

Point Counterpoint

A. Huxley

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It must have been forty years since the BBC dramatization was aired on Swedish Television, as long an interval of time that had passed since as the writing of the book itself before that. It made a deep impression on me, and I still vividly remembers many scenes, especially when that stuffed character - Sidney Quarles, pronounces that he had been a philosopher all along without realizing it, that he had had wings. I found it delightfully malicious no doubt, as well as troubling, because like many if not most of adolescents I too harbored intimations of grandeur, in my case those not too incongruent with the kind that inspired that ridiculous character. Shortly thereafter I must have bought and read the book, which is still in my possession, a penguin edition whose pages have yellowed and turned somewhat brittle, too easily detachable from a decaying binding. I admired it a lot at the time, it appeared to me as the pinnacle of sophistication. Not that I was entirely unread at the time, but clearly the kind of book was quite congenial to me at the time. I then bought and read other books by Huxley, who became something of a favorite of mine for what seemed a long period, but which must not have exceeded much more than three years. The last book I bought of his was upon my arrival in the States back in the fall of 1971 - 'Time must have a stop'. I read the initial few pages and turned it aside, not to open it for thirty years, when I for some inscrutable reason brought it with me on the train to Bucharest and finished it there¹. Yet when I in the fall of 1973 sat down and wrote my novel, ostensibly inspired by the Counterfeiters of Gide, fascinated by its self-references² in which the book itself seemed to describe its own writing, another influence, although not so obvious at the time, must have been 'Point Counterpoint' in which there is also a suggestion of self-reference, as one of the characters Philip Quarles, obviously is modeled on the author himself, a novelist whose notes for a novel are tantalizingly included and seem to apply to the novel itself.

Now what is so exciting about the novel? It is after all a mosaic of vignettes, people getting together to talk endlessly and articulately on the loftiest of topics, everybody knowing everybody else, their lives thus intertwined. There is not much of excitement and plot going on, if one does not include the rather ridiculous murder at the end, the mild excitement of which shows into relief how little of that there really is in the novel. The excitement lies to some part in the period description (in the series emphasized by the jazz music) which is, however, not too fully conveyed, but mostly in the talk. Huxley is an essayist, and the novel allows him to sketch a variety of essays without having to bring them to any kind of conclusion. The major theme is the alienation modern man feels towards

¹ I have to admit that in the late 80's I bought two travelbooks by Huxley, one on Mexico and central America, which rather closely followed a route I had myself travelled some fifteen years earlier, and one on Tuscany.

² which did not appear as clear and striking on a recent rereading

modern life, beings educated by its obvious comforts he loses his spirituality and becomes much less of a man, whatever is meant by that. Huxley's relation to science is marked by a painful ambivalence. Stemming from a family of scientific distinction, his grandfather was after all Thomas Huxley, the comrade in arms of Darwin, and also his brother and other more distant relatives pursued successful careers in biology, he always had a great respect for science, yet he was barred from the start from an experimental path due to an early eye-injury. (His eye-sight would always be poor, with the threat of blindness ever present. Huxley himself admitted in 'Heaven and Hell' that his visual imagination had always been poor.) his choice of career as a writer and novelist must have been seen as not fully serious. Huxley himself obviously looked upon his own pursuit as not quite as demanding, to say nothing about useful, as those of science, and having an encyclopedic mind (he bragged self-deprecatingly that an hour with the Encyclopedia Britannica and you are able to write an essay indicating deep erudition) he is partial to picking up tidbits of knowledge, without (like his protagonist Sidney Quarles) integrating them into a meaningful whole. The novel is peppered with such tidbits, which to the adolescent reader and the half-educated, must appear tantalizingly sophisticated. But of course within the limits of the ambition of the novel, such fragmented tidbits fit beautifully, anything else would certainly have taken over.

