

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Aesthetic Education and the Ubiquitous Bourgeois

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The idea that one needs to learn what is beautiful, that what happens at the moment of aesthetic experience is not an automatic response, like squinting in bright light or sweating in the heat, is widely shared. Nevertheless, the process whereby one comes to learn what is beautiful gets surprisingly little sustained attention. Analysis is constrained by powerful critical conventions, including the sense that there is not much left to say once one has identified the interest determining the claim that something is beautiful. In fact, two contradictory and generally unstated (because so apparently self-evident) beliefs shape the modern relationship to aesthetic experience and limit the possibility of reflection: on the one hand, the conviction that true aesthetic responses are fundamentally individual and personal, and for that reason not capable of being taught, and, on the other, the certainty that relations to art are constrained by the interests of the group, and therefore absolutely determined and inevitable—making instruction unnecessary or worse. The temptation of recent critics has been to think of the project of aesthetic education as Karl Marx had it when he described culture as a kind of training, one in which the particular pleasures or interests of one social class are reinscribed as necessary and universal. From this perspective, the notion that social progress might be attendant on learning—and learning through art—gives off a suspicious smell of reactionary condescension even as it violates several widely shared principles about the intersection of education and politics.

Current sensibilities, then, have made it difficult to recognize in the writings of Friedrich Schiller and Matthew Arnold anything other than reactionary formulations of very limited interest to contemporary thought.¹ The sense that the aesthetic experience implied *Bildung*, or development, “culture” not in its simplest and least compelling sense—where it means the established body of knowledge of a

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group—but understood as a verb, a process (“cultivation”), was central to nineteenth-century analyses. It is only the dynamic nature of the processes in which it plays a vital part that allows authors such as Schiller and Arnold to discover in the aesthetic a standard by which to judge the class systems of their day. Arnold himself proposes that culture needs to be something more than a self-regarding claim to class distinction. And so, when he writes of “culture which is . . . valued either out of sheer vanity and ignorance, or else as an engine of social and class distinction, separating its holder, like a badge or title, from other people who have not got it,” he proposes a simple rebuttal: “No serious man would call this *culture*, or attach any value to it, as culture, at all” (*Culture* 33). Despite what he says, however, and his open contempt for the ruling classes of his day notwithstanding (“Philistines” or “Barbarians,” after all), an accurate sense of Arnold’s values will be impossible for the contemporary sensibility that is unable to forgive him for the terms of praise he was prone to using. “Sweetness and light” and “the best which has been thought and said” are formulations that sound self-evidently troubling to the modern Anglo-American academic ear, evoking as they do hierarchies of judgment that will tend to be understood as necessarily pernicious. It has gone nearly without saying that these formulations, like Schiller’s original call to think about the aesthetic as entailing an educational project that would heal various social and conceptual rifts, are so many covers that culture gives to hidden but marked political interests only hinted at by Schiller’s own use of appalling terms such as “barbarians” and “savages.”

In short, the formulations of Schiller and Arnold have been understood as self-evidently and foundationally reactionary in main lines of progressive thought in the twentieth century—when they were thought about at all. The aspirations toward culture laid out in Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794), Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1867–68), and other works by both authors have been held not simply to create or instantiate a drive to validate the taste of a dominant upper class, but to advance the interests of a social

elite at the cost of other elements in society, a steep price given that it amounted to both the loss of popular forms of culture and the loss of potential political power. The will to aesthetic autonomy, which in both authors is an aspirational ideal helping shape *Bildung* in the face of the class antagonisms that characterize modernity, was discovered at every point to be the opposite of autonomous, to have a particular class interest at its core.²

