

The Idea of Culture

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P u b l i s h e r s

Versions of Culture

'Culture' is said to be one of the two or three most complex words in the English language, and the term which is sometimes considered to be its opposite – nature – is commonly awarded the accolade of being the most complex of all. Yet though it is fashionable these days to see nature as a derivative of culture, culture, etymologically speaking, is a concept derived from nature. One of its original meanings is 'husbandry', or the tending of natural growth. The same is true of our words for law and justice, as well as of terms like 'capital', 'stock', 'pecuniary' and 'sterling'. The word 'coulter', which is a cognate of 'culture', means the blade of a ploughshare. We derive our word for the finest of human activities from labour and agriculture, crops and cultivation. Francis Bacon writes of 'the culture and manurance of minds', in a suggestive hesitancy between dung and mental distinction. 'Culture' here means an activity, and it was a long time before the word came to denote an entity. Even then, it was probably not until Matthew Arnold that the word dropped such adjectives as 'moral' and 'intellectual' and came to be just 'culture', an abstraction in itself.

Etymologically speaking, then, the now-popular phrase 'cultural materialism' is something of a tautology. 'Culture' at first denoted a thoroughly material process, which was then metaphorically transposed to affairs of the spirit. The word thus charts within its semantic unfolding humanity's own historic shift from rural to urban existence, pig-farming to Picasso, tilling the soil to splitting the atom. In Marxist parlance, it brings together both base and superstructure in a single

notion. Perhaps behind the pleasure we are supposed to take in 'cultivated' people lurks a race-memory of drought and famine. But the semantic shift is also paradoxical: it is the urban dwellers who are 'cultivated', and those who actually live by tilling the soil who are not. Those who cultivate the land are less able to cultivate themselves. Agriculture leaves no leisure for culture.

The Latin root of the word 'culture' is *colere*, which can mean anything from cultivating and inhabiting to worshipping and protecting. Its meaning as 'inhabit' has evolved from the Latin *colonus* to the contemporary 'colonialism', so that titles like *Culture and Colonialism* are, once again, mildly tautological. But *colere* also ends up via the Latin *cultus* as the religious term 'cult', just as the idea of culture itself in the modern age comes to substitute itself for a fading sense of divinity and transcendence. Cultural truths – whether high art or the traditions of a people – are sometimes sacred ones, to be protected and revered. Culture, then, inherits the imposing mantle of religious authority, but also has uneasy affinities with occupation and invasion; and it is between these two poles, positive and negative, that the concept is currently pitched. It is one of those rare ideas which have been as integral to the political left as they are vital to the political right, and its social history is thus exceptionally tangled and ambivalent.

If the word 'culture' traces a momentous historical transition, it also encodes a number of key philosophical issues. Within this single term, questions of freedom and determinism, agency and endurance, change and identity, the given and the created, come dimly into focus. If culture means the active tending of natural growth, then it suggests a dialectic between the artificial and the natural, what we do to the world and what the world does to us. It is an epistemologically 'realist' notion, since it implies that there is a nature or raw material beyond ourselves; but it also has a 'constructivist' dimension, since this raw material must be worked up into humanly significant shape. So it is less a matter of deconstructing the opposition between culture and nature than of recognizing that the term 'culture' is already such a deconstruction.

In a further dialectical turn, the cultural means we use to transform

nature are themselves derived from it. The point is made rather more poetically by Polixenes in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*:

Yet nature is made better by no mean
But nature makes that mean; so over that art,
Which you say adds to nature, is an art
That nature makes . . . This is an art
Which does mend nature – change it rather, but
The art itself is nature.

(Act IV, sc. iv)

Nature produces culture which changes nature: it is a familiar motif of the so-called Last Comedies, which see culture as the medium of nature's constant self-refashioning. If Ariel in *The Tempest* is all airy agency and Caliban all earthy inertia, a more dialectical interplay of culture and nature can be found in Gonzalo's description of Ferdinand swimming from the wrecked ship:

Sir, he may live;
I saw him beat the surges under him,
And ride upon their backs; he trod the water,
Whose enmity he flung aside, and breasted
The surge most swoln that met him; his bold head
'Bove the contentious waves he kept, and oared
Himself with his good arms in lusty stroke
To th' shore . . .

(Act II, sc. i)

Swimming is an apt image of the interplay in question, since the swimmer actively creates the current which sustains him, plying the waves so they may return to buoy him up. Thus Ferdinand 'beats the surges' only to 'ride upon their backs', treads, flings, breasts and oars an ocean which is by no means just pliable material but 'contentious', antagonistic, recalcitrant to human shaping. But it is just this resistance which allows him to act upon it. Nature itself produces the means of its own

transcendence, rather as the Derridean 'supplement' is already contained by whatever it amplifies. As we shall see later, there is something oddly necessary about the gratuitous superabundance we call culture. If nature is always in some sense cultural, then cultures are built out of that ceaseless traffic with nature which we call labour. Cities are raised out of sand, wood, iron, stone, water and the like, and are thus quite as natural as rural idylls are cultural. The geographer David Harvey argues that there is nothing 'unnatural' about New York city, and doubts that tribal peoples can be said to be 'closer to nature' than the West.¹ The word 'manufacture' originally means handicraft, and is thus 'organic', but comes over time to denote mechanical mass production, and so picks up a pejorative overtone of artifice, as in 'manufacturing divisions where none exist'.

If culture originally means husbandry, it suggests both regulation and spontaneous growth. The cultural is what we can change, but the stuff to be altered has its own autonomous existence, which then lends it something of the recalcitrance of nature. But culture is also a matter of following rules, and this too involves an interplay of the regulated and unregulated. To follow a rule is not like obeying a physical law, since it involves a creative application of the rule in question. 2-4-6-8-10-30 may well represent a rule-bound sequence, just not the rule one most expects. And there can be no rules for applying rules, under pain of infinite regress. Without such open-endedness, rules would not be rules, rather as words would not be words; but this does not mean that any move whatsoever can count as following a rule. Rule-following is a matter neither of anarchy nor autocracy. Rules, like cultures, are neither sheerly random nor rigidly determined – which is to say that both involve the idea of freedom. Someone who was entirely absolved from cultural conventions would be no more free than someone who was their slave.

