is a struggle; to keep within reach of the material advantages which it is the boast of our century to have provided is a competition in which only the strong can succeed—the many fail."

over, the growing wealth of the wealthy advanced the style of living in the middle and upper classes to a point where the Victorian had to struggle for things his father had been able to ignore. George Eliot remarked that £3,000 a year had seemed wealth to provincial families in 1830, "innocent of future gold-fields, and of that gorgeous plutocracy which has so nobly exalted the necessities of genteel life." [26]

Not only the tempo of work but the tempo of living had increased with striking impact, so much so that one observer thought that "the most salient characteristic of life in this latter portion of the 19th century is its SPEED." [27] Until the Victorian period the rate of locomotion and communication had remained almost what it had been for centuries. The horse and the sailing vessel were still the fastest things on earth. But within a few years the speed of travel by land increased from twelve to fifty miles an hour on the new railroads (over 400 per cent) and the new steamships were doing fifteen knots "with wonderful regularity, in spite of wind and tide." [28] But it was less the mechanical speed of the new inventions than the speed of living they produced which impressed the Victorians. Faster locomotion, of goods and letters and people, simply increased the number of things one crowded into a day, and the rush from one to another. Once upon a time "people did not run about the town or the land as we do." They traveled less often, did not hurry to catch trains, wrote one letter a morning instead of ten. Now "we are whirled about, and hooted around, and rung up as if we were all parcels, booking clerks, or office boys." [29] It seems far more modern than Victorian. But if the speed of life has increased in the twentieth century, the sense of speed has declined, for what has become commonplace today was then a startling novelty. Our great-grandfathers may have had more leisure than we do but it seemed less. Even more than ourselves they felt they were living "without leisure and without pause—a life of *haste*—above all a life of excitement, such as haste inevitably involves—a life filled so full . . . that we have no time to reflect where we have been and whither we intend to go . . . still less what is the value, and the purpose, and *the price* of what we have seen, and done, and visited." [30]

26. *Middlemarch, 1,* Bk. I, chap. 1, p. 6; and cf. Greg, p. 278.

27. Greg, p. 263.

28. Ibid., p. 264, quoted from Greg's earlier *Enigmas of Life,* pp. 38–9. Cf. Frederic Harrison, "A Few Words about the Nineteenth Century," *The Choice of Books,* pp. 421–2.

29. Frederic Harrison, *Autobiographic Memoirs, 1,* 12, 18–19. Though he was writing in the 1880's, he was comparing conditions in his later life with those of his youth (he was born in 1831).

30. Greg, p. 268.

This sense of faster and more crowded living had its intellectual as well as its mechanical basis. The spread of education coupled with the enormous expansion of knowledge and the corresponding increase of publication, books and periodicals and newspapers, gave "every man . . . a hundred means of rational occupation and amusement which were closed to his grandfather," [31] and led George Eliot, in a threnody on the death of leisure ("gone where the spinning-wheels are gone, and the pack-horses, and the slow wagons, and the pedlers, who brought bargains to the door on sunny afternoons") to say that "even idleness is eager now,—eager for amusement; prone to excursion-trains, art-museums, periodical literature, and exciting novels; prone even to scientific theorizing, and cursory peeps through micro-scopes." [32] By the sixties Frances Cobbe was comparing her own generation with that of 1800–30 in words which sound exactly like someone today comparing the generation of 1950 with that of 1850: "That constant sense of being driven—not precisely like 'dumb' cattle, but cattle who must read, write, and talk more in twenty-four hours than twenty-four hours will permit, can never have been known to them." [33]

2. *The State of the Human Mind*

The radical transition in the human mind was less apparent at first than that in society, but sensitive observers were soon aware that the traditional framework of thought was breaking down. By 1838 Thomas Arnold had noticed a new "atmosphere of unrest and paradox hanging around many of our ablest young men of the present day." He was speaking not merely of religious doubts but "of questions as to great points in moral and intellectual matters; where things which have been settled for centuries seem to be again brought into discussion." [34] This is the atmosphere reflected in the early essays of Macaulay and Carlyle, in *Sartor Resartus* and Mill's *Spirit of the Age*, and the novels of Sterling and Maurice. All of them, written between 1825 and 1834, show that the old certitudes are certain no longer and that a reconstruction of thought is now a prime necessity. "The Old has passed away," wrote Carlyle in 1831, "but, alas, the New appears not in its stead; the Time is still in pangs of travail with the New." [35] There was, of course, more destruction to come, for the old was by no means gone (traditional Christianity, indeed, under Wesleyan and presently Tractarian influence was reviving). And there had been earlier efforts to bring forth the new, most notably by Bentham and Coleridge, the respective heirs of the French *philosophes* and the German transcendentalists, "the two great seminal minds of England in their age." [36] But *the New* had not yet appeared by the thirties. All that was then clear to the intellectuals was that their task was precisely what Carlyle found attempted in the two books he had under review in the essay "Characteristics": "Both these Philosophies are of the Dogmatic or Constructive sort: each in its way is . . . an endeavour to bring the Phenomena of man's Universe once more under some theoretic Scheme . . . they strive after a result which shall be positive; their aim is not to question, but to establish." [37]

