

In his being as in his work, Aldous Huxley bridged the divergence of which Sir Charles Snow has written so pungently, the divergence between the two cultures of science and of the humanities. It is significant that in so doing he became involved in a third activity. He was increasingly, overwhelmingly concerned with what Catholics would call the practice of the Presence of God, the '*Mysterium Tremendum Fascinans*, within and without' of which he wrote in one of the last letters of his life.

There are those who attribute his dual interests, his scientific curiosity and his attraction towards mystical experience, to his dual descent. Through his father he sprang from the stock of Thomas Henry Huxley, fiercely self-dedicated to the interests of truth, accuracy and freedom in scientific work, and through his mother from that of the Arnolds, preoccupied with literature and with religion.

This explanation is oversimplified. The literary abilities of the Arnolds were paralleled by T. H. Huxley's gift for writing admirable lucid prose; and they were as passionately concerned as he with intellectual integrity. His loyalty to truth led him to reject the narrow Evangelical tenets of his childhood, with their fundamentalist interpretation of the book of Genesis, and to stand stripped of comfort in a universe reluctantly envisaged as a vast blind interaction of mechanical forces. An equally sensitive conscience led the Arnold grandfather repeatedly to change his religious allegiance, each time with mental agony, the sacrifice of reputation, and the loss of financial security.

Perhaps it would be true to say that the confluence of two kindred traditions, the one predominantly extravert, the other predominantly introvert, shaped the mind of Aldous Huxley while the confluence of two remarkable sets of genes gave it urgent power.

He could not walk till he was two years old. His head was so large that it made him top heavy, and he fell over. He had a habit of seeking solitude in which to reflect on the strangeness of existence, and his elder brother, Sir Julian Huxley, tells a story that one of their aunts finding him at the age of four sitting absorbed in cogitation ventured to ask 'What are you thinking about Aldous, dear?' to be crushed by the monosyllabic reply '*Skin!*'

He wanted to become a doctor, but when he was sixteen and at Eton he got a painful infection of the eyes which blinded him for a year and affected his sight for the rest of his life. He never complained. He learned Braille, and said that it was a great advantage to be able to read under the blankets on cold nights. Although his condition gradually improved it was obvious that he could never undertake the training and work of a medical man.

It was probably this illness at this age that developed his phenomenal memory. Unable for some time to refer to notes, untouched for some time by that flood of printed words which can almost destroy the capacity for reflection, he had an enforced

leisure in which to remember and to think. When he began to see again he took nothing for granted. All that he saw, he saw consciously. At an assembly of people come together to honour his memory in December 1963, Sir Kenneth Clark spoke of the way in which he would examine a painting at such close range that one would have thought he could observe nothing but detail; only to show in discussing it that sight and insight had combined to give him an intensely vivid perception of the picture as an integrated whole.

Despite the handicap of his illness, he was able to go up to Oxford, after which he taught for a while at Eton. His first publication was a volume of poems. Offhand I remember a line characteristically combining wonder, scientific fact and a youthful desire to shock. It ran:

‘A thousand thousand spermatazoa – and one of them was me!’

Soon he was beginning to succeed as a novelist and essayist, and could give up schoolmastering.

His early novels were like brilliant watercolours complete in themselves. Their successors contained a number of fairly recognizable portraits but tended on the whole to show men as ‘ideas walking’ rather than as persons. They were increasingly preoccupied with intellectual problems, with beauty, with the grotesque and horrible aspects of physical existence, and with mortality and immortality. It is interesting to note, among other things, how closely his sketch of the soul of Uncle Eustace, the sensual egotist, tallies with the belief of St Catherine of Genoa that the love of God, which is overwhelming joy to the blessed is a glaring light or a burning heat to those who have chosen to remain enclosed and absorbed in themselves. It is a macabre narrative, showing the spirit angry and bewildered, trying to take refuge in the body of a spiritualist medium, furious at her stupidity, seeking darkness and shelter from the divine radiance.