The tendency to dismiss the aesthetic (and especially aesthetic education) as being hopelessly, dangerously bourgeois is part of a long tradition of far greater interest than it can seem to those who see an alignment with the bourgeois as antithetical to progressive politics. While the politics inherent in the category in the nineteenth century—and inherent in categorization itself—really ought to be recognized as too complicated to allow for such conceptual reductions, nevertheless the retrospective simplifications of later eras have been important in culture, as has the rage attendant on those simplifications. In order to understand what Schiller, Arnold, and others are saying about aesthetic education—to recover what contemporary sensibilities hide and to illuminate what’s behind those sensibilities in the first place—one has to look to the most awkward class of all. I had intended in this brief essay to try to recuperate the dynamic nature of formulations associated with Schiller and Arnold. I have found, however, that I need to spend most of my time on the unavoidable centrality of the bourgeois—and so on a line of thought that comes from what appears to be a different direction. Foundational texts by Charles Baudelaire and Marx will provide a context for understanding the nature of a term that is challenging precisely because it does not typically identify anyone so much as the person deploying it.

The centrality of the bourgeois emerges, alongside the complex forms of indignation the category generates, at the very beginning of modern writings on art, this being pretty much the first topic addressed by Baudelaire in his first “Salon” in 1845. “This word, which stinks a mile away of studio slang,” the poet-critic declares, “ought to be deleted from the dictionary of criticism” (“Salon” 33). It is

not that the category the term describes doesn't exist. It is its ubiquity that makes it practically useless, along with the fact that the rage that accompanies the term is always misplaced, originating as it does not from the rivalrous contention of members of distinct class identities but from the indignation provoked by partial or inadequate instruction:

And to begin with, on the subject of that impertinent designation "the bourgeois," we hereby let it be known that we do not at all subscribe to the prejudices of our important colleagues, with art at their finger-tips, who for several years now have been doing all they can to hurl anathemas at the inoffensive being, who would ask for nothing better than to appreciate good painting, if the gentlemen in question knew the art of making him understand it and if the artists showed him good painting more often. (33)

Baudelaire proposed, almost two centuries ago—and with the overlapping levels of irony and self-implication that always characterize his treatment of audience—not only that the term *bourgeois* was already a tired bore when he was writing but that the category involved a serious failure of education that might not be the learner's fault. "There are no more bourgeois now that the bourgeois himself uses this insulting epithet" (33), he proposes, suggesting something about the function of a term often evoked as a gesture of self-hate that is simultaneously a proleptic form of self-protection, "a fact that shows his willingness to become art-minded, and listen to what the columnists have to say" (33–34). Baudelaire goes on to directly contradict his denial of the existence of the category as he continues to demonstrate the entirely self-reflexive nature of the term: "There are so many bourgeois amongst artists themselves that it behooves us to suppress a word that describes no particular vice of any social class, since it can be applied equally to those who ask for nothing better than to deserve it no longer, and to others who have never suspected that they deserved it" (34).

The meaning of the term is not lost in its ubiquity, because its ubiquity is the source of its significance. Much as, at the culminating point of the

opening address in *Les fleurs du mal*, the hypocrite reader is recognized as the brother, the double, even, of the judgmental speaker—making the moral work of the poems poignantly immanent and self-implicating—critical use of the word *bourgeois* will always come back to a kind of self-identification (18).

Embarrassingly and concretely existing yet always evanescent out of the picture: *the bourgeois* is a term that acts as a kind of reverse shibboleth, its use identifying one as belonging to a category of which one does not wish to be a part. A similar unresolved sense of identity and repulsion comes to the fore when Arnold writes about his own place in the categorizations he advances: "For instance, I myself. . . am properly a Philistine,—Mr. Swinburne would add, the son of a Philistine, and though, I have, for the most part, broken with the ideas and the tea-meetings of my own class, yet I have not, on that account, been brought much the nearer to the ideas and works of the Barbarians or of the Populace" (*Culture* 79). The passage, which goes on to suggest that given the right circumstances (namely, a sufficiently large estate and the attendant deferential peasants) he could have easily become a Barbarian, captures in a humorous vein that quality of unsettled transition that is typical of Arnold's work—notably in his well-known description of the fundamental condition of the modern intellectual in "Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse": "Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born" (305).

