

A AND I

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November 22, 1963. The great man lay dying in the southern city, his head ravaged. His last words, scrawled in his own hand, were

LSD – Try it
Intermuscular
100 mm

The southern city was Los Angeles, and the man was Aldous Huxley, dying of cancer of the tongue in his home on Mulholland Highway. His wife had been confused to see the doctor and nurses gathered around the television in the hall, not knowing then of the assassination of John Kennedy.

The coincidence, the locale, and the final medication were all the more remarkable, since this dying man was the grandson of the most eminent of Victorian strivers.

This paper is about a long literary relationship between author – Huxley – and reader – me. If it turns out according to plan, it will be more about Huxley than me, but the experience of books by a reader at different stages of life will play a role.

The subject of Huxley was suggested by the publication of a new biography this year. ADLOUS HUXLEY, A BIOGRAPHY, by Nicholas Murray, appeared nearly thirty years after ALDOUS HUXLEY, A BIOGRAPHY, by Huxley friend Sybille Bedford. The new biography was reviewed, favorably, by both *The New York Times Review of Books* and *The New Yorker*. To *The New Yorker's* reviewer, the new biography's chief addition to the knowledge of the subject was that Huxley's first wife, Maria, was bisexual, and that the Huxleys engaged in at least one *ménage a trios* with a friend who was also Maria's lover. A cartoon of Huxley in bed with two women accompanied the review. As I recall, Huxley's cartoon expression was less cheerful than one might hope, or perhaps as worried as one might expect.

Bedford, biographer number one, told Murray, biographer number two, that she had been aware of Maria Huxley's bisexuality, but thought that it was a subject that she simply could not broach in 1974. Now, consider that Huxley himself had been a close friend of D.H. Lawrence, had had his own books banned in Boston, and in one novel had written of two lovers whose rooftop sunbathing had been interrupted by the arrival of a dog, tossed from an airplane, landing with bloody and explosive results. What would Huxley have thought of Bedford's nod to personal (as opposed to literary) respectability? The answer is not obvious. Despite being scandalous in literature, Huxley was publicly decorous in person. At any rate, the postmortem look into the Huxleys' bedroom sheds little light onto the personalities of either Aldous or Maria.

I don't recall how or when my personal interest in Huxley as author arose. It may have been a high school assignment to read BRAVE NEW WORLD, surely the most common way modern American readers encounter Huxley. It's the way my son encountered him two years ago. However, BRAVE NEW WORLD was never my favorite among Huxley's works, and that introduction would not likely have stirred further interest. Since I read Bedford's biography with eagerness when it came out in 1974 - specially ordering it, if memory serves, from the defunct and lamented James Book Store¹, I clearly had a more-than-usual interest in Huxley by my undergraduate years.

That interest, I suspect, traces to time spent in places like "Bertrand Smith's Acres of Books" on Main Street, and "Pages and Prints" on Seventh Street, later in Clifton. "Acres of Books" was Cincinnati's largest used bookstore. Its acquisitions came largely from estates, generation-skipping inventory. Popular works of the '30's, '40's and '50's were well represented in the '60's and '70's. Since I had a taste for fiction and humor, novelists of Huxley's era, and humorists of the Algonquin Round Table, lay right at hand.

"Pages and Prints" bookstore specialized (unlike the James) in paperbacks, and held a large section called "Classics". Huxley was in the '60's and '70's well represented in the "Classics." It's in "Acres of Books" and "Pages and Prints" that the "A and I" relationship was likely born.

One reason the relationship grew was that Huxley was for a Midwestern undergraduate a figure of aspiration - aspiration to the point of fantasy. Huxley's origins were almost beyond belief. His mother Julia was the granddaughter of Dr. Arnold of Rugby, one of Lytton Strachey's eminent Victorians. She was also the niece of Matthew Arnold, and sister of novelist Mrs. Humphrey Ward.

On his father's side, Aldous was the grandson of Thomas Henry ("T.H.") Huxley, a distinguished Victorian scientist, who was in many ways an ironic counterpoint to his today more famous grandson. T.H. was the son of a schoolteacher, but received less than two year's formal schooling, largely teaching himself German, French and science. Despite his revulsion to a postmortem he attended at age fourteen - an experience that led to lifelong bouts of what was called "hypochondriacal dyspepsia" -- T.H. sought and was awarded a scholarship to study medicine at Charing Cross Hospital. On passing his medical exams, he became a ship's surgeon in the Royal Navy. As a pastime, Huxley studied plankton during a four-year voyage off Australia, and his professional interest turned from medicine to zoology. Publications in zoology led to academic appointments in natural history, which in turn led to studies in paleontology.

