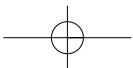
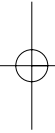


PART I

High Cultural Gladiators Some Influential Early Models of Cultural Analysis



Culture and Anarchy in the UK: a dialogue with Matthew Arnold

1

Introduction

This is the first of three chapters which make up part one of the book, which is developed around the idea of 'High Culture Gladiators: Some Influential Early Models of Cultural Analysis'. Each of the chapters introduces an approach which has been of great interest to cultural studies and which I see as in some way 'defensive' of a particular kind of culture. To begin this survey of high cultural gladiators the chapter you are about to read resurrects the ghost of Matthew Arnold to introduce his enormously influential approach to the definition of culture. It also puts his ideas into historical context by indicating how he responded to social and industrial changes in nineteenth-century Britain. Towards the end of the chapter, you will be encouraged to explore and evaluate Arnold's ideas through practice exercises designed to stimulate creative approaches to cultural criticism. The chapter closes, as will all chapters, with a summary of key points, comments on methodological relevance, and a list of references and further reading.

MAIN LEARNING GOALS

- To understand how Arnold understood and defined culture and why he felt contemporaries were in need of his model of culture.
- To appreciate how Arnold's definition grew out of his reactions to the historical circumstances in which he lived.

SOME INFLUENTIAL EARLY MODELS OF CULTURAL ANALYSIS

- To see how his ideas relate to class and politics.
- To consider Arnold's ideas in a critical but informed way and recognize how these ideas are related to important methodological concerns within cultural studies.

Matthew Arnold and the culture and civilization tradition

In the following three chapters I shall introduce some basic early models of cultural analysis. I want to do so in a way that will show their continued relevance to contemporary cultural criticism. If these approaches were like a dead language, long forgotten, there would be very little point in resurrecting them here. However, part of the value of being familiar with them is to be found in their importance in historical terms. Knowledge of them helps us to understand how cultural studies has evolved with relation to later approaches.

As mentioned in the Introduction, I shall not offer exhaustive overviews of each theorist but sift through what I see as some of the key ideas to emphasize how they relate to method. The first two chapters will look at writers whose approaches are usually referred to as the 'Culture and Civilization Tradition' which is, more often than not, the first important context in which concepts of culture are seen to be developed. The third chapter in this section is largely dedicated to the Marxist critic Theodor Adorno, whose work is, in some ways, very different from the other writers in this section. What I see as uniting these writers is their role as 'High culture gladiators' – they all defend and place very high value on what they see as 'authentic' high culture.

To introduce some of Matthew Arnold's ideas I want to use a 'creative-critical act' which, while attempting to reflect Arnold's ideas is, at the same time, an imaginative engagement with them. In fact, I shall use the dialogic form extensively in this book because I believe it can be an effective, lively and user-friendly way of introducing ideas. It is also designed to help you keep in mind that the exposition of other peoples' ideas always involves a certain imaginative engagement with them (regardless of whether they are put forward in dialogic form). A last point before I begin: I will spend more time on Arnold than is customary because I believe Arnold established a number of very important lines of thought that have important implications for cultural studies (you'll have to wait to the last chapter to fully understand why).

Culture: what it is, what it can do

Matthew Arnold has been in repose since 1888 but as a number of his ideas still interest cultural critics today we have decided to call up his ghost. Luckily, he has agreed to be interviewed by Divad Notlaw.

DIVAD NOTLAW: Now Mr Arnold, in your lifetime you were known as a poet, a social and literary critic, a professor of poetry (at Oxford University), and a schools' inspector. You constantly reflected on the meaning and effects of culture throughout your life and it is this that has left its mark on what we now call cultural studies. Your book *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) has had quite an influence on discussions about cultural value. Now, given that I'm interested in how to do cultural analysis, could you comment on what you were doing in this book?

ARNOLD: I ought to say, to begin with, that I never reflected directly on method but I'll do my best to answer your question. What I proposed was to enquire into **what 'culture really is', what good it can do, and why we need it**. I also tried to establish 'some plain grounds on which a **faith in culture** – both my own faith in it and the faith of others – may rest securely' (Arnold [1869] 1970: 203).

