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ALDOUS HUXLEY'S EARLY NOVELS: AN UNFOLDING DIALOGUE ABOUT PAIN

Abstract

The article examines four early novels by Aldous Huxley – *Crome Yellow, Antic Hay*, *Those Barren Leaves* and *Point Counter Point* – in connection to each other and to Huxley's essays, in terms of an overarching theme of a cycle of pain, and thereby connects the novels to *Brave New World*. In the course of the analysis, the methodological problems of approaching the novels as "novels of ideas" are discussed, focusing on the problem of reducing characters to type, which makes it more difficult for readers to notice the way Huxley constructs individual characters and the arguments he wishes to explore with them. Finally, implications of the existence of this overarching theme for reading strategies are discussed.

In a 1931 essay entitled "Obstacle Race," Huxley wrote that "[t]hought has a life of its own ... . A notion ... proceeds to grow with all the irresistibleness and inevitability of a planted seed, or a crystal suspended in a saturated solution" (CE vol. III, 143). This paper is focused on such a growth of ideas in his early novels, specifically in *Crome Yellow* (1921), *Antic Hay* (1923), *Those Barren Leaves* (1925) and *Point Counter Point* (1928). However, while the metaphor of a crystal suggests linear expansion in time, Huxley's ideas often developed dialogically, continually supporting, contradicting and shaping each other.

The process will be studied from two different perspectives. First, there is the internal perspective of Huxley dialoguing with himself – it is fairly well established that one of his motivations for writing was the exploration of ideas for his own benefit (see e.g. Sion, 195). It should be noted, however, that since the author is an actual person, whose motivations and unrecorded thoughts are inaccessible, the study makes a distinction between Aldous

Huxley as a *person* and his *persona*, accessible through his publicly available writing, and will be concerned only with the latter.

The second perspective of relevance is that of the readers, who are invited to be the audience of Huxley's struggle with ideas – being published texts, the novels were, in practice, provided for the readers to experience. Consequently, while inquiring into how Huxley seemed to develop particular ideas in the four novels, the analysis will also include the question of what that can mean for the reader and how it may influence the process of reading.

It must also be noted that this article has to be restricted to a selected theme, since trying to do justice to the whole content of the four novels would require a book length study. In the present paper, the analysis is limited to one theme with dystopian implications: while Huxley's four earlier novels are, in terms of setting and structure, very different from the later *Brave New World* (1932), they do contain some traces of it and this analysis is concerned with one such strand of traces.

1. True to type

A problem that needs to be addressed first is the novels' collective reputation – the texts from the twenties are relatively often discussed together (e.g. Sion) and classified as "novels of ideas," the definition of the genre being often taken straight from *Point Counter Point*, where it is suggested that: "[t]he character of each personage must be implied as far as possible, in the ideas of which he is the mouthpiece" (299).

Two significant problems may arise from looking at the novels collectively and paying excessive attention to this "mission statement." The first is the creation of a certain narrative of Huxley's development, seeing each book as, essentially, an improvement on the previous one. An example of this is offered by George Woodcock, who states that the "novels grow in complexity and quality – with the special exception of *Brave New World* – as they proceed from *Crome Yellow* to *Eyeless in Gaza*." The problem lies in that, while it is generally true that each consecutive novel from the twenties can be seen as an improvement in the scope and complexity of the narrative told, habitual thinking about the novels in this manner creates a risk that the earlier novels will be ignored or overlooked, in favour of the later ones.

Secondly, if the dedication of the novel of ideas *to* ideas is taken too simplistically, it may interfere with seeing individual novel characters *as characters*. Given that there is only a certain number of important idea combinations to be expressed, significantly different characters may be fit into a few general types (e.g. "the scientist," "the harlot," "the intellectual"),

the differences between them being purposefully overlooked. The risk is especially high, if the analysis spans a number of books.

For instance, Woodcock expresses an opinion that "that the excitement of the ideas makes up to a great extent for the shallowness of many of the characters, who are often little more than Jonsonian humours" (63). He then suggests (among other things) that "women [...] – with rare exceptions – are the enemies in Huxley's world" (128), and attributes the portrayals of the older female characters to the author's "chronic misogyny" (163). There are, however, potentially much more interesting ways to read the various female characters, if one conceives of them not as a class, but as a group of characters with individual histories.