In 1859, Charles Darwin sent T.H. one of three prepublication copies of ON THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES. On finishing it, Huxley wrote Darwin:

¹ A footnote aside on the James Bookstore for those too young to remember it, and for those unfamiliar with Cincinnati at the time. The James Bookstore was a small but quality bookstore on Garfield Place. Painted directly on its back wall, in tasteful calligraphy, was the legend "oldest bookstore west of the Alleghenies." This sort of use of the qualified superlative, so typical of the Midwest, merits an essay by Garrison Keillor, or a Literary Club paper of its own. It's a light on the Midwestern psyche. We may not be the best in the world, but we are pretty darn good, nonetheless.

As for your doctrines I am prepared to go to the Stake if requisite. . . I trust you will not allow yourself to be in any way disgusted or annoyed by the considerable abuse which unless I greatly mistake is in store for you... And as to the curs which will bark and yelp - you must recollect that some of your friends at any rate are endowed with an amount of combativeness which ... may stand you in good stead - I am sharpening my claws and beak in readiness.

Huxley's combativeness earned him the nickname "Darwin's bulldog" in encounters such as a scientific debate with the Bishop of Oxford, who asked Huxley whether Huxley's descent from an ape was on his grandmother's or grandfather's side. There is no official record of the response. By one account, Huxley answered he would rather be related to an ape than to a bishop. By others, Huxley said he'd "rather be related to an ape than to a man of ability and position who used his brains to pervert the truth." Huxley's own recollection was of a less epigrammatic comeback - in substance, that given the choice between being related to an ape, or to a man who used his capacities for the mere purpose of introducing ridicule into a scientific debate, he'd unhesitatingly choose the ape.

T.H.'s life accomplishments show an energy almost beyond belief ("hypochondriacal dyspepsia" notwithstanding). Beyond biology, zoology, paleontology, and physiology, his interest and work embraced education - he sought to teach science directly to what he termed "the working class", bypassing middle-class academia - and philosophy, where he was an extreme empiricist. The O.E.D. confirms that Huxley coined the word "agnosticism," meaning for him the proper attitude to a premise not based on logic or direct observation. His own discernment in direct observation of specimens had even early in his career put him at odds with then more eminent scientists, and Huxley, the better observer, had often proven right. Remember during what follows, that the famous grandfather of Aldous Huxley was a self-made polymath with a fondness for "the working class," and a suspicion of anything that doesn't rest on the objective analysis of external reality minutely and carefully observed.

Aldous Huxley was born in 1894 in the wonderfully named town of Godalming, in Surrey, the English county immediately southwest of London. Surrey is today still largely residential, home to superrich rock stars. In the late 19th century it was Arcadian.

Aldous's father, Leonard, was a schoolmaster and writer, biographer to his own father. Aldous expressed no great respect for his father, and a cousin described Leonard as "silly", difficult to take seriously. The burden of being the son of one of England's great worthies may be too trite an explanation. Nonetheless, the legacy of T.H. was felt by all in Leonard's household as a compulsion to achieve.

Aldous's mother, Julia, in addition to her brilliant family connections, was one of the first women to attend Oxford, and took a first in English. She went on to found a small private school. Aldous adored his mother, who was fun loving as well as brilliant.

Her death of cancer when Aldous was fourteen was a blow worsened for him by Leonard's early remarriage.

Aldous was the third of four widely spaced children. His eldest brother, Julian, became a distinguished scientist and the first Director General of Unesco. The second son, Trevenen, hanged himself in 1914 at age twenty-four, in a time of medically diagnosed depression. Biographer Bedford attributes the suicide to various stresses, including academic ones, but calls the greatest an affair with "a girl whom Trev could not have married in the Social circumstances of their time without bringing much unhappiness upon them both." Aldous's youngest sibling, Margaret, came to live in the south of England with a woman she ran a school with. She was, based on both lives of Huxley, the relative no one talked about. So, of Aldous's three siblings, one was ultimately respectable, one not so much so, and one a victim of respectability.