The idea of culture, then, signifies a double refusal: of organic determinism on the one hand, and of the autonomy of spirit on the other. It is a rebuff to both naturalism and idealism, insisting against the former that there is that within nature which exceeds and undoes it, and against idealism that even the most high-minded human

agency has its humble roots in our biology and natural environment. The fact that culture (like nature in this respect) can be both a descriptive and evaluative term, meaning what has actually evolved as well as what ought to, is relevant to this refusal of both naturalism and idealism. If the concept sets its face against determinism, it is equally wary of voluntarism. Human beings are not mere products of their environs, but neither are those environs sheer clay for their arbitrary self-fashioning. If culture transfigures nature, it is a project to which nature sets rigorous limits. The very word 'culture' contains a tension between making and being made, rationality and spontaneity, which upbraids the disembodied intellect of the Enlightenment as much as it defies the cultural reductionism of so much contemporary thought. It even hints towards the political contrast between evolution and revolution – the former 'organic' and 'spontaneous', the latter artificial and *voulu* – and suggests how one might move beyond this stale antithesis too. The word oddly commingles growth and calculation, freedom and necessity, the idea of a conscious project but also of an unplannable surplus. And if this is true of the word, so is it of some of the activities it denotes. When Friedrich Nietzsche looked for a practice which might dismantle the opposition between freedom and determinism, it was to the experience of making art that he turned, which for the artist feels not only free *and* necessary, creative *and* constrained, but each of these in terms of the other, and so appears to press these rather tattered old polarities to the point of undecidability.

There is another sense in which culture as a word faces both ways. For it can also suggest a division within ourselves, between that part of us which cultivates and refines, and whatever within us constitutes the raw material for such refinement. Once culture is grasped as *self-culture*, it posits a duality between higher and lower faculties, will and desire, reason and passion, which it then instantly offers to overcome. Nature now is not just the stuff of the world, but the dangerously appetitive stuff of the self. Like culture, the word means both what is around us and inside us, and the disruptive drives within can easily be equated with anarchic forces without. Culture is thus a matter of self-

overcoming as much as self-realization. If it celebrates the self, it also disciplines it, aesthetic and ascetic together. Human nature is not quite the same as a field of beetroot, but like a field it needs to be cultivated – so that as the word ‘culture’ shifts us from the natural to the spiritual, it also intimates an affinity between them. If we are cultural beings, we are also part of the nature on which we go to work. Indeed it is part of the point of the word ‘nature’ to remind us of the continuum between ourselves and our surroundings, just as the word ‘culture’ serves to highlight the difference.

In this process of self-shaping, action and passivity, the strenuously willed and the sheerly given, unite once more, this time in the same individuals. We resemble nature in that we, like it, are to be cuffed into shape, but we differ from it in that we can do this to ourselves, thus introducing into the world a degree of self-reflexivity to which the rest of nature cannot aspire. As self-cultivators, we are clay in our own hands, at once redeemer and unregenerate, priest and sinner in the same body. Left to its own devices, our reprobate nature will not spontaneously rise to the grace of culture; but neither can such grace be rudely forced upon it. It must rather cooperate with the innate tendencies of nature itself, in order to induce it to transcend itself. Like grace, culture must already represent a potential within human nature, if it is to stick. But the very need for culture suggests that there is something lacking in nature – that our capacity to rise to heights beyond those of our fellow natural creatures is necessary because our natural condition is also a good deal more ‘unnatural’ than that of our fellows. If there is a history and a politics concealed in the word ‘culture’, there is also a theology.

Cultivation, however, may not only be something we do to ourselves. It may also be something done to us, not least by the political state. For the state to flourish, it must inculcate in its citizens the proper sorts of spiritual disposition; and it is this which the idea of culture or *Bildung* signifies in a venerable tradition from Schiller to Matthew Arnold.² In civil society, individuals live in a state of chronic antagonism, driven by opposing interests; but the state is that transcendent realm in which these divisions can be harmoniously recon-

ciled. For this to happen, however, the state must already have been at work in civil society, soothing its rancour and refining its sensibilities; and this process is what we know as culture. Culture is a kind of ethical pedagogy which will fit us for political citizenship by liberating the ideal or collective self buried within each of us, a self which finds supreme representation in the universal realm of the state. Coleridge writes accordingly of the need to ground civilization in cultivation, ‘in the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterise our *humanity*. We must be men in order to be citizens’.³ The state incarnates culture, which in turn embodies our common humanity.

To elevate culture over politics – to be men first and citizens later – means that politics must move within a deeper ethical dimension, drawing on the resources of *Bildung* and forming individuals into suitably well-tempered, responsible citizens. This is the rhetoric of the civics class, if a little more highly pitched. But since ‘humanity’ here means a community free of conflict, what is at stake is not just the priority of culture over politics, but over a particular kind of politics. Culture, or the state, are a sort of premature utopia, abolishing struggle at an imaginary level so that they need not resolve it at a political one. Nothing could be less politically innocent than a denigration of politics in the name of the human. Those who proclaim the need for a period of ethical incubation to prepare men and women for political citizenship include those who deny colonial peoples the right to self-government until they are ‘civilized’ enough to exercise it responsibly. They overlook the fact that by far the best preparation of political independence is political independence. Ironically, then, a case which moves from humanity to culture to politics betrays by its own political bias the fact that the real movement is the other way – that it is political interests which usually govern cultural ones, and in doing so define a particular version of humanity.

What culture does, then, is distil our common humanity from our sectarian political selves, redeeming the spirit from the senses, wresting the changeless from the temporal, and plucking unity from diversity. It signifies a kind of self-division as well as a self-healing, by

which our fractious, sublunary selves are not abolished, but refined from within by a more ideal sort of humanity. The rift between state and civil society – between how the bourgeois citizen would like to represent himself and how he actually is – is preserved but also eroded. Culture is a form of universal subjectivity at work within each of us, just as the state is the presence of the universal within the particularist realm of civil society. As Friedrich Schiller puts it in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795):

Every individual human being, one may say, carries within him, potentially and prescriptively, an ideal man, the archetype of a human being, and it is his life's task to be, through all his changing manifestations, in harmony with the unchanging unity of this ideal. This archetype, which is to be discerned more or less clearly in every individual, is represented by the State, the objective and, as it were, canonical form in which all the diversity of individual subjects strives to unite.⁴

In this tradition of thought, then, culture is neither dissociated from society nor wholly at one with it. If it is a critique of social life at one level, it is complicit with it at another. It has not yet set its face entirely against the actual, as it will as the English 'Culture and Society' lineage gradually unfurls. Indeed culture for Schiller is the very mechanism of what will later be called 'hegemony', moulding human subjects to the needs of a new kind of polity, remodelling them from the ground up into the docile, moderate, high-minded, peace-loving, uncontentious, disinterested agents of that political order. But to do this, culture must also act as a kind of immanent critique or deconstruction, occupying an unregenerate society from within to break down its resistance to the motions of the spirit. Later in the modern age, culture will become either Olympian wisdom or ideological weapon, a secluded form of social critique or a process locked all too deeply into the status quo. Here, at an earlier, more buoyant moment of that history, it is still possible to see culture as at once an ideal criticism and a real social force.