That is the starting point. What was the situation a generation later? What corresponds in the intellectual world to the establishment of bourgeois industrial society? The answer is—nothing. In 1850 the age is still one "of fusion and transition. . . . Old formula, old opinions, hoary systems are being thrown into the smelting-pan; they are fusing —they must be cast anew: who can tell under what new shapes . . . they will come forth from the moulds?" In the seventies men are still searching—"amid that break-up of traditional and conventional notions respecting our life, its conduct, and its sanctions, which is undeniably befalling our age,—for some clear light and some sure stay." By the eighties "the disintegration of opinion is so rapid that wise men and foolish are equally ignorant where the close of this waning century will find us." [38] Though the Victorians never ceased to look forward to a new period of firm convictions and established beliefs, they

31. Kingsley, "Great Cities and Their Influence for Good and Evil" (1857), *Sanitary and Social Essays*, p. 203.

32. *Adam Bede*, 2, chap. 28, p. 339. In editions where the chapters are numbered consecutively this is chap. 52.

33. "The Nineteenth Century," *Fraser's Magazine*, 69 (1864), 482 (for the attribution of this article to Frances Cobbe see the Bibliography, below). Cf. Brown, *First Principles*, pp. 222–3, inviting his hearers in 1869 to compare "the rate at which you are living, . . . the rate of thought, feeling, and energy—in these as compared with those quiet and comfortable times" in the first decades of the century.

34. Stanley, *Life of Arnold*, p. 484, from a letter dated October 5, 1838. The next sentence justifies my insertion of "merely."

35. "Characteristics," *Essays*, 3, 32.

36. Mill, "Bentham," *Dissertations*, 1, 331.

37. *Essays*, 3, 33.

38. The three quotations are by Hugh Stowell, "The Age We Live In," in *Exeter Hall Lectures*, 6 (London, 1850–51), 45–6; Matthew Arnold, "Bishop Butler and the Zeit-Geist," *Last Essays on Church and Religion*, p. 287; and J. A. Froude, preface to *Short Studies*, 4, v–vi.

had to live in the meantime between two worlds, one dead or dying, one struggling but powerless to be born, in an age of doubt.[39]

The phrase is ambiguous—and at first glance dubious. When one thinks of Macaulay, Spencer, and Huxley, or of Browning, even of Mill and Ruskin, let alone thousands of pious Evangelicals and Anglicans, one is ready to deny it. Indeed, it was still common until very recently to draw a radical contrast between the Victorians and ourselves. One modern critic thought that "a spirit of certitude, wonderful to us who live in an age which has taken the note of interrogation as its emblem, impregnated the great Victorians." Another has claimed that it was only after 1900 that "the old certainties were certainties no longer," and "everything was held to be open to question"; and that "the Victorians seemed to themselves to be living in a house built on unshakable foundations and established in perpetuity . . . the Home, the Constitution, the Empire, the Christian religion—each of these . . . was accepted as a final revelation." [40] From such assumptions we could predict the reversal, under the powerful incitement of nostalgia, of the anti-Victorian movement represented by Lytton Strachey:

> If, after the first World War, we were all debunking the nineteenth century, after the second we are deferring to it, and even yearning nostalgically after it: *tendentesque manus ripae ulterioris amore.* In our own unpleasant century we are mostly displaced persons, and many feel tempted to take flight into the nineteenth as into a promised land . . . In that distant mountain country, all that we now lack seems present in abundance: not only peace, prosperity, plenty and freedom, but faith, purpose and buoyancy.[41]

Though this contrast of the Victorian period with our own has its element of truth, the tendency to invest the past with the virtues one finds lacking in the present has led to a serious misconception. The fact is, while moral values were firm until about 1870, all intellectual

39. See Arnold, "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse" (1855), lines 85–8. After Bulwer Lytton in *England and the English* refers (p. 281) to living in an age of transition, he adds in apposition, "an age of disquietude and doubt." Cf. Winwood Reade, *The Martyrdom of Man* (first published in 1872), p. 540: "We are now in the dreary desert that separates two ages of belief." Mill's important statement is quoted below, p. 30.

40. The two critics are D. Willoughby in *The Great Victorians*, ed. H. J. Massingham and Hugh Massingham (Garden City, N.Y., 1932), p. 242, and A. C. Ward, *Twentieth-Century Literature. The Age of Interrogation, 1901–1925* (London, 1930), pp. 2, 4.

