To pass now to the matters canvassed in the following essay. The whole scope of the essay is to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties; culture being a 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, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mechanically. This, and this alone, is the scope of the following essay. I say again here, what I have said in the pages which follow, that from the faults and weaknesses of bookmen a notion of something bookish, pedantic, and futile has got itself more or less connected with the word culture, and that it is a pity we cannot use a word more perfectly free from all shadow of reproach. And yet, futile as are many bookmen, and helpless as books and reading often prove for bringing nearer to perfection those who use them, one must, I think, be struck more and more, the longer one lives, to find how much, in our present society, a man’s life of each day depends for its solidity and value on whether he reads during that day, and, far more still, on what he reads during it. More and more he who examines himself will find the difference it makes to him, at the end of any given day, whether or no he has pursued his avocations throughout it without reading at all; and whether or no, having read something, he has read the newspapers only. This, however, is a matter for each man’s private conscience and experience. If a man without books or reading, or reading nothing but his letters and the newspapers, gets nevertheless a fresh and free play of the best thoughts upon his stock notions and habits, he has got culture. He has got that for which we prize and recommend culture; he has got that which at the present moment we seek culture that it may give us. This inward operation is the very life and essence of culture, as we conceive it.

Nevertheless, it is not easy so to frame one’s discourse concerning the operation of culture, as to avoid giving frequent occasion to a misunderstanding whereby the essential inwardness of the operation is lost sight of. We are supposed, when we criticise by the help of culture some imperfect doing or other, to have in our eye some well-known rival plan of doing, which we want to serve and recommend. Thus, for instance, because I have freely pointed out the dangers and inconveniences to which our literature is exposed in the absence of any centre of taste and authority like the French Academy, it is constantly said that I want to introduce here in England an institution like the French Academy. I have indeed expressly declared that I wanted no such thing; but let us notice how it is just our worship of machinery, and of external doing, which leads to this charge being brought; and how the inwardness of culture makes us seize, for watching and cure, the faults to which our want of an Academy inclines us, and yet prevents us from trusting to an arm of flesh, as the
Puritans say,—from blindly flying to this outward machinery of an Academy, in order to help ourselves. For the very same culture and free inward play of thought which shows us how the Corinthian style, or the whimsies about the One Primeval Language, are generated and strengthened in the absence of an Academy, shows us, too, how little any Academy, such as we should be likely to get, would cure them. Every one who knows the characteristics of our national life, and the tendencies so fully discussed in the following pages, knows exactly what an English Academy would be like. One can see the happy family in one’s mind’s eye as distinctly as if it was already constituted. Lord Stanhope, the Bishop of Oxford, Mr. Gladstone, the Dean of Westminster, Mr. Froude, Mr. Henry Reeve,—everything which is influential, accomplished, and distinguished; and then, some fine morning, a dissatisfaction of the public mind with this brilliant and select coterie, a flight of Corinthian leading articles, and an irruption of Mr. G. A. Sala. Clearly, this is not what will do us good. The very same faults,—the want of sensitiveness of intellectual conscience, the disbelief in right reason, the dislike of authority,—which have hindered our having an Academy and have worked injuriously in our literature, would also hinder us from making our Academy, if we established it, one which would really correct them. And culture, which shows us truly the faults, shows us this also just as truly.