There is a medley of characters, all of them being or pretending to be intellectuals pursuing intellectual aims. In addition to the two Quarles, father and son, there are the old Bidlake, the sensual, selfish artist, the Canadian adventuress, now a British lady E. having her saloon, her daughter Lucy (the illegitimate off-spring with an affair with the artist (?)) who is the quissential femina fatale, fatally attracting the ineffectual Walter Bidlake (son of the old) who is stuck with an insipid woman, whom he has allured away from a distasteful drunk of a devout Catholic husband and whom he just ave made pregnant. Then there is the scientist Lord E. doing his nocturnal experiments with an assistant Illedge, consumed by class-consciousness, and the uneasy companion of Spandrell a self-proclaimed cynic. Furthermore cycles are woven out of the connections, the sister Elinore of Walther is married to Philip the novelist, she is being pursued and attracted by the fascist Webley. Then there is Burlap, the editor of Life, at which the young Bidlake is working, the two women who pursue them, one of whom commits suicide. Then there are add-ons like the Rampions, a woman of upper married to the man of the lower classes, gaining admittance through sheer power of talent. Mark Rampion is clearly modeled on D.H.Lawrence, and one short part of the novel, depicting the meeting of Rampion and his wife to be, stands apart from the rest by its very Lawrensqe tenor. Whether this was a deliberate pastiche on the prose of Lawrence or not one can only speculate. In fact one would suspect that, as in most novels, the different characters have real-life model, the game of identification being a substantial part of the pleasure at the time. Philip Quarles is obviously a kind of self-portrait. His wife trying to set him up with other women as a desperate stratagem to get him to break out of his impersonal shell supposedly had a biographical counterpart³. Now surely there are any number of models for the mostly stock in characters of which the novel is composed, one certainly can think of any number of candidates for Bidlake the artist, Lady E. and her daughter Lucy, the pretensios Burlap, the fascist Webley (Mosley?),

³ According to a biographer Huxley did comply with those schemes, but without undue enthusiasm.

the pompous Sidney Quarles and his efficient wife Rachel covering up for him; but eighty years afterwards the basic question is whether the characters are indeed alive. Regretfully one has to note that they are really not, apart from a few flashes here and then. The delineation of full-bodied characters is one of the major challenges that meets a novelist, and it is not clearly Huxley's forte, something of which he must have been aware, given his self-ironic portrait of his alter ego. For a TV-series this is no impediment to success, on the contrary it makes a dramatization so much easier. What about the satire? Satire dates, and much that he whips, has since then been whipped to irrelevance. The empty talk of intellectuals is of course an easy target, except that the act of hitting it is yet another manifestation of what is being ridiculed. The erudition of Huxley is spurious, as he admits⁴, and his sermons on the lack of spirituality in modern life are somewhat hackneyed and tired. Yet one cannot deny his articulateness as well as his intermittent prescience. His discussion, refracted through the mind of his alter ego, on the seduction of fascist oratory is indeed insightful, written as it is in the late twenties. Fascism as a moving spectacle, quite different when performed than when presented as a still-shot; something to be born in mind by contemporary commentators, to whom the advantages of hindsight and misleading fragmentary documentation, make it far too easy to take a disparaging view. Huxley also take up some environmental concerns, about men exhausting the resources (in this case he lest lord E. worry about the waste of phosphorus which is being taking out of circulation with no attempts at recycling). Here we may also credit him with prescience, but I suspect that those concerns of which he makes himself a vicarious mouthpiece were rather common at the time. As the hackneyed saying goes, there is nothing new under the sun. The cast of characters are of course all taken from a thin veneer of society, the one with which Huxley is the most familiar (sorry indeed would have been the result had this not been the case), but this veneer make up a charmed circle, to which most of the reader would not mind being part. And once again it explains the charm and fascination to an adolescent. Would that young reader not be part of those clever people? The fact that the circles are of the past makes the desire even sharper for being impossible to fully satisfy.

Maybe the characters should speak for themselves. Why not collect them all at some country estate where they can meet for a weekend of intoxicating talk spiced with sensual adventure, served by a staff of unobtrusive servants shielding them from the basic chores of living. Such gatherings no doubt still take place, but the gatherings of the past, so lovingly depicted by a generation of writers possess far more allure. So let us set them all up on a summers day on the House of E. gathering at a garden party, all of them pretending to be somewhat bored while enjoying themselves immensely.