41. Basil Willey, *Nineteenth Century Studies*, p. 52.

theories, including those of morality, were insecure. What John Morley said of the fifties and sixties applies to the entire period, though with greater intensity and wider repercussions as the years passed: "It was the age of science, new knowledge, searching criticism, followed by multiplied doubts and shaken beliefs." [42] The very effort to resolve the situation made it worse. New solutions raised new controversies, which raised new questions. "Intellectually," wrote J. A. Froude—with religion in mind, but his remark has broader relevance—"the controversies to which I had listened had unsettled me. Difficulties had been suggested which I need not have heard of, but out of which some road or other had now to be looked for." [43] But which road? The choice was baffling. "None of the ways in which . . . mental regeneration is sought," Mill recognized in 1842, "Bible Societies, Tract Societies, Puseyism, Socialism, Chartism, Benthamism, etc.—will *do*, though doubtless they have all some elements of truth and good in them"; with the result that he was finding it very hard to make up his mind "as to the course which must be taken by the present great transitional movement of opinion and society." [44]

The range of discussion reflected by Mill's list is significant. It was not only in religion that one faced a series of alternatives: is there a God or is there not, and if so, is he a person or an impersonal force? Is there a heaven and a hell? or a heaven but no hell? or neither? If there *is* a true religion, is it Theism or Christianity? And what is Christianity? Roman Catholicism or Protestantism? Is it Church or Chapel? High Church? Broad Church? Low Church? Similar questions, if not so pressing or so widespread, invaded ethical theory and the

42. *Recollections*, *I*, 100. The view of the period I am advocating—not that doubt existed, which has long been recognized, but that it was an "age of doubt" rather than of certitude—emerged, here and there, in *Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians* (1949): see pp. 19, 23–5, 71–7, 423; and in 1953 Gaylord C. LeRoy published a book on Victorian writers called *Perplexed Prophets*. But as recently as June 19, 1953, a critic in the *Times Literary Supplement* (p. 397) wrote of the era: "We may envy the unquestioning firmness of its faith, whether the object of that faith was religion, or science, or humanity."

43. "The Oxford Counter-Reformation," *Short Studies*, *4*, 311–12. On p. 252 Froude notices that the Oxford Tracts, designed to check the advance of liberalism and atheism, "provoked doubts, in those whom they failed to persuade, about Christianity itself." Also cf. "The Age We Live In," *Fraser's Magazine*, *24* (1841), 5: "The very truths which have come forth have produced doubts . . . and the very lights that have shone in one quarter have only dazzled in others, and this dazzle too often has ended in darkness."

44. From a letter to R. B. Fox printed in Caroline Fox, *Memories of Old Friends*, ed. H. N. Pym (Philadelphia, 1882), pp. 393–4.

conception of man: have we free-will or are we human automatons? and if we have the power of moral choice, what is its basis? a God-given voice of conscience? or rational calculation deciding which of two actions will promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number? Is man a man or simply a higher ape? Even the political-economic order of bourgeois capitalism, if an established fact of the outer environment in 1850, held no unquestioned supremacy in the world of ideas. The sanctity and blessings of private property, laissez-faire, and unlimited competition were challenged, in one aspect or another, by Owen and Mill, Carlyle and Ruskin, the Chartists and the Christian Socialists. The abortive "communism" of 1848 in France further opened Victorian eyes to the possibility that the old political economy was limited and temporary. And the provisional character of middle-class government, suggested by the Chartist agitation of the forties, was confirmed by the Reform Bill of 1867. By 1870 the uncertain future seemed to belong to the unpredictable populace.

It was not, however, the mere existence of competing philosophies which called all in doubt. It was also the prevailing atmosphere. As one prophet after another stepped forward with his program of reconstruction, the hubbub of contending theories, gaining in number as the century advanced, and echoing through lectures, sermons, and periodicals as well as books, created a climate of opinion in which, quite apart from any specific doubts, the habit of doubt was unconsciously bred. One had an uneasy feeling, perhaps only half-conscious, that his beliefs were no longer quite secure. Nor should we forget the complementary effect of the vast increase of knowledge, scientific and historical, that almost inundated the Victorians and left them often baffled by the sheer number and complexity of its implications. The yeasty state of mind which Kingsley ascribed to the young men of 1851 was not only one in which "the various stereotyped systems which they have received by tradition [are] breaking up under them like ice in a thaw"; it was also one in which "a thousand facts and notions, which they know not how to classify, [are] pouring in on them like a flood"; and that fragmentation of knowledge was to increase with increasing specialization.[45] Mill's diary for January 13, 1854, contains what is perhaps the best statement on Victorian doubt:

45. "Epilogue" to *Yeast*, p. 312. Cf. Harrison, "A Few Words about the Nineteenth Century," pp. 437, 442; and Matthew Arnold, *Letters of Arnold to Clough*, p. 130: "Yes—*congestion of the brain* is what we suffer from—I always feel it and say it—and cry for air like my own Empedocles."