It is by a like sort of misunderstanding, again, that Mr. Oscar Browning, one of the assistant-masters at Eton, takes up in the Quarterly Review the cudgels for Eton, as if I had attacked Eton, because I have said, in a book about foreign schools, that a man may well prefer to teach his three or four hours a day without keeping a boarding-house; and that there are great dangers in cramming little boys of eight or ten and making them compete for an object of great value to their parents; and, again, that the manufacture and supply of school-books, in England, much needs regulation by some competent authority. Mr. Oscar Browning gives us to understand that at Eton he and others, with perfect satisfaction to themselves and the public, combine the functions of teaching and of keeping a boardinghouse; that he knows excellent men (and, indeed, well he may, for a brother of his own, I am told, is one of the best of them,) engaged in preparing little boys for competitive examinations, and that the result, as tested at Eton, gives perfect satisfaction. And as to school-books he adds, finally, that Dr. William Smith, the learned and distinguished editor of the Quarterly Review, is, as we all know, the compiler of school-books meritorious and many. This is what Mr. Oscar Browning gives us to understand in the Quarterly Review, and it is impossible not to read with pleasure what he says. For what can give a finer example of that frankness and manly self-confidence which our great public schools, and none of them so much as Eton, are supposed to inspire, of that buoyant ease in holding up one’s head, speaking out what is in one’s mind, and flinging off all sheepishness and awkwardness, than to see an Eton assistant-master offering in fact himself as evidence that to combine boarding-house-keeping with teaching is a good thing, and his brother as evidence that to train and race little boys for competitive examinations is a good thing? Nay, and one sees that this frank-hearted Eton self-confidence is contagious; for has not Mr. Oscar Browning managed to fire Dr. William Smith (himself, no doubt, the modestest man alive, and never trained at Eton) with the same spirit, and made him insert in his own Review a puff, so to speak, of his own school-books, declaring that they are (as they are) meritorious and many? Nevertheless, Mr. Oscar Browning is wrong in thinking that I wished to run down Eton; and his repetition on behalf of Eton, with this idea in his head, of the strains of his heroic ancestor, Malvina’s Oscar, as they are recorded by the family poet, Ossian, is unnecessary. “The wild boar rushes over their tombs, but he does not disturb their repose. They still love the sport of their youth, and mount the wind with joy.” All I meant to say was, that there were unpleasantnesses in uniting the keeping a boarding-house with teaching, and dangers in cramming and racing little boys for competitive examinations, and charlatanism and extravagance in the manufacture and supply of our school-books.
But when Mr. Oscar Browning tells us that all these have been happily got rid of in his case, and his brother’s case, and Dr. William Smith’s case, then I say that this is just what I wish, and I hope other people will follow their good example. All I seek is that such blemishes should not through any negligence, self-love, or want of due self-examination, be suffered to continue.

Natural, as we have said, the sort of misunderstanding just noticed is; yet our usefulness depends upon our being able to clear it away, and to convince those who mechanically serve some stock notion or operation, and thereby go astray, that it is not culture’s work or aim to give the victory to some rival fetish, but simply to turn a free and fresh stream of thought upon the whole matter in question. In a thing of more immediate interest, just now, than either of the two we have mentioned, the like misunderstanding prevails; and until it is dissipated, culture can do no good work in the matter. When we criticise the present operation of disestablishing the Irish Church, not by the power of reason and justice, but by the power of the antipathy of the Protestant Nonconformists, English and Scotch, to establishments, we are charged with being dreamers of dreams, which the national will has rudely shattered, for endowing the religious sects all round; or we are called enemies of the Nonconformists, blind partisans of the Anglican Establishment. More than a few words we must give to showing how erroneous are these charges; because if they were true, we should be actually subverting our own design, and playing false to that culture which it is our very purpose to recommend.

Certainly we are no enemies of the Nonconformists; for, on the contrary, what we aim at is their perfection. Culture, which is the study of perfection, leads us, as we in the following pages have shown, to conceive of true human perfection as a harmonious perfection, developing all sides of our humanity; and as a general perfection, developing all parts of our society. For if one member suffer, the other members must suffer with it; and the fewer there are that follow the true way of salvation the harder that way is to find.

And while the Nonconformists, the successors and representatives of the Puritans, and like them staunchly walking by the best light they have, make a large part of what is strongest and most serious in this nation and therefore attract our respect and interest, yet all that, in what follows, is said about Hebraism and Hellenism, has for its main result to show how our Puritans, ancient and modern, have not enough added to their care for walking staunchly by the best light they have, a care that that light be not darkness; how they have developed one side of their humanity at the expense of all others, and have become incomplete and mutilated men in consequence. Thus falling short of harmonious perfection, they fail to follow the true way of salvation. Therefore that way is made the harder for others to find, general perfection is put further off out of our reach, and the confusion and perplexity in which our society now labours is increased by the Nonconformists rather than diminished by them. So while we praise and esteem the zeal of the Nonconformists in walking staunchly by the best light they have, and desire to take no whit from it, we seek to add to this what we call sweetness and light, and develop their full humanity more perfectly; and to seek this is certainly not to be the enemy of the Nonconformists.