'This novel is too abstract', it is Elinor, the suffering wife of Philip Quarles speaking, pouring herself a cup of tea into an exquisite piece of chine ware, a servant girl standing behind, her apron newly starched, bright and white in the sun, 'it is clever no doubt, but the characters lack warmth and depth, they are but chess pieces in a solitary game played by the author'. 'This criticism is unfair' her husband retorts quickly if somewhat hurt picking up a cigarette from a tray presented to him 'a novel is not real life, not even a mirror of the same, it is a diagram in which the merely accidental and fortuitous is being shorn away to reveal the basic structure of the dynamism of social interaction.' 'But' his

⁴ c.f. a previous footnote

wife interrupts 'it is precisely the accidental and the fortuitous as you call it that make up the essence of human interaction, it is that which make us care for what we otherwise would just dismiss as the bare mathematics.'. 'You are referring to the confused world of the senses which Plato so rashly condemned' this is Mark Rampion, leaning over from an adjacent table, who interrupts. 'What would life be without the senses'. Old Bidlake, nursing a big glass of brandy walking over, his gaze affixed by the ample bosom of the young maid with her spotless white apron, wondering how it would appear undraped. 'Sense is sensuality, and without sensuality there would be no sense to existence, at least as far as humans are concerned'. He chuckles being lost in erotic reverie, which at his age has become less of an honest passion than a mere diversion fed by obsessive habit. 'You need to stress the balance between mind and matter' Rampion continues, unchecked by the interruption he rightly judges as irrelevant.' It is the basic misunderstanding of philosophers to think that you must have one or the other, when you can in fact have both. Without its down-to-earth manifestation, general ideas would literally be invisible, and as far as relevance go, be without any existence at all. Man should strike that golden mean, and by so doing he transcends both'. 'This is nonsense' Bidlake refuses to leave, his distractive thoughts have faded, as the maid has left and gone to pursue some errand commanded by some guest. 'I do not give a damn for your abstract theories at all, what matters is the eye and the hand, the eye to behold the hand to guide and touch and imprint. The flesh exist only in the eye of the beholder the idealist may believe, but with the hand it is given tangible and palpable shape.'. He seems quite proud of his interjection, and he takes another sip from his glass. he is old but his legs are still steady, but his mind is apt to wander a little, and he finds himself annoyed at having slipped a thought, the tenor of which were so pleasant, but whose identity seems gone. It is like having a brilliant idea but not being able to recall its contents, only exasperatedly recalling its very attribute of brilliancy. 'What matters is if you love life' that is Burlap joining in. He too has been sitting at an adjacent table, conversing a young middle-aged woman of ample proportions and insipid conversation.'What does life have to do with it?' Rampion retorts irritably, having his train of thought temporarily broken off and hence being in the danger of permanent derailment. 'Life is just a word, a catch-all phrase that means nothing at all, as little as Universe, or the All, or God for that matter.' 'Do not speak of God in that tone of voice' a rather shrill lady ejaculates from a distance. One is a bit puzzled that the conversation seems to entail such a large circle. 'I do not speak about God at all' Rampion retorts quickly, with a mixture of exasperation and malice, 'How could one speak about God at all, how can one speak of something that does not even exist?'. There is a tone of easy triumph in his voice. 'Who cares about God anyway' Bidlake remarks, still rankled by his inability to recall a train of reverie which obviously was quite pleasant. 'So you do not believe in God' Burlap asks Rampion' But what about life. Do you believe in life, or do you deny it as well? Do you claim that we are all dead.' 'Not exactly all of us' Rampion retorts 'but certainly some of us.' and he chuckles. The maid with the white apron has returned, and as a consequences has the reverie of Bidlake, who vitalized forgets about all other matters, decided on his future course. 'Cynicism is such a cheap virtue' Elinor resumes 'still if Life and God and Truth and all that can be used interchangeable, as mere synonyms of abstractions, what significance do those very words really have, are

they not empty coinage rattling in our pockets'. 'Cleverly put' Rampion remarks 'but of course this was exactly what I was saying, had you cared to pay attention'.

