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Literature, Anthropology and Culture

Edited by Tadeusz Sławek

Volume 3

Tadeusz Lewandowski

Dwight Macdonald
on Culture

The Happy Warrior
of the Mind, Reconsidered



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Introduction

In October of 2011 the *New York Review of Books* reissued a collection of Dwight Macdonald's writings on culture under the title *Masscult and Midcult: Essays Against the American Grain*.¹ The volume's appearance was in some ways surprising given the derision heaped on Macdonald's cultural theories in previous decades by academics determined to expose his supposedly undemocratic leanings and rigid notion of hierarchy, and not least because the essays had not appeared in print since 1983. Nonetheless, the reissue testified to Macdonald's loyal if slim base of admirers, indicating the enduring respect he has earned for his colorful and frequently contentious life in American letters and politics. Without question it is within the latter of those realms that Macdonald is best remembered and regarded among historians, in particular for the probing essays on the horrors of the Second World War featured in his short-lived but intellectually significant magazine *Politics*. Concern over matters of culture, however, ran parallel to and at times overrode Macdonald's political obsessions. Macdonald was indisputably the most visible critic of mass culture during the early 1950s to mid-1960s. Soon after, the foundations of his theories were questioned by an ever-growing litany of voices that eventually dubbed him a passé neo-Marxist who spewed little but misguided, elitist critical venom.² Yet at the same time, Macdonald arguably has some claim to relevance, and in view of his place in the pantheon of American intellectuals, certainly deserves reconsideration. His critics, though admittedly uncovering many failings, have ignored Macdonald's prophetic statements, while the field of cultural studies has generally miscategorized the ultimate strain of his thought in the radical left-wing rather than conservative tradition of criticism. *Dwight Macdonald on Culture: The Happy Warrior of the Mind, Reconsidered* seeks to amend such misconceptions, offering new perspectives on a figure who grappled with issues of culture that remain ever-pertinent.

Macdonald was born in New York City into comfortable upper-middle-class surroundings on March 24, 1906. His father practiced law while his mother, who hailed from a prominent family, busied herself with climbing Manhattan's many-runged social ladder. Educated at fine private boarding schools in his youth, Macdonald attended Phillips Exeter Academy and later Yale University. An unusually precocious child, he showed a deep interest in literature from an

1 Dwight Garner, 'Dwight Macdonald's War on Mediocrity,' *New York Times Sunday Book Review* (October 21, 2011), accessed November 27, 2011, online.

2 See Paul Gorman, *Left Intellectual and Popular Culture in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), p. 217.

early age, sending his parents lists of books he expected to discuss with them during his school vacations.³ At Exeter Macdonald was elected class poet, but despite this potential indicator of popularity, as a boy he felt alienated from his peers. In a 1979 interview he explained, “they were just ordinary guys and I was quite a bright fellow. I just had the biggest contempt for them.”⁴ Such modesty aside, at Exeter young Macdonald graciously deigned to socialize with two other students, forming an exclusive society called ‘The Hedonist Club,’ which distinguished itself with debonair monocles, canes and ties, after the effete example of Oscar Wilde. Adopting the droll slogan ‘Cynicism, Estheticism, Criticism, Pessimism,’ the club self-published two issues of *Masquerade*, in which the fourteen-year-olds snidely poked fun at school traditions.⁵ Macdonald showed a similar desire to rebel against God and man at Yale immediately after his arrival in the mid-1920s. In an impolitic letter to the university president he questioned the wisdom of compulsory chapel – “To be forced to listen to such puerile, stupid twaddle is an insult to any intelligent person” – and unwisely risked expulsion with a brash attack on a famed English professor in what could be considered Macdonald’s first critical venture into issues of culture.⁶

William Lyon Phelps had taught at Yale for three decades before Macdonald appeared in one of his courses. In addition to being a respected academic, Phelps authored a regular newspaper column devoted to scholarly subjects and hosted a well-known radio show that popularized classic works of literature for the American public. These suspicious activities, along with Phelps’ reputation for keeping Yale’s athletes eligible for play despite their baleful ignorance, incurred Macdonald’s sardonic censure. In a foolishly brazen editorial for *Yale Literary Magazine* he counseled Phelps to forgo teaching a new course on Shakespeare, condescendingly inquiring “if he honestly thought he was competent to give it.”⁷ The assault was the perilous culmination of a series of criticisms Macdonald had leveled at the Yale administration, encompassing everything from the quality of teaching at the university to an attempt to inspire an underclassmen revolt against the exclusive right of Yale seniors to go hatless on campus. The Phelps

3 Michael Wreszin, ed. *Interviews with Dwight Macdonald* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2003), p. xii.

4 Diana Trilling, ‘An Interview with Dwight Macdonald,’ *Interviews with Dwight Macdonald*, p. 123.

5 Joseph Epstein, ‘Dwight Macdonald: Sunburned by Ideas,’ *New Criterion* 20 (November 2001), accessed July 7, 2007, online.

