

**THE MODERN BRITISH NOVEL – AN ANALYSIS OF ALDOUS HUXLEY’S NOVEL
POINT COUNTERPOINT**

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Abstract : In this paper I want to analyse the way in which the political, economical and social contexts have affected the modern novel. The term “novel” contains a wide variety of types from reportage, social history to romance. It has changed dramatically from the eighteenth century, when it became an important form of public expression in British culture, to our own time. The novel developed considerably in the Victorian period when it became a form of social entertainment, it also had a moral value, a political perspective, and it was even considered a book of good manners. The modern novel is in many ways a reaction against the Victorian novel, questioning everything from the notion of patriarchal morality to the concept of the “real”. Throughout the twentieth century the borders and frontiers of fiction have been disputed. The modern novel has been many things, and functioned at many levels. Point Counter Point is a novel of ideas about writing a novel of ideas. A main theme is the very nature of modern itself: “Living modernly’s living quickly,” explains Lucy Tantamount in the novel, “you can’t cart a wagonload of ideals and romanticism around you these days. When you travel by airplane, you must leave your heavy baggage behind.”

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“Modern” has a weak and strong meaning, referring both to an overall period, the “modern” century, and to a distinctive tradition of *avant-garde* literary and artistic experiment. The idea of the novel has been so disputed because it has become increasingly central to modern British culture, even while that culture has been changing radically. If we look starting with “the modern novel” up to the very plural scene of the present, which we now generically call “postmodernism” we can see a flourishing period, when the novel changed in spirit, and became a key literary form, challenging poetry and drama for literary dominance, until it was challenged by the new technological media, film and television, with which it is really simple to interact.

The word “novel” – the term itself suggests it – has always described a loose and baggy monster, a form of fictional prose narrative that contains an infinite variety, many different genres, from reportage and social history to fantasy and romance, and reaches from serious explorations of the narrative frontiers to popular gratification and endless generic repetition. The novel has changed greatly from the eighteenth century, when it became a key form of public expression in British culture, to our own time, when it is everywhere. It developed radically in the Victorian period (to which so many novelists have returned), in the age of Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontes, George Eliot; it became social entertainment, moral tract, political criticism, book of etiquette. Then came the “modern novel”, which was in many respects a reaction against the Victorian novel, questioning everything from its patriarchal morality to its notion of the “real”. Throughout the twentieth century, the borders and frontiers of fiction have been endlessly disputed, and an important part of this story is the thriving argument that has since existed about what the novel is and does.

The modern novel has been many things, and functioned at many levels. Novelists are always quarrelling with the idea of the novel. “I have an idea that I will invent a new name for

my books to supplant ‘novel’”, wrote Virginia Woolf in her diary as she struggled with just this question: “A new – by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?” The frontier here can open in many ways – to lyricism and poetry, reportage and autobiography. We can challenge the idea of the author, the idea of the text, the idea of its representation, the idea of the reader. Sean O’Faolain, in “The Vanishing Hero” (1956), studies some of the best writers of the twenties and thirties (Joyce, Woolf, Hemingway, Faulkner, Huxley) in them all is the virtual disappearance of that focal character of the classical novel, the conceptual hero. In his view, the novel of the twenties sees the end of earlier functional humanism and of the socially approved hero, who becomes instead the anti-hero, the self-creator, the non-entry, the rebel, the misfit or the “galvanized puppets of their authors’ transcendental ideas”. And the humanist framework of the novel was indeed weakening, not only because of the movement toward symbolism and poetic fiction, or toward Lawrence’s “in human self”, but for more directly historical reasons: the war itself had eroded heroism in the scale of its mass slaughter, and post-war weakening of public values, and social and psychological stability accelerated the process. Heroes were falling of their monuments in the twenties, and public values decaying. One of the mechanisms for dealing with this was a new comedy of manners and ideas, which in fact the novelists of the twenties gave us in considerable profusion.

