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by Winfield H. Rogers

ALDOUS HUXLEY'S HUMANISM

MR. ALDOUS HUXLEY does not interpret life, on his own admittance, in those exciting and emotional terms which persuade the generality of men. His followers are confronted, moreover, with the astonishing fact that even some of the intellectual and sophisticated minority fail completely to understand or to like his work. Very few of Mr. Huxley's readers, apparently, take the trouble to discover the true implication and importance of his satire. As with all satire worthy the name, the reader must discover in this instance the point of view or philosophy that in the first place dictated the satiric criticism, which is, with novelists who are not also essayists, an inductive process of no little difficulty. Fortunately, to construct the positive philosophy from the negative material of satire, though entirely possible because his philosophy is implicit in each of his works, is not necessary with Mr. Huxley. In numerous essays and in isolated passages in his novels, he has clearly set forth his attitude. A true understanding of Mr. Huxley's philosophy indicates, contrary to the common American conception, that his novels are genuinely significant works; the unity of his thought, his intellectual acumen, his humanity, above all, his morality (for he describes immorality only to condemn it) become crystal clear. Mr. Huxley then stands out as one of the important social thinkers, as well as critics and creative writers, of our time.

The inability of many American readers to arrive at an understanding of Mr. Huxley's attitude, as well as of his importance, may be illustrated from several points of view. One intelligent reader of *Point Counter Point* pronounces it sewage; another, a scholar of distinguished ability, states, in effect, that readers put up with the immoralities of the book because of the author's intellectualism; a writer in one of the foremost learned journals emphasizes the scientific element in Huxley, without making clear

exactly what he means by this term. And other readers frankly are baffled. The American reader of Mr. Huxley, piqued at the foreign conception that Mr. Sinclair Lewis portrays accurately the American scene, might well consider that he is falling into a similar error. The exaggerated pictures drawn by either writer must be taken for what they are, satiric pictures or segments of their respective societies. The great difference between these two satirists, on the other hand, is that Mr. Huxley has a far more definite, an infinitely more valuable philosophy behind his criticism. His philosophy, though often formulated in intellectual terms, is shot through with emotional conviction. It is the product of a fine brain and a sane emotional attitude. This philosophy is inherent in all of Mr. Huxley's work, in every satiric portrait, in every comedy and tragedy of his novels. So completely does it dominate his work, that whatever he touches must in some way be brought into contact with it. It is this philosophy which dictated the essential pattern of *Point Counter Point* and which keeps it from being a mere literary freak.

II.

Mr. Huxley's attack on Wordsworth indicates at once the essential basis and sufficiency of his philosophy. Wordsworth, he believes, committed the unpardonable sin of making an intellectual generalization from the emotional particular. Not that the emotion itself was invalid, but the resulting rationalization has no validity, for it is "suspiciously anthropocentric". He recognizes and insists upon the small value of truth in the emotional experience, though condemning the poet for attempting to erect a life philosophy upon it. That most intellectual philosophies are ultimately based on emotional attitudes, he believes is natural and right and inevitable by virtue of their human origin; indeed, the emotion is given force and permanence through embodiment in an idea. Nevertheless, this basis assuredly must not be an emotional particular.

The emotional basis of his own philosophy Mr. Huxley expresses in various places,—Colman's statement in *Antic Hay*, for example. Late at night when he and his companions are walk-ink through the streets, Colman asks them to think of the ". . .

seven million distinct and separate individuals, each with distinct and separate lives and all completely indifferent to our existence . . ." who are about them. He asks them to think of the "Hundreds of thousands" experiencing similar activities and emotions; and yet ". . . they are all alive, all unique and separate and sensitive, like you and me." Mr. Huxley is definitely fascinated and influenced by the thought. This incongruous quality of life—its oneness and simultaneous diversity—is the basic emotional conception of his philosophy. It gives him his zest for life and his pessimism; it determines his philosophic position, which he defines as *pessimistic humanism*.

III.

The salient difference between the humanism of Mr. Huxley and that of the humanists of the school of the late Professor Irving Babbitt is found in Mr. Huxley's modernity, at the center of which is his reconciliation of the psychological and humanistic points of view. He can best be described as a "psychological humanist". Inherent in the term is the pessimism which he himself uses to describe his attitude. The terms of many so-called humanists seem vague and outmoded when compared to those of this psychological humanism. The fine humanistic tradition of the Greeks and the life worship of the Elizabethans are reinterpreted for the benefit of the twentieth century man in terms which he can understand.

