

Scholars, Gypsies, Poets, and Priests:

George Borrow, Matthew Arnold, and the romance of the margins

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“.....this strange disease of modern life
With its sick hurry, its divided aims.....”

(Matthew Arnold, *The Scholar-Gypsy*)

It is a curious fact of literary history that at about the same time that Matthew Arnold was contemplating a poem that (whatever its intrinsic merits) has served ever since as a “touchstone” of Victorian world-weariness, entitled *The Scholar-Gypsy* and published in 1853, but conceived as early as 1848¹, George Borrow, if we may believe the *Advertisement* he prefixes to *Lavengro* (1851), was likewise contemplating that great autobiographical work in which gypsies play a crucial part as agents of another way of life and an “alternative” vision of the nation and the universe. He tells us there that the m/s of *Lavengro* dates from 1842/3, and although he is not the most reliable of informants in such matters, especially where dates are concerned, his claim has never conclusively been disproved. We might of course just leave the matter at that, with a note to the effect that Romanticism had (as Sir Angus Fraser tells us) “led to an interest in primitive folk culture” and that in “its later phases” it stimulated “the collection and imitation of folklore (a word invented only in 1846)”—including that of the gypsies². Seminal Romany studies like Paul Bataillard’s in France and August Friedrich Pott’s in Germany³ paved the way leading from the Romantic Romany of legend and fantasy to the more realistic Carmens of Mérimée⁴ and Bizet, and thence to

the serious ethnographic studies of modern times.

It may not be altogether surprising, then, that two eminent writers, one from the establishment both of letters and of public administration, and one from the margins of the world of "professional," market-driven, writing, should simultaneously discover the gypsies, given the changes in the sensibility of the age which gave them so much more prominence at precisely the moment when what we could call the Victorian bourgeois cultural consensus succeeded to the aristocratic and gentry culture of the Regency. But it is nevertheless a matter of some interest that these two writers, who did not impinge on each other at all in their careers, should have shared (in the matter of Romanies) some common literary sources and objectives, and charted their ambitious (but utterly different) "criticisms of life"⁵ with the aid of a Romany paradigm drawn from the same source in the seventeenth century. Their Romany narratives may be said to run now alongside each other, now in altogether contrary directions; now identifying closely with the Romany as a folk hero, now standing back in wonder or dismay. Of course, there are no "real" gypsies in Arnold. His poem, *The Scholar-Gypsy*, is in some sense "about" a seventeenth century scholar (or student) who became a gypsy (there is a powerful sort of empathy in the topic) in order to preserve his sense of authenticity, which was threatened by the wantonness of undergraduate life and perhaps also by the "high" culture of Oxford. Borrow's sagas of gypsydom almost certainly "originate" with the same seventeenth century Protestant writer as Arnold's, as internal evidence shows, but they are supplemented by a multitude of experiences on the road, and much serious research.

Borrow's autobiography, the first volume of which is subtitled *The Scholar, The Gypsy, The Priest*, is about the outcast and largely unrecognized writer (as he was before the considerable success of *The Bible in Spain* in 1843) who took up with the gypsies, and learned their language to quite a

high standard, in order to study their ways and find for himself a tentative alternative to the establishment of letters which had rejected him so often. Arnold, the future Oxford Professor of Poetry, finds in gipsydom a Romantic extension of the freedom and *Wanderlust* of the long vacation pastoral, which he turns into a vehicle for serious (though very diffuse) critical comment on the repressiveness of Victorian institutional culture and the growing materialism of his age. Arnold's poem is further motivated by a sense of loss, the loss of the youthful companionship of a dead poet, Arthur Hugh Clough, whom Arnold felt had not fulfilled his potential and yet had done well to "flee" the agonising compromises of Victorian public life. There is a deep ambivalence about Arnold's censuring of Clough's "fluctuating" personality. He praises the "fresh" powers, "undiverted to the world without" that characterised Glanvill's original protagonist; and it is now Arnold himself, he thinks, who "fluctuates," as he admits, driven by the contradictory imperatives of professional and personal life.