A similar fate befalls the main focalising characters (Denis Stone, Theodore Gumbril Junior, Mr Calamy and Francis Chelifer, and Philip Quarles), who are not infrequently collectively described as variants of the failed intellectual type. For example, Milton Birnbaum classes them all as "cerebrotonicis," and sees them as frustrated and hampered by a "Hamlet-like [...] indecision and inability to execute their plans" (48). In consequence, both Calamy and Francis Chelifer seem to be reduced to type, for neither of them actually demonstrates significant inactivity and indecision: by the end of the novel Calamy embarks on a quest for mystical enlightenment, while Chelifer takes a frustrating job and lives in an unpleasant lodging house out of conviction (AH: 97), in sharp contrast to a number of other Huxley characters, who feel cripplingly embarrassed in the presence of poverty and misfortune.

An even more troubling case of simplified interpretation, one also most likely to happen to the main focalising characters, involves identifying them as author-mouthpieces. Some instances of such identification may even have mildly humorous or absurd results, as when David Izzonotes that while Philip Quarles's wife had an affair, it "did not happen in real life" (91). In other instances, when it is actually highly probable that Huxley had given one of those characters a particular idea he agreed with, depending too heavily on the notion of an author's mouthpiece can lead to overlooking things other characters have said in probable agreement with Huxley.

There is, for example, Mrs Betterton, a generally satirical character, who delivers a quotation from Shakespeare on the virtue of feasts being rare (PCP: 55), which Huxley later repeats in the 1929 essay "Holy Face" (CE vol. II, 363). A similar thing happens to Illidge, a devout Communist working as a research assistant, apparently suffering from an inferiority complex, a man eventually cajoled into committing a murder, who delivers the following lines:

> 'Asymmetrical tadpoles! [...]' He thought of his brother Tom. Who [sic] had weak lungs and worked a broaching machine in a motor factory at Manchester. He

> remembered washing days and the pink crinkled skin of his mother's water-sodden hands. 'Asymmetrical tadpoles!' (PCP: 66)

The language used in the passage, especially the evocative "pink crinkled skin of his mother's water-sodden hands," echoes Huxley's own sentiment, a mixture of concern and embarrassment, evident in essays he wrote after encounters with people forced to do gruelling physical labour (see *Jesting Pilate* and "Sight-Seeing in Alien Englands,"). There are many ways in which Illidge is not Huxley, but in this instance the author and character seem to be in significant agreement.

The purpose of this demonstration is to challenge a commonly held idea about the novels of ideas – the genre has a reputation of being inattentive to characters and plot, but while Huxley, admittedly, did not create very memorable characters in his early novels, a critical approach that actively overlooks the individuality of particular characters only exacerbates the problem. The characters, however flawed, have more to offer than first meets the eye, an example of this hidden complexity being Myra Viveash from *Antic Hay*.

2. The wounded flapper

In his online essay, Jake Poller describes Myra as a "an archetype of the despairing, pleasure-seeking, sexually promiscuous post-war flapper" (paragraph 4), in line with such previous critics as Woodcock, who classifies her as embodying "the Circe figure [...] who reduces her victims to animality or stupidity" (45). This type of sentiment is sometimes tempered with an admission that Myra is also a victim – Poller describes her as "a sympathetic figure, goaded by grief into an endless succession of affairs" (paragraph 8), while Jerome Meckier calls her a "victim of the war," whose "despair can be traced to the battlefield death of [...] the only man she apparently ever loved" (69), but he still insists on an interpretation in which Myra is one in a series of female characters re-enacting "Huxley's recurrent negative myth, the collision of idealistic males and vapid or heartless females to signify reality's refusal to correspond to the presumptuous designs of the mind, [...] life's inability to imitate art" (68).

This seems to still be a reductionist reading, even if Myra is accorded some measure of sympathy. While it is true that at least three male characters in the novel – Theodore Gunbril, Lypiatt and Shearwater – lose their heads over her and pursuing her leads to personal tragedies for them, their "idealism" can only be taken seriously if one reads them as reliable narrators of their own condition. That can be done, and is especially common with

a focalising character like Gumbril, but is not the only reading apparently justified by textual evidence.

