The nineteenth century witnessed important changes in English society. There was the upheaval of the Industrial Revolution, the increasing prominence of the middle class, and a spread of power over a broader segment of society. There was the increasing importance of science and machinery, an increasing materialism, and an increasing questioning, or ignoring, of traditional beliefs and standards. How did the artist, and especially the poet, react to these changes?

By the mid Victorian period the problem of the artist in society had been accentuated. The middle class, virile but crude, had taken a prominent place in society; there was the beginning of the "democratic experiment". With this went a weakening of the old aristocratic standards, the ending of the prominence of a cultured class; there was a broadening and perhaps debasing of cultural standards. The mechanical, materialistic view of the universe was further stimulated by the questioning of the basis of religion. The increasingly influential scientific view of life, and materialist philosophy claiming a total explanation of the universe, produced profound internal conflict, and the disintegration of long accepted religious ideas and allied standards. The artist was "confronted with the bleak materialism of an Industrial Age".

The changed environment exerted, of course, a profound influence on the artist of the time. We might first notice the fundamental problem of "audience" - for whom was the artist painting or the poet writing? In the field of poetry - perhaps the most sensitive of the arts culturally - Tennyson and Browning attempted to keep the large reading public, but at the risk of vulgarity and loss of integrity. Later in the century and since, there has been a strong tendency for the poet to write for the small selective audience, to show an increasing concern for his own inner problems, and to dally with the idea of "art for art's sake". The poet has tended to reject general society as alien; and poetry and art has tended to cease being an integral part of general life.

Matthew Arnold commented that his poems represented "the main movement of mind of the last quarter of a century", and we can see the reaction to the Victorian environment in much of his verse, as the well-known last lines of "Dover Beach":

The sea of faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled;
But now I only hear
It's melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
... the world, ...

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

In this we have a feeling of worry and strain, and uncertainty; a concern for the receding "sea of faith"; a feeling of break-up, of anarchy - political and spiritual. There is also a suggestion of man in an alien, unfriendly society and world, and a strong suggestion of isolation, partly as a result of Arnold's own personality and partly because, as Lionel Trilling comments: "Arnold lived in an age when - it is one of the cliches of cultural history - man was becoming increasingly aware of loneliness".

Faced with the uncongenial community Mathew Arnold does not try to adapt himself to it; nor does he try to ignore its problems and take to the turning out of polished vacuity as does the later Tennyson; nor does he reject society and turn to his own inner problems. Mathew Arnold does not try to mould himself to the society, he does not reject the society; instead he seeks to reform and transform Victorian society. He emphasised the necessity of criticism, called for poetry to be a "criticism of life", and himself turns from verse to writing literary and social criticism. He becomes the leading exponent of a tradition of social criticism which had developed, largely under the influence of Coleridge and Newman, in the nineteenth century, and which presented an anti-materialistic view of man and society. It is this which makes him of particular importance; he is not only - like the Great Exhibition, antimacassars or Mr. Tennyson - an example of Victoriamism, he is also an important social thinker. The poet has become prophet.

Mathew Arnold was one of the very first to see the "main movement" of our time clearly, and to state a position regarding it. He saw the modern situation from the standpoint of a humanist, and wished to apply a humanistic cure. Humanism - to its strength and weakness - has an essential quality of vagueness; there is a distrust of specified dogma, a belief in certain ill-defined, but nevertheless positive values. In Mathew Arnold we find a deep concern for cultural tradition, for the values descending from Greece, through Rome and post-Renaissance scholarship; we find in Arnold a profound belief in the possibilities of human nature and in the value of human personality - together with a fear for what would become of it.