> Scarcely any one, in the more educated classes, seems to have any opinions, or to place any real faith in those which he professes to have. . . . It requires in these times much more intellect to marshal so much greater a stock of ideas and observations. This has not yet been done, or has been done only by very few: and hence the multitude of thoughts only breeds increase of uncertainty. Those who should be the guides of the rest, see too many sides to every question. They hear so much said, or find that so much can be said, about everything, that they feel no assurance of the truth of anything.[46]

Without contrary evidence, who would be surprised if the passage were dated *1954*?

This evidence—and much more could be given—suggests that continuity rather than contrast is the conclusion to be drawn from comparing the Victorians with ourselves. And yet, if both periods can be called ages of doubt, it is certainly with a difference. Neither the kind of doubt nor the strength of its hold was the same in 1850 as it is today.

In the four decades under inspection, doubt never reached the point of positive or terminal skepticism. It never involved a denial of the mind as a valid instrument of truth. No mid-Victorian ever described his age as Dobrée described the 1930's: "All the previous ages . . . had something they could take for granted. . . . We can be sure of nothing; our civilization is threatened, even the simplest things we live by. . . . In our present confusion our only hope is to be scrupulously honest with ourselves, so honest as to doubt our own minds and the conclusions they arrive at. Most of us have ceased to believe, except provisionally, in truths, and we feel that what is important is not so much truth as the way our minds move towards truths."[47] Though the seeds of that radical doubt were planted by the 1870's, as we shall see in a moment, they did not grow up until the dissolving influences of modern sociology, anthropology, and psychology had done their work, and mined the old confidence with relativism and rationalization.[48]

46. *Letters*, 2, 359.

47. *Modern Prose Style* (Oxford, 1934), p. 220.

48. Cf. W. H. Auden, writing of these modern studies in *Poets of the English Language*, ed. W. H. Auden and N. H. Pearson (5 vols. New York, 1950), 5, xxii–xxiii: "Their exhibition of the mind's capacity for self-deception, of the unconscious effect upon its thinking of social status and sex, their demonstration that the customs and beliefs of other peoples could not be dismissed as merely

The Victorians might be, and often were, uncertain about what theory to accept or what faculty of the mind to rely on; but it never occurred to them to doubt their capacity to arrive at truth. When Mill thought of his age as one of intellectual anarchy, his reaction to such a condition was quite different from ours. He could see it as a momentary and necessary stage in a process of growth: "So long as this intellectual anarchy shall endure, we may be warranted in believing that we are in a fair way to become wiser than our forefathers; but . . . we have not yet advanced beyond the unsettled state, in which the mind is, when it has recently found itself out in a grievous error, and has not yet satisfied itself of the truth." [49] Not yet but soon! "If your opinions, or mine, are right," he told Sterling, "they will in time be unanimously adopted by the instructed classes." [50] It is this faith in the existence of ultimate truths in religion and ethics, in politics, economics, and aesthetics (as well as in the natural sciences), and in the capacity of the human mind to discover them, by some form of reason or of intuition, which unites the partisans of every school. That, one is tempted to say, is the one intellectual certitude in Victorian England. But it is a great one, for on such a foundation the universe can be held together: it can remain rational. That is why Chesterton could claim that the Victorian period was "orderly compared with what came after." (But not, he added, "compared with the centuries that came before.") [51] On that foundation it was still possible, as it no longer is, to find comfort in the thought

> That, though I perish, Truth is so:
> That, howsoe'er I stray and range,
> Whate'er I do, Thou dost not change.[52]

It was still possible to adopt this or that theory of Church or State with full confidence that it might well be true—though not that it *was*.

But less possible after 1870. For about that time a number of things converged to suggest the relativity of knowledge and the subjective character of thought. This radical change, bounding the mid-Victorian temper, is documented in the popular work of Walter Pater.

The historical method, as it was formulated under the influences of

savage, irrational, and quaint but must be accepted as rival civilizations complete in themselves, cast doubts on the finality of any truth."

49. *The Spirit of the Age*, pp. 12–13.
50. *Letters, I*, 6. Cf. *The Spirit of the Age*, p. 33.
51. *The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton* (New York, 1936), p. 20..
52. Arthur Hugh Clough, "It fortifies my soul to know," *Poems*, p. 75.