Lypiatt's most direct impulse to commit suicide is learning how lowly Myra thinks of his art, i.e. learning what many other people have previously told him. And even then, in his deathbed confession, he does not abandon the pretence of being larger than life, going so far as to compare himself to Hamlet (AH: 214). His propensity for bombastic grandiloquence is, however, perhaps best represented in a scene in which Myra has agreed to sit for one of his paintings:

> 'You make me suffer a great deal,' said Lypiatt ... quietly and unaffectedly [...]
> 'I am very sorry,' she said; and, really, she felt sorry. 'But I can't help it, can I?'
> 'I suppose you can't,' ... his voice had now become the voice of Prometheus in his bitterness. 'Nor can tigresses.' ... 'You like playing with the victim,' he went on; 'he must die slowly.'
> Reassured, Mrs Viveash faintly smiled. This was the familiar Casimir. So long as he could talk like ... an old-fashioned French novel, it was all right; he couldn't really be so very unhappy. (74)

Myra admits she knows she is hurting Lypiatt and the reader is told she even "feels sorry" for causing him pain. However the locus of agency in breaking away from this relationship lies, to a significant extent, with Lypiatt, who refuses to honestly face the facts. On the verge of doing so, he reverts to faux tragedy, eventually prompting a real one.

The second victim, Shearwater, has previously estranged his wife, Rosie, to pursue his research without any distractions. In response, after repeated attempts to win his attention, his wife has an affair and, by the time Shearwater has embroiled himself in an affair with Myra and wishes to come clean to his wife, there is no communication between them. The opportunity for healing missed, he is last seen running a potentially lethal experiment on himself.

And, finally, there is Gumbril Junior. He perhaps best fits Meckier's notion of a "male protagonist pour[ing] [his] own untenably idealistic notions" (68) onto a woman, since there actually is a woman he seems to idealise. Yet, when presented with an opportunity of pursuing a life with her, he throws it away. While Myra does press him strongly to accompany her for lunch, he could probably refuse and catch the train out of London to meet Emily, if he had enough conviction. Instead, he creates a fiction of "the clown," who "couldn't be called to account for his actions" (161–162). That to refuse to take responsibility for oneself *is* a fiction, is made obvious the next morning, when he attempts to meet Emily and finds the rented cottage empty.

Both Shearwater and Gumbril follow a pattern of behaviour that leads to inflicting pain on others and later reaping painful consequences for

themselves, the pain being magnified in the process. Rosie is initially greatly distraught at her husband's lack of interest in human contact, but, by the time Shearwater needs her, she has moved on to accepting a life of emotional separation. Gumbril clearly mourns the loss of Emily, but ultimately leaves her wounded by his actions.

The pattern also manifests in Myra – she has lost the love of her life in the Great War and is now unable to live fully. She admits that the neon signs in Piccadilly, which for Gumbril epitomise "[r]estlessness, distraction, refusal to think, [...] an unquiet life," "are her" (231). Having children she calls "the most desperate experiment of all," a final bid for connection she is unwilling to actually resort to, apparently for fear it may not succeed (242).

3. The destructive cycle

This pattern of inflicting harm in response to an initial catastrophe and, thereby, perpetuating pain can be observed, in varying contexts and to varying degrees, in all of Huxley's early novels. In general, it begins with an experience of the Great War (a shatterer of values and individual lives), personal trauma or a general sense of alienation. The exposure then leads to a destructive reaction, such as an affair or the adoption of a harmful lifestyle, which, predictably, leads to damage to other characters and their initiation into the cycle.

To begin, somewhat anachronistically, with *Point Counter Point*, we have, among others, Marjorie who is propelled into an affair with Walter Bidlake by her alcoholic husband, leaves her emotionally unsatisfying but economically independent life, and ends up pregnant and unhappy as Walter begins to pursue the beautiful and unscrupulous Lucy Tantamount. There is Walter himself, disliked by his father, embroiled in an affair he initiated but has no wish to continue, painfully afraid of confrontation, and grovelling at the feet of the woman he wants to have. She, in turn, is a child of the War, who came "out of the chrysalis ... when the bottom had been knocked out of everything" (138), refuses to "agree to anything in ... life ... for more than half an hour at a time" (156) and envies people who are sufficiently detached to have "fun" without being unhappy, even if that also precludes true happiness.