Aldous Huxley, born in 1894, grandson of the Darwinian T. H. Huxley, wrote four fine novels over the twenties – *Crome Yellow* (1921), a brilliant debut, mocking Lady Ottoline Morrell’s Garsington and filled with invention and cynical bohemia; *Antic Hay* (1923), a highly satirical portrait of London’s cynical bohemia; *Those Barren Leaves*, which was set among expatriates in Italy, and *Point Counter Point* a novel of ideas about writing a novel of ideas. A presiding theme is the very nature of the modern itself. “Living modernly’s living quickly”, explains Lucy Tantamount: “you can’t cart a wagonload of ideas and romanticism around with you these days. When you travel by airplane, you must leave your heavy baggage behind. The good-old fashioned soul was all right when people lived slowly. But it’s too ponderous nowadays. There’s no room for it in the airplane.” The good old-fashioned soul disappears from Huxley’s novels; these are characters that are quite used to critics. “I don’t see that it would be possible to live in a more exciting age,” says Calamy in Aldous Huxley’s *Those Barren Leaves*: “The sense that everything’s provisional and temporary...the feeling that nothing...is really safe, the intimate conviction that anything may happen, anything may be discovered – another war, the artificial creation of life, the proof of continued existence after death – why is it infinitely exhilarating.”

It was little wonder that Huxley’s novels came to be seen as works of modern cynicism. His characters appeared powerless to act, their relationships incapable of taking shape, their ideas circular and pointing to eventual futility. These are novels of ideas that set no store by the salvation of ideas. When, in *Point Counter Point* Philip Quarles sets out to write a book for the times, it is indeed a novel of ideas. “Novel of ideas...”, he notes. “The chief defect about the novel of ideas is that you must write about people who have ideas to express”, in other words intellectuals, who are disappointing and futile in their own ways. Quarles also states the fact that it is a good idea to put a novelist in the novel (“He also justifies experiment. Specimens of his work may illustrate other possible or impossible ways of telling a story”), which of course is just what Huxley had done; these books are nothing if not self-conscious. As for the ideas themselves, they generally turn on notions of crisis and

desires for primitivism, the products of an age of lost ideals and universal boredom in which barbarism and Freudian libido become solutions to an intellectual sterility (which is why, of course the ideas turn into comedy). Huxley knew well he was one of the people that satirises himself, living in a “pointless landscape” (or what D. H. Lawrence, himself satirized in *Point Counter Point* as Pampion, called the “slow suicide of inertia”), in a world where things are either existing or boring, when humanity is a wearisome condition. Behind them is a sense of the failure of history and the collapse of secular progress, so that only irrational solutions are possible.

Point Counter Point is Huxley’s fourth novel first published in 1928. It is his first true “novel of ideas”, the type of fiction with which he has become identified. He once explained that his aim as a novelist was “to arrive, technically, at a perfect fusion of the novel and the essay”, arguing that the novel should incorporate as many opinions and ideas as possible. Thus the content of the novel was more important than the form, thing which was opposite to the beliefs of the modernist movement. Huxley was attracted to the idea that “the same person is simultaneously a mass of atoms, a physiology, a mind, an object with a shape that can be painted, a cog in the economic machine, a voter, a lover etc.” and this pluriperspectivism is what he wants to underline through his principal characters from *Point Counter Point*.

Huxley shows through his novel that the modern man is constantly searching for spiritual and psychological equilibrium, but it is very hard for him to find this inner peace because he applies the wrong standards. Huxley’s wide reading in parapsychology and Oriental philosophy has clearly affected his way of seeing life. His criterion of spiritual health is very simple, inner peace, in comparison with the standards of the modernist psychologist which were in a continuous movement. Almost all his characters have this quest for searching their peace.

This equilibrium is reached only in the moment in which one realizes that identity is just a trap, an illusion. One can escape from this trap by going beyond the usual limits of time and by always keeping in touch with reality, a reality which Huxley calls the Divine Ground. James H. Quina Jr. distinguishes between six general methods used by Huxley’s characters in order to secure inner peace: by a hypocritical identification with religious or metaphysical values, by deifying the self so that all values become a projection of the self, by identifying himself with nature, by placing ultimate value on material gains, by suspending judgement, and by transcending time and concretely identifying the self with the mystical world.

In *Point Counter Point* Spandrell tries to reach inner peace through self deification. He is the representative of the most absolute evil. The character pretends to be a man with Christian beliefs but his true intention is to corrupt innocent victims into sin. Spandrell tells Mark and Mary Rampion how he seduced an abandoned young Harriet: “A regular technique, Spandrell repeated. One chooses them unhappy, or dissatisfied, or wanting to go on the stage, or trying to write for the magazines and being rejected and consequently thinking they’re *ames incomprises*.” (Huxley 150) After being his mistress for several months he then starts to turn spirituality against sensuality, to disapprove of the body and of its evil functions. Harriet is filled with hatred for him and for herself after this unpleasant episode of her life. Spandrell is left to meditate upon his own misery, which he believes can be made less difficult and painful by finding another victim.