Romantic and scientific conceptions of development, meant the study of social phenomena of all kinds, institutions, customs, beliefs, as the natural product of a given time and place; with the result that the type of question one put to the past underwent a crucial change. One no longer asked, What do I think of this? is it good? is it true? For once everything was thought relative, good or true only for a particular society at a particular stage in its cultural evolution, the right questions became: How shall I account for it? Why did men believe that it was good or true? [53]

> In the intellectual as in the organic world the given product, its normal or abnormal characteristics, are determined, as people say, by the "environment." The business of the young scholar therefore, in reading Plato, is not to take his side in a controversy, to adopt or refute Plato's opinions . . . still less, to furnish himself with arguments on behalf of some theory or conviction of his own. His duty is rather to follow intelligently, *but with strict indifference*, the mental process there, as he might witness a game of skill. . . . To put Plato into his natural place, as a result from antecedent and contemporary movements of Greek speculation, of Greek life generally: such is the proper aim of the historic, that is to say, of the really critical study of him.[54]

The phrase I have italicized adds the final touch: nothing could be less Victorian. Though recognized earlier, the awareness that the historical attitude could issue in skepticism did not reach general consciousness, I think, until after 1870 when it came to be debated in the periodicals by men like John Morley, Edward Dowden, and Henry Sidgwick.[55]

At the same time the scientific view that all things, material and human, were in constant flux, changing under the inevitable influences of many and complex factors, could make all truths seem relative only to a particular moment. In the opening paragraphs of the "Coleridge" (1866) and the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* (1873), Pater revived the skepticism of Hume and reduced all knowledge to a series of "im-

53. See Morley, *Recollections, I*, 71–2, and Wilfrid Ward, "The Time-Spirit of the Nineteenth Century," *Edinburgh Review, 194* (1901), 92–131, reprinted in his *Problems and Persons*, London, 1903.
54. Pater, *Plato and Platonism* (New York, 1901), p. 6. The italics are mine.
55. Morley, *On Compromise*, pp. 18–21; Dowden, *Studies in Literature*, pp. 106–9; Sidgwick, "The Historical Method," *Mind, 11* (1886), 213–15.

pressions unstable, flickering, inconsistent," each of which "is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world." [56] On such assumptions the intellectual life was ridiculous. Only the aesthetic life of delicate perceptions and sensitive response had any importance. Not that philosophy or "speculative culture" was ruled out. It still had value for the human spirit—but only "to rouse, to startle it into sharp and eager observation." By suggesting "points of view" it could "help us to gather up what might otherwise pass unregarded by us." [57]

To turn back from Pater to Arnold is to return to the Victorian world. For Arnold threw his whole weight against relativism. Not, it is true, with reference to historical or scientific theories, but to the liberal dogma of individualism and its assertion of private judgment, which in society as a whole was the major force that undermined the belief in absolute truths. By 1864 Arnold was aware of a "baneful notion that there is no such thing as a high, correct standard in intellectual matters; that every one may as well take his own way." [58] To the contemporary boast that every Englishman could believe what he liked, what was true for him, Arnold kept asking whether it was not important that what people were free to believe should be worth believing; whether, in short, the anarchy of individualism should not be checked by the authority of Culture, with its inherent power of discovering truth. For Culture, "bent on seeing things as they are," can dissipate delusions like the worship of freedom for its own sake, and fix "standards of perfection that are reall" [59] What is meant here by things as they are or standards that are real is the very absolutes which Plato affirmed and Pater denied. "To see things as they are" is "to draw towards a knowledge of the universal order which seems to be in-

56. *Appreciations*, pp. 65–7, and *The Renaissance*, pp. 246–9. The quotation is on p. 248. The "Conclusion" was first written in 1868. On Pater's skepticism, see Helen H. Young, *The Writings of Walter Pater. A Reflection of British Philosophical Opinion from 1860 to 1890* (1933), chap. 3, esp. pp. 27–9, and Milton Millhauser, "Walter Pater and the Flux," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 11* (1952–53), 214–23. Cf. Karl Pearson, *The Grammar of Science* (1892), where the same skeptical conclusions were systematically advanced. That book and its impact are discussed in *The Education of Henry Adams*, chap. 31.

57. *Renaissance*, pp. 249, 251.

58. "The Literary Influence of Academies," *Essays in Criticism, First Series*, p. 66.