Raymond Williams has traced something of the complex history of the word 'culture', distinguishing three major modern senses of the word.⁵ From its etymological roots in rural labour, the word comes first to mean something like 'civility', and then in the eighteenth century becomes more or less synonymous with 'civilization', in the sense of a general process of intellectual, spiritual and material progress. As an idea, civilization significantly equates manners and morals: to be civilized includes not spitting on the carpet as well as not decapitating one's prisoners of war. The very word implies a dubious correlation between mannerly conduct and ethical behaviour, which in England can also be found in the word 'gentleman'. As a synonym of 'civilization', 'culture' belonged to the general spirit of Enlightenment, with its cult of secular, progressive self-development. Civilization was largely a French notion – then as now, the French were thought to have a monopoly on being civilized – and named both the gradual process of social refinement and the utopian *telos* towards which it was unfolding. But whereas the French 'civilization' typically included political, economic and technical life, the German 'culture' had a more narrowly religious, artistic and intellectual reference. It could also mean the intellectual refinement of a group or individual, rather than of society as a whole. 'Civilization' played down national differences, whereas 'culture' highlighted them. The tension between 'culture' and 'civilization' had much to do with the rivalry between Germany and France.⁶

Three things then happen to the notion around the turn of the nineteenth century. For one thing, it begins to veer from being a synonym of 'civilization' towards being its antonym. This is a rare enough semantic swerve, and one which captures a momentous historical one. Like 'culture', 'civilization' is part-descriptive, part-normative: it can either neutrally designate a form of life ('Inca civilization'), or implicitly commend a life-form for its humanity, enlightenment and refinement. The adjectival form 'civilized' does this most obviously today. If civilization means the arts, urban living, civic politics, complex technologies and the like, and if this is considered an advance upon what went before, then 'civilization' is inseparably

descriptive and normative. It means life as we know it, but also suggests that it is superior to barbarism. And if civilization is not only a stage of development in itself, but one which is constantly evolving within itself, then the word once more unifies fact and value. Any existing state of affairs implies a value-judgement, since it must logically be an improvement on what went before. Whatever is is not only right, but a great deal better than what was.

The trouble begins when the descriptive and normative aspects of the word 'civilization' start to fly apart. The term really belongs to the lexicon of a pre-industrial European middle class, redolent as it is of manners, refinement, *politesse*, an elegant ease of intercourse. It is thus both personal and social: cultivation is a matter of the harmonious, all-round development of the personality, but nobody can do this in isolation. Indeed it is the dawning recognition that they cannot which helps to shift culture from its individual to its social meaning. Culture requires certain social conditions; and since these conditions may involve the state, it can have a political dimension too. Cultivation goes hand in hand with commerce, since it is commerce which breaks down rural churlishness, brings men into complex relationship and thus polishes their rough edges. But the industrial-capitalist inheritors of this sanguine age would have rather more difficulty in persuading themselves that civilization as fact was at one with civilization as value. It is a fact of early industrial-capitalist civilization that young chimney sweeps tended to develop cancer of the scrotum, but it is hard to see it as a cultural achievement on a level with the Waverley novels or Rheims cathedral.

Meanwhile, by the end of the nineteenth century, 'civilization' had also acquired an inescapably imperialist echo, which was enough to discredit it in the eyes of some liberals. Another word was accordingly needed to denote how social life should be rather than how it was, and the Germans borrowed the French *culture* for the purpose. *Kultur* or Culture thus became the name of the Romantic, pre-Marxist critique of early industrial capitalism. Whereas civilization is a sociable term, a matter of genial wit and agreeable manners, culture is an altogether more portentous affair, spiritual, critical and high-minded rather

than cheerfully at ease with the world. If the former is formulaically French, the latter is stereotypically German.

The more actual civilization appears predatory and debased, the more the idea of culture is forced into a critical attitude. *Kulturkritik* is at war with civilization rather than at one with it. If culture was once seen as allied with commerce, the two are now increasingly at odds. As Raymond Williams puts it, 'A word which had indicated a process of training within a more assured society became in the nineteenth century the focus of a deeply significant response to a society in the throes of a radical and painful change'.⁷ One reason for the emergence of 'culture', then, is the fact that 'civilization' was beginning to ring less and less plausible as a value-term. So it is that the turn of the nineteenth century witnesses a growing *Kulturpessimismus*, of which perhaps the major document is Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*, but which finds its minor English resonance in F.R. Leavis's significantly entitled *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture*. The copula of the title marks, needless to say, a glaring contrast.

If culture is to be an effective critique, however, it must retain its social dimension. It cannot simply lapse back into its earlier sense of individual cultivation. Coleridge's celebrated antithesis in *On the Constitution of Church and State* – 'The permanent distinction and the occasional contrast between cultivation and civilisation' – foreshadows much of the destiny of the word over the decades which were to follow. Born at the heart of the Enlightenment, the concept of culture now struck with Oedipal ferocity against its progenitors. Civilization was abstract, alienated, fragmented, mechanistic, utilitarian, in thrall to a crass faith in material progress; culture was holistic, organic, sensuous, autotelic, recollective. The conflict between culture and civilization thus belonged to a full-blown quarrel between tradition and modernity. But it was also to some extent a phoney war. The opposite of culture, for Matthew Arnold and his disciples, was an anarchy which was engendered by civilization itself. A grossly materialist society would breed its raw, resentful wreckers. But in refining these rebels, culture would find itself riding to the rescue of the very civilization for which it felt such disdain. Though the political wires

between the two concepts were thus notoriously crossed, civilization was on the whole bourgeois, while culture was both patrician and populist. Like Lord Byron, it represented in the main a radical brand of aristocracy, with a heartfelt sympathy for the *Volk* and a supercilious distaste for the *Burgher*.

This *volkisch* turn of the concept is the second strand of development Williams traces. From the German Idealists onwards, culture comes to assume something of its modern meaning of a distinctive way of life. For Herder, this is a conscious assault on the universalism of the Enlightenment. Culture, he insists, means not some grand, unilinear narrative of universal humanity, but a diversity of specific life-forms, each with its own peculiar laws of evolution. In fact, as Robert Young points out, the Enlightenment was by no means uniformly opposed to this view. It could be open to non-European cultures in ways which perilously relativized its own values, and some of its thinkers prefigured the later idealizing of the 'primitive' as a critique of the West.⁸ But Herder explicitly links the struggle between the two senses of the word 'culture' to a conflict between Europe and its colonial Others. He is out to oppose the Eurocentrism of culture-as-universal-civilization with the claims of those 'of all the quarters of the globe' who have not lived and perished for the dubious honour of having their posterity made happy by a speciously superior European culture.⁹

'What one nation holds indispensable to the circle of its thoughts', Herder writes, 'has never entered into the mind of a second, and by a third has been deemed injurious'.¹⁰ The origin of the idea of culture as a distinctive way of life, then, is closely bound up with a Romantic anti-colonialist penchant for suppressed 'exotic' societies. The exoticism will resurface in the twentieth century in the primitivist features of modernism, a primitivism which goes hand-in-hand with the growth of modern cultural anthropology. It will crop up rather later, this time in postmodern guise, in a romanticizing of popular culture, which now plays the expressive, spontaneous, quasi-utopian role which 'primitive' cultures had played previously.¹¹