Situated in a pivotal position in Arnold's text is another anonymous but recognizable figure, that of Goethe, the least "fluctuating" of men, whose melancholy synthesis of cultures, which could subsume past and present, classical and romantic, exotic and homely, was Arnold's unattainable ideal. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, another poem, entitled *Thyrsis*, a "monody" for Clough's death in 1861, finds a correlative for the "scholar-gypsy" and for Arnold's dead friend in a certain "bright elm" tree, now felled, but living on in the mind's eye. "That lonely tree" proves the lasting reality of "our Gipsy-Scholar" who haunts these same slopes "outliving thee" and represents the "fugitive and gracious light" praised in the poem which the Oxford editors suggest also attaches to Joubert, whom Arnold was working on at the time. It is perhaps a light which inevitably fades as life goes by.

The successful author of *The Bible in Spain* finds among the gypsies an extension of a more robust spirit of protest than Arnold would have cared

for, strangely akin in its resolution and independence to his own fiercely Protestant world view, which had very effectively propelled the narrative of his best-seller. Writing this had brought him into close contact with the gypsies of Spain, about whom he wrote a remarkable book entitled *The Zincali*. By introducing gypsies in the way he does, in *Lavengro*, he lost some of his righteous followers, and puzzled his reviewers with what looked like obscurantism, even mysticism. He builds upon this imaginative act of empathy with the gypsies' self-sufficiency and general antinomianism a substantial amount of ethnographical and linguistic research designed to illuminate the obscure ways and practices of this exotic folk without giving away their secrets. Borrow's familiarity with the Romany language may not have been as great as he pretends, but still it was considerable, and unusual at the time. But both writers begin, as I have said, from the seventeenth century philosopher, academician, and Protestant divine Joseph Glanvill⁶.

Arnold⁷ bought a copy of Glanvill's *The Vanity of Dogmatising* in 1844, and (as Allott and Super have noted) the seventeenth century philosopher, scientist, and divine was still in his thoughts thirteen years later, when he published *Thyrsis*. Glanvill's mixture of skepticism and piety, the curiosity of his mind and his certainty that God's gift of reason will prevail, his odd combination of superstition (he believed firmly that witchcraft existed) and the scientific urge to explicate the irrational, all left their mark on Arnold, as they did on Borrow, who found Glanvill's work in Norwich Library, as well as encountering it via Hume (a favourite of his teacher and sponsor William Taylor, the eminent Norwich Germanist). *The Scholar-Gypsy* was not published until 1853, though (cf. Allott and Super) the idea for it was in place by 1848, and probably earlier. Arnold's own note on Glanvill (published in 1853 with the poem) is misleading to the extent that he excerpts Glanvill's text in such a way as to make the gypsy narrative into a rather cosy (if melancholy) anecdote, instead of what it really is, the popular

face of a complex Protestant writer who left a serious imprint on English culture. Up to a point we may agree with the Oxford editors when they say rather disparagingly that the note Arnold supplied for *The Scholar-Gypsy* is “pieced together from passages in Glanvill,” but we should not suppose that a degree of arbitrariness diminishes Glanvill’s significance for Arnold. Indeed, the way he appropriates Glanvill indicates the extent of his identification with him.

The Glanvill passages in question are actually made integral to Arnold’s skeptical preoccupation with “the vanity of dogmatizing” and the institutions of Victorian high culture that promote the dogma he detests. Although only one short section of the scholar-gypsy story is cited by Arnold, in transcribing it he does in fact pick up on Glanvill’s larger intention, in telling this tale, more comprehensively than at first meets the eye. The gypsies are (according to Glanvill, cited by Arnold) “extravagant people,” which seems to mean not that they are not bound by the codes of polite society (or spend too freely) as that they “wander outside” (the root meaning of the word “extravagant,” they are above all “vagrants”). Their most salient feature is therefore their freedom, but the Gypsies accept the alien scholar among themselves on account of the “insinuating subtilty” of “his carriage.”