NOTLAW: So, in the first place, you were interested in defining culture. OK, so in your view, what is culture?

ARNOLD: Well, to answer this you might look at the title of my first chapter which is called '**Sweetness and Light**'. Firstly, culture can be related to **curiosity** which is a question of looking at things in a disinterested way and 'for the pleasure of seeing them as they really are' (204–5). But this is only a part of an adequate definition because curiosity has to be linked to a study of perfection. Well (here Arnold hesitates) culture, properly described, doesn't really have its origin in curiosity but in **the love of perfection**: 'it is a study of perfection. It moves by the force [...] of the moral and social passion for doing good' (205).

NOTLAW (politely but a little perplexed): So, you start by saying that it's concerned with curiosity and then that it's the study of perfection. Why contradict yourself?

ARNOLD: It's simply part of the way I think. Now, before any of you high-powered cultural theorists get hold of me, I ought to emphasize that I saw my approach as simple and unsystematic.

NOTLAW: OK, let's try to live with that. When you say that culture as the study of perfection is motivated by 'the moral and social passion for doing good', you seem to be arguing that culture serves a very important ethical purpose. If we think about this in terms of method, the definition of culture can't be divorced from bringing about positive change.

ARNOLD: That's true; culture realizes a Christian purpose. I believed that culture 'believes in making reason and the will of God prevail' (206).

SOME INFLUENTIAL EARLY MODELS OF CULTURAL ANALYSIS



Culture is sweetness and light. It makes the "best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere".

NOTLAW (not wanting to offend and thinking, 'Well, he doesn't say much about what reason is or how we can know what God's will is'): Hmm, well, let's move the argument on a little. We know that, in an unsystematic way, you see culture as seeing things as they really are, the study of perfection linked to curiosity, reason and God's will, but let's move on to your next stated aim, what good Culture can do.

ARNOLD: My simple answer is that it can help us achieve ever higher states of inner perfection. It is in '**endless growth in wisdom and beauty**', that is how 'the spirit of the human race finds its ideal'. It is here we find that culture is 'an indispensable aid', this is the 'true value' of culture: it's not 'a having and a resting, but a growing and a becoming, [this] is the character of perfection as culture conceives it; and here, too, it coincides with religion' (208). Yet culture goes beyond religion.

CULTURE AND ANARCHY IN THE UK: A DIALOGUE WITH MATTHEW ARNOLD

- NOTLAW: I'd like to stop you there and say that although I don't agree with everything you say I like the idea of culture as a question of growing and becoming: this suggests that it doesn't have a fixed identity – it is never static.
- ARNOLD: But you conveniently forget that I connect it to the question of inner perfection. To help you sum up my argument I would add that culture is: 'a harmonious expansion of all the powers which make the beauty and worth of humanity' (208); it chooses the **best of everything and helps to preserve it**; it helps us to judge correctly (236) and to discover our best self (246) through reading, observing, and thinking (236). In short, culture is a humanizing of knowledge and the **pursuit of perfection** is an internal condition rather than a development of external things or 'animality' (227).
- NOTLAW: I would say that here it is necessary to see what you are saying with relation to the historical circumstances of the 1860s. You were attacking what you saw as the exaggerated belief in mechanisms of all kinds, from the factory machine to railways and mechanical ways of thinking associated with science and rational systems of thought like political thinking and theories about the economy. In this sense we could link your work with other British writers like Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Carlyle, Ruskin, Morris (to name only a few). In the works of all these writers we see a concern about the increasing dominance of external forms of culture over the inner life.
- ARNOLD: Yes, all these writers were responding to and criticizing changes associated with what you now call the Industrial Revolution and, in this sense, we might be called early cultural critics. We were reacting against mere **blind faith in machinery** and the inability to look beyond the machine to the ends to which machinery is put (231).

