



CHAPTER III

POINT COUNTER POINT : A NOVEL OF TRANSITION

In the early novels, Crome Yellow, Antic Hay and Those Barren Leaves, Aldous Huxley's wit and intelligence are main elements in the reader's enjoyment. In Crome Yellow there is also a prominent sense of gaiety. When Huxley became serious in his second-period novels, the gaiety disappeared. Point Counter Point can be considered as a transition between the two periods. In Point Counter Point, Huxley developed his early novels to their highest point and also began the changes in attitude which led to a new kind of novel. This new kind of novel was to be the novel based primarily on social, political and scientific themes. In his early novels, his primary intention is to satirize his contemporaries. Admittedly there are included ideas about society, religion and even politics, but in the second period, he put across these ideas more seriously; the significant difference is one of tone and emphasis. His interests became more political and scientific, as in Brave New World. Point Counter Point can be accepted as a transition between these two periods because it includes many of the characteristics of each of the two periods; while not belonging completely to either, it shows the stages of the development of his ideas towards the second period.

It certainly cannot be said that this novel was completely one of development. As could be seen in Those Barren Leaves, Huxley had begun to make tentative exploration of mysticism as a solution to

the various moral dilemmas of the century, notably in the character of Calamy. This was eventually to be the main line of Huxley's intellectual and spiritual evolution. If Point Counter Point were simply a novel of development, then it would be reasonable to assume a further exploration of that particular area of experience. But this was not so; the theme of mysticism is temporarily ignored.

The explanation for this can be found in two particular aspects of Huxley's life at the time. One of these is the influence of Lawrence on him at this time; and the other is the journey he made to the East in 1925. ^{D.H.} Lawrence and Huxley renewed their acquaintance in 1926 and remained close friends till the former's death in 1930. To what extent Lawrence deflected Huxley from his original path is a matter for conjecture. What is clear is that he did have a considerable influence on Huxley. The anti-clerical element in Huxley's writings at this time was certainly a product of Lawrence's influence. It is also reasonable to accept that Lawrence kept Huxley's thought more firmly based in physical reality than perhaps it might have been; and a base in physical reality was a counter challenge to the mystical inclinations latent in him.

Huxley's visit to the East was on the whole a disappointing affair. Perhaps Huxley expected too much; he may well have had a kind of initial concept that he was journeying to a new spiritual and moral reality. In his travel book, Jesting Pilate, written in 1926, he wrote that:

'In Europe ... and still more, no doubt, in

America, the Way of Guatama has all the appearance of the way of Salvation. One is all for religion until one visits a really religious country ... To travel is to discover that everybody is wrong. The philosophies, the civilizations which seem, at a distance, so superior to those current at home, all prove on a close inspection to be in their own way just as hopelessly imperfect.³⁰

Huxley further expresses this temporary disillusionment through the semi-autobiographical figure of Philip Quarles who exclaims on his return from India:

What a comfort it will be to be back in Europe again! And to think there was a time when I read books about Yoga and did breathing exercises and tried to persuade myself that I didn't really exist! What a fool!³¹

Point Counter Point is still basically of the "novel of ideas" genre. Structurally, however, it is a more ambitious attempt to break away from the Peacockian house-party format of Crome Yellow or Those Barren Leaves than was the case in Antic Hay. The very title Point Counter Point gives one an idea of Huxley's somewhat ambitious structural intentions. These intentions are more clearly explained by means of Philip Quarles's notebook extracts. Quarles is a novelist who keeps a journal in which he discusses, at considerable length, the novelist's technique. Huxley, therefore, has his own mouthpiece of technique: a novelist within the novel.

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Peter Bowering, op. cit., p.77.

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Aldous Huxley, Point Counter Point, op. cit., ch.6, p.77.