This odd phrase, and the snake-y word “insinuating,” might at first be taken to mean that he made illicit use of his charm to enter their company, but in fact it seems to mean that he is interested, as they are, in the obscure bye-ways of thought and feeling, “insinuating” implying a degree of secrecy, and “carriage” suggesting reserve, or holding back. One thinks of Borrow, in *Lavengro*, sharing his snake-wisdom with his gypsies, and becoming a “word-handler” – the meaning of “lavengro” – as they are “snake-handlers,” or “sapengros,” the subtlest of insinuating arts⁸. A basic point is made by Arnold about the need the scholar has to “slip into” alien codes and styles (Borrow was very adept at this) if he wants to understand what is going on.

It is also what a translator does. This is consonant with Arnold's own quite modern fascination with roles and identities and the kinds of masks and disguises people wear in order to survive, or to utter unwelcome truths. In this, "scholars" and "gypsies" and "translators" perhaps have something in common, the subtlety of the serpent.

The reward for the intimacy of the renegade scholar's dealings with the Romanies is that the gypsies (again quoting Arnold's paraphrase) "discovered to him their mystery." The copious Romantic tales of gypsydom had always attributed to the travelling people magical powers (especially of prediction, or "dukkerin")⁹, based on the gypsies' special relationship with nature, to which they are peculiarly exposed, and whose ways they are obliged to understand and respect. Many authentic accounts of Romanies stress this characteristic above all, whether it is a matter of appraising a horse or forecasting the weather or leaving, or reading, a trail of signs in the hedgerows (cf. Borrow, *passim*). The gypsy lore or wisdom was rarely shared with gorgios¹⁰, or non-gypsies, which only served to make it all the more fascinating to the latter, and even confirmed its "supernatural" status in their eyes. Arnold goes so far as to call it "a traditional kind of learning," which lends it a quasi-academic, even scientific, dignity, and gives an indication of his own hidden agenda in cultivating gypsydom, which seems to be the discovery of a kind of solidarity among wise but misjudged outsiders who bear a secret wisdom, "the tradition" in its pure form.

The word "learning" is carefully chosen for its cultural resonance, suggesting silent depth, and continuity of tradition, thus contributing as it does to a sense of the gypsies' place in British cultural life, broadly defined, an issue (the making of Britishness) which we know both writers took the keenest interest in. Borrow, too, communicates a vivid sense of the hidden chains of command and communication in gypsy tribes¹¹, deriving from a shared archaic culture, and this secrecy, while lying at the root of the real

reason why uncanny kinds of intuited knowledge seem to be available to them, demands serious study. Gypsies are rather like the peas under the thimble in Borrow's pointed, quasi-allegorical narrative of this traditional (and very lucrative) Romany fairground sideshow, of thimble-rigging¹². They move around in secret, appearing now here, now somewhere else, and if an officer of the law shows up the whole seductive sideshow is whisked away as if by magic, or by the intervention of the gods.

Glanvill, then, as I have suggested, judging by internal evidence, played a larger part in both Arnold's and Borrow's thinking and writing than just the inspiration provided by the famous gypsy anecdote which they shared. Borrow makes no explicit reference to Glanvill at all; but this pillar of the Royal Society, and master of Restoration prose, much admired by Hume¹³, would certainly have reached William Taylor via the route of the eighteenth century philosopher's writing and teaching, particularly his critique of religion, being thence transmitted to Borrow. Glanvill's fascination with the oddities and byways of God's creation often strikes a Borrovian note, as does Glanvill's sturdy Protestant good sense strongly tinged with "natural religion," and his touching awe (so like Borrow's) at the wonder of the natural world and the mystery of God's ways and the signs he gives us. It was almost certainly William Taylor, who made such a deep impression on the young Borrow, regarded him as his star pupil, and encouraged most actively his interest in languages, who directed Borrow's attention to the volume of Glanvill's *Vanity of Dogmatising* in the Norwich Library which Borrow used so freely, thereby supplying another key element of the Protestant tradition which shaped Borrow's life and writings.