Culture: why Arnold thought his contemporaries needed his view of culture

- NOTLAW: So, you continued lines of thought already expressed in British culture and which would be continued by other writers like Dickens and William Morris. Is this why, according to you, the British society of the 1860s needed your version of culture so much?
- ARNOLD: That is absolutely correct. The industrial society of nineteenth-century Britain was increasingly dominated by external factors, for example: its obsession with material things, unrestricted competition, the making of large industrial fortunes, and forms of dissent in politics and religion. For me, ideal culture was a way of helping humanity to develop in a more balanced way where the inner life is given its proper importance. The role of culture is to bring sweetness and light to everyone, not just a privileged few (although it must inevitably begin with a few enlightened minds). According to my definition, culture acts as a counterbalance to the excessive **materialism** and **utilitarianism** of the industrial age. Now, looking at the world you live in the twenty-first century, I see that you are still arguing over these things.

SOME INFLUENTIAL EARLY MODELS OF CULTURAL ANALYSIS

- NOTLAW: Yes, I think you're right, We are still concerned with the *value* of cultural products. Hardly a week goes by where someone isn't complaining about the decline of standards with relation to things like reality TV and mobile phone text messaging ...
- ARNOLD (cutting in): Your literary supplements are full of writers insisting on the importance of reading great works of literature instead of dedicating so much time to popular television, films, video games and the internet. If, as I argued, the best does lead to perfection, then it is of the utmost importance for a society to establish the means by which the most exemplary cultural products can be recognized.
- NOTLAW: Well, as it happens, in the next chapter some of these issues will be addressed.
- ARNOLD (ignoring him): So, fundamental to my view of civilization was **the importance of education**, which, I argued, would broaden the minds of all people, not just the privileged classes. In fact, I was very active in this respect, being an inspector of schools and involved in trying to establish a national system of State education.

help FILE: defining utilitarianism

Many nineteenth-century social critics reacted against the philosophy of utilitarianism. Very simply put, it argues that decisions should be made according to the greatest happiness of the greatest number and with relation to whether the consequences of an action lead to greater happiness or pain. In more general terms, it was associated with an excessively pragmatic approach to life where everything is considered from a practical point of view (for its use) rather than for its value. It is chiefly associated with Jeremy Bentham. However, John Stuart Mill tried to 'humanize' it and iron out some of its theoretical difficulties (see Mill and Bentham, 1987).

- NOTLAW: Coming back to method, this means that part of your form of cultural analysis is to be able to recognize the relative value of different kinds of culture, so as to decide which cultural products make a positive contribution to society.
- ARNOLD: Yes, of course, if you are going to educate people to reach the ideals of civilized life, you need to decide what it is you're going to teach.

Arnold, class and politics: Barbarians, Philistines and Populace

- NOTLAW: As it is very easy to dismiss a writer's thoughts, and more so when there is a failure to appreciate the historical period in which s/he was writing, I'd like to explore the historical context of your thought. One thing that modern critics have found of interest in your work is how your ideal definition of culture is related to class and politics.

CULTURE AND ANARCHY IN THE UK: A DIALOGUE WITH MATTHEW ARNOLD

You divided the classes into **Barbarians**, **Philistines** and the **Populace**; could you comment on this for us?

ARNOLD: For me the aristocratic classes were in decline and losing their authority and, anyway, I felt they had to be superseded. These I called Barbarians and were characterized by things like individualism, field sports (physical strength), good looks, chivalry and manners, but all these qualities were external. Their 'inward gifts' were those which came nearest to outward ones; things like courage, high spirits and self-confidence. However, far within, lay sleeping 'a whole range of powers of thought and feeling' which were, for most of this class, completely unrealized (252–3). In this, they also had something of the Philistine in them.

NOTLAW: Yes, for the middle classes I see you coined the term Philistines and described them as 'The people who believe most that our greatness and welfare are proved by our being very rich, and who most give their lives and thoughts to becoming rich' (210).

ARNOLD: That's true but I also saw the Philistines characterized by a practical ability for organization and material development. However, I lamented the Philistine's materialism, dreadful utilitarianism, obsession with machinery and general unreceptiveness or hostility towards the ideals of high culture. I argued that the middle classes, while being important to economic prosperity, had to develop beyond their material obsessions and their narrow-minded individualism.

