

Crome Yellow

A. Huxley

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The book was written around 1921 when Huxley was still a young man at 27. It is a work of youth and as such very slight. I must have read it over forty years ago at a time when I read a lot of Huxley, no doubt having been impressed and inspired by the serialization of his *Point Counter Point* which at the time made a deep impression on me. *Crome Yellow* must have made very little impression on me as I recall nothing when I reread it. Maybe I did not understand it at the time, blind to its attempts at wit and irony, and thus unable to retain anything. At the time I was a bit of a snob, as young people usually are, and read books not so much for entertainment as edification and sophistication. But maybe something stuck, if nothing else but the charms of a country house with intellectual guests in the post Edwardian period after the War. It was modern when it was written, and outmoded modernity appears rather quaint and gentle.

The setting is an ancient estate by name of Crome stemming from the 16th century. There is the protagonist - Denis Stone¹, a young man of twenty-two or twenty-three, who is pursuing a literary career involving poetry and the writing of novels, in fact one of the most common characters in literary fiction, and more often than not a slightly sarcastic portrait of the writer himself as young, and it is hard not to suspect this also being the case in this short novel. Young Denis fancies himself in love with Anne, a woman a few years older than him and the niece of the proprietor - Henry Wimbush. Wimbush is married to some Priscilla, mostly interested in horoscopes and betting on horses. To those should be added a few other guests. A young lady Mary, a deaf woman Jenny, an middle aged cynic Mr Scogan, and a painter Gombauld of eligible age and circumstances. Add to that two come-on appearances of a successful writer Barbecue-Smith, who gives the main protagonist some hair-brained advice on how to write books without making an effort, before the author gets tired of him and packs him off, and a certain Ivor a serial seducer whose presence is just long enough to seduce Mary on his interminable tour of conquests.

If there is a plot it can be briefly summarized. Denis having the hots for Anne tries to declare his love only to be gently rebuffed as would he be a mere child. Ravished by jealousy he witnesses how Gombauld makes advances to Anne, dancing with her all evening at the concluding fair. His youthful jealousy drives him to a youthful contemplation of suicide jumping from one of the estates towers. He has no opportunity though to act on his doleful reflections before being accidentally interrupted by Mary who since her brief tryst with the traveling seducer Ivor, continues to sleep through the balmy nights on the leads of the towers. They open their hearts to each other, and Mary persuades Denis to cut short his stay and arrange by telegram an excuse for leaving due to pressing family

¹ Actually the last name is only given twice in the whole novel. First when the character is checking out a bicycle, and latter when addressed by an older woman at a fair, by which time the reader more likely than not have forgotten the last name and is only puzzled by its use.

business. Unbeknownst to Denis though, Anne has rejected the post-dancing approaches by Gombauld, accusing him of taking advantage of her state, declaring it to be as bad as making love to someone whom you have drugged or intoxicated. At the time in England, this may not have been illegal, if immoral, while in Sweden, people are persecuted for that very crime, which is characterized as a form of rape. Consequently Anne starts to feel a bit more sympathetic to the youthful advances of the protagonist. But it is too late. The charade is set in motion, and although Denis starts to get an inkling of what is up, it is too late, his feeble attempts at aborting the scheme are thwarted by the intervention of Mary, who sees to it that he gets a reservation on the convenient afternoon train. Denis returns dejected, as well as rejected, as his departure does not seem to make any stir, to a life in London that strikes him as a grave.

In short the novel is rather slight. But as a piece of art, what are its redeeming features? Evocation of time and place? Maybe, Huxley tries at word-painting, but not very successfully. In fact the most successful attempt is that of evoking the sounds of a warm summer night in the English country side with the tireless screeching of owls and the sudden cackling of startled and frightened geese. Huxley had notoriously bad eye-sight and confessed that his visual imagination was weak, so it is hardly surprising that he fails to evoke a visual presence. As to time, those are usually unintentional when writing about a contemporary scene, which has its advantages and disadvantages. Advantages due to the same kind of authenticity that a snapshot reveals, but disadvantages because of the lack of essential details that sets one period apart from another.

Huxley is an intellectual, and the main pleasure to be drawn from his fiction is that of intellectual conversation and conveying interesting ideas through the mouthpieces of the characters. Mr Scogan does not disappoint. 'We are too sane, we are merely reasonable' he tells Denis, after the latter has explained some of the secrets of poetry to him². 'Men such as I am, such as you may possibly become, have never achieved anything' Scogan elaborates

We're too sane; were merely reasonable. We lack the human touch, the compelling enthusiastic mania, People are quite ready to listen to the philosophers for a little amusement, just as they would listen to a fiddler or a monte-bank. But as to acting on the advice of the men of reason -never. Wherever the choice has to be made between the man of reason and the madman, the world has unhesitatingly followed the madman. For the madman appeals to what is fundamental, to passions and the instincts; the philosophers to what is superficial and supererogatory -reason.