Above all, Glanvill represented a firm advocacy of the experimental method, as his title suggests, learning through experience, a stance dear to the hearts of the Royal Society at the time of the Society's foundation, advocating a pursuit of the byways of sensory and cognitive experience in order to

discover their hidden texts. Glanvill is very explicit about his dislike of Aristotle, the “schoolmen,” dogma, and Roman Catholics (in their guise of schoolmen especially), and was quite sure that nothing could be properly known that had not been observed at first hand and experienced for oneself, and that there was no valid knowledge that was not essentially personal knowledge. His knowledge of God was (like Borrow’s) altogether personal, and unfolded experientially in the course of his journey through life and through a series of allegorized landscapes which sometimes remind us of *Pilgrim’s Progress*. The “plot” of Glanvill’s narratives is always located in the interaction between the contingencies of the world and the moral learning process we call experience. And the world is full of “signs” of the presence of the Maker. Reading these signs is an activity that links the man of letters with the gypsies and makes both these categories of humanity “extravagant.”

“Dogmatising” was a word that Glanvill used for all *a priori* general truth, and it was “vain” because life is a permanent existential quest or journey on which we must test the evidence of our senses (with the help of the Humean faculties of imagination and memory)¹⁴ at every stage. This process, though Glanvill would certainly have wished it to be thought of primarily as scientific, is at the same time religious, and so the scientific journey is in some sense a pilgrimage. A kind of reverence shines through Glanvill’s natural descriptions, and this distinguishes him from his admirer Hume. This quality is reproduced in Borrow’s gypsies, and communicated by them to non-gypsies. We know, too, that in the midst of Glanvill’s Royal Society pragmatism there lurked a keen belief in witchcraft, reminiscent of Newton’s odd combination of scientific stringency and superstition. But even that may be seen as part of his effort to find a comprehensive representation of the world of experience, irrational as well as rational. The irrational (magic) was so powerful that it demanded interpretation. There is nothing in Glanvill that one might call psychological, yet in reading him one feels the

powerful presence of an unconscious.

To give an example of what I take to be the Glanvill spirit in Borrow, and what looks like a deep affinity linking the two men, we might adduce the part of Chapter Twenty-Five of *Lavengro* where the eighteen-year-old George skirts (as he often does) the depression which frequently brought him low (“the horrors”). Telling himself how much he has learned, he then asks himself skeptically what it all means: “All this is mere learning and translation,” he says. Maybe Berkeley and Spinoza are voicing a more comprehensive skepticism. But George has not read either of them, so when he equates their philosophy with the belief that “all is a lie; a deceitful phantom,” he presents this view (the deceitfulness of things) as one for which he has scant respect; these are

“old cries; they come naturally from the mouths of those, who, casting aside that choicest shield against madness, simplicity, would fain be as wise as God, and can only know that they are naked. This doubting in the “universal all” is almost coeval with the human race: wisdom, so called, was early sought after. All is a lie—a deceitful phantom—was said when the world was yet young; its surface, save a scanty portion, yet untrodden by human foot, and when the great tortoise yet crawled about.” (*Lavengro* 160)

This leads with characteristic Borrovian naturalness to “One day, whilst I bent my way to the heath of which I have spoken on a former occasion...,” the prologue to a new encounter with God’s world.

The sentiment against Spinoza here, although it may be based on a fair degree of ignorance, is wholly comparable to Glanvill’s censure of Aristoteleanism and of philosophy itself in its pure ratiocinative form. “Most of our Rarities have been found out by *casual emergency*; and have been the works of Time, and Chance, rather than of Philosophy,” he says (*Scepsis Scientifica* 132). This sense of the revelatory power of contingency is altogether compatible with the scientific spirit, according to Glanvill, which

must operate upon mental and affective phenomena—human behaviour—as well as upon the physical world. He is (like Borrow) especially interested in how it is that “the spirit of one man hath sometimes a power over that of another” (ibid. 146). There are “immaterial intercourses between our spirits” and some “secret influences may be advanc’d to so strange an operation in the Imagination of one upon another” (ibid. 147). Gypsies seem to demonstrate these kinds of obscure, intuitive relationships one with another, sending and receiving secret messages as if by empathetic powers.