6 Quoted in Michael Wreszin, *A Rebel in Defense of Tradition: The Life and Politics of Dwight Macdonald* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), p. 13.

7 Dwight Macdonald, ‘Politics Past,’ *Memoirs of a Revolutionist: Essays in Political Criticism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1957), p. 7.

episode earned Macdonald the threat of dismissal straight from the Yale president's lips, which he regarded as a badge of honor for the rest of his life.⁸ What is striking about the incident from today's perspective is how it gives a taste of Macdonald's future writings on the American cultural scene. Most significant is his conviction that high culture is inviolable, reflected in his attack on Phelps' attempts to make the arts accessible to the otherwise benighted. Such odium for the dilution of high culture would become a primary theme in later theories.

Macdonald's career after Yale was no less notorious. After graduating in 1928, he planned to make a great deal of money in business and establish a Brook Farm-type community where he and other like-minded friends could lead sheltered lives immersed in literary criticism. However, a failed attempt at retail sales in Macy's Department Store quickly impressed upon Macdonald the fact that, as he put it later, "even a modest degree of success was possible only if one took merchandizing far more seriously than I was able to."⁹ Though disenchanted with the business world, in 1929, the year of the Great Depression, Macdonald took a job as a staff writer for media mogul Henry Luce's *Fortune*.¹⁰ The magazine, slavishly devoted to promoting free-market capitalism in the midst of a collapse that laid bare the obsolescence of its philosophical underpinnings, was a bad fit.¹¹ The experience contributed greatly to Macdonald's political radicalization, and following a dramatic resignation he fell in with a group now known as the 'New York intellectuals,' who in the 1930s and '40s coalesced around the radical left-wing literary journal, *Partisan Review*. As one of the editors of *PR*, Macdonald found himself among company that stimulated his interests in both politics and culture. The group included Philip Rahv, William Phillips, and Clement Greenberg, whose critiques of popular entertainments and capitalist society were echoed by the German émigrés who made up the Frankfurt School, namely Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Leo Lowenthal. By and large, the above critics shared a perspective on social and economic issues inspired by Marxism, bound with a reverence for modernist art, which to them embodied a powerful protest against modern society. In the work of the avant-garde movement's most illustrious figures – Joyce, Picasso, Cézanne, Kandinsky, and Stravinsky – they found socially critical and radical qualities, along with the inherent difficulty believed to be an indispensable hallmark of high art. Such lofty

8 Wreszin, *A Rebel in Defense of Tradition: The Life and Politics of Dwight Macdonald*, p. 15.

9 Macdonald, 'Politics Past,' pp. 7-8.

10 Wreszin, *A Rebel in Defense of Tradition: The Life and Politics of Dwight Macdonald*, pp. 21-22.

11 James L. Baughman, *Henry R. Luce and the Rise of the American News Media* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), pp. 34-70.

cultural principles mixed with socialist idealism resulted in an evaluation of mass culture as an instrument of domination over the intrinsically healthy but insensate masses.¹² Macdonald shared such aesthetic sympathies and unease with American popular amusements, though not the entirety of the above intellectuals' frameworks. Fearful that both high culture, artistic standards, and humanity at large were under threat, over the course of thirty years he struggled to locate solutions to the perceived onslaught of mass culture on American society. The journey would bring him considerable fame and veneration during his lifetime, but equal scorn after his death.

Before discussing any of the issues of culture that so troubled Macdonald, one must invoke the potent specter of the English poet and social critic Matthew Arnold. Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (1869) began the study of popular culture in the modern era and established the 'culture and civilization' tradition of cultural criticism.¹³ The definition of culture put forth by Arnold hinges on several central aspects vital to the amelioration of Christendom. Firstly, culture is designated as the "pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically."¹⁴ As well, culture "moves by the force, not merely or primarily of the scientific passion for pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social passion for doing good." Seeking such study and betterment enables men to live within "sweetness and light," allowing God to prevail through an ideal of perfection that encourages the "harmonious expansion of *all* powers which make the beauty and worth of human nature" [emphasis in original].¹⁵ In Arnold's paradigm 'culture' finds its diametric opposite in 'anarchy,' which functions as a synonym for popular culture, or in other words a description of rough working-class existence. This dichotomy reflects Arnold's belief that the political participation of plebian males in 1860s England constitutes a danger to cultivated civilization – artistic standards being his main concern.¹⁶ This preoccupation was a common one in the mid-nineteenth century, when social thinkers wondered how the rise of democracy

12 Gorman, *Left Intellectual and Popular Culture in Twentieth-Century America*, pp. 141-45.

13 John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* (Harlow: Prentice Hall, 2001), p. 18.

14 Matthew Arnold, 'Preface to *Culture and Anarchy*,' *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) p. 190.

15 Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism*, in *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, pp. 59, 66-67, 62.