The only facts, Mr. Huxley thinks, in which we can believe are psychological. In one sense these facts are only rationalizations, but in any case the only possible ones in the new state of mind of humanity. Everything else, apart from these psychological facts, I presume with the exception of the physical sciences, is either man's projection, in some way, of himself, or pure conjecture. Thus, with this irrational absolute, man's attention should be concentrated on his psychological well-being in the present. Our mode of living and our social institutions must be brought into harmony with the individual's psychological necessity. I do not think I am misinterpreting in saying that Mr. Huxley believes that our time has gives itself alternately to two tendencies, that of theorizing and that of living for the moment in an unreasonable

enjoyment of what he calls "direct perceptions and spontaneous feelings". In the mean between reflection and spontaneity we find that humanistic ideal.

The essential difference between this type of humanism and the purely psychological point of view may not, at this point, be clear. With Mr. Huxley, emphasis upon material psychology does not, as with many modern thinkers, lead him to anything approaching a materialistic, naturalistic, or behaviouristic outlook. To him the human spirit is distinct from the body; for, in comparison, the capacity of the spirit is limitless and subject to profound modification; the spirit is the result of all experience. This conception is a very adequate reconciliation of the findings of modern psychology to the individual sense of oneness. The capacity of the spirit gives a oneness to the obvious diversity within the individual man. Mr. Huxley's conception of sin illustrates the psychological basis, the profound modernity and the true nature of his philosophy. A sin is not a sin because it has been somewhere prohibited, but because it is hygienically unsound, either to the mind or body. On the other hand, the virtues might be described as those things which are hygienically sound because they make it possible for a man to develop his potentialities, unhindered by disease and agitation. Capacity for development, for modification on the part of the human entity, is the cornerstone of his humanistic philosophy. The reader of Mr. Huxley's work who emphasizes his scientific attitude, or his demand for scientific integrity in literature, should absorb his idea that scientific explanations are not the whole truth.

The balance between reflection and spontaneity, already mentioned, is part of the humanist's emphasis upon harmony within the individual. The individual, by varied functions, by participation in the diversity of the world, must develop his own diverse psychological constitution. Because, Mr. Huxley says in effect, they ignore important phases of individual life, philosophers, ascetics, money-grubbers, hard-headed business men, routine workers, commit suicide.

During the English Renaissance the representative man, in Mr. Huxley's mind, was the "life-worshipper", in other words, the humanist. This representative man came as near as is humanly

possible to the humanistic ideals of the "harmonious adult man". He was able to do this because he, as is Mr. Huxley, was concerned with this world almost to the exclusion of other interests. Unconsciously he made his mode of living fit his psychological facts, on the whole quite unconcerned with things beyond adequate explanation by man. The life-worshipper, for the most part, disregards eternal life and religion, finding life in this world quite sufficient in itself, and life an adequate reason for life. As man's nature prohibits such a contradiction as a homogeneously perfect life, he strives for as diversified a life as possible. In spite of all kinds of procrustean exercises on the part of man to achieve imaginary unity, human life reveals discontinuity and diversity. The conventional conception of perfection as conceived by the ascetic, the believer in social service, and the puritan, goes by the boards, for their perfection is self-annihilation which has no place in human life, in fact is not life at all. As the individual is actually many persons, he should sincerely try to be all of them. Man's almost infinite potentiality he should recognize and do his best to realize. His potentialities allow him to live in the universals of human experience rather than in the individual and one. The validity of the experience of oneness and simplicity, however, or even the occasional consciousness of oneness with the whole universe, though only true of one psychological experience, is not destroyed.

To this end of developing the harmonious adult man, of attaining perfection in all the diverse aspects of the human entity, our entire attention should be concentrated on this world. In realizing his potential humanity and primary duty to himself, it is necessary for man to keep himself at a pitch of efficiency which will allow him to give life to all his elements and latent capacities. The conscious mind, the instincts, and the body must be allowed life, so that man may become a perfect animal and a perfect human. The best life consists of: "Multiplicity of eyes and multiplicity of aspects seen." The right of all the diverse components of human nature to real life is important to Mr. Huxley. When he says that each man, by virtue of his heredity and his acquired habits is domiciled in several universes, he carries his sense of diversity to the extreme. Yet when he states that the whole of a single man's

universe is composed of a series of "non sequiturs", all connected by the individual, we begin to realize the emotional reality behind his idea.

All the elements of man, Mr. Huxley realizes, cannot be brought into play at any given time. He pleads that we lead the balanced life passionately. He counsels man to proceed to a realization of the various aspects of his being, balancing each by vital excess in every direction, balancing these excesses with moderation. The man most likely to achieve this ideal in civilized society Mr. Huxley believes is the gentleman, for it is the gentleman who most frequently achieves porportion in living. The love of life of the life-worshipper, it must be emphasized, by no means releases him from the necessity of selecting; the life-worshipper believes in intense life activity but not in indiscriminate activity.