In a gesture prefigurative of postmodernism, itself *inter alia* a vein of

late Romantic thought, Herder proposes to pluralize the term 'culture', speaking as he does of the cultures of different nations and periods, as well as of distinct social and economic cultures within the nation itself. It is this sense of the word which will tentatively take root around the mid-nineteenth century, but which will not establish itself decisively until the beginning of the twentieth. Though the words 'civilization' and 'culture' go on being used interchangeably, not least by anthropologists, culture is now also almost the opposite of civility. It is tribal rather than cosmopolitan, a reality lived on the pulses at a level far deeper than the mind, and thus closed to rational criticism. Ironically, it is now a way of describing the life-forms of 'savages' rather than a term for the civilized.¹² In a curious reversal, savages are cultured but the civilized are not. But if 'culture' can describe a 'primitive' social order, it can also provide a way of idealizing one's own. For the radical Romantics, 'organic' culture could furnish a critique of actual society; for a thinker like Edmund Burke, it could provide a metaphor for actual society, and so shield it from such criticism. The unity some could find only in pre-modern communities could also be claimed of imperial Britain. Modern states could thus plunder pre-modern ones for ideological purposes as well as for economic ones. Culture is in this sense 'a word strictly improper, divided against itself . . . both synonymous with the mainstream of Western civilisation and antithetical to it'.¹³ As a free play of disinterested thought, it can undermine selfish social interests; but since it undermines them in the name of the social whole, it reinforces the very social order it takes to task.

Culture as organic, like culture as civility, hovers indecisively between fact and value. In one sense, it does no more than designate a traditional form of life, whether of Berbers or barbers. But since community, tradition, rootedness and solidarity are notions we are supposed to approve of, at least until postmodernism happened along, there might be thought to be something affirmative in the sheer existence of such a life-form. Or, better, in the sheer fact of a plurality of such forms. It is this fusion of descriptive and normative, retained from both 'civilization' and the universalist sense of 'culture', which

will rear its head in our own time in the guise of cultural relativism. Such 'postmodern' relativism derives, ironically, from just such ambiguities in the epoch of modernity itself. For the Romantics, there is something intrinsically precious about a whole way of life, not least if 'civilization' is busy disrupting it. Such 'wholeness' is no doubt a myth: anthropologists have taught us how 'the most heterogeneous habits, thoughts and actions may lie side by side'¹⁴ in the most apparently 'primitive' of cultures, but the more rhapsodically minded have been conveniently deaf to this caveat. Whereas culture as civilization is rigorously discriminating, culture as way of life is not. What is good is whatever springs authentically from the people, whoever they may be. The case works rather better if you are thinking of, say, people like the Navajo rather than people like the Alabama Mothers for Moral Purity, but this was a distinction which was rapidly lost. Culture as civilization had borrowed its distinctions between high and low from early anthropology, for which some cultures were plainly superior to others; but as the debates unfolded, the anthropological sense of the word became more descriptive than evaluative. Simply being a culture of some kind was a value in itself; but it would no more make sense to elevate one such culture over another than to claim that the grammar of Catalan was superior to that of Arabic.

For the postmodernist, by contrast, whole ways of life are to be celebrated when they are those of dissident or minority groups, but to be castigated when they are those of majorities. Postmodern 'identity politics' thus include lesbianism but not nationalism, which for earlier Romantic radicals, as opposed to later postmodern ones, would be a wholly illogical move. The former camp, living through an era of political revolution, were protected from the absurdity of believing that majority movements or consensuses are invariably benighted. The latter camp, flourishing at a later, less euphoric phase of the same history, has abandoned a belief in radical mass movements, having precious few of them to remember. As a theory, postmodernism comes after the great mid-twentieth-century national liberation movements, and is either literally or metaphorically too young to recollect such seismic political upheavals. Indeed the very term 'post-colonialism'

means a concern with 'Third World' societies which have already lived through their anti-colonial struggles, and which are thus unlikely to prove an embarrassment to those Western theorists who are fond of the underdog but distinctly more sceptical about such concepts as political revolution. It is also, perhaps, rather easier to feel solidarity with 'Third World' nations which are not currently in the business of killing one's compatriots.

To pluralize the concept of culture is not easily compatible with retaining its positive charge. It is simple enough to feel enthusiastic about culture as humanistic self-development, or even about, say, Bolivian culture, since any such complex formation is bound to include a good many benign features. But once one begins, in a spirit of generous pluralism, to break down the idea of culture to cover, say, 'police canteen culture', 'sexual-psychopath culture' or 'Mafia culture', then it is less evident that these are cultural forms to be approved simply because they are cultural forms. Or, indeed, simply because they are part of a rich diversity of such forms. Historically speaking, there has been a rich diversity of cultures of torture, but even devout pluralists would be loath to affirm this as one more instance of the colourful tapestry of human experience. Those who regard plurality as a value in itself are pure formalists, and have obviously not noticed the astonishingly imaginative variety of forms which, say, racism can assume. In any case, as with much postmodern thought, pluralism is here oddly crossed with self-identity. Rather than dissolving discrete identities, it multiplies them: Pluralism presupposes identity, rather as hybridization presupposes purity. Strictly speaking, one can only hybridize a culture which is pure; but as Edward Said suggests, 'all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic'.¹⁵ One needs to recall, too, that no human culture is more heterogeneous than capitalism.

If the first important variant in the word 'culture' is anti-capitalist critique, and the second a narrowing-cum-pluralizing of the notion to a whole way of life, the third is its gradual specialization to the arts. Even here the word can be shrunk or expanded, since culture in

this sense can include intellectual activity in general (science, philosophy, scholarship and the like), or be slimmed down even further to allegedly more 'imaginative' pursuits such as music, painting and literature. 'Cultured' people are people who have culture in this sense. This sense of the word, too, signals a dramatic historical development. It suggests, for one thing, that science, philosophy, politics and economics can no longer be regarded as creative or imaginative. It also suggests – to put the case at its bleakest – that 'civilized' values are now to be found only in fantasy. And this is clearly a caustic comment on social reality. If creativity could now be found in art, was this because it could be found nowhere else? Once culture comes to mean learning and the arts, activities confined to a tiny proportion of men and women, the idea is at once intensified and impoverished.

The story of what this will do to the arts themselves, as they find themselves accorded a momentous social significance which they are really too fragile and delicate to sustain, crumbling from the inside as they are forced to stand in for God or happiness or political justice, belongs to the narrative of modernism. It is postmodernism which seeks to relieve the arts of this oppressive burden of anxiety, urging them to forget all such portentous dreams of depth, and thus liberating them into a fairly trifling sort of freedom. Long before then, however, Romanticism had tried to square the circle between finding in aesthetic culture an alternative to politics, and finding in it the very paradigm of a transformed political order. This was not quite as hard as it seems, since if the whole point of art was its pointlessness, then the most flamboyant aestheticist was also in a sense the most dedicated revolutionary, pledged to an idea of value as self-validating which was the very reverse of capitalist utility. Art could now model the good life not by representing it but simply by being itself, by what it showed rather than by what it said, offering the scandal of its own pointlessly self-delighting existence as a silent critique of exchange-value and instrumental rationality. But this elevation of art in the service of humanity was inevitably self-undoing, as it lent the Romantic artist a transcendent status at odds with his or her political significance, and

as, in the perilous trap of all utopia, the image of the good life came gradually to stand in for its actual unavailability.