It is striking to see how terms wielded to mark class differences are owned up to by nineteenth-century authors who do not cease ironizing the power of a category even as they acknowledge it. In a Baudelairean mode, Arnold writes of "my own class, the middle-class, with which I am in closest sympathy, and which has been, besides, the great power of our day, and has had its praises sung by all speakers and newspapers" (*Culture* 75). That the unstable nature of the category is in fact fundamental to the role of the bourgeois in the period is made most vividly clear in Marx, but the removal of his thought from the nineteenth-century context

from which it emerged has led to a surprisingly impoverished sense of the dynamic nature of Marx's treatment of aesthetic education even in Marxist approaches. Indeed, some of the most extraordinary formulations related to *Bildung* in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) are continuous with those to be found in the writings of Arnold and Baudelaire, a commonality that not only illuminates the reasons for the challenge of stabilizing the meaning of the category, "bourgeois," but also suggests why the instability of the relationship between aesthetic education and that extraordinarily fluid category is so important.

It is characteristic of the modern era, Marx writes, that social class has been reduced to just two categories: "Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses . . . this distinctive feature: it has simplified the class antagonisms: Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat" (Marx and Engels 474). This could not be more straightforward, yet the mind hesitates as it tries to reconcile the relationship between the contending elements in the dyad on which the text insists and the adjective that identifies the modernity that dyad inhabits: "our" epoch (*Unsere epoch*). To ask who is included in the possessive pronoun would be to pretend not to understand a common turn of phrase used to describe something we all share because nobody owns it—like "our century," "our environment," "our language." Still, it's hard to say that the question of who we are and what is or isn't ours is not pressing in a manifesto that starts with the fear of the ruling class about the specter haunting Europe and ends with a direct address to the proletariat to unite in order to claim the world. So, the epoch is ours, but the world is, what do we say . . . *theirs*?

Baudelaire's declaration of boredom with the ubiquitous nature of the category is evidently a way of ironically illustrating the mystified self-disgust expressed in the term *bourgeois* in the nineteenth century. It is not so much that Marx never got the memo that the term was out of favor in the avant-garde, but that it is these very qualities—the

rage, the instability, and the ubiquity—that he is picking up on in the *Manifesto* three years after Baudelaire's first "Salon." When Arnold writes that he is of the middle class and a Philistine, he makes it clear that those conditions of being are fluid even as he acknowledges that he instantiates some of the qualities of the category into which he was born. Marx's commitment to material determinants leads to an argument less interested in addressing individual cases. Nevertheless, his formulations are notably close to those of Baudelaire or even Arnold.

Read with even a little more sympathy than it is generally given, the situation of the bourgeois is truly poignant in Marx: blinkered, doomed, alarmed and right to be alarmed—though never fearing quite the right things. *Bildung* is at the heart of what the bourgeois fears and should fear—a weapon that is destined to turn on its maker. Its forceful claims notwithstanding, Marx's dialectical argument is subtle in its treatment of an anxious bourgeois nostalgia about culture that is multiply mystified. The bourgeois, always male in the *Manifesto*, is a figure liable to generate all the comic overtones attendant on the misplaced worries of threatened masculine authority. What is at risk is not a general value, but a class interest, and so the bourgeois's fruitless anxiety is all the more misguided because he cannot recognize developments that are far more fundamental than those that fill him with trepidation. "Just as, to the bourgeois, the disappearance of class property is the disappearance of production itself, so the disappearance of class culture [*Klassenbildung*] is to him identical with the disappearance of all culture [*der Bildung überhaupt*]" (486–87). Marx's point is not to feel for the limited perspective of the bourgeois, of course, but to advance an extraordinarily powerful claim about the impact of the inevitably partial culture of the bourgeois on the rest of society: "That culture, the loss of which he laments, is, for the enormous majority, a mere training to act as a machine" (487). Here, evidently, we are coming to our aesthetic education: a looking-glass classroom equipped with a fun-house mirror in which what is development for one group, *Bildung*—suggesting individual self-realization through an open-ended process of learning of the sort we might associate

with the bildungsroman—is training for the other group, instruction in certain specific practices with purely pragmatic goals for the instructor and limited ends for the student (goals that are ends).

