

Introduction

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What is art good for? The question was in the air in Britain in the 1860s and, according to many commentators, the answer was: not very much. It wasn't art that had made the great industrial towns, laid the railways, dug the canals, expanded the empire and made Britain pre-eminent among nations. Indeed, art seemed capable of sapping the very qualities that had made these achievements possible; prolonged contact with it risked encouraging effeminacy, introspection, homosexuality, gout and defeatism. In a speech in 1865, John Bright, MP for Birmingham, described cultured people as a pretentious cabal whose only claim to distinction was 'a smattering of the two dead languages of Greek and Latin'. The Oxford academic Frederic Harrison held an equally caustic view of the benefits of prolonged communion with literature, history or painting. 'Culture is a desirable quality in a critic of new books, and sits well on a possessor of *belles lettres*,' he conceded, but 'as applied to everyday life or politics, it means simply a turn for small fault-finding, love of selfish ease, and indecision in action. The man of culture is one of the poorest mortals alive. For simple pedantry and want of good sense no man is his equal. No assumption is too unreal, no end is too unpractical for him.'

When these practically minded disparagers looked around for a representative of art's many deficiencies, they could find few more tempting targets on the English literary scene than the poet and critic Matthew Arnold, Professor of Poetry at Oxford and the author of several slim volumes of melancholic verse that had been well received among a highbrow coterie. Not only was Arnold in the habit of walking the streets of London with a silver-tipped cane,

he also spoke in a quiet, high-pitched voice, sported peculiarly elongated sideburns, parted his hair in the middle and, worst of all, had the impudence to keep hinting, in a variety of newspaper articles and public lectures, that art might be one of the most important pursuits of life. This in an age when for the first time one could travel from London to Birmingham in a single morning and Britain had earned itself the title of workshop of the world. The *Daily Telegraph*, stout upholder of industry and monarchy, was infuriated. It dubbed Arnold an 'elegant Jeremiah' and 'the high-priest of the kid-gloved persuasion', and it mockingly accused him of trying to lure the hard-working, sensible people of the land 'to leave their shops and duties behind them in order to recite songs, sing ballads and read essays'.

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Arnold accepted the ribbing with good grace until, in 1869, he was goaded into writing a systematic, book-length defence of what he believed art was for and why exactly it had such an important function to play in life – even for a generation that had witnessed the invention of the foldaway umbrella and the steam engine.

Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* began by acknowledging some of the charges laid at art's door. In the eyes of many, it was nothing more, he said, than 'a scented salve for human miseries, a religion breathing a spirit of cultivated inaction, making its believers refuse to lend a hand at uprooting evils. It is often summed up as being not practical or – as some critics more familiarly put it – all moonshine.'

But far from moonshine, great art was, Arnold proposed, a medium that could offer solutions to life's deepest tensions and anxieties. However impractical art might seem to 'the young lions of the *Daily Telegraph*', it was capable of presenting us with nothing less than an interpretation of and solution to the deficiencies of existence.

Consider the work of any great artist, proposed Arnold, and you

will find it marked (directly or not) by 'the desire to remove human error, clear human confusion, and diminish human misery'. All great artists are, said Arnold, imbued with 'the aspiration to leave the world better and happier than they find it'. They may not always embody such an aspiration in an overtly political message, they may not even be conscious of such an aspiration, and yet, within their work, there will almost always be a protest against the state of things and so an effort to correct our insights or to educate us to perceive beauty, to help us understand pain or to reignite our sensitivities, to nurture our capacity for empathy or to rebalance our moral perspective through sadness or laughter. Arnold concluded his argument with a pronouncement upon which this chapter is built. Art, said Arnold, is 'the criticism of life'.

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What should we understand by the phrase? Perhaps first, and most obvious, that life is a phenomenon in need of criticism, that we are, as fallen creatures, in permanent danger of worshipping false gods, of failing to understand ourselves or misinterpreting the behaviour of others, of growing unproductively anxious or desirous, and of losing ourselves to vanity and error. Surreptitiously and beguilingly, with humour or gravity, works of art – novels, poems, plays, paintings or films – can function as vehicles to explain our condition to us. They may act as guides to a truer, more judicious, more intelligent understanding of the world.

Given that few things are more in need of criticism (or insight and analysis) than our approach to status and its distribution, it is hardly surprising to find so many artists across time creating works that in some way contest the methods by which people are accorded a rank in society. The history of art is filled with challenges – ironic, angry, lyrical, sad or amusing – to the status system.