Culture was self-undoing in another sense too. What made it critical of industrial capitalism was its affirmation of wholeness, symmetry, the all-round development of human capacities. From Schiller to Ruskin, this wholeness is set against the lop-sided effects of a division of labour which stunts and narrows human powers. Marxism, too, has some of its sources in this Romantic-humanist tradition. But if culture is a free, self-delighting play of spirit in which all human capacities can be disinterestedly cherished, then it is also an idea which sets its face firmly against partisanship. To be committed is to be uncultivated. Matthew Arnold may have believed in culture as social improvement, but he also refused to take sides over the slavery question in the American civil war. Culture is thus an antidote to politics, tempering that fanatical tunnel vision in its appeal to equipoise, to keeping the mind serenely untainted by whatever is tendentious, unbalanced, sectarian. Indeed for all postmodernism's dislike of liberal humanism, there is more than a hint of that vision in its own pluralist unease with hard-and-fast positions, its mistaking of the determinate for the dogmatic. Culture, then, may be a critique of capitalism, but it is just as much a critique of the commitments which oppose it. For its many-sided ideal to be realized, a strenuously one-sided politics would be necessary; but the means would then run disastrously counter to the end. Culture requires of those clamouring for justice that they look beyond their own partial interests to the whole – which is to say, to their rulers' interests as well as their own. It can then make nothing of the fact that these interests may be mutually contradictory. For culture to become associated with justice for minority groups, as it has been in our own time, is thus a decisively new development.

In this refusal of partisanship, culture appears a politically neutral notion. But it is precisely in this formal commitment to many-sidedness that it is most clamorously partisan. Culture is indifferent to which human faculties should be realized, and so would seem genuinely disinterested at the level of content. It insists only that these faculties must be realized harmoniously, each judiciously counterbalancing the

other, and thus insinuates a politics at the level of form. We are asked to believe that unity is inherently preferable to conflict, or symmetry to one-sidedness. We are also asked to believe, even more implausibly, that this is not itself a political position. Similarly, since these powers are to be realized purely for their own sake, culture can hardly stand accused of political instrumentality. But there is, in fact, a politics implicit precisely in this non-utility – either the patrician politics of those who have the leisure and liberty to cast utility disdainfully to one side, or the utopian politics of those who wish to see a society beyond exchange-value.

It is not, in fact, just culture, but a particular selection of cultural values, which is in question here. To be civilized or cultivated is to be blessed with refined feelings, well-tempered passions, agreeable manners and an open mind. It is to behave reasonably and moderately, with an innate sensitivity to others' interests, to exercise self-discipline, and to be prepared to sacrifice one's own selfish interests to the good of the whole. However splendid some of these prescriptions may be, they are certainly not politically innocent. On the contrary, the cultivated individual sounds suspiciously like a mildly conservative liberal. It is as though BBC newscasters set the paradigm for humanity at large. This civilized individual certainly does not sound like a political revolutionary, even though revolution is part of civilization too. The word 'reasonable' here means something like 'open to persuasion' or 'willing to compromise', as though all passionate conviction was *ipso facto* irrational. Culture is on the side of sentiment rather than passion, which is to say on the side of the mannered middle classes rather than the irate masses. Given the importance of equipoise, it is hard to see why one would not be required to counterbalance an objection to racism with its opposite. To be unequivocally opposed to racism would seem distinctly non-pluralist. Since moderation is always a virtue, a mild distaste for child prostitution would seem more appropriate than a vehement opposition to it. And since action would seem to imply a fairly definitive set of choices, this version of culture is inevitably more contemplative than *engagé*.

Such, at least, would seem true of Friedrich Schiller's notion of the

aesthetic, which he presents to us as a 'negative state of complete absence of determination'.¹⁶ In the aesthetic condition, 'man is Nought, if we are thinking of any particular result rather than of the totality of his powers'¹⁷; we are suspended instead in a state of perpetual possibility, a kind of nirvanic negation of all determinacy. Culture, or the aesthetic, is without bias to any specific social interest, but precisely on that account is a general activating capacity. It is not so much opposed to action, as the creative source of any action whatsoever. Culture, 'because it takes under its protection no single one of man's faculties to the exclusion of the others . . . favours each and all of them without distinction; and it favours no single one more than another for the simple reason that it is the ground of possibility of them all'.¹⁸ Unable, as it were, to say one thing without saying anything, culture says nothing whatsoever, so boundlessly eloquent as to be speechless. In cultivating every possibility to its limit, it risks leaving us muscle-bound and immobilized. Such is the paralytic effect of Romantic irony. When we do come to act, we close off this free play with the sordidly specific; but at least we do so in the awareness of other possibilities, and allow that unbounded sense of creative potential to inform whatever it is we do.

For Schiller, then, culture would seem at once the source of action and the negation of it. There is a tension between what makes our practice creative, and the very earth-bound fact of practice itself. For Matthew Arnold, rather similarly, culture is at once an ideal of absolute perfection and the imperfect historical process which labours to that end. In both cases, there would seem to be some constitutive gap between culture and its fleshly incarnation, as the many-sidedness of the aesthetic inspires us to actions which contradict it in their very determinateness.

If the word 'culture' is an historical and philosophical text, it is also the site of a political conflict. As Raymond Williams puts it: 'The complex of senses (within the term) indicates a complex argument about the relations between general human development and a particular way of life, and between both and the works and practices of art and intelligence'.¹⁹ This, in fact, is the narrative traced in Williams's

Culture and Society 1780–1950, which charts the indigenous English version of European *Kulturphilosophie*. One might see this current of thought as struggling to connect various meanings of culture which are gradually floating apart: culture (in the sense of the arts) defines a quality of fine living (culture as civility) which it is the task of political change to realize in culture (in the sense of social life) as a whole. The aesthetic and anthropological are thus reunited. From Coleridge to F.R. Leavis, the broader, socially responsible sense of culture is kept firmly in play, but can only be defined by a more specialized sense of the term (culture as the arts) which threatens constantly to substitute for it. In a stalled dialectic of these two senses of culture, Arnold and Ruskin recognize that without social change, the arts and ‘fine living’ themselves are in deadly danger; yet they also believe that the arts are among the forlornly few instruments of such transformation. In England, it is not until William Morris, who harnesses this *Kulturphilosophie* to an actual political force – the working-class movement – that this vicious semantic circle can be broken.