Mathew Arnold saw Victorian England as threatened with spiritual anarchy; with disintegration, fragmentation and vulgarisation; it was a country dominated by sprawling cities, loud cries for liberty, by a complacent belief in material progress - with a worship of size and number. "There is not", he wrote, "a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a
received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve" 2 England was "between two worlds, one dead, the other waiting to be born". Arnold, unlike Carlyle, had no belief in the desirability or practicability of the restoration of the English aristocracy to their previous pre-eminence. He realised that the future - at least the immediate future - lay with the middle class, and despite all, thought they were "the best stuff we have" ... But Arnold was horrified by the "vulgarity and hideousness" of middle class life, their lack of "sweetness and light", and much of his late writing is devoted to chastising this "Philistine" class. The lower class were to Arnold as yet undeveloped, although he conceived and hoped that they would, perhaps by "culture", achieve eventual equality - and he hoped it would be equality in a society worthwhile being equal in. But at the time of writing the new world was "waiting to be born". None of the classes seemed to be fit to govern the country; none of the classes had the high ideals he sought.

The culture of Mathew Arnold is essentially the ideas of humanism stated in a modern context. He has a belief in the value of the Classics, in the worth of poetry. In the Study of Poetry, we find, for example, an excited insistence on the value of poetry, and a determined certainty that poetry will survive. 3 But culture to Arnold was not just poetry, or a "smattering of the two dear languages of Greek and Latin". 4 It was the attainment of perfection; it was dynamic - not just a static body of knowledge; and - shades of Mr. Bentham and materialism - it was socially useful.

As the first step towards the ideal of culture, he stressed the need for middle class education, by which he hoped the Philistines would be transformed. But any worthwhile development and improvement of middle class education must be undertaken by the State. This gave him one of his many reasons for emphasising the need for government action and stressing the importance of government authority. The state could best prevent anarchy; in the absence of any class combining "sweetness and light" the State could best act as leader of the society. However he did not support authoritarian government, and ridiculed the possibility of English democracy being overmastered by the State. Arnold hoped the state would act as an example of civic unity, and that it would act as a centre of "sweetness and light".

Mathew Arnold's reaction to the religious proclamings of his time is interesting. He maintains a nominal belief in God; but in a God who exists for social and cultural reasons, and who can be amended to suit social conditions. His concern is for religion as part of tradition, and as a necessary element in social happiness and order. His religion is something like the State religion which Plato introduces into Book X of the Republic; it exists primarily because it is useful. Religion is, to Arnold, "morality touched by emotion"; God is "that stream of tendency, not ourselves, which makes for righteousness"; the Church is "a great national society for the promotion of what is commonly called "goodness". Surprisingly little troubled by inner religious questionings, his concern was for
religion as an element in society. He was much more concerned in having a unifying comprehensive Church practising the "beauty of holiness", than in with any dogma or question of theology. Arnold has been called the "first Modernist", and, as with Modernism generally, Arnold can find all manner of virtues in the Christian religion, but he can never quite bring himself to say that it is true.

Mathew Arnold could with justice be accused of vagueness, of using circular arguments, of lack of philosophical logic. He, in fact, presents a belief, an attitude, rather than argues a case from fundamentals. At the crudest, Mathew Arnold is only, as Dover Wilson put it, advocating the ideals of Oxford, and their dispersal by an indefinite number of Rugby Schools under State control. But Arnold's writings are in truth more subtle and complex than this. He was one of the first to take stock of industrial society, and to offer it a view of life which stressed spiritual rather than material values. At a time of increasing doubt about the existence of God, he offered a spiritual standard of values based on the humanist tradition, and largely independent of the Christian religion, to stand against the gaining materialist view of life. The very putting forward of this belief is of great importance. In some ways Arnold's writing may seem inadequate, but the case of humanism, the case for the humanities has not as yet been better stated. Those who now stress the humanities or the value of "culture" are relying very strongly on the views put by Arnold. He is the most important propounder of the ideals of a liberal education; of the ideals behind the existence of an Arts Faculty. Arnold's case remains a strong statement against the materialist view of life, especially at a time when there is a widespread disbelief in a controlling deity. Victorian society is similar to present-day society in essentials, and Arnold's writing remains very relevant today, perhaps more pressingly relevant than ever.

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Footnotes -
3. As a contemporary equivalent one could perhaps take Mr. Colin Bennett writing about the art of the film.
4. A depreciating phrase used by John Bright, quoted in Culture and Anarchy.