Matthew Arnold, Victorian Anxiety and His Utopia

Dana Fotheringham

The Victorian Era was a period of rapid political, economic, and societal changes that left many feeling disoriented, dislocated, and lost in a new world. As Mark Twain said during the celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of Queen Victoria's ascension, "British history is two thousand years old…and yet in a good many ways the world has moved farther ahead since the Queen was born than it moved in all the rest of the two thousand put together."[1] This rapid progress and growth occurred in almost every aspect of life in England. As influence shifted from Paris to London, population increased dramatically in tandem with a shift from life centered on ownership of land and agriculture to an increasingly urbanized and modern economy focused on trade and manufacturing. England was the first country to experience this industrialization and urbanization, and the process was one fraught with social, political, and economic issues associated with such rapid, and therefore unregulated, changes. Economic prosperity fluctuated, societal issues ran rampant, and many cried for social reform. Technology moved faster than ever before, and science posed questions that shook the foundation of traditional religious convictions.

The industrialization of England with this shift in economy brought about a myriad of technological advances and innovations, including the further development and usage of steam power for quicker and more accessible railroads, the introduction of the telegraph, photography, and the introduction of mandatory education. These changes dramatically transformed the lives of the English during the Victorian period, with brand new technology being created and developed all the time, and relatively older technological advances becoming more accessible. Matthew Arnold saw these changes as posing a real and immediate threat to the stability of society and saw the world as "a scene of both

[1] "The Victorian Age," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, 9th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2012), 1017.

actual and increasingly possible anarchy."[2] These fears of anarchy do not seem as far-fetched when understood in the context of the intellectual and philosophical turmoil of the time period. The beginning of the Victorian period experienced a continuance of the ideas utilitarianism, which was based on the belief that "all human beings seek to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. The criterion by which we should judge a morally correct action, therefore, is the extent to which it provides the greatest pleasure to the greatest number."[3] This philosophy, while helpful in providing the philosophical and moral foundation to much of the social reform occurring, was considered to be lacking as it failed to recognize the spiritual needs of people.

In mid Victorian England, however, the challenge to traditional religious beliefs shifted from utilitarian ideas to advances in science, notably the ideas of evolution and natural selection posited by Charles Darwin and the tendency of biology to reduce "humankind even further into 'nothingness.'"[4] Darwin's ideas of natural selection and survival of the fittest "conflicted not only with the concept of creation derived from the bible, but also with long-established assumptions of the values attached to humanity's special role in the world"[5] and unsettled many people with its implications of human's close connections to the animal world. In addition to Darwin's theories, the discovery and exploration of geology and astronomy posed a challenge to traditional religious and spiritual beliefs; geology by extending the history of the earth backward by millions of years, reducing the stature and importance of humans in time, and astronomy by extending a knowledge of space and the universe to infinite and incomprehensible expanses that reduced human importance as well. Both of these fields provided a disconcerting challenge to previously solid beliefs in the Old Testament story of creation and the world, and humans understanding of their place in the world and their assumption of their importance. For many, these scientific advancements and ideas disrupted their beliefs, leaving them questioning and adrift without the security their faith once provided for them.

---

[2] Steven Marcus, "Culture and Anarchy Today," *Southern Review* 29, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 433.
[3] Greenblatt, "The Victorian Age," 1026.
[4] Greenblatt, 1027.
[5] Greenblatt, 1027.

This angst over the changing world and the threat of anarchy that Arnold perceived served as a shaping influence in the development and creation of his poetry and criticism. His work exists as both a reflection of the anxiety and isolation he felt in the presence of an everchanging, urbanized world, and as a criticism of industrialization, the increasing modernity of the world around him and the possible consequences. Though much of Arnold's work was creating during the mid to late Victorian Period, he grew up in the early Victorian Period, exposed to the "Time of Troubles" and daily life associated with this period. When he was young, the opening of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway in 1830, followed by a period of rapid railway construction transformed England's commerce and economy, as well as connecting cities. Political movement was slow to follow, resulting in economic distress, social tensions, and an economic crash in the late 1830s. In addition to the political and economic struggles during Arnold's younger years, social issues also ran rampant, with increased crime, issues of child labor, and food shortages due to high tariffs. Many viewed the Victorian period as a time of increased amorality, due to increased crime in cities, the development of a seedy underbelly in many urbanized towns, and the circulation of newspapers reporting the crimes and scandals of the day on the front page.

Much of Arnold's poetry and criticism functions around the central question of how one is to live a fulfilling and enjoyable life in a world that was becoming increasingly modernized and industrialized, something which he viewed as a detriment to individual happiness and morality. In contemplating this question, he uses his poetry as a record of his personal life and the emotions he experienced, such as his loneliness, melancholy, sense of isolation, and the feeling of being a troubled individual living in a society that is equally as troubled.