These subtle and sinuous connections between things are, or should be, open to enquiry like all natural phenomena. “According to the notion of the Dogmatist,” he says, “we *know* nothing, except we *know* all things; and he that pretends to Science affects an Omnipotence.” But this omits the reality of contingency, or chance discovery, which, paradoxically, is what validates the experimental method, as well as the presence in creation of its creator, lending it consistency. Glanvill’s sense of the natural world is exceptionally vivid, apparently verging on animism, like Borrow’s, but this is because Nature is a book written by a divine hand, to be read always anew as the senses permit

All our Science comes in at our Senses.... Thus objects have a different Appearance when the eye is violently any way *distorted*, from that they have, when our Organs are in their proper *site* and *figure*, and some extraordinary alteration in the Brain duplicates that which is but a single object to our undistemper’d Sentient. Thus, that’s of one colour to us standing in *one place* which hath a contrary aspect in *another*: as in those versatile representations in the neck of a *Dove*, and folds of *Scarlet*... (161)¹⁵

Here, perhaps, lies the deepest root of George’s obsessive “touching” (in *Lavengro*), to verify the “real” existence of an object in the world by an experimental method by means of a repeated, perhaps even a rather guilty, testing, followed by a renewed, reformulated confirmation of God’s plan as it

is, after all, revealed to all men in the rich diversity of things.

This kind of scepticism or empiricism (a favourite term for it in the Restoration was "Pyrrhonism")¹⁶, curiously linked to faith, is bound to cast doubt not only upon certain kinds of philosophical method, but also upon the "enlightening" functions of education and the culture which it represents and which reproduces it. Arnold, of course, stood by the light of reason, but recognized everywhere (but especially in his poetry) that the world of feeling may not coincide with it. Like Borrow, he wished to extend the range of reference of Anglo-Saxon culture to create a larger national culture which contained elements from non-Anglo-Saxon sources which might (and perhaps should) work against the excessive pragmatism of the Anglo-Saxon part of the national culture and safeguard fancy and imagination. Only in this way, and by maintaining the "nobility" (Arnold's word) of epic, both classical and indigenous, could we combat the overpowering "machinery" of middle-class Victorianism¹⁷ that played such a key role in Arnold's paranoid theory of culture.

That is why Glanvill's famous anecdote, which so much took Arnold's fancy, is much more than a passing whim. The young man who fled to the gypsies was escaping from the centre to the margins, from the tyranny of a "dogmatising" kind of enlightenment to the light of experience, to a kind of experimental method wherein you could "touch" reality for what it "really" was, in your own person. Just as Arnold shunned "dogma"¹⁸ ("philosophy (is) the illusion") in the name of the truth, or reality, of poetry (which he approached with reverence yet in an experimental spirit), so Glanvill attacks what he calls "the prejudices of education and customary belief" in the name of "striking at the root of Pedantry and opiniative Assurance" for the sake of the "more generous Freedom" which was absolutely central to his Protestantism.

In Arnold's poem, the nature of the critique of Victorian values is made

clear and the author of *The Study of Poetry* (written much later, in 1880) declares himself. Here is the skepticism that took shape in the theory of the touchstones, and in Arnold's differentiation of three kinds of judgment, personal, historical, and real, the greatest (and hardest to attain) of which is real, arrived at by dint of arduous personal experience, against which all teaching and learning must be tested. Evidently much more is at stake here than just a Romantic bid for freedom, or a fantasy of escape, or the rejection of authority which is inevitably enacted by every new generation. The existential anxiety which pervades Borrow's work as it pervades Arnold's strikes very deep into the roots of modern culture at their growth point in the divided allegiances of Victorianism to material and spiritual values. It was Arnold, not Borrow, who (for good reason) became the forerunner of modern literary criticism, and the theorist of modern humanist education. Yet when we read Borrow again alongside him, we may find that the man whom Robert Bridges called "Mr. Kidglove Cocksure," by virtue of his intellectual poise, and spiritual refinement, has lost touch with a broader spirit of enquiry, so crucial to the great English Protestant tradition. This is the spirit which links Bunyan and Defoe and Blake with Lawrence, and runs through Borrow into the modern age.