The conversation flares up and goes away, not unlike fire-works which leave no permanent trace on the sky, but startle and amuse during their brief moments of performance when they outshine the stars. At the other end of the garden, Lucy is being courted by a collection of young, and not so young men. She is not really pretty, but of course prettiness is secondary to being accessible, and while most women do never send off signals of being in heat, at least not publicly, Lucy is permanently scenting her path by the foggy rumours of her bad reputation. Where one man has succeeded there is hope for another, as most men consider themselves above average in their masculine abilities. To record her conversation and the pathetic rejoinders that it elicits would be painful and only intermittently amusing, so let us instead turn off the sound and be saved the chatter, not unlike Philip Quarles admonishing us to have the merely accidental shorn off, in order to reveal the inner structures better. You will notice her laughing a lot, bit not really laughing, her mouth opens up frequently, the red bright lips making such a contrast to the paleness of her palate. She is like a crocodile, eager to chew you into bits and digest you piecemeal, but like the crocodile she is not able to pursue her prey actively, she has to lie still and wait for the moment to be seized. Her eyes are tired, to her suitors they no doubt look bright and eager, but interpretation is the matter for the mind, it matters not to matter at all. She sits quite still and the movement she makes are those due to intermittent fidgeting. To wait for prey is a tedious business, something you would never do unless you had to. But she is hungry. Hungry for diversion, hungry for men to amuse her. They try their best, just look at them, their centers of gravities precariously juttet forward. They do not sit on chairs they are perched. Normally they would topple, but the laws of mechanics are sometimes withheld, and surely this is one of those occasions, and do they take advantage of it. Look at that young man, he is probably still a virgin, judging from the eagerness of his gaze, the whitened knuckle as it grasps the back of his chair turned back to forth, and the frequent blushing of his cheeks. Then look instead at that other man who obviously is older, he has dispensed of a chair altogether in order to get a better view, to ascertain his superiority among the others. How eager are the gazes of the men, how desirous, how transfixed and enchanted. And the enchantress, does she really exist or is she a mere social delusion, a shared hallucination brought forth by a common desire. Let us leave them there locked in sterile obsession of thought, one look is enough to seize up the situation. Nothing very sophisticated is going on there.

Meanwhile there is a row fermenting between Philip Quarles and Rampion, the former being accused of being a mere scientist, obsessed by scrutinizing not what lives but what is dead. Rampion is assisted by inane remarks from Burlap, an assistance probably doing him more harm by their comic sincerity inadvertently robbing his profound remarks of their sharp contours by appearing as if through a veil of irony. Quarles on the other hand defends himself by claiming not to be a scientist, still maybe of a scientific mind. We live after all in the 20th century, a century devoted to rational thought, science and technology, an era in stark contrast to the superstition of the past, devoted to logical positivism and the rejection of metaphysical rubbish, committed to the unsentimental investigation of nature and the hard facts from which there is no escape. if ever there was a religious

undertaking, if ever there was a commitment to survival and progress, this is what modern science is really about. To which Rampion replies, Bosh, bosh, pouring himself another cup of tea, in order to hide his temporary loss of words. He speaks not from the brain, he explains later, as he takes frequent sips of tea, he speaks from the heart. All animals have brains, even if most of them have but rudimentary such; but man alone has a heart, and it is this what truly distinguishes himself from the beasts. The truths of the brain are just superficial, they are mechanical and predictable; not that they are useless, on the contrary, he is all too willing to grant that, although most of their use is for the bad; but as he has claimed all along, there is a need to strike a balance, to think with the heart, to sense what is truly important. It is the heart that makes a man a man, what saves him from being a mere automata, that gives to his life and endeavors a meaning and purpose, however evasive. Quarles retorts by scoffing at the outdated Cartesian nonsense, about dualism being discarded since centuries, quoting a few poems in Greek, Latin and French. To which Rampion, no longer sitting in his chair, but standing, somewhat threateningly leaning over Quarles, who is puffing on yet another cigarette, telling him his mind, and that he is, if ever there was a truer enemy of dualism. We can predict the outcome (there will be none) and turn off the sound. There will be more gesticulation from Rampion, more fire to his eyes; while Quarles will shrink back from such an inexplicable and ridiculous show of passion and excitement. He will know that it will all fade away when the servants will ring the bell for dinner. He himself is eager to retire, to sit down and compose a few notes in his black notebook. People tire him, ideas do not. People shout, ideas just are. People stink, make demands, need to be fed and comforted. Ideas just are, just are there to be looked at and admired. That is what he longs to do most of all at the moment. To retire, to retreat onto himself and his clean, orderly world. He will be granted his wish and have his prediction confirmed in due time, in the interrim he will have to suffer the apparently necessary hardships that membership in the human race, or at least membership in the upper governing classes, demand. So let us leave the scene.

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