The Williams of *Keywords* is perhaps not alert enough to the inner logic of the changes he records. What is it that connects culture as utopian critique, culture as way of life and culture as artistic creation? The answer is surely a negative one: all three are in different ways reactions to the failure of culture as actual civilization – as the grand narrative of human self-development. If this becomes a hard story to credit as industrial capitalism unfolds, a tall tale inherited from a somewhat more sanguine past, then the idea of culture is faced with some unpalatable alternatives. It can retain its global reach and social relevance, but recoil from the dismal present to become a poignantly endangered image of a desirable future. Another such image, unexpectedly enough, is the ancient past, which resembles an emancipated future in the sheer unignorable fact of its non-existence. This is culture as utopian critique, at once prodigiously creative and politically enervated, which is always in danger of disappearing into the very critical distance from *Realpolitik* it so devastatingly establishes.

Alternatively, culture can survive by abjuring all such abstraction and going concrete, becoming the culture of Bavaria or Microsoft or

the Bushmen; but this risks lending it a much-needed specificity in proportion to its loss of normativity. For the Romantics, this sense of culture retains its normative force, since these forms of *Gemeinschaft* can be drawn on for a resourceful critique of industrial-capitalist *Gesellschaft*. Postmodern thought, by contrast, is far too allergic to nostalgia to take this sentimentalist path, forgetful that for a Walter Benjamin even nostalgia can be given a revolutionary meaning. What is valuable for postmodern theory is more the formal fact of the plurality of these cultures than their intrinsic content. In fact as far as their content goes there can really be nothing to choose between them, since the criteria of any such choice must themselves be culture-bound. The concept of culture thus gains in specificity what it loses in critical capacity, rather as the Constructivist rocking-chair is a more sociable art-form than the high modernist artwork, but only at the cost of its critical edge.

The third response to the crisis of culture as civilization, as we have seen, is to shrink the whole category to a handful of artistic works. Culture here means a body of artistic and intellectual work of agreed value, along with the institutions which produce, disseminate and regulate it. In this fairly recent meaning of the word, culture is both symptom and solution. If culture is an oasis of value, then it offers a solution of sorts. But if learning and the arts are the sole surviving enclaves of creativity, then we are most certainly in dire trouble. Under what social conditions does creativity become confined to music and poetry, while science, technology, politics, work and domesticity become drearily prosaic? One can ask of this notion of culture what Marx famously inquired of religion: For what grievous estrangement is such transcendence a poor compensation?

Yet this minority idea of culture, however much a symptom of historical crisis, is also a kind of solution. Like culture as way of life, it lends tone and texture to the Enlightenment abstraction of culture as civilization. In the most fertile currents of English literary criticism from Wordsworth to Orwell, it is the arts, not least the arts of ordinary language, which offer a sensitive index of the quality of social life as a whole. But if culture in this sense of the word has the sensuous

immediacy of culture as way of life, it also inherits the normative bias of culture as civilization. The arts may reflect fine living, but they are also the measure of it. If they embody, they also evaluate. In this sense, they link the actual and the desirable in the manner of a radical politics.

The three distinct senses of culture are thus not easily separable. If culture as critique is to be more than idle fantasy, it must point to those practices in the present which prefigure something of the friendship and fulfilment for which it yearns. It finds these partly in artistic production, and partly in those marginal cultures which have not yet been wholly absorbed by the logic of utility. By roping in culture in these other senses, culture as critique tries to avoid the purely sub-junctive mood of 'bad' utopia, which consists simply in a sort of wistful yearning, a 'wouldn't it be nice if' with no basis in the actual. The political equivalent of this is the infantile disorder known as ultra-leftism, which negates the present in the name of some inconceivably alternative future. 'Good' utopia, by contrast, finds a bridge between present and future in those forces within the present which are potentially able to transform it. A desirable future must also be a feasible one. By linking itself to these other senses of culture, which at least have the virtue of actually existing, the more utopian brand of culture can thus become a form of immanent critique, judging the present to be lacking by measuring it against norms which it has generated itself. In this sense, too, culture can unite fact and value, as both an account of the actual and a foretaste of the desirable. If the actual contains that which contradicts it, then the term 'culture' is bound to face both ways. Deconstruction, which shows how a situation it is bound to violate its own logic in the very effort to adhere to it, is simply a more recent name for this traditional notion of immanent critique. For the radical Romantics, art, the imagination, folk culture or 'primitive' communities are signs of a creative energy which must be spread to political society as a whole. For Marxism, arriving in Romanticism's wake, it is a rather less exalted form of creative energy, that of the working class, which might transfigure the very social order of which it is the product.

Culture in this sense arises when civilization begins to seem self-contradictory. As civilized society unfolds, there comes a point where it forces upon some of its theorists a strikingly new kind of reflection, known as dialectical thought. This is, as it were, a response to a certain embarrassment. Dialectical thought arises because it is less and less possible to ignore the fact that civilization, in the very act of realizing some human potentials, also damagingly suppresses others. It is the internal relation between these two processes which breeds this new intellectual habit. You can rationalize this contradiction by confining the word 'civilization' to a value-term and contrasting it with present-day society. This, presumably, is what Gandhi had in mind when asked what he thought of British civilization: 'I think it would be a very good idea'. But one can also dub the suppressed capacities 'culture', and the repressive ones 'civilization'. The virtue of this move is that culture can act as a critique of the present while being based solidly within it. It is neither the mere other of society, nor (as with 'civilization') identical with it, but moves both with and against the grain of historical progress. Culture is not some vague fantasy of fulfilment, but a set of potentials bred by history and subversively at work within it.

The trick is to know how to unlock these capacities, and Marx's answer will be socialism. For him, nothing in the socialist future can be authentic unless it somehow takes its cue from the capitalist present. But if it is a chastening thought that the positive and negative aspects of history are so closely linked, it is also an inspiring one. For the truth is that repression, exploitation and the like would not work unless there were reasonably autonomous, reflective, resourceful human beings to exploit or be exploited. There is no need to repress creative capacities which do not exist. These are scarcely the soundest reasons for rejoicing. It seems odd to foster faith in human beings on the grounds that they are capable of being exploited. Even so, it is true that those more benign cultural practices we know as nurture are implicit in the very existence of injustice. Only someone who has been cared for as an infant can be unjust, since otherwise he would not be around to abuse you. All cultures must include such practices

as child-rearing, education, welfare, communication, mutual support, otherwise they would be unable to reproduce themselves, and thus unable among other things to engage in exploitative practices. Of course child-rearing can be sadistic, communication garbled and education brutally autocratic. But no culture can be entirely negative, since just to achieve its vicious ends it must foster capacities which always imply virtuous uses. Torture requires the sort of judgement, initiative and intelligence which can also be used to abolish it. In this sense, all cultures are self-contradictory. But this is grounds for hope as well as cynicism, since it means that they themselves breed the forces which might transform them. It is not a matter of parachuting in such forces from some metaphysical outer space.