Quarles writes of his interest in "the musicalization of fiction". He stresses that by this he does not mean "in the symbolist way, by subordinating sense to sound". What it does mean is that the novel can be constructed on the same principles as a musical work:

A theme is stated, then developed, pushed out of shape, imperceptibly deformed, until though still recognizably the same, it has become different ... All that you need is a sufficiency of characters and parallel contrapuntal plots. Waile Jones is murdering a wife, Smith is wheeling a perambulator in the park. ³²

The most outstanding method of achieving this intricate counterpoint in the novel was by the use of parallel plots involving a large number of characters. The method is discussed by Quarles:

A novelist modulates by reduplicating situations and characters. He shows several people falling in love, or dying, or praying in different ways--dissimilars solving the same problem. ³³

Modulate is here obviously used in the musical sense of moving freely from one key or tone to another, hence the idea of the novelist changing freely from one parallel plot to another. There could also be variations: "vice versa, similar people confronted with dissimilar problems". The end result of this structural concept is that: "you can modulate through all the aspects of your

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Ibid., ch.22, p.298.

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Ibid.

theme, you can write variations in any number of different moods.

Often the parallel plots are repetitive. The novel opens with a crisis in the life of Walter Bidlake, who turns from the rather cold and repressed Marjorie Carling to the predatory Lucy Tentamount. This initial part of the plot acts as a prologue to the main story, that of Walter's sister Elinor. She returns from the rather bloodless Philip Quarles to the predatory Everard Wesley. Both Walter and Elinor get badly hurt, though in different ways, by the appearance of these predatory characters in their lives. It must be noted, of course, that though the two plots are very similar, they are by no means identical, and there are therefore numerous shades of variation; the variations are as much a part of Huxley's intentions as are the parallels.

The way there are both similarities and dissimilarities in the novel can be shown by Huxley's juxtaposition of John Bidlake and Sidney Quarles, the respective parents of Walter and Elinor. We find both of them indulging in extra-marital sexual relationships. This is a similar problem. But they are "dissimilars solving the same problem?" John Bidlake, who is careless of convention, has his affairs openly and with conspicuous indifference to the opinions of others. Sidney Quarles, on the other hand, has to conduct his affairs behind an elaborate screen of guile and secrecy.

Point Counter Point does not only mark a change in Huxley's structural technique. It is also a stage in the widening of his interests; he begins to include political ideas in his novels. Political intrigue was first brought to the English novel by Dostoyev-

sky's influence in the nineteenth century. A number of English writers accepted and developed this idea in their writings. In Point Counter Point, Huxley includes as one of his main characters a political figure, Everard Webley, the head of the Brotherhood of the British Freeman. Also various other characters such as Rampion (of the working class), Spandrell (a disbeliever)^{and} Illidge (an assistant scientist) convey various political ideas through their talk and actions. It is a new step in Huxley's novels to show his ideas through his characters instead of having a Peacockian group that discusses them.

The characters were shown in more rounded development; the caricature began to disappear. In Crome Yellow, Antic Hay and Those Barren Leaves, the readers are given a gallery of caricatures, such as Gumbrell and his pneumatic trousers in Antic Hay. Grotesque types of characters can be seen in Huxley's early novels. But in Point Counter Point, such characters are not produced because Huxley began to lessen his cynical humour, substituting instead a tone of serious irony. His characters, if they are not serious, are treated as butterflies that seek only pleasure, such as the various examples of "la femme fatale" that appears in every one of his novels. All characters are seriously treated both dramatically and psychologically as mouthpieces for his ideas.

Spandrell illustrates this point clearly; he is one of the most vividly drawn of all Huxley's characters, and in many ways one of the most significant; he is a cynical and disillusioned person. His father died when he was young. When he grew up, his

mother remarried. It was as if his idealisation of the perfect mother was suddenly broken down. He hates human sexuality, especially that of women. He seduces many girls through hatred, not through love. Spandrell is in some ways a modern personification of the French writer Baudelaire, whose character Huxley had always found fascinating. The situations of Baudelaire's life are almost exactly echoed in Spandrell's. But Spandrell is more than just an echo of Baudelaire; he is also in some ways a representative of Huxley himself in his continual conflict between asceticism and sensuality.

In Spandrell this conflict is presented in its most extreme form; his debauchery is a kind of unremitting protest against what he regards as his mother's disloyalty:

'When you married that man,' he went on, 'did you think of my happiness?'