59. *Culture and Anarchy*, chap. 1, p. 51. Cf. Lionel Trilling, *The New Yorker Magazine* (June 18, 1949), p. 74, where—with Arnold plainly in his mind—he spoke of George Orwell's "commitment to intellect" as "fortified by an old-fashioned faith that the truth can be got at, that we can, if we actually want to, see the object as it really is."

tended and aimed at in the world . . . to learn, in short, the will of God"; and this insight comes from the use of right reason, meaning intuitive judgment, by a man of wide learning and flexible intelligence. Indeed, Arnold cites Plato by name as explicitly denying to the mere man of virtue the Greek instinct for what he (Plato) calls "the true, firm, intelligible law of things." "He reserves it for the lover of pure knowledge, of seeing things as they really are,—the φιλομαθής." [60]

The contrast of Pater with Arnold is pointed by their respective conceptions of the "modern spirit." To Pater, of course, it is the relative spirit, which considers that "truth itself is but a possibility, realisable not as a general conclusion, but rather as the elusive effect of a particular personal experience"; and which "must needs content itself with suspension of judgment, at the end of the intellectual journey, to the very last asking: *Que scais-je?* Who knows?" [61] For Arnold the modern spirit is the awareness that traditional beliefs and institutions are no longer adequate to embody contemporary life; and the representatives of the modern spirit, "the would-be remodellers of the old traditional European order," are "the invokers of reason against custom." For them the end of the intellectual journey is not doubt but reconstruction.[62]

Pater and Arnold face each other across the gulf between two basic conceptions of the human mind that opened up between 1865 and 1875. By 1877, at the house party given by W. H. Mallock where "culture, faith, and philosophy" are discussed in a new "Republic," the Paters have become a society, still small but destined to rise to fame, or notoriety, in the nineties. Mr. Herbert, who speaks for the mid-Victorians (he is Ruskin) berates the younger generation because, in the face of conflicting opinions, they persuade themselves "that neither opinion is of much moment—that the question cannot be decided absolutely—that it should not be decided absolutely." [63] This is as true of morality as of everything else. "There is no recognised rule of life

60. *Culture and Anarchy*, chaps. 1, 4, 5, pp. 46, 134, 147. Arnold was also indebted to Cicero and the Stoic theory of natural law: see p. 54 of the essay cited in note 58. It is true that Arnold sometimes uses "things as they are" to mean as they "objectively exist" or "as they are in fact," in contrast with how they appear to a prejudiced mind.

61. *Plato*, pp. 156–7. As the quotation suggests, Pater found the beginning of the modern, relative spirit in Montaigne.

62. "Heine," *Essays in Criticism, First Series*, pp. 185, 189–90. Though I develop it somewhat differently, this contrast between Pater and Arnold was suggested to me by Graham Hough, *The Last Romantics*, pp. 134–41.

63. W. H. Mallock, *The New Republic, or, Culture, Faith, and Philosophy in an English Country House*, p. 279.

anywhere," comments Mr. Leslie. "Every one who does right at all only does what is right in his own eyes. All society, it seems, is going to pieces." To which another guest replies:

> "I," said Mr. Rose, "look upon social dissolution as the true condition of the most perfect life. For the centre of life is the individual, and it is only through dissolution that the individual can re-emerge. All the warrings of endless doubts, all the questionings of matter and of spirit, which I have myself known, I value only because, remembering the weariness of them, I take a profounder and more exquisite pleasure in the colour of a crocus, the pulsations of a chord of music, or a picture of Sandro Botticelli's." [64]

Mr. Rose, I need hardly say, is Pater—a caricature of Pater. A decade later Canon Liddon, who like Arnold and Ruskin was a mid-Victorian, observed that "a morbidly active imagination which cannot acquiesce in the idea of fixed and unalterable truth" had become a malady of modern society.[65]

Though the Victorians were certain that truth existed and the mind could discover it, they found themselves involved in two forms of doubt: either what is sometimes called negative skepticism, when the judgment is suspended between alternate conclusions, one of which is considered true; or the affirmation of a belief which they only half believed—and half doubted. Both types of insecurity are present in the important passage from Mill's diary quoted earlier: "Scarcely any one, in the more educated classes seems to have any opinions [because he sees "too many sides to every question"] or to place any real faith in those which he professes to have." [66]

When Alfred North Whitehead spoke of the nineteenth century as being disturbed by the conflicting claims of incompatible doctrines,

64. Pages 54–5.

65. Quoted by R. H. Hutton, *Aspects of Religious and Scientific Thought*, p. 17. For a similar account of "the intellectual revolution of our time," which he sees beginning somewhat later, viz. "about 1890," see H. Stuart Hughes, *An Essay for Our Times* (New York, 1950), pp. 15–17. For an extended discussion of the Victorian faith in absolute and universal laws, see below, Chap. 6, sec. 2.