There are other ways in which these three senses of culture interact. The idea of culture as an organic way of life belongs to 'high' culture quite as much as Berlioz does. As a concept, it is the product of cultivated intellectuals, and can represent the primordial other which might revitalize their own degenerate societies. Whenever one hears admiring talk of the savage, one can be sure that one is in the presence of sophisticates. Indeed it took a sophisticate, Sigmund Freud, to reveal what incestuous desires may lurk within our dreams of sensuous wholeness, our hankering for a body which is warmly palpable yet eternally elusive. Culture, which is at once a concrete reality and a cloudy vision of perfection, captures something of this duality. Modernist art turns to these primeval notions in order to survive a philistine modernity, and mythology provides a pivot between the two. The overbred and the underdeveloped forge strange alliances.

But the two notions of culture are related in other ways too. Culture as the arts may be the harbinger of a new social existence, but the case is curiously circular, since without such social change the arts themselves are in jeopardy. The artistic imagination, so the argument runs, can flourish only in an organic social order, and will not take root in the shallow soil of modernity. Individual cultivation now depends more and more on culture in its social sense. So it is that Henry James and T.S. Eliot abandon the 'inorganic' society of their native United States for a more mannered, devious, richly sedimented Eu-

rope. If the United States stands for civilization, a thoroughly secular notion, Europe symbolizes culture, a quasi-religious one. Art is fatally compromised by a society which enthuses over it only in the auction room, and whose abstract logic strips the world of sensuousness. It is also tainted by a social order for which truth has no utility, and value means what will sell. Just for the arts to survive, then, it might be necessary to become a political reactionary or revolutionary, wind back the clock *à la* Ruskin to the corporate order of feudal Gothic or wind it forward with William Morris to a socialism which has outlived the commodity form.

It is just as easy, however, to see these two senses of culture as locked in contention. Is not overbredness the enemy of action? Might not the cloistered, nuanced, myriad-minded sensitivity which the arts bring with them unfit us for broader, less ambivalent commitments? One would not generally assign the chair of the sanitation committee to a poet. Does not the focused intensity which the fine arts demand disable us for such humdrum affairs, even if it is on socially conscious artworks that we bend our attention? As for the more *gemeinschaftlich* sense of culture, it is not hard to see how this involves a transference to society of the values linked with culture as art. Culture as way of life is an aestheticized version of society, finding in it the unity, sensuous immediacy and freedom from conflict which we associate with the aesthetic artefact. The word 'culture', which is supposed to designate a kind of society, is in fact a normative way of imagining that society. It can also be a way of imagining one's own social conditions on the model of other people's, either in the past, the bush, or the political future.

Though culture is a popular word with postmodernism, its most important sources remain pre-modern. As an idea, culture begins to matter at four points of historical crisis: when it becomes the only apparent alternative to a degraded society; when it seems that without deep-seated social change, culture in the sense of the arts and fine living will no longer even be possible; when it provides the terms in which a group or people seeks its political emancipation; and when an imperialist power is forced to come to terms with the

way of life of those it subjugates. Of these, it is probably the latter pair which have put the idea most decisively on the twentieth-century agenda. We owe our modern notion of culture in large part to nationalism and colonialism, along with the growth of an anthropology in the service of imperial power. At roughly the same historical point, the emergence of 'mass' culture in the West lent the concept an added urgency. It is with Romantic nationalists like Herder and Fichte that the idea of a distinct ethnic culture, with political rights simply by virtue of this ethnic peculiarity, first springs up;²⁰ and culture is vital to nationalism in the way that it is not, or not so much, to, say, class struggle, civil rights or famine relief. On one view, nationalism is what adapts primordial bonds to modern complexities. As the pre-modern nation gives way to the modern nation-state, the structure of traditional roles can no longer hold society together, and it is culture, in the sense of a common language, inheritance, educational system, shared values and the like, which steps in as the principle of social unity.²¹ Culture, in other words, comes to prominence intellectually when it becomes a force to be reckoned with politically.

It is with the unfolding of nineteenth-century colonialism that the anthropological meaning of culture as a unique way of life first starts to take grip. And the way of life in question is usually that of the 'uncivilized'. As we have seen already, culture as civility is the opposite of barbarism, but culture as a way of life can be identical with it. Herder, so Geoffrey Hartman considers, is the first to use the word culture 'in the modern sense of an *identity culture*: a sociable, populist, and traditionary way of life, characterised by a quality that pervades everything and makes a person feel rooted or at home'.²² Culture, in short, is other people.²³ As Fredric Jameson has argued, culture is always 'an idea of the Other (even when I reassume it for myself)'.²⁴ It is unlikely that the Victorians thought of themselves as a 'culture'; this would not only have meant seeing themselves in the round, but seeing themselves as just one possible life-form among many. To define one's life-world as a culture is to risk relativizing it. One's own way of life is simply human; it is other people who are ethnic, idiosyncratic,

culturally peculiar. In a similar way, one's own views are reasonable, while other people's are extremist.

If the science of anthropology marks the point where the West begins to convert other societies into legitimate objects of study, the real sign of political crisis is when it feels the need to do this to itself. For there are savages within Western society too, enigmatic, half-intelligible creatures ruled by ferocious passions and given to mutinous behaviour; and these too will need to become objects of disciplined knowledge. Positivism, the first self-consciously 'scientific' school of sociology, discloses the evolutionary laws by which industrial society is becoming inexorably more corporate, laws which an unruly proletariat needs to recognize as no more violable than the forces which stir the waves. Somewhat later, it will be part of the task of anthropology to conspire in 'the massive perceptual illusion through which a nascent imperialism brought "savages" into being, freezing them conceptually in their sub-human otherness even as it disrupted their social formations and liquidated them physically'.²⁵

The Romantic version of culture thus evolved over time into a 'scientific' one. But there were key affinities even so. The former's idealizing of the 'folk', of vital sub-cultures buried deep within its own society, could be transferred easily enough to those primitive types who lived abroad rather than at home. Both folk and primitives are residues of the past within the present, quaintly archaic beings who crop up like so many time-warps within the contemporary. Romantic organicism could thus be recast as anthropological functionalism, grasping such 'primitive' cultures as coherent and non-contradictory. The word 'whole' in the phrase 'a whole way of life' floats ambiguously between fact and value, meaning a form of life you can grasp in the round because you are standing outside it, but also one with an integrity of being lacking to your own. Culture thus places your own agnostic, atomistic way of life under judgement, but quite literally from a long way off.