Aldous himself was early on recognized as brilliant and different. His childhood nickname was "Ogie", from "ogre", a reference to a head outsized to his body. Sickly, he fared better against the bullying of an English public school than one would expect. He was big for his age - he

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background, but Lady Ottoline introduced him as T.H. Huxley's grandson. At Garsington, Aldous met Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, Bertrand Russell, Lytton Strachey – all of the glitterati of the day – and his future wife, a Belgian war refugee named Maria Nys.

Maria Huxley is a sphinx. She was multilingual, convent educated, and bisexual. She had her own literary aspirations, but no literary accomplishments. Slight and dark, she was described as beautiful, but photographs don't show it. In fact, the many photographs of her in the Huxley biographies could be of different women, their subjects look so unlike. Neither Huxley biographer divulges one utterance of Maria's that's witty, wise or memorable.

Whatever she had enthralled giants. Huxley was devoted to her and dependent on her. She literally mobilized him, chauffeuring him around the south of France in their red Bugatti, being his factotum in every everyday thing. She moved easily in the thin air of Huxley's circle, and others in that circle must have seen something in her that they didn't record. D.H. Lawrence, the long-time friend of both Huxleys, was nursed in his last illness by Maria, and died in her arms.

After Oxford, Huxley taught two years, unhappily, at Eton, published three volumes of poetry, one of short stories, and later worked for several magazines including, strangely, the English periodical *House and Garden*. I can only suppose that it must not have been a lot like *Better Homes and Gardens*.

His first novel, CROME YELLOW², came out in 1921. I reread it for this paper. The edition was a yellowed "Bantam Modern Classic" from our bookshelves, printed 1968, purchased who knows when. The cover blurb reads:

² It's not a typo. "Crome" is a place name, and has no "h".

This famous novel is Huxley's bold exploration into love and sex. When it appeared, it struck the reading public like a bolt of lightning. It was denounced on both sides of the Atlantic. It was forbidden to the young and even credited with --or blamed for, according to viewpoint - the downfall of post-Victorian standards of morality.

I would like to get a job writing blurbs for Bantam Paperbacks, if it still exists. The job does not require you to waste time reading the books you puff, and I think could do well at it.

There is no sex and little love in *CROME YELLOW*. It's set in an English country house, where guests, including a young would-be novelist, a popular self-help author, a painter and others, and the host and hostess, speak to each other in lengthy and very well written essays.

It's unclear how ironically the author views the characters. Are they avant-garde sophisticates (as for the Bantam Books blurb-writer) or over bred fools?

Two incidents, although trivial, were on this rereading most memorable: young writer Denis tells his host he's working on a novel. The host says:

I'll describe the plot for you. Little Percy, the hero, was never good at games, but he was always clever. He passes through the usual public school and the usual university and comes to London, where he lives among the artists. He is bowed down with melancholy thoughts, he carries the whole weight of the universe on his shoulders. He writes a novel of dazzling brilliance; he dabbles delicately in Amour and disappears, at the end of the book, into the luminous future.

Young Denis replies that "You're entirely wrong," but his host was, of course, entirely right.

Denis later riffs for a page and a half on the word "carminative," a word he's "treasured from his earliest infancy." Every evocation, from "warmth" to "flesh" to "rose-colored," is savored until Denis reveals that "carminative" means, as he finally learned from a German-English dictionary, "*Windtreibend*". Huxley does not translate this - since of course his readers would know that it means "causing the passing of gas."

This is definitive early Huxley. A hyper-erudite fart joke, but a fart joke nonetheless. Denis's fellow guest tells him, "A mental carminative . . . that's what you need." It's hard to disagree.

The most kindly treated character is a young woman, who, compared with her fellow guests, kept her mouth mostly shut. Denis finds that she's filled a notebook with telling renderings (both meanings intended here) of her fellow guests, and is impressed.

CROME YELLOW sold well. It led to Huxley's first contract with the English publishing house Chatto and Windus, and he would have no more need of a regular job.

Three years after CROME YELLOW, Aldous and Maria took a round-the-world tour recorded in JESTING PILATE - another book reread for this paper. The title, like many of Huxley's titles, was an allusion - this one to Francis Bacon: "'What is truth?' said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer."