66. Reference in note 46, above. In discussions of the period, both contemporary and modern, the word "doubt" is sometimes used to mean religious unbelief. In this book I restrict it to the two definitions just given, which apply to all areas of thought, but especially religious thought, and use "religious skepticism," "unbelief," "agnosticism," or "atheism" for outright disbelief in a divine reality.

he pointed out that Cardinal Newman in his *Apologia pro Vita Sua* found it a peculiarity of Pusey, the great Anglican ecclesiastic, that "he was haunted by no intellectual perplexities." "In this respect," Whitehead continued, "Pusey recalls Milton, Pope, Wordsworth, as in contrast with Tennyson, Clough, Matthew Arnold, and Newman himself." [67] A letter of George Eliot's, written in 1839, gives a characteristic illustration of this new state of mind, and with reference to a topic which for Newman was especially baffling:

> I think no one feels more difficulty in coming to a decision on controverted matters than myself. . . . The other day Montaigne's motto came to my mind (it is mentioned by Pascal) as an appropriate one for me,—"Que sais-je?"—beneath a pair of balances, though, by the by, it is an ambiguous one, and may be taken in a sense that I desire to reprobate. . . . I use it in a limited sense as a representation of my oscillating judgment. On no subject do I veer to all points of the compass more frequently than on the nature of the visible Church. I am powerfully attracted in a certain direction, but when I am about to settle there, counter-assertions shake me from my position.[68]

Nothing could better describe the negative skepticism of the time, including, as it does, the rejection of the positive skepticism which Pater drew from the same passage in Montaigne.[69] It was not, of course, limited to religion. In the forties Disraeli found society "in the midst of a convulsion in which the very principles of our political and social systems are called in question," and created a hero in its image—"confused, perplexed," his mind "a chaos"; but his spirit sustained "by a profound, however vague, conviction, that there are still great truths, if we could but work them out." [70] In the same years, worried because the condition-of-England problem was "shaking many old beliefs, and leading him whither he knew not," Tom Brown at Oxford plunged into works on political economy, then consulted an Anglo-Catholic friend about High Church teaching on social questions, and finally read *Past and Present*—and so filled his head "full of a set of contra-

67. *Science and the Modern World*, p. 120.

68. J. W. Cross, *George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals*, 1, 41, letter to Miss Lewis, May 20, 1839.

69. For the Victorian view of Montaigne, see John Sterling's essay in the *Westminster Review*, 29 (1838), 321–52, reprinted in his *Essays and Tales*, 1, 129–87.

70. *Coningsby*, in *Works*, 12, chap. 23, pp. 196–7.

dictory notions and beliefs." By the time he graduated, reading and discussion had combined to drag him into "perplexities, and doubts, and dreams, and struggles." [71] The Victorian plight was summed up by Clough in a poem which deals with still another area of doubt, the nature of man: *Is* he a human automaton?

> Oh say it, all who think it,
> Look straight, and never blink it!
> If it is so, let it be so,
> And we will all agree so;
> But the plot has counterplot,
> It may be, and yet be not.[72]

It must not be supposed, however, that the normal state of the Victorian mind was one of indecision or suspended judgment. The confidence in reason or intuition and the powerful will to believe made doubt itself unstable. It came and went. Individuals passed through it. Mill confessed in 1833 that "I am often in a state almost of scepticism, and have no theory of Human Life at all, or seem to have conflicting theories, or a theory which does not amount to a belief"; but he added at once, "This is only a *recent* state, and, as I well know, a passing one, and my convictions will be firmer." [73] Passing but recurrent. What he says of his own transition (from his early Benthamism through doubt to his later liberalism) applies in general to all the mid-Victorian intellectuals. For reasons we shall have to consider, Carlyle, Newman, Disraeli, Froude, Eliot, Arnold—none was any more content than Mill to remain "confused and unsettled." [74] All like him succeeded in weaving new ideas and old dogmas into a fresh pattern of thought.

Not until the sixties does a settled state of baffled judgment and a mind empty of beliefs begin to appear. It was then, when the *Origin of Species* and *Essays and Reviews* intensified the difficulties of decision, especially in religion, while at the same time positive skepticism was emerging, that Frances Cobbe was struck by a new disposition "to accept as a finality that condition of hesitation and uncertainty

71. Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown at Oxford* (which describes the university when Hughes was there from 1842 to 1845), chaps. 35 and 50, pp. 415–19, 572.

72. *Poems*, p. 44, from an untitled poem beginning, "Is it true, ye gods, who treat us."

73. *Letters*, *1*, 48–9.