Moreover, the idea of culture, all the way from its etymological origins in the tending of natural growth, had always been a way of decentring consciousness. If it meant in its narrower usage the finest,

most exquisitely conscious products of human history, its more general meaning signalled exactly the opposite. With its resonance of organic process and stealthy evolution, culture was a quasi-determinist concept, meaning those features of social life – custom, kinship, language, ritual, mythology – which choose us far more than we choose them. Ironically, then, the idea of culture cut both above and below ordinary social life, at once incomparably more conscious and considerably less calculable. ‘Civilization’, by contrast, has a ring of agency and awareness about it, an aura of rational projection and urban planning, as a collective project by which cities are wrested from swamps and cathedrals raised to the skies. Part of the scandal of Marxism had been to treat civilization as though it were culture – to write, in short, the history of humanity’s political unconscious, of those social processes which, as Marx put it, go on ‘behind the backs’ of the agents concerned. As with Freud a little later, a finely civilized consciousness is dislodged to reveal the hidden forces which put it in place. As one reviewer of *Capital* commented to its author’s approval: ‘If in the history of civilisation, the conscious elements play a part so subordinate, then it is self-evident that a critical enquiry whose subject-matter is civilisation, can, less than anything else, have for its basis any form of, or any result of, consciousness’.²⁶

Culture, then, is the unconscious *verso* of the *recto* of civilized life, the taken-for-granted beliefs and predilections which must be dimly present for us to be able to act at all. It is what comes naturally, bred in the bone rather than conceived by the brain. It is not surprising, then, that the concept should have found such a hospitable place in the study of ‘primitive’ societies, which in the eyes of the anthropologist allowed their myths, rituals, kinship systems and ancestral traditions to do their thinking for them. They were a kind of South Sea island version of English common law and the House of Lords, living in a Burkeian utopia in which instinct, custom, piety and ancestral law worked all by themselves, without the meddling intervention of analytical reason. The ‘savage mind’ thus had a particular importance for cultural modernism, which from T.S. Eliot’s fertility cults to Stravinsky’s rites of spring could find in it a shadowy critique of Enlightenment rationality.

One could even have one’s theoretical cake and eat it, finding in these ‘primitive’ cultures both a critique of such rationality and a confirmation of it. If their supposedly concrete, sensuous habits of thought offered a rebuke to the desiccated reason of the West, the unconscious codes which governed that thought had all the exacting rigour of algebra or linguistics. So it was that the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss could present such ‘primitives’ as both consolingly similar to and exotically different from ourselves. If they thought in terms of earth and moon, they did so with all the elegant complexity of nuclear physics.²⁷ Tradition and modernity could thus be agreeably harmonized, a project which structuralism had inherited, unfinished, from high modernism. The most avant-garde mentality thus turned full circle to meet up with the most archaic; indeed for some Romantic thinkers it was only in this way that a dissolute Western culture could be regenerated. Having reached a point of complex decadence, civilization could refresh itself only at the fountain of culture, looking backward in order to move forward. Modernism accordingly put time into reverse gear, finding in the past an image of the future.

Structuralism was not the only branch of literary theory which could trace some of its origins back to imperialism. Hermeneutics, behind which lurks an anxious query as to whether the other is intelligible at all, is hardly irrelevant to the project, and neither is psychoanalysis, which unearths an atavistic subtext at the very roots of human consciousness. Mythological or archetypal criticism does something of the same, while post-structuralism, one of whose leading exponents hails from a former French colony, calls into question what it sees as a profoundly Eurocentric metaphysics. As for postmodern theory, nothing could be less to its taste than the idea of a stable, pre-modern, tightly unified culture, at the very thought of which it reaches for its hybridity and open-endedness. But the post- and pre-modern are more akin than this would suggest. What they share in common is the high, sometimes extravagant respect they accord to culture as such. In fact one might claim that culture is a pre-modern and postmodern rather than modern idea; if it flourishes in the era of modernity, it is largely as a trace of the past or an anticipation of the future.

What links pre-modern and postmodern orders is that for both, though for quite different reasons, culture is a dominant level of social life. If it bulks so large in traditional societies, it is because it is less a 'level' at all than a pervasive medium within which other kinds of activity go on. Politics, sexuality and economic production are still caught up to some extent in a symbolic order of meaning. As the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins observes, in a smack at the Marxist base/superstructure model, 'In the tribal cultures, economy, polity, ritual, and ideology do not appear as distinct "systems"'.²⁸ In the postmodern world, culture and social life are once again closely allied, but now in the shape of the aesthetics of the commodity, the spectacularization of politics, the consumerism of life-style, the centrality of the image, and the final integration of culture into commodity production in general. Aesthetics, which began life as a term for everyday perceptual experience and only later became specialized to art, had now come full circle and rejoined its mundane origin, just as two senses of culture – the arts and the common life – had now been conflated in style, fashion, advertising, media and the like.

What happens in between is modernity, for which culture is not the most vital of concepts. Indeed it is hard for us to think ourselves back to a time when all of our own most fashionable buzz-words – *bodiliness, difference, locality, imagination, cultural identity* – were seen as the obstacles to an emancipatory politics, rather than its terms of reference. Culture for the Enlightenment meant, roughly speaking, those regressive attachments which prevented us from entering upon our citizenship of the world. It signified our sentiment for place, nostalgia for tradition, preference for tribe, reverence for hierarchy. Difference was largely a reactionary doctrine which denied the equality to which all men and women were entitled. An assault on Reason in the name of intuition or the wisdom of the body was a charter for mindless prejudice. Imagination was a sickness of the mind which prevented us from seeing the world as it was, and so of acting to transform it. And to deny Nature in the name of Culture was almost certainly to end up on the wrong side of the barricades.

Culture, to be sure, still had its place; but as the modern age un-

folded, that place was either oppositional or supplementary. Either culture became a rather toothless form of political critique, or it was the protected area into which one could siphon off all of those potentially disruptive energies, spiritual, artistic or erotic, for which modernity could make less and less provision. This area, like most officially sacred spaces, was both venerated and ignored, centred and sidelined. Culture was no longer a description of what one was, but of what one might be or used to be. It was less a name for your own group than for your bohemian dissenters, or, as the nineteenth century drew on, for less sophisticated peoples living a long way off. For culture no longer to describe social existence as it is speaks eloquently of a certain kind of society. As Andrew Milner points out, 'it is only in modern industrial democracies that "culture" and "society" become excluded from both politics and economics . . . modern society is understood as distinctively and unusually asocial, its economic and political life characteristically "normless" and "value-free", in short, uncultured'.²⁹ Our very notion of culture thus rests on a peculiarly modern alienation of the social from the economic, meaning from material life. Only in a society whose everyday existence seems drained of value could 'culture' come to exclude material reproduction; yet only in this way could the concept become a critique of that life. As Raymond Williams comments, culture emerges as a notion from 'the recognition of the practical separation of certain moral and intellectual activities from the driven impetus of a new kind of society'. This notion then becomes 'a court of human appeal, to be set over the processes of practical social judgement . . . as a mitigating and rallying alternative'.³⁰ Culture is thus symptomatic of a division which it offers to overcome. As the sceptic remarked of psychoanalysis, it is itself the illness to which it proposes a cure.