Then there is Lord Tantamount who attempts to clumsily lecture his daughter about proper morality while wildly underestimating her exploits and who ensconces himself in his highly abstract research. There is his assistant, Illidge, both deriding his employer and deriving his livelihood from that which he derides, plagued by a sense of inferiority, a theoretically devout communist goaded into becoming an unwilling accomplice to murder as a test of convictions. The dynamic can also be seen in the life of his partner in

crime, Maurice Spandrell, who plans and performs the murder, aspiring to diabolism in a lopsided search for God and in an attempt to wound his mother's feelings, to take revenge for her remarriage.

Finally, there is the main focalising character, Philip Quarles, and his wife. Their marriage is damaged by an affair Elinor pursues, prompted by her husband's detachment. Her lover is later murdered by Illidge and Spandrell, ostensibly for political reasons, which traumatises her, and additional strain is then put on the couple by the death of their child. As if that were not enough, Quarles is also disabled and the disability seems to be one of the factors apparently exacerbating his detachment.

Crome Yellow does not deal with tragedies on such a monumental scale, so its destructive cycle is harder to notice – the main symptoms are "the inherent lack of proper human communication" (as noted by Wim Tigges – Barfoot 21) and self-delusion. The two characteristics seem to be most strongly embodied by the focaliser, Denis Stone, whom Tigges describes as "self-centred and self-preoccupied" (Barfoot 21), and by the intellectually aspiring but naïve Mary Bracegirdle.

Denis' ego crisis is made evident when he encounters caricatures of himself:

> Denis was his own severest critic; so, at least, he had always believed. [...] His weaknesses, his absurdities–no one knew them better than he did. Indeed, in a vague way he imagined that nobody beside himself was aware of them at all. It seemed, somehow, inconceivable that he should appear to other people as they appeared to him; inconceivable that they ever spoke of him among themselves in that [...] mildly malicious tone in which he was accustomed to talk of them. (136)

When he later attempts to share this experience, he speaks in defensive generalities, as if his feelings were common facts:

> The individual [...] is not a self-supporting universe. There are times when he comes into contact with other individuals, when he is forced to take cognisance of the existence of other universes besides himself. (140)

This is met measure for measure when Mary Bracegirdle, the addressee, proceeds to similarly explain her own predicament, an affair with another guest:

> The difficulty [...] makes itself acutely felt in matters of sex. If one individual seeks intimate contact with another [...], she is certain to receive or inflict suffering. If on the other hand, she avoids contacts, she risks the equally grave sufferings that follow on unnatural repressions. (141)

At this point, the narrator overtly tells the reader that the two are talking at cross purposes, too preoccupied to notice each other's pain. When Denis eventually manages to make Mary his confidante, the result is no less

disheartening – she convinces him to stage an emergency departure from Crome and his unrequited love interest, but he loses heart before the plan comes to fruition and leaves frustrated, surrounded by "funeral imagery" (Barfoot 23).

What happens to Denis can be interpreted as an extreme case of a problem that plagues many of the characters. Mary, with her newfound experience of heartbreak, prescribes a cure that is tailored to her own needs rather than his, just as many other characters either live in their own worlds (e.g. Mr Wimbush) or give advice without true regard for the one they are advising, seemingly communicating but actually isolated. Such is the case of Mr Scogan, more interested in the hypothetical Rational State than in current problems, or of Barbecue-Smith, who advises Denis to use his automatic writing technique despite the difference in goals. *Crome Yellow* can be read as the first in a series of novelistic explorations of the cycle of pain, here mostly in the guise of egocentric isolation.

Those Barren Leaves partly breaks the pattern and is the most optimistic of the books. While unrequited love and possessiveness (Mrs Aldwinkle), alienation from reality (Miss Thriplow), existential discontent (Francis Chelifer), and even death make their appearances, the resolution is smoother than in the other texts. The cynical Thomas Cardan attempts to marry a mentally challenged woman for her money, but in doing so saves her from her murderous brother, and she dies of natural causes shortly after experiencing some freedom. Mrs Aldwinkle's niece is able to break free from her aunt's influence and marry well, despite the aunt's protestations. Calamy embarks on a promising quest for enlightenment, his last words – and the closing words of the novel – being: "he was somehow reassured" (230).

To summarise, the exploration of the cycle of pain begins with *Crome Yellow*, focusing mainly on miscommunication, egoism, and mental isolation, expands in *Antic Hay*, diminishes in *Those Barren Leaves*, and explodes in full force in *Point Counter Point,* which portrays many different varieties of suffering in significant detail. It must be noted, though, that in the two bleakest novels there are characters who manage to avoid most of the pain.