Aldous Huxley’s writings also showed a growing interest in the life of prayer and contemplation. That this was in no way a form of escapism is made clear by the recognition of the dangers of such a life demonstrated in his two historical works, *The Devils of Loudun*, a terrible study of hysteria and obsession, and *Grey Eminence*, where Richelieu is shown attempting to use the spiritual powers of prayer in Carmelite communities not for God’s purposes but to further the political aims of France. (They may of course have seemed identical to him; the temptation to assume that one’s country is the direct instrument of Providence is not uncommon. It was for instance shared by Milton, Charles de Foucauld and Kipling among many others.)

Other books, notably *Ends and Means* and *The Perennial Philosophy* show how intensely Aldous Huxley was aware of the total demands made upon those who seek for God. It may roughly be said that *Ends and Means* is concerned with exterior, and

*The Perennial Philosophy* with interior, life. The first examines the demands for purity of motive and consistency of action, and argues throughout that good ends cannot be achieved by evil means; an argument which led its author to reject all war and to affirm the necessity for pacifism, unpopular and complete. The second assembles and discusses the writings of contemplatives of all the great religions, and explicitly illuminates the necessity for self-knowledge, self-discipline and detachment in those called to this work. It should perhaps be emphasized that he unobtrusively fulfilled these demands. He kept to a sparing diet, he scrutinized his own motives, he used the meditational techniques of the Vedantist group in California.

During the last ten years two fundamental disasters struck him. His first wife died. Later, his house was burned down in a forest fire. He lost everything except the manuscript of *Island*, on which he was then engaged. Books, diaries, notes, photographs, paintings, furniture, the written records of a lifetime, the familiar objects embodying, storing, re-echoing remembered happiness, all were destroyed. To lose all one's possessions, all one's links with the past, is in itself a kind of death. To sympathy he replied, 'It is hard, but it teaches one detachment. It is easy to think one has achieved it, but this demands the real thing.' Perhaps this fire played in his later life the part of the year of blindness in his youth. He remained full of gentleness, affection, humour and intense interest in all manner of things; but he was stripped of 'the heat of having'.

I first remember him in the nineteen twenties, when I went to stay with him and his wife, Maria, who was Belgian and dazzlingly beautiful, in a house on the hills outside Florence. I was very young, and did not enjoy as much as I should now his stimulating talk about the pictures and buildings of Florence itself in the hot light and black shadow of a brilliant June. (In fact, I longed to go swimming.) But I have never forgotten his discussion of a great house we visited with its formal gardens and fountains and cypresses, or the way in which his being there enhanced every moment of a walk in deepening dusk through a field of young wheat with the green fireflies rising and falling on either side of the path. One's own enjoyment of the landscape was quickened by his reflection of it. One perceived it as it were 'quivering within the wave's intenser day'.

He said one summer when he was in England – by this time he had made his home in California, whose dry heat suited him – how marked here was the use of the phrase 'most extraordinary!' It is true that if you listen to the general conversation at a party you may hear these words from time to time, but I think the reason Aldous Huxley heard them so often was that they expressed the normal reaction to his own immense, learned and stimulating wonder at all manner of things: traditional Chinese medicine, for instance; William James, for whom he had a deep admiration; psychophysical

types – ectomorphs, endomorphs, mesomorphs – and their difficulties in understanding one another; architecture; music; the difficulties of educating Puerto Rican children in American schools; extra-sensory perception; experiments in planetaria showing that one species of migrant bird seemed to orientate itself not by awareness of the earth's magnetic currents, but by keeping a certain pattern of stars on the right in its long flights . . . The brilliance of his mind, the freshness of his interest, his urgent and informed curiosity flowered in everything he said, but he spoke always with gentleness and in personal relationship to those about him. There was never a hint of lecturing, or of a desire to impart superior knowledge.

He could be extremely entertaining, sometimes with a cerebral wit, often with a lively sense of fun. I remember his enchanting a small boy with punning riddles (later retailed with great effect at school) and playing blow football in gales of laughter one Christmas at a large party of different generations.

Most families have an idiom of their own, a matrix of thought as it were. That he drew on such an idiom was neatly demonstrated in the conversation at a luncheon party given for him by Julian and Juliette Huxley nearly ten years ago now. I wrote it down within an hour or so of hearing it, as I did not want to forget what had been said. The notes show how thought flowed between brother and brother.