Mark Rampion tried to reach for his inner peace by identifying himself with nature. He believed that, in order to stabilise the identity one has to experience as much as possible without any meditation and that the traditional canonical system should be replaced by a simpler way of understanding what God is, by perceiving the absolute deity as being equal with life: “God’s a quality of actions and relations — a felt, experienced quality. At any rate, he’s that for our purposes, for purposes of living. Because, of courses for purposes of knowing and speculating he may be dozens of other things as well. He may be a Rock of Ages; he may be the Jehovah of the Old Testament; he may be anything you like. But what’s that got to do with us living corporeal beings? Nothing, nothing but harm, at any rate. The moment you allow speculative truth to take the place of felt instinctive truth as a guide to living, you ruin everything.” (Huxley 556)

With *Point Counter Point* Huxley builds a world which is inhabited by peculiar modern characters, such as Lord Edward Tantamount, who makes experiments on frogs and newts, or Old Quarles who wants to write the biggest book about democracy. In music, counterpoint is the relation between two or more voices that are harmonically independent, but in Huxley’s novel the harmony is destroyed, the voices, in this case the characters, cannot harmonise with the world around them and with each other. This is very well underlined by the narrator: “The parts live their separate lives; they touch their paths cross, they combine for a moment to create a seemingly final and perfected harmony, only to break apart again. Each is always alone and separate and individual.” (Huxley 31) I believe that this accentuated egocentricity characterises the modern society. This is why each character struggles to eliminate or to isolate itself from others and to transform its private world into the focal point of the universe. In such a chaotic society the artists, who should observe life steadily and analyse it are split between two kinds of reaching knowledge: through *Vita Activa*, by experiencing themselves the world, or through *Vita Contemplativa*, by passively observing what happens around them. They cannot speak with each other because each has his own path which he follows and in the same time each character is a battleground of mind against body.

Fulke Greville states in the poem cited as epigraph that “Passion and reason” are “self-division’s cause”. Both the artist and the society have a state of mind against the body, they represent either a man of intellect or a man of desire and lust. Philip Quarles admires the artist’s ability to morph into numerous forms “in an artist there is less specialization, less one-sided development; (...) That’s why a man like Tolstoy is so specially unforgivable. Instinctively you trust him more than you would trust an intellectual or a spiritual specialist.” (Huxley 347) Yet, Quarles’ novels are only intellect with no emotions involved. This is also the reason why his wife seeks sexual pleasure in other men and why he is not used to care about the people around him: “For in the ordinary daily world of human contacts he was curiously like a foreigner, uneasily not at home among his fellows, finding it difficult or impossible to enter into communication with any but those who could speak his native intellectual language of ideas. Emotionally, he was a foreigner.” (Huxley 98)

Harold Bloom compares the world presented in *Point Counter Point* with a zoo because nearly every character has animal features and thus it becomes more difficult to say whether these are humans behaving like animals or animals with some human features: Lucy compares Walter with a beast, Hilda also uses this metaphor to characterise John Bidlake, he remembers his former mistress as a monster, Lord Edward is like “a dog with the smell of

rabbits in his nostrils” when he listens to music and this motif is very clearly stated by Huxley through Quarles who notes the fact that: “the great defect of the novel of ideas is that it’s a made up affair. Necessarily; for people who can reel off neatly formulated notions aren’t quite real; they’re slightly monstrous. Living with monsters becomes rather tiresome in the long run.” (Huxley 385)

Perhaps it was inevitable that Huxley’s next famous book would be *Brave New World* (1932), a dystopian, anti-Wellsian novel about the future, set in the seventh century AF (After Ford), a world where science, mechanism and reason have triumphed over human nature, it makes clear that, his novels were regarded as indifferent and cynical, the underlying pain, anxiety and humanism were real enough. And Huxley spent his later years in the U.S.A, as a modern thinker rather than a novelist, watching, as his eyesight failed, a good many of his bleaker predictions and prophecies come true in the age of science and mechanization.

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