'You know I thought it would be for the best,' she answered brokenly. She had explained it so often; she couldn't begin again. 'You know it,' she repeated.

'I only know what I felt and said at the time,' he answered. 'You didn't listen to me, and now you tell me you wanted to make me happy.'

'But you were so unreasonable,' she protested. 'If you had given me any reasons...'

'Reasons,' he repeated slowly. 'Did you honestly expect a boy of fifteen to tell his mother the reasons why he didn't want her to share her bed with a stranger?'³⁴

Spandrell's hatred of moral values is extended to a hatred of even the symbols of beauty. This revulsion is indicated by

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Ibid., ch.13, p.184.

his behaviour during a country walk. Significantly his companion for the day is an elderly and very ugly prostitute:

'Lovely, lovely', was Connie's refrain. The place, the day reminded her, she said, of her childhood in the country. She sighed.

'And you wish you'd been a good girl,' said Spandrell sarcastically. 'The roses round the door make me love mother more! I know, I know...'

'Oh, the foxgloves?' cried Connie, who hadn't even been listening. She ran towards them, grotesquely unsteady on her high heels. Spandrell followed her.

'Pleasingly phallic,' he said, fingering one of the spikes of unopened buds. And he went on to develop the theme, profusely.

'Oh be quiet, be quiet,' cried Connie. 'How can you say such things?' She was outraged, wounded. 'How can you--here?'

'In God's country,' he mocked. 'How can I?' And raising his stick he suddenly began to lay about him right and left, slash, slash, slash, breaking one of the tall proud plants at every stroke. The ground was strewn with murdered flowers.

'Stop, stop!' she caught his arm. Silently laughing, Spandrell wrenched himself away from her and went on beating down the plants ...

'Down with them,' he shouted, 'down with them ...'

Connie was in tears.

'How could you?' she said. 'How could you do it?'

... 'Serve them right,' he said. 'Do you think I'm going to sit still and let myself be insulted? The insolence of the brutes! Ah, there's another!' He stepped across the glade to where one last tall foxglove stood as though hiding among the hazel saplings. One stroke was enough. The broken plant fell almost noiselessly. ... 35

Philip Quarles's reactions to the world can be explained in a psychological way. He is indifferent to his wife. He is an



intellectual who leads a solitary life. No one can understand him and he himself cannot find a positive way of leading his life. His parents had an unsuccessful marriage and in his turn, his marriage is unsuccessful. Some critics have said that Philip is capable of understanding anything, but he can feel nothing. He is above all an introvert. If the readers study Philip's characteristics carefully, they will perhaps sympathize with him and understand why he behaves in such a way:

All his life long he had walked in a solitude, in a private void, into which nobody, not his mother, not his friends, not his lovers had ever been permitted to enter. Even when he held her thus, pressed close to him, it was by wireless, as she had said, and across an Atlantic that he communicated with her.³⁶

Huxley, in Point Counter Point, portrays his characters vividly and psychologically. This point makes this novel different from those of the early period in which the characters were just mouth-pieces; and therefore were completely flat. In Point Counter Point, the main characters, such as Philip Quarles and Maurice Spandrell are individuals that we can sympathize with and understand. We can get involved in their feelings. Huxley's later novels are also more developed in this aspect. In Brave New World, the Savage is shown in some psychological depth in addition to his other characteristic facets. In Eyeless in Gaza the hero, Anthony Beavis, is studied in some psychological depth. But Point Counter

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Ibid., ch.6, p.81.

Point shows the greatest single change in the development of characters.

There is one more point about the main characters. In his early novels, Huxley invariably portrays his main character as a young man (usually a writer or poet), such as Denis in Crome Yellow, Gumbril in Antic Hay and Calamy in Those Barren Leaves. In his later novels, the main character type is changed. In Brave New World, the main character is the Savage; in Eyeless in Gaza, Anthony Beavis is a sophisticated individual; so also are the main characters in Point Counter Point. They are a contrast to the early type of disillusioned young man.