A real bird's eye glance at Mr. Huxley's novels at this point reveals their true import and the significance of the satiric characterization. He believes that a great many modern writers, because of their reaction to the "excesses of popular art", and because they have confined themselves to "only a tiny fraction of existence" have neglected the important things in life. The inclusiveness, for example, of *Point Counter Point* is an attempt to indicate the diversity of human nature and human life, and implied plea, as well, that we do not let a single aspect of our beings dominate our lives. Each character who is satirically condemned in this novel, as well as in his other satiric works, in some way violates the humanistic code of the life-worshipper. Each in some way fails to be the harmonious adult man. Lucy Tantamount fails in life, for example, because of her overemphasis of one specialized physiological and psychological aspect of her being. Perhaps it is in this respect that Mr. Huxley thinks our age most errs. The realism of the time offers no check to the sexual impulse, which now achieves neither love, nor amusement, nor lasting significance. Lucy's father, also, remained undeveloped on all but one side of his personality. Out of the laboratory, except when listening to music, he is a complete child. One suspects that Mr. Huxley gave him his taste for music not only to lend verisimilitude to his satire, but to indicate undeveloped potentialities. Against the indiscriminate sensation-seeking of Lucy is opposed,

in *Point Counter Point*, the scientific impersonality—equally characteristic of our age—as it manifests itself in various characters, for example, in Phillip Quarles. Of Mr. Huxley's positive statements on this contemporary tendency I have already spoken. Strikingly, Mr. Huxley's deep conviction and sincerity cause him to turn whatever he touches into a humanistic document. He looks upon his novels, I believe, as he does upon poetry; they exist primarily as instruments “. . . for the modification of existence patterns”.

IV.

Mr. Huxley has specifically stated what he considers to be the great menaces to modern society. They are (I suspect in the order of their importance in Mr. Huxley's mind): first, monotheism and the superhuman ideal; second, the worship of success and efficiency; third, the machine. Each of these, it should be emphasized, is a menace not of external nature, but each becomes menacing in proportion to its possible effects upon the internal man, as it becomes a menace from *within*. Mr. Huxley is not so much concerned with society as with the possible effects of it upon each of the ideals of an impossible superhumanness, as it has through the course of centuries developed, leads to an ignoring of the essential nature and diversity of man, and thus to emotional and intellectual suicide. Contemporary monotheism, particularly, offers no sustenance by which the individual may live. The ideal of “perfect humanity” is more healthy than the impossible striving for a superhumanness. Too often in the past have we allowed the sick in mind or body, those unbalanced in emotion or intellect, to lead us. The “neuralgia-metaphysic” of Pascal, for example, or the “asthma-philosophy” of Marcel Proust are equally odious to the healthy humanist.

To a certain extent the monotheistic ideal has obscured the truth, for it has, in the past, been uncondusive to “participative knowledge”. Participative knowledge brings a knowledge of diversity which defeats the monotheistic ideal. Mr. Huxley hopes that man will turn from the worship of abstraction, which seems to be supplanting monotheism, to some form of polytheism. Modern society under the influence of science and the worship of ab-

stractions or rationalism is no longer a place where man can live fully and harmoniously. Against the very probable objection to the humanistic philosophy that under it a stable society would not be possible, Mr. Huxley cites the examples of the Greeks. Furthermore, he emphatically denies that man's exclusive concern with this world will lead to an acceptance of the advice of Horace and the Preacher to "swill, guzzle, and copulate". We can safely say that Mr. Huxley believes that the humanistic ideals and life are fully compensatory for the loss of religious fervour.

Mr. Huxley's philosophy is, in essence, an exposition of, and a plea for, a sense of proportion in the conduct of life. The Northerner he believes, has lost this more markedly than any other modern man. This is perhaps why Protestantism, far more monotheistic than Catholicism or the religions of the East, has gained its hold and present form here. His observation is that the Southern European and the Oriental have a greater sense of proportion, against which the Northern European and American has only his material development to counterpoise. One can imagine Mr. Huxley thinking that the northern intensity, the capacity for oneness of purpose, the inelasticity of mind, has brought physical accomplishment and dominance at the expense of the ability to lead a full and many-sided, a genuinely humanistic life.

V.

To many this philosophy of Mr. Huxley will undoubtedly seem lacking in one important aspect, that of social responsibility. His formulation of his attitude, however, undoubtedly has been dictated by his feeling of the great need in modern life for some sort of faith. To him, the most important faiths of the present day, the product of the new materialism, namely, Nationalism, Socialism, and Progress, are completely unsatisfactory. The selfishness of Nationalism is too obviously "unhumanistic" to need discussion. Socialism as the logical development of democracy holds nothing out to the humanist. Mr. Huxley believes in an intelligent oligarchy. "The ideal state," he says, "is one in which there is a material democracy controlled by an aristocracy of intellect—a state in which men and women are guaranteed a decent human existence and are given every opportunity to develop such talents

as they possess and where those with the greatest talent rule". To say, as has been said, that Mr. Huxley is an aristocrat—he is far too aware of the nature of snobbery to ever be one in the Thackerian sense—is misleading; he merely recognizes the unescapable fact that there is a great difference between man and man in respect to capacity and potentiality.

