

ALDOUS HUXLEY—A TRIBUTE

Huston Smith

WHEN ALDOUS HUXLEY was at M.I.T. in the fall of 1960, giving lectures which drew listeners so heavily that they jammed traffic all the way across the Charles River into Boston, I once spoke of those crowds as a tribute. "It's because I've been around so long," he replied. "I've become like Queen Anne's Cottage. If I live to be a hundred I shall be like Stonehenge."

He didn't live to be a hundred, and the world is the loser.

Most obviously, it has lost an encyclopedic intelligence. That adjective is overworked these days, but in his case it comes close to being exact. Indeed, when a leading journal felt that an encyclopedia—the Fourteenth Edition of the *Britannica*—itself needed to be brought under review, no one was surprised when Huxley was asked to do the job.

More impressive than the range of the man's mind, however, was its sympathy and interest. Few major intelligences since William James have been as open. Huxley's regard for mysticism was well known by dint of being so nearly notorious. What some overlooked was his equal interest in the workaday world and its exigencies: peace, the population explosion, and conservation of our natural resources. To those who, greedy for transcendence, deprecated the mundane, he counseled that "we must make the best of *both* worlds." To their opposites, the positivists, his word was, "All right, one world at a time; but not half a world!"

Accepting the fact that "truth lies at the bottom of a very muddy well," he descended: to ESP and LSD, to 'sight without glasses' and Vedanta. But never as martyred hero; there wasn't a grain of "Invictus" in him. If he lost his reputation, it was not for his omnivorous interests but because he wasn't content simply to do what he could do well. His competence bored him. So the master of words moved on to what eludes them, remarking over his shoulder that "language is a device for taking the mystery out of reality." Not needing triumph or adulation, he could bypass them for truth.

He could because he had so little egoism. A supreme unpretentiousness characterized him to the end. "It's a bit embarrassing," he

said, "to have been concerned with the human problem all one's life and find at the end that one has no more to offer by way of advice than 'Try to be a little kinder.'" If, as he had earlier remarked, the central technique for man to learn is "the art of obtaining freedom from the fundamental human disability of egoism," Huxley achieved that freedom.

But this wasn't his supreme achievement, for his personal problem was never pride so much as pessimism—"tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, creeps in this pretty pace from day to day." His final victory, therefore, lay not in emerging selfless but in winning through to equanimity, to evenness of spirit and a generalized good-cheer. Thereby the line he used to close his best novel becomes the appropriate epitaph for his own life-story: "Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven." Said this time without sarcasm.

SOME REMEMBRANCES OF ALDOUS HUXLEY

Alan Watts

I KNEW ALDOUS HUXLEY personally only after his so-called "mystical period" had begun, and had not by then read much of his earlier work of the *Point Counter Point* and *Chrome Yellow* period. I encountered him first through *Ends and Means*, *Brave New World*, and then *Grey Eminence*.

It was just after he had written the latter that I got in touch with him for the first time, and was wholly enchanted by the breadth and intricacy of his interests. He was a marvelous conversationalist. Every time I met him I felt charged in some way, as if a whole new world of ideas had been opened up to me. He was an entrancing talker. I well remember the day when we were having lunch at the Tokyo Restaurant in San Francisco, and his conversation reduced everyone at the neighboring tables to silence because they wanted to listen in.

When I first knew Aldous Huxley, he was in the beginning of the period in which he became interested in mystical experience and the transformation of consciousness. At that time I felt that he was following a type of mystical philosophy that rejected the material universe as a degraded mode of consciousness. It was about then that D. S. Savage wrote a critique of Huxley's work,

in the *Sevance Review*,* saying that the old Huxley and the new Huxley were really just the same. Don't, he said, be deceived by the change. The old Huxley in *Point Counter Point* is a bitter and cynical man of destructive brilliance; he loves to pick people apart. But this is the same Huxley appearing now in the guise of a mystic, for in Eastern mysticism the object is to transcend and thus abolish personality and all differentiation. The ideal of dissolving the whole world of multiplicity and of form into a sort of undifferentiated morass is a new way of playing Huxley's old game.

There was, as I also felt, *some* truth in this at the time, but obviously Savage didn't know Huxley very well as a person. What was so striking about the man and his surroundings—the kind of house he lived in and the works of art he collected—was his actual fascination with the material world and his love of the good life. His prickly attitude, his critical-satirical point of view, was not really destructive: it was a defense of his own sensitivity. He was a very sensitive man indeed—too sensitive. Therefore he adopted a slightly aloof and superior attitude. After all, he and I went through the same kind of education—the British “public” school—and thus I understand not only his sexual preoccupations (as they come out in *The Genius and the Goddess*) but also the need for just this kind of “character armor.”

As the years passed—say from 1945 on—Aldous Huxley's philosophy made a definite progression. He became, in effect, a full-fledged Mahayana Buddhist, with the vision of the total union of the spiritual and physical domains. This is the Bodhisattva ideal, not of passing out of the world of form into the formless world of Nirvana, but of realizing the inner unity of Nirvana and the everyday world. He saw this unity not as one who, like a *laissez-faire* do-nothing reactionary, would leave the world as it is, but as one who incarnated the paradox that if you can see that the everyday world, *as it is*, is a divine manifestation, then and then *only* can you love it enough to want to change it in a constructive way. Otherwise people are changing the world not because they love it but because it is personally inconvenient to them.

This philosophy of “spiritual materialism” found its final expression in *Island*, a book with which I find myself in complete harmony, so far as its philosophical content is concerned. Huxley

*Autumn, 1947. Reprinted in B. Rajan, ed., *The Novelist as Thinker*. London: Dobson, 1948.

made it a novel because the novelist was so largely his role and because the book had to be a counterpart to *Brave New World*. But as a writer of *fiction*, Huxley's skill in describing the ideal was not up to his skill in satirizing the real. Yet it must be admitted that for *any* artist the depiction of heaven is the hardest task of all—and thus the task in which he may most easily make a fool of himself. *Island* is a “thinly fictionalized” collection of essays on education, psychology, and metaphysics in which Huxley stuck out his neck as far as it would go. He advocated everything calculated to evoke the ridicule of sensible people—abolition of the sacred American family, free love, Tantric sex practices, drugs for inducing mystical experience, and the fantasy of the island paradise. He made himself a sitting duck for snickers in the literary reviews and scandal in the Sunday supplements.

But Huxley was no fool, and no sentimentalist. It is just in those “sore point” areas where the public defends itself by jeers without argument, that we find the most touchy and important issues of the time. Within twenty years it will be clear to all of us that Aldous Huxley had a genius for raising the right questions.

THE LAST MESSAGE OF ALDOUS HUXLEY

Timothy Leary

NOVEMBER 22, 1963, was for Aldous Huxley the time to go.

In paying tribute (a curious word) to a departed luminary, it is customary to appraise his contribution, to wrap up the meaning and message of the hero and to place it with a flourish in the inactive file.

This ceremonial function is notoriously risky in the case of writers. The literary game has its own stock-exchange quotations in which hard-cover commodities rise and fall to the irrational dictates of scholarly fashion.

To predict the place that Aldous Huxley will have as a literary figure is a gambling venture we shall leave to the professionals who are paid to do it. They might note that he did not win a Nobel prize—a good sign, suggesting that he made the right enemies and was properly unacceptable to the academic politicians. They will note also that he was a visionary—always a troublesome issue to the predictor.