It is clear that Huxley changed his attitudes in many ways. His aims in writing novels was also changed. He used to write gay and light novels, such as Crome Yellow but later, from Point Counter Point, he no longer wrote primarily to entertain. His intention was to make the readers absorb the various ideas and tenets he was presenting. His methods of description were also changed. Noticeably he began to describe human events in non-human terms; such as Marjorie Carling's pregnancy in Point Counter Point:

She looked ugly, tired and ill. Six months from now her baby would be born. Something that had been a single cell, a cluster of cells, a little sac of tissue, a kind of worm, a potential fish with gills, stirred in her womb and would one day become a man--a grown man, suffering and enjoying, loving and hating, thinking, remembering, imagining.³⁷

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Ibid., ch.1, p.8.

After Spandrell and Illidge help each other to kill Everard Web-
ley, Everard's corpse is described in biological terms:

Their total colony, their living hive had been a man. Their hive was dead. But in the lingering warmth many of the component individuals still faintly lived; soon they also would have perished. And meanwhile, from the air, the invisible hosts of saprophytics had already begun their unresisted invasion. They would live among the dead cells, they would grow and prodigiously multiply and in their growing and procreation all the chemical building of the body would be undone, all the intricacies and complications of its matter would be resolved, till by the time, their work was finished a few pounds of carbon, a few quarts of water, some lime, a little phosphorus and sulphur, a pinch of iron and silicon, a handful of mixed salts--all scattered and recombined with the surrounding world....³⁸

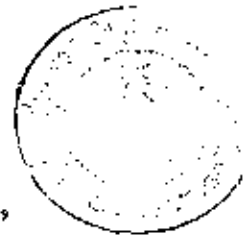


As we have already noted, Muxley often describes one thing in terms of another in his early novels, as for example, his description of Gambril's feeling for Emily in musical terms (in Antic Hay). Later however, as in Point Counter Point, he based his comparison more on scientific and biological terms. This gives a greater effect of detachment from the characters.

In 1925, after his tour of the far-east, he began to collect together his Perennial Philosophy. His acquaintance with D.H. Lawrence reinforced Muxley's growing distrust of intellectualism; in Point Counter Point and Brave New World he showed this influence by presenting the most concentrated attack on the scientific attitude and its effect on the modern world.

Huxley attacks especially the intellectuals' and scientists' indifference to the world. Shearwater in Antic Hay illustrates this point. Huxley also pointed out that the scientists tried to seek non-human truth in order to escape from the world of reality. Rampion is the character who most strongly represents this viewpoint:

What the scientists are trying to get at is non-human truth. Not that they can ever completely succeed; for not even a scientist can completely cease to be human. But they can go some way towards abstracting themselves from the human world of reality. By torturing their brains they can get a faint notion of the universe as it would seem if looked at through non-human eyes. What with their quantum theory, wave mechanics, relativity and all the rest of it, they do really seem to have got a little way outside humanity. Well, what the devil's the good of that?³⁹



It is clear that the anti-clerical ideas of Huxley at this time came from D.H.Lawrence. In Point Counter Point, a number of characters, notably Spandrell, question religion. Philip Quarles questions the religious idea that men should work to serve God; he regards 'work' as no more respectable than alcohol, and it serves exactly the same purpose: it just distracts the mind, makes a man forget himself. Work is simply a drug.

In Point Counter Point, we can see Huxley showing his consciousness of violence in his age; such as the violence of Materialism and its menace. Some people worship money as a God; such as

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Ibid., ch.34, p.402.

Burisp, a capitalist and editor. In his early novels, Huxley never treated Materialism in a violent way. Materialism made people evaluate every thing by money. Morality, therefore, was disregarded. People lost their faith both in religion and politics. Huxley was affected by such attitudes and he illustrated it in his novels. After Point Counter Point he turned more to scientific interests or else the creation of various kinds of Utopia as in Brave New World and Island.