JESTING PILATE seems today an ugly book. A more direct title would be "Mr. Huxley takes displeasure in many parts of the world." The Taj Mahal is ill proportioned. Hindus are too spiritual. Americans are materialistic, and in the wrong way. Huxley hears a speech by Gandhi and writes nothing of Gandhi or his words, rather perceiving in the inattention of the audience inherent differences in the world-views of "Northerners" (meaning the English) and "Southerners" (meaning, at the very least, Indians and Italians).

There is no evidence in JESTING PILATE that the Huxleys spoke to, let alone befriended, anyone along the way in their travels.

America does not come off well. Hearing a blues singer in Los Angeles, Huxley writes, "The enthusiasm which greets these rhymed lectures in elementary physiology is inordinate. Being enthusiastic is a joy." Concurrently, throughout this world tour, Maria Huxley was writing breathless letters to the Huxleys' common lover, Mary Hutchinson, anticipating the reunion of Aldous and Mary and her.

Huxley's entry for "Chicago" draws only from an ad in the Chicago phone book for a "mortician" by the name of Kalbsfleisch. Mr. Kalbsfleisch's ad extols the value of his service. This offends Huxley:

The service rendered by a mortician or realtor has come to be regarded as the equivalent of the service rendered by an artist or a man of science. Babbitt can now honestly believe that he and his kind are doing as much for humanity as the Pasteurs and the Isaac Newtons...

The mental and moral qualities, the occupations and diversions of the greatest number are regarded as the best, the sole permissible; the qualities and occupations of the few are condemned.

This statement on the audacity of the mob to find their work came five years before the Great Depression. I wonder if Huxley looked back with regret. I have found no evidence.

Today the undertaker's name--Kalbsfleisch--grates. Huxley in the '20's and '30's went out of his way racial and ethnic tags on characters - especially American ones. Reading early Huxley novels today, there's a jarring note of insensitivity at best, and bigotry at worst. In AFTER MANY A SUMMER DIES THE SWAN, Huxley's "Southern California novel, a chauffeur is page after page referred to as "the Negro."

Other American characters are Clancy, O'Reilly and Tittelbaum. Tittelbaum, we learn, can be bribed at bargain-basement prices.

To recoil from this might seem like anachronistic correctness - this book was, after all, written in 1939. But Huxley suffers in comparison with contemporaries like e.e. cummings - whose one novel has a strong black character - and George Orwell, who was himself Huxley's anti-Semitic comments.

Despite the revulsion toward the U.S. expressed in *JESTING PILATE*, by 1939 the Huxleys had settled in Los Angeles. Continental Europe had become politically too hot by '36, and a planned nine-month trip to the U.S. became permanent when Huxley was offered a job as a screenwriter at MGM. He there befriended a number of movie celebrities. One of his best friends was Harpo Marx.

It's hard to imagine any novelist less suited to writing screenplays. Dialogue, character development, and plot development were not Huxley's strengths. Nothing written by Aldous Huxley could credibly come out of the mouth of Humphrey Bogart. Huxley did have a few screen credits - *Pride and Prejudice* was one -- but novels and belle-lettres remained his occupation.

Beyond Hollywood, Southern California was good for Huxley. The strong light helped his eyes. Possibly the eclecticism, and lack of any real past, helped his soul. The conventional story is that Huxley moved to Southern California and went native, becoming the "Hollywood guru." In fact, religious themes, and political ones, were in his works long before the move to Los Angeles. Once there, he was influenced by local religious teachers, including Krishnamurti, and even, slightly, by L. Ron Hubbard, founder of Scientology, but he was also approaching his 50's, when for most of us the brilliant cynicism of youth dulls.

Huxley was not by nature either disciple or sectarian. When he turned his thoughts seriously to religion, he tried to find what he called "the highest common denominator" in all religions, and reported the result in a book called *THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY*.

Reading *THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY* today, with the view of Huxley as mild anti-Semite, is an odd experience, particularly given Huxley's ambitious goal. His excerpts from Christian, Buddhist, Islamic, Taoist and Hindu sources are prolix. There are three references to Judaism. In the first two, the operative words are "ritualism" and "legalism." The third is a brief quote from Hillel, whom Huxley describes as "the great rabbi whose teachings on humility and the love of God and man read like an earlier, cruder version of some of the Gospel sermons. . ." The dismissive treatment could charitably be seen as a failure of scholarship. Given Huxley's industry as a scholar, that's an unlikely explanation. Today, when even a celebrity who calls herself Madonna studies kabbala, the insularity of this book, especially from a writer of such expansive mind, is literally beyond belief.