The proletariat, however, may be learning more than is intended: “The bourgeoisie itself, therefore, supplies the proletariat with its own elements of political and general education [*Bildungselemente*], in other words, it furnishes the proletariat with weapons for fighting the bourgeoisie” (481). Here is where the fun-house mirror element of the bourgeois-proletarian dialectic comes into focus: if the lesson of culture is training to better subject the proletariat to servicing the capitalist machine of production, it also provides instruction in those things that will become the very implements of class war. When Marx makes a sequence of direct second person addresses not to the workers of the world but to the bourgeois himself, a productive logical impossibility worthy of *Alice in Wonderland* comes to the fore. He invites the bourgeois to understand the nature of his membership in the category along with the inevitability of his own Cheshire cat-like disappearance, though one does not imagine a grin left hanging in the air: “You must, therefore, confess that by ‘individual’ you mean no other person than the bourgeois, than the middle-class owner of property. This person must, indeed, be swept out of the way, and made impossible” (486). To confess is to recognize one’s own impossibility. A melancholy fate and a logical crisis await this figure who organizes an epoch but does not know himself, and whose self-knowledge will come not as an apotheosis but as a moment of ontological aporia. “The other classes,” Marx writes (though at this point in history there are only two) “decay and finally disappear in the face of Modern Industry; the proletariat is its special and essential product” (482).

Marx’s solution to the impasse he sets up—the play of identity and evanescence—is to admit into the argument a fluidity between the classes that can make the figure in the mirror at times something different from a distortion, something more like a recognition of the promise of change:

In times when the class struggle nears the decisive hour . . . a small section of the ruling class cuts itself

adrift, and joins the revolutionary class, the class that holds the future in its hands . . . a portion of the bourgeoisie goes over to the proletariat, and in particular, a portion of the bourgeois ideologists, who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole.

(481)

The bourgeois participates everywhere in the dialectic: innocent, guilty, oppressor, liberator, raised when lowered, most necessary at the point of vanishing.

I can now return to the constraints and assumptions with which I began—the readiness to treat the aesthetic as a category reducible to its “bourgeois” interests—and note that the discomfort attendant on the topic of aesthetic education is part of a long tradition of disguised partial recognitions. In the nineteenth century no less than today, the face of the bourgeois is that of the modern subject: ubiquitous, often self-blinded, vastly powerful in the aggregate, deeply insecure as an individual. Schiller, Baudelaire, and Arnold find in the contemptible project of self-loathing that is the characteristic response of bourgeois self-recognition the opportunity for critical engagement with the condition it helps one identify. Marx, characteristically, materializes the play of alienation and recognition, but he also creates the conditions for the kinds of confusions we still live with today. “A small section of the ruling class cuts itself adrift,” Marx predicts in the passage I just cited, “and joins the revolutionary class, the class that holds the future in its hands.” Shaping the future by cutting oneself adrift is an odd sort of revolutionary activity, one linked to or made intelligible through the ubiquity of the bourgeois. Is it possible that the anxious sense that instruction in taste has built into it an anti-egalitarian quality is part of the long tradition of partially recognizing and fearing the class power, complicity, and individual weakness of the bourgeois?

Recent years have seen work in critical theory and in literary and cultural history newly engage with the political significance of the concept of the aesthetic—moving beyond the boldly reductive claims that it is a stalking-horse for class interests

or that it of necessity neglects certain categories of creators, or even that it ever was a fully achieved and widely accepted concept rather than an ongoing project of relatively modest success.³ Standing in the way of further developments in this area, however, is a set of underexamined ideas about the relationships among taste, social status, and power on the one hand, and about the project of social critique available to critics through a commitment to these ideas on the other. Arguments of varying degrees of sophistication have depended on uncovering what are understood to be the interested and compromised nature of formulations such as Arnold's, and on identifying what can appear to be the self-evidently problematic drive to find distinctions among individuals by tracing the vicissitudes of taste found in Schiller. The longevity of the kinds of arguments I have characterized in general terms here is even more puzzling given that the conditions on which they are ostensibly based find no support in the world as we know it.