NOTLAW: Yes, I remember a memorable phrase of yours in your essay 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' where you called the English Constitution 'a colossal machine for the manufacture of Philistines' (Arnold, [1864] 1970: 147). There you argued that, given the increasing decline of religion, culture is a civilizing force and criticism one of the chief instruments by which perfection could be achieved. However, coming back to *Culture and Anarchy*, I think the most controversial part of your discussion of class is when you come to the Populace, or what we now call the working class.

ARNOLD: If you want to be accurate, in *Culture and Anarchy* I said that the working class was made up of two groups. One group shared the ideals and characteristics of the Philistines and the other was the 'vast mass' which I referred to as the Populace. The Populace I saw as 'raw and half-developed', a class that had traditionally been hidden by its poverty and squalor. But something angered me about the Populace: by the 1860s it had come out from its hiding place to assert what it saw as an 'Englishman's heaven-born privilege of doing as he likes'. There it was, 'marching', 'meeting', 'bawling' and 'breaking' ([1869] 1970: 254). However, it ought to be remembered that these are dominant characteristics and that each class may display traits associated with the other classes and there will be aliens in every class.

NOTLAW: But you seemed particularly hard on the Populace.

ARNOLD: I was against all their **demands for rights and liberties** which I saw as causing so much social unrest. I saw them as working against civilization, or my model of culture – it was threatening **anarchy**. Once, as I wrote in *Culture and Anarchy* (he quotes from memory):

SOME INFLUENTIAL EARLY MODELS OF CULTURAL ANALYSIS

The strong feudal habits of subordination and deference continued to tell upon the working class. The modern spirit has now almost entirely dissolved those habits, and the anarchical tendency of our worship of freedom in and for itself, of our superstitious faith, as I say, in machinery, is becoming very manifest. (Arnold, [1869] 1970: 231)

Actually, I saw my view of culture as above class considerations arguing that no single class could be trusted to bring about the high cultural ideals of sweetness and light. The only grounds on which a faith in culture could rest was the **disinterested pursuit of knowledge**, which I saw as above politics and religion. As you may know, the Victorian age was full of people trying to indoctrinate the ‘masses’ (yes, I used that term (226)). I wasn’t necessarily against these debates, but deeply suspicious of them. However, my point was that culture had to work differently – not try to teach down to the level of ‘inferior classes’ or win them over for sectarian purposes. Culture must be above class if we are **‘to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere’** (226).

NOTLAW: But surely, one class or group still had to dominate to create and preserve your idea of civilization?

ARNOLD Well, yes, the power of the State would have to guarantee ‘right reason’ over personal (looking liberty. As far as I was concerned, change was not to come from popular revolutionary uneasy): demands from below; therefore, all disturbances were to be put down by ‘the principle of authority’ (236).

NOTLAW: Society, then, is to be left in the hands of ... not so much the Philosopher King, but the Culture King?

ARNOLD (forgetting to answer the question, starts quoting a passage from *Culture and Anarchy* where he starts with ‘we’ and ends up with ‘he’):

[...] – every time that we snatch up a vehement opinion in ignorance and passion, every time that we long to crush an adversary by sheer violence [...] that we are envious [...] brutal [...] that we adore mere power or success [...] that we add our voice to swell a blind clamour against some unpopular personage [...] that we trample savagely on the fallen, – he has found in his own bosom the eternal spirit of the Populace, and that there needs only a little help from circumstances to make it triumph in him untameably’ (256).

NOTLAW: Personally, I feel very uncomfortable with your view of the Populace and your nostalgic yearning for subordination and deference, but in terms of what this means methodologically I think this way of looking is very interesting. Stripping away your value judgements, the kind of criticism you are doing here is similar to what we do in cultural studies: you are seeing culture with relation to a broad analysis of different classes in society. Furthermore, you are aware of historical conditions and tensions between classes which may threaten or destroy the bases for the establishment of your ideal view of culture ... (At this point Notlaw realizes that he is talking to himself because Arnold has fallen into a deep sleep.)