But now, with these ideas in our head, we come across the present operation for disestablishing the Irish Church by the power of the Nonconformists’ antipathy to religious establishments and endowments. And we see Liberal statesmen, for whose purpose this antipathy happens to be convenient, flattering it all they can; saying that though they have no intention of laying hands on an Establishment which is efficient and popular, like the Anglican Establishment here in England, yet it is in the abstract a fine and good thing that religion should be left to the voluntary support of its promoters, and should thus gain in energy and independence; and Mr. Gladstone has no words strong enough to express his admiration of the refusal of State-aid by the Irish Roman Catholics, who have never yet been seriously asked to accept it, but who would a good deal embarrass him if they
demanded it. And we see philosophical politicians, with a turn for swimming with the stream, like Mr. Baxter or Mr. Charles Buxton, and philosophical divines with the same turn, like the Dean of Canterbury, seeking to give a sort of grand stamp of generality and solemnity to this antipathy of the Nonconformists, and to dress it out as a law of human progress in the future. Now, nothing can be pleasanter than swimming with the stream; and we might gladly, if we could, try in our unsystematic way to help Mr. Baxter, and Mr. Charles Buxton, and the Dean of Canterbury, in their labours at once philosophical and popular. But we have got fixed in our minds that a more full and harmonious development of their humanity is what the Nonconformists most want, that narrowness, one-sidedness, and incompleteness is what they most suffer from; in a word, that in what we call provinciality they abound, but in what we may call totality they fall short.

The pursuit of perfection, then, is the pursuit of sweetness and light. He who works for sweetness works in the end for light also; he who works for light works in the end for sweetness also. But he who works for sweetness and light united, works to make reason and the will of God prevail. He who works for machinery, he who works for hatred, works only for confusion. Culture looks beyond machinery, culture hates hatred; culture has but one great passion, the passion for sweetness and light. Yes, it has one yet greater!—the passion for making them prevail. It is not satisfied till we all come to a perfect man; it knows that the sweetness and light of the few must be imperfect until the raw and unkindled masses of humanity are touched with sweetness and light. If I have not shrunk from saying that we must work for sweetness and light, so neither have I shrunk from saying that we must have a broad basis, must have sweetness and light for as many as possible. Again and again I have insisted how those are the happy moments of humanity, how those are the marking epochs of a people’s life, how those are the flowering times for literature and art and all the creative power of genius, when there is a national glow of life and thought, when the whole of society is in the fullest measure permeated by thought, sensible to beauty, intelligent and alive. Only it must be real thought and real beauty; real sweetness and real light. Plenty of people will try to give the masses, as they call them, an intellectual food prepared and adapted in the way they think proper for the actual condition of the masses. The ordinary popular literature is an example of this way of working on the masses. Plenty of people will try to indoctrinate the masses with the set of ideas and judgments constituting the creed of their own profession or party. Our religious and political organisations give an example of this way of working on the masses. I condemn neither way; but culture works differently. It does not try to teach down to the level of inferior classes; it does not try to win them for this or that sect of its own, with ready-made judgments and watch-words. It seeks to do away with classes; to make all live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light, and use ideas, as it uses them itself, freely,—to be nourished and not bound by them.

This is the social idea; and the men of culture are the true apostles of equality. The great men of culture are those who have had a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to the other, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time; who have laboured to divest knowledge of all that was harsh, uncouth, difficult, abstract, professional, exclusive; to humanise it, to make it efficient outside the clique of the cultivated and learned, yet still remaining the best knowledge and thought of the time, and a true source, therefore, of sweetness and light. Such a man was Abelard in the Middle Ages, in spite of all his imperfections; and thence the boundless emotion and enthusiasm which Abelard excited. Such were Lessing and Herder in Germany, at the end of the last century; and their services to Germany were in this way inestimably precious. Generations will pass, and literary monuments will accumulate, and works far more perfect than the works of Lessing and Herder
will be produced in Germany; and yet the names of these two men will fill a German with a reverence and enthusiasm such as the names of the most gifted masters will hardly awaken. Because they humanised knowledge; because they broadened the basis of life and intelligence; because they worked powerfully to diffuse sweetness and light, to make reason and the will of God prevail. With Saint Augustine they said: “Let us not leave Thee alone to make in the secret of thy knowledge, as thou didst before the creation of the firmament, the division of light from darkness; let the children of thy spirit, placed in their firmament, make their light shine upon the earth, mark the division of night and day, and announce the revolution of the times; for the old order is passed, and the new arises; the night is spent, the day is come forth; and thou shalt crown the year with thy blessing, when thou shalt send forth new labourers into thy harvest sown by other hands than theirs; when thou shalt send forth new labourers to new seed-times, whereof the harvest shall be not yet.”