16 Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, p. 19.

could sustain the cultural and aesthetic values that had depended on the landed gentry for existence.¹⁷ As Arnold writes in one of his many treatises: “The difficulty for democracy is, how to keep ideals high.”¹⁸ That said, Arnold was not entirely enamored of the upper classes that ruled in his day. In *Culture and Anarchy* he divides English society into three unsavory groups – the ‘Barbarians’ of the aristocracy, the ‘Philistines’ of the middle classes, and the lowly ‘Populace’ – each of which maintains a flawed relationship with culture. Barbarians, who have the greatest opportunity for enrichment, are instead “lured off from following the light by those mighty and eternal seducers of our race which weave for this class their most irresistible charms, – by worldly splendour, security, power, and pleasure.” Philistines, on the other hand, remain “perverse in the resistance to the light,” preferring the “machinery of business, chapels, [and] tea-meetings” that make up their “dismal and illiberal life.” The Populace, lastly, embodies all that is ignorant and brutal in society: “bawling, hustling, and smashing,” and of course, “beer.”

To Arnold, the growth of Populace-generated anarchy stands as the great menace of proletarian intrusion into the political scene, while culture represents the only potential barricade. Culture is an active force, a policing, civilizing agent among the “raw and half-developed” commoners. Notwithstanding the degraded condition of the vast, miserable mob, Arnold suggests that regardless of social class mankind shares “a common basis of human nature” that can be exploited for good.¹⁹ Arnold’s recommendation, therefore, is a strong state, whose proposed role is that of culture disseminator, guiding the masses upward towards civilization, and bestowing the franchise of education on those below in order to prepare them for inclusion in a new bourgeois, capitalist order. Despite this neat solution presented in *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold eventually came to the further, less optimistic conclusion that: “Knowledge and truth in the full sense of the words, are not attainable by the great mass of the human race at all.”²⁰ But fortunately, hope for culture still survived. He writes that in all social classes (Barbarians, Philistines, and Populace, alike) there are so-called “aliens” – “persons who are led...by a general *humane* spirit, by the love of human perfection,” and who potentially offer protection from culture’s foes [emphasis in original]. These numbers must be encouraged, insists Arnold, by “authoritative centers,” or academies operated by a self-perpetuating cultural elite who act as the guardians of mankind’s finer legacies. Within this scheme the lower classes,

17 Sefan Collini, *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, p. xiii.

18 Matthew Arnold, ‘Democracy,’ *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, p. 14.

19 Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism*, pp. 105-09.

20 Quoted in Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, p. 22.

by virtue of the salve of education, assume a position of deference even while remaining attached to their decidedly common customs.²¹ This conception of the division of cultures would draw the battle lines in cultural debates and influence thinking on popular culture well into the mid-twentieth century. Arnold's culture and civilization discourse, for example, appears eight decades later in T. S. Eliot's *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1949), when terms like 'popular culture' and 'mass culture' had come to replace Arnoldian 'anarchy,' and the concept of 'mass society' had given new theoretical structure to the fear of the overgrown and bothersome Populace. Also, Arnoldian discourse informs the work of Macdonald in many ways previously unrecognized.

Just as any discussion relating to culture must make reference to Matthew Arnold, so too must it include a word of qualification regarding the terms 'mass culture' and 'mass society.' Mass culture, for all that has been written about it, still lacks a universally accepted working definition. Much of the problem has to do with the terminology itself, namely the difference in meaning between the words 'popular' and 'mass.' The former is clearly less judgmental and the latter more pejorative, while the economically connotative 'commercial culture' and 'commercial entertainments' are also sometimes employed as synonyms for 'amusements' produced on a mass scale for mass consumption. To make things more problematic, during the cultural debates that occurred in 1950s America, those on all sides used the same labels to identify differing cultural trends and phenomena.²² Since then, scholars have tried to make distinctions both between mass and popular culture, and those who consume it. Lawrence Levine, for instance, points out that not all mass-produced culture achieves widespread popularity, and maintains that this is where the division of 'mass' and 'popular' should be made.²³ Raymond Williams takes this observation a step further. Arguing against the notion that popular or mass culture products should be equated with those who consume them, he draws a line between 'working-class' and popular culture. Whatever their intrinsic significance, these semantic and categorical debates are of little concern to this book, as is establishing any timeline for the development of such nomenclature. As a result, in an effort to counter lexical redundancy terms such as 'mass culture,' 'popular culture,' 'commercial culture,' 'popular amusements' and 'popular entertainments' are utilized to designate essentially the same phenomenon depicted by Macdonald and other critics who shared what is referred to as the left-wing 'mass culture perspective.'

21 Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism*, pp. 110-11.

22 Michael Kammen, *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the 20th Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), pp. 162-64.

23 Lawrence Levine, *The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 296.