CULTURE AND ANARCHY IN THE UK: A DIALOGUE WITH MATTHEW ARNOLD

Well, reader, let's carry on for moment without him. As suggested above, one problem for many cultural critics is that although Arnold could be sarcastic and critical of other classes (Arnold's sense of irony is not always appreciated) he was especially hard on the working classes. However, despite what many critics regard as Arnold's objectionable political thinking, his ideas have continued to be of interest (as I hope this, and later chapters, will demonstrate). Let's probe Arnold a little more on history.

Understanding Arnold through political reform

ARNOLD (Notlaw nudges Arnold, who wakes with start): Who? What? Where am I? Oh, it's you ...

NOTLAW: I was just saying ... Well, never mind. I'd like to return to the question of history.

ARNOLD: Must we? Have some consideration for my age!

(yawning):

NOTLAW: Don't worry, we are nearly finished. Earlier you indicated that you reacted against the radical political movements which fought for the rights of those who had no say in politics (we'll be hearing much more about these movements in chapter five on E.P. Thompson). I thought it would be useful to explore this historical background a little further in order to see your ideas within the context of political reform.

ARNOLD: Young man, I'm glad you haven't lost a sense of history. If we just restrict ourselves to the 30 years or so before the publication of *Culture and Anarchy*, the following historical references should prove useful to your readers: the **Reform Act of 1832** and the **Chartist Movement**. But why should I do all the work? How would you describe the Reform Act?

NOTLAW: I'd say the 1832 Act attempted to eradicate some of the worst abuses of the British political system and extended the (male) vote (mainly to the moneyed commercial classes and the larger farmers).

ARNOLD: Those aren't the words I would have used. What would you say was its effect?

(raising his eyebrows):

NOTLAW: Although it satisfied many of the middle classes, the fact that it failed to concede rights to the working classes helped to make those members of the working classes interested in political reform even more discontented than they already were. Hardly surprising, then, that in 1839 the Chartists, the first major working-class reform movement, petitioned parliament for major reforms, including universal male suffrage.

ARNOLD: Yes, but it was, quite rightly, rejected (along with the 1842 and 1848 Charters). All those unruly, violent outbreaks, all that social unrest, pitching civilization towards anarchy – it put the fear of God – or, I should say, the fear of working-class rebellion, into many of us. We saw the decline and historical redundancy of the aristocracy. In its place we saw the rise of democracy, of middle-class power and increasing demands for representation by the working classes. Given these struggles and recent and alarming changes in political life, I saw (as a member of the

SOME INFLUENTIAL EARLY MODELS OF CULTURAL ANALYSIS

ruling classes) the need to prepare *all* classes for a future which would guarantee social cohesion and continued cultural development.

NOTLAW (disturbed by Arnold's Although there were riots and some violence, it ought to be said that the Chartist movement was generally peaceful and, in my opinion, wholly justified. What seems to me very unjustified was the violence with which successive governments carefully policed working-class demonstrations and severely punished working-class leaders. Just take a look at the history of reform. In 1867, two years after your *Culture and Anarchy* was published, the Second Reform Act finally conceded the vote to town artisans, shopkeepers and (in England and Scotland) the smaller farmers. It wasn't until 1918 that all men (who were not mentally unfit or criminals) over 21 were given the vote. Upper class women had to wait until 1918 to receive the right to vote and it wasn't until 1928 that all women (who were not mentally unfit or criminals) over 21 were allowed to vote ... (Notlaw realizes, once again, that he is talking to himself because Arnold not only falls into a deep sleep but fades into thin air.)

Oversimplification

W A R N I N G

It is easy to oversimplify Arnold's thought especially when considering his elitist views and general lack of sympathy for radical political movements. However, some moral outrage might be assuaged by the fact that when he proposed reforms in education they were to benefit society as a whole and, if one reads beyond *Culture and Anarchy* (e.g. 'The Popular Education of France' (1861)), the reader finds that Arnold believed that the working classes (the 'masses') had a right to 'expansion and a fuller life' (Arnold, [1861] 1970: 107). Nevertheless, he felt that change could only come in what he saw as an organized and rational way and that meant change from the top down.