74. *Autobiography*, chap. 5, pp. 132–3. For the "reasons," see below, Chap. 4, sec. 2, on the will to believe.

which in the nature of things should be one of transition." [75] Such a condition, as we might expect, is habitual in the society of Mallock's *New Republic*, where "nobody knows what to believe, and most people believe nothing," [76] but it did not exist a generation earlier. It had only afflicted individuals for shorter or longer intervals. Most of the time the Victorian mind contained beliefs and not doubts—but the beliefs were shaky.[77]

What *is* constantly present, therefore, is the fear or suspicion, or simply the vague uneasy feeling, that one was not sure he believed what he believed. I do not mean that no one had any strong beliefs. The traditional morality was firmly held by almost everyone until the seventies and by a vast majority until after World War I; and there were certainly many people whose religious or political convictions remained unshaken. But the more one studies the period, the more certain he is that most Victorians were aptly described by Mill himself in *The Spirit of the Age:* "The men of the present day rather incline to an opinion than embrace it; few . . . have full confidence in their own convictions"; or, in a variant phrase, people "have no strong or deep-rooted convictions at all." [78] How could it have been otherwise in a period of dissolving creeds and clashing theories? If one's formal

75. *Fraser's Magazine*, 69 (1864), 491. A few years later Henry Sidgwick (*Henry Sidgwick: A Memoir*, p. 158) detected signs that "an age of general indecisiveness" seemed to be commencing; and Symonds (Horatio F. Brown, *John Addington Symonds*, pp. 316–17) referred to "the *habitual* condition of scepticism" in which the soul is denuded of "moral ideas and fixed principles," and went on to say that nowadays a man "is *always* saying like Montaigne: 'Ni comme ceci, ni comme cela, ni même autrement'; or again, 'Peut-être oui, peut-être non, peut-être ni l'un ni l'autre.'" The italics are mine.

76. Page 50. Cf. Harrison, *Autobiographic Memoirs*, *1*, 24, in 1882; Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship*, p. 165, in 1884 (and cf. pp. 49–50); Mark Rutherford, *Mark Rutherford's Deliverance*, pp. 28, 75–6, in 1885.

77. This was particularly true of religious beliefs; and in calling the period one of doubt, I do not mean to imply that it was one of religious skepticism. On the contrary, Christian faith was characteristic of the frame of mind. If most Victorians had reservations about one or more theological doctrines, they instinctively looked for the hand of God in the events of life; interpreted success as the reward for virtue, or suffering as the punishment for sin. They thought of death quite literally as a reunion with the loved ones who had gone ahead. The churches were crowded; Bibles (on chains!) were placed in railroad stations; sermons outsold novels. But here, too, as in other areas, belief was shaky.

78. *The Spirit of the Age*, pp. 12, 13. These remarks were made in 1831, but the quotation from his diary given above (p. 13) shows that he would have thought them entirely applicable in 1854.

doubts were sooner or later discarded for one creed or another, the taint of doubt remained. A prayer attributed to the Victorians is a witty distortion of the truth: "O God—if there is a God—save my soul—if I have a soul." Like Spencer in later life (and the example is significant, since no one could seem more certain or dogmatic), one clung to his dogmas, old or new or a mixture of both, "but without confident faith." [79] Or like Tennyson. In the representative poem of the age, the key words are "trust," "hope," "guess":

> Behold, we know not anything;
> I can but trust that good shall fall
> At last—far off—at last, to all.
>
> I trust I have not wasted breath:
> I think we are not wholly brain,
> Magnetic mockeries.
>
> The Power in darkness whom we guess.[80]

In Memoriam is not a poem of belief or of unbelief. It is a poem of doubt, that is, of doubtful beliefs. In our generation, Kingsley noted, "few of us deeply believe anything." [81]

The two outstanding features of their world which most impressed the Victorians are now before us. No one could escape them. No one could take them, as we can take them now, with the indifference or the neutrality adopted toward the customary. Everyone in all classes to some degree felt their impact. We might well expect, therefore, that the major Victorian attitudes would have been mainly determined by the powerful influence (as much from the reaction they provoked as from their positive effect) of these two things, one or both of which are implicit in every reference to "the age of transition"—bourgeois industrial society and widespread doubt about the nature of man, society, and the universe. In the analysis that follows this is the central thread in a pattern planned to include, in due relation to it, other important influences, especially that of the so-called Puritan or Evangelical revival.[82]

79. Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship*, p. 32.
80. *In Memoriam* (1850), secs. 54, 120, 124.
81. *Letters and Memories*, *I*, 113 (unabridged ed., *I*, 141).
82. Elie Halévy's well-known thesis (a typical statement is in the "Conclusion" to his *England in 1815*) that Victorian culture was the child of Evangelicalism and Industrialism has been widely adopted; indeed, this has been the only general key to the period. Valuable as it is, I think it gives too much importance in the total picture to the Puritan revival, however central that was for a few attitudes, mainly moral earnestness (though even there other factors must be reckoned with, as we shall see in Chap. 10); and it ignores the widespread and demonstrable influence of doubt upon the Victorian frame of mind.

At the threshold stand two emotional attitudes, in the broad sense of pleasure-pain responses, which were bound to occur in a period of conscious and radical change, and which were nourished by many of the same social and intellectual developments. The Victorians reacted to their age with hope and dismay, optimism and anxiety.