Scogan goes on to elaborate a scheme to change the affairs of mankind rationally.

² 'Black ladders lack bladders' Denis shows as an example. The truth conveyed is trivial, the point is in the play of words, which would surely be lost in say a French translation or a rephrasing. But most of poetry is like that, he points out, it is the pleasure of individual words that drives the poet. He takes as an example the word *carminative* with which he fell in love as a child, and with which he endowed with all kinds of associations, and finally used in his poetry, which prompted him to look it up in a dictionary. Having a German dictionary at hand he learned that it meant *windtreibend*. It is typical that the author does not translate this word back into English but assumes that his readers will be sufficiently familiar with German as they are with French and Italian and the intermittent Latin quote.

A state of affairs to which everybody is assigned his just place in society. This vision obviously draws on Plato's Republic, something Huxley must have been very familiar with, and connects to the caste system as traditionally maintained in India. Scogan goes on to outline his division into human species. There will be the Directing Intelligence and the Men of Faith with the great majority belonging to the Herd. The Men of Faith are obviously the madmen through whom the rational and intelligent manages the Herd. Clearly this presages the *The Brave New World*. Denis wonders where he will fit in, and Scogan has to tell him, that he does not. But maybe the real talent of Scogan is displayed at the fair, where he gives sinister advice dressed up as an old woman, with lines of people queuing outside eager to be terrified by the intimations of pending misfortunes. Scogan is not above cleverly attempting to lure a young woman into a rendez-vous with him, but whether he will carry it off, the author does not deign to reveal.

Denis himself, succumbing to the temptation to peek into the red notebook kept by the deaf half-with Jenny, has the shock of his life, discovering that this apparent simpleton is in fact very sophisticated and has drawn some very clever caricatures of himself. He is jolted out of his comfortable solipsism by realizing that other people see you dispassionately from the outside as mere incidental, seeing through your social facade and being aware of all your weaknesses, a privilege you think is exclusively yours. And what is worse, while you view your defects sympathetically, they will view them unsentimentally and harshly.

Henry Wimbush has an antiquarian interest in history, focused on his family estate and the immediate region in which it is set. He has at his own expense and after twenty years of loving labor at last printed his book of the history of Crome, out of which the author Huxley is happy to invent passages to be read aloud. Those are to be seen as finger exercises maybe, or at least to allow a change of pace for the hard-pressed author. The chapters of the book are typically very short, as if the author has run out of steam, but assume a more normal expansion in length, when allowed to elaborate. More interesting than those made up passages, are the confessions of Wimbush. To him getting to know people is tedious, how much better is it not to make their acquaintance by reading books. How much more delightful to get to know Johnson through the writings of Boswell, than to actually meet him in the flesh. In the future people will read books instead of socializing. Evidently Wimbush did not anticipate the digital age which would shortcut the reading of books. As to the dancing at the fair, Wimbush considers that tedious and offensive, but a delight to read about a few hundred years later. Just as every event in life, including amorous affairs, only really comes to the fore on the page, because in actual life, one event is as boring as the other, amorous affairs being no exception, as Wimbush, infers from personal experience (as if he ever was a Don Juan!). Here Huxley is on to something really interesting, maybe inspired by Proust, who expresses similar sentiments.

What about wit and building of character? The wit tends to be farcical and thus, like the rhetorical flashes Cicero used to adorn his legal speeches with, not liable to survive the immediate reception of the novel. As Cicero explained, addressing a jury, you need to be persuasive, but as the persuasion has to work at the very moment, it is not required to stand a second reading the next day. Likewise the characters seem to be stock ones, and they will under various guises reappear in future Huxley novels, somewhat more elaborated (and convincing?) in his *Point Counter Point*. One may see the entire novel as sketch, a

finger exercise, for future work.

Finally as to composition? One must say that the novel contains a few lapsed loose ends which could have been edited out. Barbeque-Smith does not add much to the narrative and could easily have been erased. The same goes for the pastor Bodiham. A subject of sarcastic commentary n the clergy, but almost a century later (it is sobering to realize that when I read it, the events were only a half century deep into the past) it seems pointless and dated.

And what about the following passage (*for Sir Ferdinando married in 1809 in the height of the Napoleonic wars*)? Clearly had a non-native written this, he or she would be faulted for a lack of proper idiom. But clearly Huxley is a Native speaker and can get away with it. Or could it just be a typo (The second 'in' should clearly have been an 'at').

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