If you read over the dialogue above you will see that I have hinted at some of the inconsistencies in Arnold's thought although, in general, I've not offered many criticisms – preferring, at that stage, to let the ideas stand on their own. In the practice sections below, however, you'll find some exercises to help you think through some of the debatable and controversial elements in his writing on culture. I hope these will also help to focus on some of the methodological implications of Arnold's thought while assisting you to develop a critical attitude towards them. In later sections you'll see that many cultural theorists engage in either explicit or implicit debates with a number of Arnold's propositions.

practice EXERCISE 1.1: getting a sense of tradition

Read the following excerpts and see if you can discern how Arnold was extending ideas already present in British culture.

In this first quotation William Wordsworth is recommending his collection of poetry, *Lyrical Ballads*, to the reader (which included some poems by Samuel Taylor Coleridge):

For a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and, unfitting it for all voluntary exertion, to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies [through newspapers] [...] The invaluable works of our elder writers [...] are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse. (Wordsworth, 'Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*' [1798] 1993: 145)

In 'A Defence of Poetry' Percy Bysshe Shelley describes poetry in the following way (although note that his politics are very different from Arnold's):

But Poetry [...] wakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. [...] We have more moral, political and historical wisdom, than we know how to reduce into practice; we have more scientific and economical knowledge than can be accommodated to the just distribution of the produce which it implies. The poetry in these systems of thought, is concealed by the accumulation of facts and calculating processes. [...] Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds [...] Poetry thus makes immortal all that is best and most beautiful in the world [...] Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed. (Shelley, [1821] 1993: 761–3)

Thomas Carlyle summed up contemporary life in his 'Signs of the Times' in the following way:

These things, which we state lightly enough here, are yet of deep import, and indicate a mighty change in our whole manner of existence. For the same habit regulates not our modes of action alone, but our modes of thought and feeling. Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand. They have lost faith in individual endeavour, and in natural force, of any kind. Not for internal perfection, but for external combinations and arrangements, for institutions, constitutions, – for Mechanism of one sort or other, do they hope and struggle. Their whole efforts, attachments, opinions, turn on mechanism, and are of a mechanical character. (Carlyle, [1829] 1971: 67)

SOME INFLUENTIAL EARLY MODELS OF CULTURAL ANALYSIS

practice EXERCISE 1.2: thinking through Arnold's ideas

1. How does Arnold define 'inner perfection'? Do you agree, and can you see any value in insisting on developing inner perfection as a counterbalance to the outer material world?
2. Try to imagine how Arnold would distinguish between different kinds of cultural products (from any period of history) according to the way he defined culture (this exercise is based on a very useful suggestion for practice in Giles and Middleton (1999: 13–14)). You might organize the lists in the following way:

<p>Intimations of Immortality Debussy Euripides Aristotle Leonardo da Vinci</p>	<p>Tina Turner Reality TV American Psycho Soap operas Hip hop</p>
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You can see that the two columns spell out 'Ideal' and 'Trash' (the latter, by the way, does not reflect what I personally feel is trash). To make this exercise more revealing and fun you might try organizing your material to spell out words which suggest positive, negative or prejudicial attitudes towards certain cultural products.

Now try a third column of items that might complicate a simple either/or way of thinking. That is, can you think of examples of culture which may question the simple distinction between 'high' and 'low' forms of culture? In the following notes on practice you'll find some ideas to get you started.

notes ON PRACTICE: challenging a simple either/or way of thinking

Dickens' *Hard Times* (1854)

This work began its life, like many a nineteenth-century novel, in serial form printed in a popular magazine (*Household Words*). At the time of its publication, and after, there was considerable debate about its merits. It is now common to find it on literature courses. Historically, its fate changed from serialized popular fiction to Literature (with a capital 'L').