It may be interesting to quote:

'Julian said he found quite amazing the fact that electrical stimuli affecting the body, stimuli which had numerical frequencies and were quantitative in nature, were transformed on reaching the brain into a flow of qualitative experiences of colour and sound. Bertrand Russell replied that it was no more surprising than that we should make the staccato noises of a typewriter, achieve a pattern of black shapes on white paper and convey to those looking at this pattern the works of Shakespeare. Julian said human beings had invented language, writing, typewriters and reading, and that the whole affair was one of agreed human codes of communication, whereas the transformation of electrical stimuli into direct experience was a given thing. Aldous supported him but Bertrand Russell could not or would not appreciate the distinction. Aldous eased a certain tension by remarking meditatively how odd it would be if all perceptions *were* in fact quantitative, if we could only apprehend say blue and green as different series of wave lengths; if our actual experience were mathematical.

'Bertrand Russell began talking about psychical research and said its findings, especially about precognition, were incredible. He said that if phenomena only happened sporadically one could formulate no law about them, and they could not be considered of any scientific importance. He enlarged on this for some time, and was again impervious to argument.

'At coffee I sat next to Aldous and found he had just returned from an international

parapsychology conference at Vence. He said what an enormous change the last twenty years had made. Here were eminent philosophers, such as Professor H. H. Price, and trained psychiatrists and psychologists all getting together to discuss the psi function. The whole subject was becoming intellectually respectable.

'When the party broke up he and I went together by bus as far as Tottenham Court Road. He curled his long legs out of the way of the other passengers and talked with great animation. I asked if he had ever gone on with a projected book about St Catherine of Siena. (I do not think it ever got very far.) He said no, but what an extraordinary century hers was, how hard it was to get into its atmosphere and to know what they believed literally and what they did not. We discussed the allegorical interpretations of the Bible.

'He said how passionately people struggled for a monistic explanation of life, how they had sought it in astrological theories of the microcosm and the macrocosm, and how Harriet Martineau had thought to find it by way of "animal magnetism". I said how curious it was that even in lesser matters people were reluctant to admit what Eric Strauss called (in a medical context) "multiple causation". He said yes; it was pride and laziness. I said it looked as if Jung too were trying, in his passion for astrology, and his theory of synchronicity to posit an interlocking universe. Aldous spoke with admiration of Victor White's *God and the Unconscious*, with its integration of Jungian concepts and Thomist philosophy, but remarked that Jung did not set out his own ideas clearly. To the argument that Jung claimed only an empirical truth for his theories he replied that he wondered how far they were empirical, how far they actually worked. He complained that none of the case-histories given said anything about the physical condition of the patients, and that the references to physical somatotypes in the theoretical works were old fashioned.

'At this moment, to my intense regret, I had to get off the bus.'

I saw him I think on most of his subsequent visits to England. Many things happened to him, but he did not change. He married again, an Italian American lady who had been a friend of his first wife. He travelled in various parts of Europe and Asia. He was appalled by the world wide population explosion. Though he lost his possessions – and all chance of writing his reminiscences – in the fire which has already been mentioned, he was in no way diminished. At every meeting one was fascinated, exhilarated by his intellectual vitality. Even when he was plainly a very sick man, marked in 1962 by the dreadful bruised pallor that follows X-ray treatment, and in 1963 an ashen grey, he remained essentially himself. He was withdrawn, he had little energy; but directly his interest was engaged his spirit sprang up and ranged the world again.

It is common knowledge now that he was aware three years before the end that he had cancer and would probably die of it, as his first wife had died. He did not want to

arouse any avoidable anxiety or pain, and concealed his illness as long as possible, though he had operations and treatments for it in the United States. He hoped, I think, to live, with the kind of bodily hope that goes on long after the mind has received and accepted doom. He was talking of writing another novel, and planning a study of historical theories in relation to the time and place of their origin.

These are only the most scrappy of notes about one of the greatest figures of our time. I will conclude them by quoting the remark of a lawyer, with no illusions about people, who knew him well.

'Aldous Huxley? I never knew a man of letters so close to being a saint.'

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### Notes on Contributors

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