To put the matter bluntly, is it really possible in the United States in 2023—or in the United Kingdom, or in France, or in Russia, or in China, or in Iran, or pretty much anywhere—to keep pretending that the cultural formations we associate with elite aesthetic taste really subtend dominant elements in the social hierarchy? And if they don't, what is the political value of projects based on the significance of a tight relationship between those categories? These would be big questions, it seems to me—if the answers were not so obvious. So let me scurry back to the more academic issue: What happens to ideas about nineteenth-century aesthetic formulations if critics stop pretending that they were the theoretical program for a successfully achieved high-cultural project of political hegemony structured around a claim for the autonomous nature of art that it is still urgent to resist? Will it then become possible to recognize and make useful the aesthetic projects of the nineteenth century, or even to historicize the resistances those projects provoked? To do so would require reading authors such as Schiller and Arnold and would also entail taking seriously the deep sense of crisis and the contempt for the ruling classes that characterize

the tradition of thought to which both authors belong.

Readers of Arnold know that *Culture and Anarchy* was provoked by the violence of groups demanding the further expansion of the right to vote, but they are prone to treating the panic of the middle-class author as meaning that his arguments amount to a defense of a status quo that, in fact, he writes against at every turn. Schiller's aesthetic writings were produced in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution—an ongoing crisis of possibility and fear that shaped his far from sanguine account of the lower classes at this moment of political engagement: “crude lawless instincts, unleashed with the loosening of the bonds of civil order, and hastening with ungovernable fury to their animal satisfactions” (Schiller 25). It is all the more striking, then, that these are not the truly distressing elements in his analysis as far as Schiller is concerned. It is the cultivated (*zivilisierten*) classes that “offer the even more repugnant spectacle of lethargy and of a depravation of character which offends the more because culture [*Kultur*] is its source” (27). Given this evident failure of the cultured, how then can it be that art will be a force for social good, how can it, as he hopes, restore “the totality of our nature which the arts themselves have destroyed” (43)? For Schiller, the experience of beauty is a step toward a social reconciliation that is fundamentally internal. Modern society causes the fragmentation of human nature that leads to the extremes of a savage freedom or a barbaric restraint. Culture is the only means to repair a breach that is experienced as social but that has its source in the heart of the individual. “How can education through beauty counter both these opposite failings at one and the same time?” Schiller asks. “Can it enchain nature in the savage, and set it free in the barbarian? . . . And if it does not really manage to do both, how can we reasonably expect it to effect anything so important as the education of mankind?” (63).

The conservative nature of his argument is most interestingly manifested in Schiller's claim that every attempt at political reform is “untimely. . . as long as the split within man is not healed” (45),

and in his belief that the healing he seeks is a task for more than one century (47). Then again, if Schiller's account of how the personal may be political received a fuller hearing it might provide some food for thought in an era when the persistent failure of individuals to recognize their own interests is the barren insight against which progressive hopes keep running aground. In terms of a timetable, it bears pointing out that so far Schiller has proved to be more accurate than those who have anticipated an earlier arrival of political utopia.

NOTES

1. Collini, among the most thoughtful recent writers on Arnold as a cultural critic, addresses the "special hazards" political conventions present to discussion of his subject in the afterword to *Matthew Arnold: A Critical Portrait* (125; see 125–38).

2. The most influential account of the play of interests in the aesthetic is certainly Bourdieu's *Distinction*. For revisions to his claims, see Siegel, "Beauty" and *Material Inspirations*.

3. Rancière has advanced what is probably the most compelling challenge to received ideas about art and instruction, especially in relation to nineteenth-century culture. See in particular *Aisthesis* and *The Philosopher and His Poor*. The ambitious and wide-ranging collection of essays edited by Levine, *The Question of the Aesthetic*, is another important recent attempt to advance a discussion the scope of which has often been surprisingly constrained.

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