Well, then, what if we tried to rise above the idea of class to the idea of the whole community, the State, and to find our centre of light and authority there? Every one of us has the idea of country, as a sentiment; hardly any one of us has the idea of the State, as a working power. And why? Because we habitually live in our ordinary selves, which do not carry us beyond the ideas and wishes of the class to which we happen to belong. And we are all afraid of giving to the State too much power, because we only conceive of the State (88) as something equivalent to the class in occupation of the executive government, and are afraid of that class abusing power to its own purposes. If we strengthen the State with the aristocratic class in occupation of the executive government, we imagine we are delivering ourselves up captive to the ideas and wishes of Sir Thomas Bateson; if with the middle-class in occupation of the executive government, to those of the Rev. W. Cattle; if with the working-class, to those of Mr. Bradlaugh. And with much justice; owing to the exaggerated notion which we English, as I have said, entertain of the right and blessedness of the mere doing as one likes, of the affirming oneself, and oneself just as it is. People of the aristocratic class want to affirm their ordinary selves, their likings and dislikes; people of the middle-class the same, people of the working-class the same. By our everyday selves, however, we are separate, personal, at war; we are only safe from one another’s tyranny when no one has any power; and this safety, in its turn, cannot save us from anarchy. And when, therefore, anarchy presents itself as a danger to us, we know not where to turn. (89)

But by our best self we are united, impersonal, at harmony. We are in no peril from giving authority to this, because it is the truest friend we all of us can have; and when anarchy is a danger to us, to this authority we may turn with sure trust. Well, and this is the very self which culture, or the study of perfection, seeks to develop in us; at the expense of our old untransformed self, taking pleasure only in doing what it likes or is used to do, and exposing us to the risk of clashing with every one else who is doing the same! So that our poor culture, which is flouted as so unpractical, leads us to the very ideas capable of meeting the great want of our present embarrassed times! We want an authority, and we find nothing but jealous classes, checks, and a dead-lock; culture suggests the idea of the State. We find no basis for a firm State-power in our ordinary selves; culture suggests one to us in our best self.

It cannot but acutely try a tender conscience to be accused, in a practical country like ours, of keeping aloof from the work and hope of a multitude of earnest-hearted men, and of merely toying with poetry and aesthetics. So it is with no little sense of relief that I find myself thus in the position of one who makes a contribution in aid of the practical necessities of our times. The great thing, it will be observed, is to find our best self,
and to seek to affirm nothing but that; not,—as we English with our
over-value for merely being free and busy have been so accustomed
to do,—resting satisfied with a self which comes uppermost long
before our best self, and affirming that with blind energy. In
short,—to go back yet once more to Bishop Wilson,—of these two
excellent rules of Bishop Wilson’s for a man’s guidance: “Firstly,
never go against the best light you have; secondly, take care that
your light be not darkness,” we English have followed with
praiseworthy zeal the first rule, but we have not given so much heed
to the second. We have gone manfully, the Rev. W. Cattle and the
rest of us, according to the best light we have; but we have not taken
enough care that this should be really the best light possible for us,
that it should not be darkness. And, our honesty being very great,
conscience has whispered to us that the light we were following, our
ordinary self, was, indeed, perhaps, only an inferior self, only
darkness; and that it would not do to impose this seriously on all the
world.

But our best self inspires faith, and is capable of affording a
serious principle of authority. For example. We are on our way to
what the late Duke of Wellington, with his strong sagacity, foresaw
and admirably described as “a revolution by due course of law.” This
is undoubtedly,—if we are still to live and grow, and this famous
country is not to stagnate and dwindle away on one hand, or, on
the other, to perish miserably in mere anarchy and confusion,—what
we are on the way to. Great changes there must be, for a revolution
cannot accomplish itself without great changes; yet order there must
be, for without order a revolution cannot accomplish itself by due
course of law. So whatever brings risk of tumult and disorder,
multitudinous processions in the streets of our crowded towns,
multitudinous meetings in their public places and
parks,—demonstrations perfectly unnecessary in the present course
of our affairs,—our best self, or right reason, plainly enjoins us to set
our faces against. It enjoins us to encourage and uphold the
occupants of the executive power, whoever they may be, in firmly
prohibiting them. But it does this clearly and resolutely, and is thus a
real principle of authority, because it does it with a free con-
science; because in thus provisionally strengthening the executive
power, it knows that it is not doing this merely to enable Sir
Thomas Bateson to affirm himself as against Mr. Bradlaugh, or
the Rev. W. Cattle to affirm himself as against both. It knows that
it is establishing the State, or organ of our collective best self, of
our national right reason; and it has the testimony of conscience
that it is establishing the State on behalf of whatever great changes
are needed, just as much as on behalf of order; establishing it to
deal just as stringently, when the time comes, with Sir Thomas
Bateson’s Protestant ascendancy, or with the Rev. W. Cattle’s
sorry education of his children, as it deals with Mr. Bradlaugh’s
street-processions.