His poem, "Buried Life," is one of the perfect examples of his poetry serving as a reflection on his personal life and experiences. It expresses the speaker's frustration and sadness at his seeming inability to achieve the openness and true expression for which he yearns, and a criticism of an increasingly modern society and population. He expresses his feelings of isolation and separateness by depicting the speaker existing in a world of men that "lived and

moved tricked in disguises, alien to the rest of men, and alien to themselves."[6] The speaker feels alone in a world surrounded by people he views as presenting in a disguise, hiding their true selves from others and from their own selves. This frustration is magnified because he is trying to achieve the opposite and express his true self, but also acknowledges the futility of the quest for self-expression, stating that even if "for a moment, [one] can get free [their] heart, and have [their] lips unchained,"[7] their attempts to "speak and act [their] hidden self…what [they] say and do" may be eloquent, and well-spoken but they would not be true, and would therefore just be in vain.[8] The speaker can be viewed as an extension of Arnold himself, reflecting Arnold's views of the world around him and his desire for self-expression, and the futility of existence in an indifferent world.

He also describes a nameless sense of sadness rolling over him, and explores his feelings of isolation and dislocation when stating that "often, in the world's most crowded streets, but often in the din of strife, there rises an unspeakable desire after the knowledge of our buried life; a thirst to spend our fire and restless force in tracking out our true, original course; a longing to inquire into the mystery of this heart which beats so wild, so deep in us."[9] This feeling of burning restlessness and unspeakable desire for originality and self-expression is a reflection of Arnold's reaction to a world that was changing around him too quickly for him to keep up. The poem, as a whole, reflects and depicts Arnold's struggles to understand his existence and the world around him, as well as his urge to make his life and expression meaningful.

In his poems "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse" and "Dover Beach," Arnold touches upon his feelings of anxiety, isolation, and his distaste for the modernized world in which he found himself. In "Stanzas," Arnold explores his struggles with faith and religious conviction by creating a narrative that explores the struggles he was experiencing. Arnold reflects on the two faiths he has rejected; Christianity and the rationalism provided as a substitute. Feeling

[6] Matthew Arnold, "The Buried Life," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, 9th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2012), Line 21-22.
[7] Arnold, Line 26-29.
[8] Arnold, Line 64-66.
[9] Arnold, Line 45-53.

lost without belief in either, or anything, Arnold feels as though he is "wandering between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born, with nowhere yet to rest [his] head."[10] This sense of suffering and dislocation without conviction in faith is a highly personal struggle that Arnold explores, and one that many Victorians were experiencing due to the turmoil and conflict created by scientific advancements. Arnold ends the poem by depicting his alienation and loneliness as someone who is outside his beliefs, like children cloistered in an abbey.

"Dover Beach" explores similar feelings of isolation, this time in the form of the speaker's contemplation of the ceaseless nature of the waves and critique of the modern world. By placing the speaker in the presence of such a force of nature, and one that is seemingly infinite and everlasting, Arnold highlights the isolation and transience of humanity, as well as a commentary on an increasingly urban world in contrast to the primal beauty of nature. The speaker begs his love to be true to him, since the "world, which seems to lie before us like a land of dreams…hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain."[11] These lines epitomize Arnold's feelings of the world he lived in; a wide-open future, that should be full of bountiful opportunities and dreams, that is instead uncertain, joyless, and indifferent. He expresses his feelings of faithlessness as well, saying that the "Sea of Faith was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore…but now [he] only hear[s] its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar."[12] He no longer sees his "Sea of Faith" as overflowing, but instead as having retreated, leaving him with just a melancholy roar. This metaphor for the speaker's loss of faith, and grim contemplations of the future parallel Arnold's feelings of faith in a world where religion is more challenged and displaced than ever.

Some of his work, in addition to existing as a reflection of his inner turmoil from the external world, develops some of his ideas of perfection, both on an individual basis, and a societal one. Arnold's criticism of society is based upon

---

[10] Matthew Arnold, "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, 9th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2012), Line 85-88.
[11] Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, 9th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2012), Line 30-34.
[12] Arnold, Line 21-25.

idea that the Victorian middle class, or Philistines, was not wicked per se, but instead were ignorant, narrow minded, and suffering from the dullness of their private life.[13] This led to the close-mindedness in the middle class that Arnold condemned and criticized. This analysis of society was reinforced by Arnold's conviction that the world of the future was a middle class one, and therefore would be dominated by a class poorly equipped to lead or enjoy civilized living.[14] Not only did he believe the middle class was not properly equipped to successfully lead a civilization, but that they would not even be able to enjoy the life they created because of their narrow mindedness.

In addition, Arnold developed a way to view civilization based on what he considered the four 'powers'; conduct, intellect and knowledge, beauty and social life, and manners. He would use this scale to grade a variety of civilizations in each category. This scale highlights what aspects of society he places emphasis on; the manners and way people conduct themselves, intellectual progress, and beauty. An ideal civilization would receive high scores in each of these categories, yet when Arnold graded Victorian England, he gave an 'A' for conduct, and failing grades for the rest.[15]