In *Antic Hay* the one who seems to escape without major damage is Emily. While her character is relatively difficult to decipher, because she is focalised mainly through Gumbril and last seen through her farewell letter to him, she nevertheless distinguishes herself by responding to Gumbril's affected philosophical ruminations about the disharmony of modern life with "You make things very complicated" (148). Furthermore, in the letter announcing her permanent departure, the tone is mild and accepting, in contrast to the mental gymnastics other characters engage in when pained.

In *Point Counter Point* at least two characters have strategies for dealing with reality. One is Mark Rampion, commonly read as an exponent of D. H.

Lawrence's philosophy (see e.g. Woodcock), who appears to be living a rather satisfactorily simple life with his wife Maria. The other is Mrs Quarles, who, dealing with an adulterous and incompetent husband, stands by traditional Christian ideas. She believes the young are mistaken in focusing on "happiness," since "good times [...] simply cannot be had continuously," and that it would be better to ask "How can we please God, and why aren't we better?," since, in the course of answering this question in practice, people "achieve happiness without ever thinking about it" (352–353).

Yet, even though both Mrs Quarles and Rampion offer venues of escape from the cycle of pain, Huxley seems not to endorse either of their positions. Christianity may have a spokeswoman, but it is also represented by Burlap, who is full of pious ideas about Saint Francis but drives his secretary out of work and into suicide. Rampion is treated comparatively mildly, but is portrayed as didactic, impractical, domineering and somewhat of a puritan.

4. Implications

In the four works – although in *Those Barren Leaves* less intensely than in others – the reader is presented with a cycle: hurt individuals react to their own pain in ways that cause further hurt and proliferate pain. While avenues of escape are suggested, in the more pessimistic novels they are also either downplayed or deprived of authorial approval, so it is never clear whether they are legitimate paths of escape or personal delusions.

There are at least three interesting implications of the presence of this theme in Huxley's work. Firstly, it seems to inform *Brave New World* – in his foreword to it, Huxley assured readers that the World Controllers "are not madmen," even if they are not, strictly speaking, sane (BNW: xii), but the novel does not necessarily deliver on this assessment. The snapshots of atrocities offered by Mond in chapter three might explain why a more stable state was considered necessary, but not why that state could not tolerate any suffering at all.

It is easier to seriously consider the notion that the World State's total aversion to suffering is not an absurd overreaction, if every potential unhappiness is looked at through the lens of the cycle of pain Huxley seems to be concerned about. From that perspective, while his argument may still be extreme, it is at least better delivered – the reader is openly faced with the argument that pain may lead to more pain irrespective of scale and, therefore, if the objective is to create total social stability, it does make sense to eradicate pain completely, at whatever cost.

This leads to the second way in which such readings may be beneficial. Huxley's early novels seem to follow a pattern whereby each consecutive

novel modifies the tone and message of the earlier one. The effect is not properly visible, however, in selective readings – the early novels reward an organic, chronological process of reading, proceeding from one text to another not merely to establish some canonical idea about Huxley as a writer, but to truly listen in to the dialogue he is having with himself. While reading only selected texts still remains an obviously valid strategy, the benefits of a more organic approach are worth noting.

Finally, in the process of reading texts in this manner it is possible to discover a different way of committing to the notion of dialogicallity in literature. In an actual dialogue it is necessary to listen and resist the impulse to reduce the other party's statements out of convenience. Similarly, Huxley's early texts reward the reader who is willing to see them as more than just social critiques with typecast characters, or *roman à clef* repositories of biographical data. While they do not actively resist being thus reduced and there may be good reasons to reduce them, they also hide some complexities that may be difficult to notice, if the reader opts for a reductive framework.

In his defence of the novel of ideas, Meckier asserts that "In *Point Counter Point*, Huxley has an abundance of explanations of what life is and ... can see through them all" (34), but it seems he also *speaks* through them. Huxley seems to dismiss his character's worldviews, since none of them contain an ultimate answer to the questions posed by life, but he is also generous enough to let many of the characters state their positions in full and to give them touches of genuine humanity. But he will be caught in the act of doing so, only if the reader pays close attention.

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