Huxley was, in general, very much less interested in politics than he was in questions of morality and social trends. Point Counter Point is the only one of his novels in which politics was to play a fairly major part. After 1928 his interest in politics became even less. Basically Huxley was convinced that the solutions to the problems of his age were not to be found in the political field. This lack of interest in political matters is perhaps the more striking when contrasted with the enthusiastic interest of so many contemporaries. Huxley was, after all, a writer in the age when the great clash between Fascism and Communism was taking place. His character Rampion seems to show Huxley's viewpoint: he says that the Communists and Fascists, the Radicals and Conservatives were "all headed for the same impasse". The impasse that Rampion refers to is their common belief in an industrial and organised society. To Huxley it was this concept of society that was the main problem of the age, not the specific ideology under which it was to be formed.

In Point Counter Point, however, Huxley did deal with the

major political confrontation of his age. He dramatises it in the clash between Illidge, the Marxist scientific assistant to Lord Edward, and Everard Webley, the self-appointed Führer of the British Freemen, a fascist organisation. It is noticeable that Huxley was by no means against everything Everard Webley has to say. Many of his character's statements echo rather clearly his own opinions expressed in Proper Studies the year before. Both Huxley and Lawrence were, in fact, in favour of the leader-concept that is at the base of the Fascist ideology. Huxley favoured "any system which secured intelligent men with a talent for government to do the ruling". His idea of "a ruling aristocracy of mind" is very similar to Webley's principle that the best men should rule irrespective of class or origin.

It was at this time of maximum influence over Huxley that Lawrence was to write that... "Men have got to choose their leaders and obey them to the death. And it must be a system of culminating aristocracy, society tapering like a pyramid to the supreme leader." This is a political statement that is clearly expressing the basis of the Fascist concept. But Huxley himself was already showing his awareness of the dangers in Fascism. Webley is pictured as a greedy demagogue, backing up his own warped picture of himself with various pieces of cheap trumpery; his collections of swords and firearms, his medallion heads of Caesar and Alexander.

Illidge, a scientist from a working-class background, represents the opposite end of the political spectrum. Illidge sees

himself as a scientific and political rationalist, but he is basically irrational, motivated primarily not by reason but by emotion. His aggressive politics are an outlet for his sense of social inferiority; his social conscience mainly an emotional thing resulting from his hatred of all the symbols and products of leisure and wealth. His desire to destroy finally focusses on Web-ley, and results in the latter's murder.

It is noticeable that each married couple in Point Counter Point is unsuccessful in creating a harmonious life. They never have mutual understanding; their wants cannot be reconciled. The examples we can look at John Bidlake and his wife, Sidney and Rachael Quarles, Walter and Marjorie and Philip and Elinor Quarles. These characters show the results of the conflict between passion and reason. Walter's marriage is perhaps the clearest example; Walter reveals his inner feelings:

What he wanted? But what he wanted was Lucy Tantamount. And he wanted her against reason, against all his ideas and principles, madly, against his own wishes, even against his own feelings--for he didn't like Lucy; he really hated her. A noble end may justify shameful means. But when the end is shameful, what then? It was for Lucy that he was making Marjorie suffer -- Marjorie, who loved him, who had made sacrifices for him, who was unhappy. But her unhappiness was blackmailing him.⁴⁰

Walter was basically a romantic, believing that the sexual side of love is an irrelevant side issue to be kept in the back-

ground as much as possible. Marjorie's repressions are based on a different source. She has been brought up in the Christian ideal of the division between the ugly animal side of human nature in contrast to the beauties of the spirit. After a few years of their marriage Marjorie's cold and bloodless virtue is boring, and Walter is seeking an outlet for his suppressed instincts. This outlet is Lucy Tantamount, who is, in fact, a supreme example of everything his conscious and rational feelings dislike. He is the symbol of the clash between passion and reason which was such an integral part of Huxley's own nature.

Point Counter Point is the most ambitious work of Huxley. He illustrates again many of the ideas he had displayed in the early novels. After this novel, he was to turn mainly to scientific, then finally mystical themes. Huxley is perhaps at his best when he explains his ideas rationally and intellectually. That is why Point Counter Point is accepted as his most successful novel. It is also a real transition between his early novels and the main part of his later works.