Notes

- 1 My references are to the text in Miriam Allott and Robert H. Super (eds.), *Matthew Arnold* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986. The Oxford Standard Authors) 208-15 and 545-47.
- 2 Cf. Michael Collie and Sir Angus Fraser in their *George Borrow: A Bibliographical Study* (London: St. Paul's Bibliographies, 1984), where citations from letters to John Murray of 1842 and 1843 refer to both Lavengro and gypsies, though suggesting that little enough of his text has been written as yet.
- 3 Cf. Sir Angus Fraser, *The Gypsies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) 197.
- 4 Prosper Mérimée, *Carmen* (1845).
- 5 In a much-quoted phrase from *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time* (1864) Arnold says that poetry is a "criticism of life."

- 6 Joseph Glanvill (1636-1680) was (like Borrow) a fascinating compendium of contradictions which complemented and even illuminated one another. *Britannica* notes that he “defended the Royal Society’s experimental method as religious in nature because it revealed the workings of God” (CD-rom, 1999). His scepticism and anti-authoritarianism appealed to Hume, who was an influential figure in the thinking of George Borrow’s teacher and mentor William Taylor. Glanvill’s interest in witchcraft and the miraculous provided ample matter for the critical enquiry into the irrational which runs through all his work.
- 7 Cf. *Matthew Arnold* (Oxford Standard Authors) 545.
- 8 George Borrow, in *Lavengro*, explains that the Romany ending “engro” means “maker” or “master,” as in the proper name “Petulengro,” which means (literally) “Smith” (maker of the “petulo” or horse-shoe). “Sapengro” was a proper Gypsy designation (snake-master), so “Lavengro” (word-master) was derived naturally from it.
- 9 The glossary of Gypsy words appended to *Lavengro* (Knapp ed. 568) gives the following for “dukkerin”: “The in is Eng. ing, any one’s fortune, or fortunes, fate, fortune-telling.” The word is clearly cognate with the Russian word “duch,” “mind, spirit, ghost, or spectre.”
- 10 The word “gorgio” (Romany “gorjo,” also found in the form “gadjo,” and in other variant spellings) basically means “person of non-Romany origins,” but the Anglicised spelling “gorgio” suggest the English word “gorgeous,” i.e. rich and powerful.
- 11 Cf. my analysis of *Lavengro* elsewhere. *The Romany Rye* contains some comments on the secret signs, or “patterans,” left in hedgerows, which only a Romany could decode. Cf. p.391 of the Knapp edition, where the word “patteran” is glossed as “leaf of a tree, Gypsy trail.”
- 12 Cf. *Lavengro* 294, where a clear connection is established between “cant” (the special secret language of the underworld, thieves’ jargon) and Romany. This thimble-rigger, who is not a gypsy, knows that the jargon of thimble-rigging is full of Romany, though he professes (rather surprisingly) not to know why.
- 13 There have been numerous studies of the relationship between Hume and Glanvill. One of the most interesting is Richard H. Popkin’s *Joseph Glanvill: A Precursor of David Hume* in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* XIV (1953), 292-303.55. Glanvill’s belief that “a science of the laws of regularities rather than of necessary connections is adequate for understanding Nature” falls short of Hume’s analysis of causality, which dispenses altogether with the “ground” of knowledge which Glanvill still considers necessary. Popkin concludes that it is hard to discover Glanvill’s influence on the British “empirical tradition,” but he does not consider literary influences, which surely include Swift as well as Borrow and Arnold.
- 14 “The knowledge we have comes from our Senses, and the Dogmatist can go no higher for the original of his certainty.” (Joseph Glanvill, cited by Popkin 295.)
- 15 It goes without saying that much of Glanvill’s distinction consists in his refusal to dissociate poetry and prose, analysis and belief.
- 16 Pyrrhonism, a philosophy attributed to (among others) John Dryden, was appropriate to

a historical moment which had witnessed such a violent clash of ideologies and sought reconciliation. Pyrrho (c.365-c.275 BC) believed that we must suspend judgment because we can never find certainty.

17 "Machinery" is a powerful paranoid construct in Arnold's seminal *Culture and Anarchy* (1867). He uses the term to mean not so much industrial machinery as bureaucratic machinery (displacing personal knowledge).

18 *Literature and Dogma* (1873) continues Arnold's extended critique of religion, in which "poetry" is promoted to a truth-telling role which leaves philosophy and theology far behind.

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