Huxley's spiritual explorations led him to experiment with drugs, starting with mescaline in the early '50's. "Experiment" fits Huxley's behavior better than most others' in such trials. Huxley took mescaline under medical supervision, was provided various stimuli, and his reactions recorded. The results were described in a short book titled

THE DOORS OF PERCEPTION, from a line by William Blake: "If the doors of perception were cleansed, every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite." That line well explains Huxley's thesis - that certain chemicals can take us to a higher and better state of awareness, achieving the same goal sought through prayer, fasting, isolation, and other, more accepted, religious exercises.

Huxley's description of his mescaline experience was mild. Presented with art books, he was most fascinated by the draperies in the paintings, and by the texture and folds of his own gray flannel trousers. I can't resist what follows, so forgive me. With mescaline, Huxley found new meaning in the material world.

In the '60's, the decade after its publication, THE DOORS OF PERCEPTION found readers who knew exactly what Huxley was talking about - namely, we who inhaled. Thanks to THE DOORS OF PERCEPTION, Huxley's face (with many others') even appeared on the cover of a Beatles' album -- "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts' Club Band."

The iconic '60's American rock group, The Doors, took their name from Huxley's title. Jim Morrison, leader of The Doors, rock satyr also known as the Lizard King, died in Paris, probably of an overdose, and is buried in Le Pere Lachaise cemetery there, along with many of Huxley's beloved French authors - Moliere and Balzac among them. Morrison's grave is the destination of pilgrims. The guidebooks say you don't need to ask directions at the cemetery - graffiti marks the way. I wonder what Huxley would make of this. I suspect the ironist would be cheered.

Looking back over decades of interest in Huxley as man and author, I tried to analyze what the attraction was, and whether the object was worth it. As I said, clearly the adolescent's and undergraduate's attraction was for a figure of fantasy, someone who lived a sort of "Masterpiece Theater" life. There was also an element of snobbery. Huxley's writing is dense with allusions. It felt good to catch all the balls he threw out. Finally, the writing itself does not disappoint. It can be precious - as when Huxley rewrites some lines of Milton in the style of Edgar Allen Poe - but never grating. By contrast, I can't read even a page of Anne Tyler's without throwing the book down.

The man himself was more flawed than he wanted to be, but then, who isn't? He was brilliant, full of contradictions, and at least by the last part of his life, without the malice of the first part. He took many things seriously, but his own self was not one of them.

As for literary merit, Huxley himself wondered whether he would be another "Thomas Love Peacock" - Huxley's byword for a novelist of passing fame and influence. By the standard of continued popularity, the evidence is mixed. Even a large vendor of new books, Joseph-Beth, carries only a couple of Huxley's books: BRAVE NEW WORLD, and BRAVE NEW WORLD REVISITED. I asked four of my young colleagues, products of America's finest law schools, if they had heard of Aldous Huxley. The result: two "yeses" (including one "Yes. Was he American?"); one "no" and one "What? Always sexy?" Although Aldous might have legitimately taken exception, I count that last answer as a "no."

On the other hand, dozens of Huxley titles are still in print, readily ordered on the Internet. Huxley remains abundant at large used bookstores like Dutton's, but of course that only shows his popularity in the previous generation.

When Random House published its list of the 100 best novels of the 20th century, two of Huxley's were on it - BRAVE NEW WORLD at number 5, and POINT COUNTER POINT at number 44. Since Random House issued the list on a bookmark that looks like a scorecard, I'll report that Huxley's two listings have him tied with seven authors, including Faulkner and Fitzgerald. He's bested by only James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, and Henry James, with three listed books each, and Joseph Conrad, with four. Thomas-Love-Peacock land seems unlikely - for now.

As my number of reading days grows smaller, Huxley has less and less priority, but hasn't disappeared from the lists. I've never read POINT COUNTER POINT, and should. I have it on good authority that it is the 44th best novel in English of the last century. And I'll continue to look to a Huxley essay or article, whenever (as is often) I need a mental carminative.