He is also a critic of religious institutions, arguing that not only is their worldview narrow and restrictive, but also that they do not know how to read the bible intelligently or go to church intelligently. He states that of Christianity, two things are obvious, "one is that men cannot do without it, and the other that they cannot do with it as it is."[16] Arnold considered the bible a great work of epic literature rather than a sacred, historical text. In his criticism of Christianity and the Church, Arnold was not calling for the dismantling of these institutions, rather he was arguing that they were credible in that they made a contribution to the civility of humanity, but when understood correctly were agents in what he defined as 'culture'[17] rather than being the foundation of culture itself. He argued for the perfection of the Christianity and the Church, as it would help in the "develop[ment of] all sides of…humanity; and as a general

[13] "Matthew Arnold," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, 9th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2012), 1372.
[14] "Matthew Arnold," 1372.
[15] "Matthew Arnold," 1372.
[16] "Matthew Arnold," 1372.
[17] "Matthew Arnold," 1372.

perfection, [the development of] all parts of…society."[18] Arnold criticizes the Puritan religious institutions throughout his work *Culture and Anarchy*, particularly in the first chapter, "Sweetness and Light," for their narrowmindedness, although he does place value on many of their ideas. For example, he lauds religions "ideal of complete harmonious human perfection" and religion's virtue in having "conquered even the plain faults of [mans] animality."[19] Arnold's relationship with religion and faith is a strange one. On one hand, he is lamenting the loss of religious conviction, or the challenging of faith in his poetry, but on the other he critiques religious close-mindedness in his criticism.

Literary critic Steven Marcus examined Arnold's social criticism, *Culture and Anarchy* and its relevance today. He identifies Arnold's fear of potential anarchy as being divided into two general categories; spiritual and social anarchy. He viewed spiritual anarchy as being associated with unrestricted economic and social forms of laissez-faire, whereas social anarchy he connected with what he perceived to be the inevitable advent of modern democracy. When talking about Arnold himself, he states that "like almost all the great Victorian figures he set himself—consciously and in the wake of such world-historical developments…—to confront the immense questions of how to reconcile progress or change with order and continuity."[20] Arnold's recommendation is twofold. He first posits a more practical suggestion to increase education for both the middle and working classes sponsored by the state. His second idea recommends the inculcation of the ideas, practices, manners, temperament etc. that are implicit in his 'master term' of culture He makes the assumption that for these practices to be enacted that religion, in particular, Christianity, has somehow disappeared as the ultimate truth of the world. Marcus argues that Arnold's arguments regarding the future and ideal form of religion are "logically unsustainable" and that once "divine claims and supernatural sanctions are abducted from religion, once religious is naturalized, historicized, and relativized, there is no way of investing any other set of beliefs that concern or prescribe

[18] Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 2001, accessed April 15, 2017, http://public-library.uk/ebooks/25/79.pdf.
[19] Arnold.
[20] Marcus, "Culture and Anarchy Today."

norms."[21] Arnold's belief that religion is nonessential to the formation of culture as he defines it, to Marcus is "logically built on sand" given his recommendations for the improvement of society.

Author and Professor Catherine Runcie also criticizes Arnold's criticism as one that "does not look ahead to a new stage of experience. It does not mark time. It cannot cope with change."[22] Arnold's theory of poetics was the desire to have his poetry *do* something, rather than just exist as something beautiful or pleasurable. He believed that poetry's main purpose was to bring happiness. He later extended poetry's duties to include "even more difficult duties, man's 'sustenance', 'consolation', the very 'self-preservation of humanity."[23] These duties he later expanded to include are difficult to achieve, and complex demands on the form. In positing poetry's purpose to include all these things, Runcie argues that Arnold was underestimating the "importance of the sheer pleasurableness of a poem."[24] He finally dictates that poetry should be that of "high seriousness, poetry of a profound criticism of life or moral profundity."[25] That slightly contradicts his previous stance of poetry's purpose of the providing of pleasure. This slightly contradictory nature, and logical fallacies in Arnold's criticism can be seen both in his social and literary criticism.

Based on Arnold's reactions to the changing world around him, and his criticisms of society, it is possible to extrapolate these thoughts and sentiments to a guess of what his ideal, utopic society would look like. One of Arnold's basic ideas in his social and religious essays is that "the good of life is Happiness."[26] In his essay *Literature and Dogma*, Arnold attempts to show that not only is happiness the proof, but it is also the reward of righteousness,[27] and emphasizes the importance of joy in human life. In order to attain happiness, Arnold recommends the study of 'perfection'. Arnold has two different ideas on how to attain individual perfection. The first defines perfection as lawful obedience,

---

[21] Marcus.
[22] C. A. Runcie, "Matthew Arnold's Criticism: A Reconsideration," *Sydney Studies* 3 (1977): 47, https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/SSE/article/viewFile/335/307.
[23] Runcie, 48.
[24] Runcie, 48.
[25] Runcie, 49.
[26] C. V. Boyer, "Self-Expression and Happiness: A Study of Matthew Arnold's Idea of Perfection," *International Journal of Ethics* 33, no. 3 (1923): 265.
[27] Boyer, 265.

while the other defines perfection as the "full development of personality."[28] By reaching individual perfection, through either definition, as well as reaching societal perfection through the education of the masses in behavior and manners, and the eradication of the narrow-minded religious view, we can achieve what Arnold would consider an ideal society.

[28] Boyer, 266.