Orson Wells' *Citizen Kane* (1941)

Working within the popular Hollywood system (RKO) Wells' first feature film was a commercial flop. However, again, the film can be regarded as a product of both popular culture and, as it commonly is, a masterpiece of world cinema.

Michel Duchamp

As a direct attack on bourgeois art institutions, Duchamp displayed a series of 'ready-mades' like the wheel of a bicycle screwed to a stool (1913) and a urinal signed 'R. Mutt'

CULTURE AND ANARCHY IN THE UK: A DIALOGUE WITH MATTHEW ARNOLD

(1917). As predicted, these provoked hostile responses from the art establishment (Arnold would surely have condemned them). However, by the mid-1960s these objects had been absorbed by the establishment they had been designed to shock and defy. They are now on display as important examples of twentieth-century avant-garde art.

3. As a creative critical exercise, you could write a letter to Arnold asking questions about all those things you feel need further explanation. The notes on practice provide you with an example of what you might do.

notes ON PRACTICE: a letter to Matthew Arnold

You might begin in the following way (imagining you are a contemporary of Arnold's):

My dear Mr Arnold,

I have, with some profit, read your book called *Culture and Anarchy* and while I feel you do justice to a number of important issues, I feel the book is wanting in some respects. I hope you will forgive me for being so blunt but I write as one who has a strong interest in getting to know your work better.

I feel I should be frank when I say that I have a problem with the idea of high cultural ideals as classless. For example, is it possible to insist on a classless model which relies on State power and the repression of the Populace? What does it mean to be disinterested? How might 'right reason' be defined? Also, *how* would you go about choosing the best that has been thought and written? *Who* would or should decide if there are conflicts between those who have made choices? If there could be agreement on what is the best, how might teaching the 'best' lead to a process of universal perfection? For example, in what ways might listening to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony help to perfect a person? Would knowledge of 'high' culture necessarily lead to perfection? I mean, you could enjoy reading or watching Shakespeare and still be a kleptomaniac, or so mentally unbalanced, that you commit delinquent, violent or murderous acts! You say that perfection may be defined as 'sweetness and light' – a combination of knowing how to behave and 'right reason'. Again, I wonder if it would be possible get wide agreement on these two issues and this would bring us back to politics and State power ...

Creative-critical practice

The above exercise might be extended considerably and, to do justice to Arnold's work, you might try to anticipate how he would reply. A last comment on this kind of creative-critical practice: this is a technique that can be adapted

SOME INFLUENTIAL EARLY MODELS OF CULTURAL ANALYSIS

to taste and can be applied to *everything* you read. In this way you can develop an analytical style in such a way that you entertain yourself in the process. For essay work you might extract the critical, analytical parts and leave the fictive parts behind, unless your tutor is open to a creative-critical approach.

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

This chapter has explored Arnold's definition of culture as the endless growth in wisdom and beauty which helps the human race find its ideal through a critical study of 'the best that has been thought and known in the world'. It has also emphasized what good Arnold thought his version of culture could do and why he believed his contemporaries needed it. Arnold's definition has been seen to have grown out of his reactions to the historical circumstances in which he lived and his scepticism and rejection of libertarian politics. While Arnold claimed that he wished to abolish the classes, his definition can be seen as reactionary because his notion of culture tends to support State repression and see all cries for political reform as anarchy.

Arnold's importance in methodological terms can be summed up in the following way:

- Like so many cultural theorists he was concerned with defining culture.
- The definition of culture can't be divorced from bringing about positive change.
- Criticism has to be able to recognize the relative value of different kinds of culture.
- Cultural criticism includes a broad analysis of different classes in society and an awareness of historical conditions and tensions between different classes.
- Cultural criticism includes the idea of resisting what are seen as negative social forces and cannot be divorced from politics.

As we sample different cultural theories we will see that even though many cultural critics differ from Arnold, they will share many of these implicit methodological concerns.

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CULTURE AND ANARCHY IN THE UK: A DIALOGUE WITH MATTHEW ARNOLD

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Further reading

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