Progress, the third great faith of the present time, which makes happiness the end of life—actually happiness being only a by-product of life activity—is anathema to him. The pursuit of happiness under the banner of Progress leads inevitably to the killing of many of the individuals of which each human entity is made. Inevitably it calls for a subjugation of the personality to social ends. For this purpose great restraints have been placed on individuals. Political liberty and its concomitant ideals have succeeded in further entrapping the individual rather than in freeing him. Nevertheless Mr. Huxley is by no means without his social faith; his philosophy is far from hedonistic, far from the anthropocentrism toward which in his mind Wordsworth inclined. He believes in improving the conditions under which men live to a point at which it will be possible for every individual to lead the humanistic life. The sadness and painfulness of human life, and the comparative slowness with which change can come lead him into pessimism.

Phillip Quarles in *Point Counter Point* summarizes Mr. Huxley's attitude towards modern society. Quarles wrote: "The whole of modern civilization is based on the idea that the specialized function which gives a man his place in society is more important than the whole man, or rather is the whole man, all the rest being irrelevant or even (since the physical, intuitive, instinctive, and emotional part of man doesn't contribute appreciably to making money or getting on in an industrialized world) positively harmful and detestable." To compensate for the restraints placed upon him by the extant social ideals and to fill the leisure time produced by specialized functioning, man has surrounded himself with substitutes for real emotions. This compensation is necessary because of the worship of success and efficiency, which brought in its wake the exaltation of the machine with its concomitant, standardization. To the typical modern

thinker Utopia would be like what he has demonstrated in *Brave New World*. Indeed Mr. Huxley sees our ever increasing leisure and our supposedly greater liberty as dubious blessings. However, in answer to the dilemma produced by democratic, industrial and mechanical development, he pleads that we spend our time in being complete man. Over this prospect he is not too optimistic, for even education cannot mold the incorrigible. Continuous progress calls for an improvement in the "heritable qualities" of the human race and a decrease in population,—the first being particularly difficult to bring about with any degree of perceivable rapidity. Mr. Huxley deplores in a reasoned and philosophical manner the things decried time and time again by critics standing on quite different ground. Consistently he is humanistic, inevitably pessimistic. In his estimation real complete human beings are the *desiderata*, not newspaper readers, jazzers, radio fans. He deals in various ways, through satire in his novels and explicitly in his essays, with the futile dissipation of leisure by the substitution of the spurious for real human activities. The old pleasures of life, he finds, demanded intelligence and personal initiative, the new pleasures none. The members of a jazz band, he says, (and why not those who listen?) are not in any kind of relation to the decencies of human life. Further, he wonders if these decencies will not be completely dead in another generation. The modern good time and the modern substitutes for feeling, the newspaper, and the movies, have destroyed all emotional and intellectual initiative. In general our leisure is utterly inconsequential; consequently our lives are but waste lands.

This condemnation of life as it is led in the north of Europe and in America is not the usual superficial attack upon the materialism of western civilization, for Mr. Huxley is himself a materialist. That we should be interested in the actual world he believes is admirable; the fault of the majority is that they are not sufficiently interested in enough of the world, a world filled with intensely interesting phenomena. Our fault is that we are not materialistic enough. In other words, modern man is intent upon escaping from life, rather than upon seeking means of participating in life and of extending the life range. The great enemies, actually, of the humanistic philosophy are the members

of the middle class, for they are the fearful hypocrites afraid of the truth, and fearing things beyond their traditional spiritual and material range.

VI.

The philosophy of Mr. Huxley must be synthesized into the organic whole from which it came. As we see it in its isolated manifestations, a sharp eye, considerable curiosity and constructive power are required to discern its true importance. The humanism of Mr. Huxley, here set forth, differs from that of the noisier humanists contemporary with him in that it is rationally acceptable, clear in terminology, and more powerful in creative force. He makes us vitally aware of the enormous possibilities of life and living, of the opportunities in knowledge and art. The fact that we are on earth is quite enough. We must adventure, and gain knowledge, and advance—not necessarily for any particular reason—towards an unattainable goal. As a novelist, moreover, Mr. Huxley becomes extremely important when it is realized that he is among the remarkably small number of distinguished English and American novelists who have raised their work upon a coherent philosophy. With the realization that his novels have behind them a philosophy which is an acceptable working hypothesis for modern man, they become definitely significant. There are many who will agree with Mr. Huxley that the greatest need of our times is to make this humanistic philosophy generally assimilable.