Chapter VII

Conclusion

Aldous Huxley never had any first-hand, genuine mystical experience. Julian Huxley testifies the fact that Huxley was "never a mystic in any exclusive or in any wooly sense, though he was keenly interested in the facts of mystical experience."¹ Jerome Meckier, in this context, observes: "To Huxley himself, the consciousness of being no more separate, of having attained union with the Divine Ground, probably never came."² It was as a student of mysticism, that Huxley, after having read the writings of mystics, came to acquire empirically the conviction, that mysticism is the only philosophy, which promises a fusion of faith and reason into an integral experience. As an agnostic, Huxley felt that mystical religion is "the ideal religion for doubters - those ultimate schismatics who have separated themselves from all belief," and that it is "perfectly possible to have a numinous emotion without believing in the existence of a numen or divinity, as its hypothetical cause."³ Huxley accepts mysticism because it does not advocate belief in any such dogmatic assertions as cannot be operationally verified. If it postulates the existence of the Divine Ground, it also advocates a Tao or Dharma or Way to have a first-hand experience.
of the spiritual reality. Though Huxley accepts mysticism, his interest in it, as he himself concedes, "is mainly theoretical and scientific." This is quite evident from the fact that Huxley had been enthusiastically writing about mysticism since 1936, but in *The Doors of Perception* he concedes that he had no vision of the ultimate reality, till the mescaline opened his doors of perception, and offered him a visionary experience. He writes:

> For until this morning I had known contemplation only in its humbler, its more ordinary forms — as discursive thinking; as a rapt absorption in poetry or painting or music; as a patient waiting upon those inspirations, without which even the prosiest writer cannot hope to accomplish anything; as occasional glimpses, in nature... But now I knew contemplation at its height. At its height, but not yet in its fullness.

Contemplation in its "fullness," Huxley could never know for the simple reason that he could never attain the state of non-attachment, he so emphatically preached in *Ends And Means*. The whole of this book has been written from the point of view of the "rational idealist," not that of the mystic. Moreover, writing about the genuine mystical experience, Huxley very often uses the verb 'may be' rather than the verb 'is', which indicates that he never had any genuine religious experience. Though he had come to acquire the attitude of stoic resignation in his later life, Huxley could
never attain the ideal of non-attachment. He was never able to rise above the ordinary worldly level, when the successes and failures of temporal life, lose all significance. This is quite evident from his correspondence in later life, which expresses his professional anxiety for theatrical success, which he could never gain. Laurence Brander aptly observes that Huxley is "like most Westerners, incapable of that 'holy indifference' to which he often refers."

The mere acceptance of an Eastern philosophy of existence does not bring Huxley any near the mystics of the East. In the land of the Buddha and Samkara, no philosophical position is acceptable as long as it is not found good for life. The mere theorizer has no place in the Oriental scheme of life. Huxley writes in Island: "Western philosophers, even the best of them—they're nothing more than good talkers." Like most Western intellectuals, Huxley was never able to practise what he so emphatically urged others to follow. We don't find any evidence in his literature and letters, to suggest that Huxley ever tried the mystical path.

Karuna, which forms the central theme of Island, is missing in Huxley's own assessment of modern life. Ghose points out that Huxley lacks charity which, according to Huxley, is "the highest and most divine form of love." Mr. Ghose rightly observes: "The
champion of charity is himself not its exemplar. With the passage of time, Huxley’s satire does not become mellow, and the scathing wit of the early period is not replaced by any forgiving attitude of the mystic towards his erring fellow human beings. Similarly no mystic could ever write *Ape And Essence*. It is, in the words of George Woodcock, "the view of a man who despises his kind: not, then, a Huxleian saint." He admonishes men, for they do not follow him and become supermen. He forgets that any attempt to produce saints on a large scale is foredoomed to failure. The mystic is a rare bird, and no technique, no drug can ever produce saints on a mass scale.

Huxley admits that "to write convincingly about things which you do not know at first hand is very hard," and that "the temptation is always to make up for deficiency...by protesting too much." Huxley accuses Balzac of spiritual vulgarity, and criticizes his *Séraphita*, for in it, the novelist protests too much about mysticism, of which he had no first-hand knowledge. The accusation can be equally applied to Huxley. Huxley does too much talking about mysticism. A real saint never propagates about his mystical experience. Writing about the true yogis, Paul Brunton observes: "They are exceedingly rare, are fond of hiding their true attainment from the public, and prefer to pose as ignoramuses."
The path to the realization of the Divine Ground demands not only a rigorous physical discipline, the complete surrender of the intellect is also an imperative condition. Huxley was, in the words of John Atkins, "a sort of diplodocus, carrying more knowledge than his cranium could bear." He found it hard to renounce his formidable intellect, which never allowed him to have an experience of the unindividuated, undifferentiated consciousness. If, knowledge, as his intellect would tell him "is always a function of being," there is always a place for doubt in the claim of mystics, that the Beatific Vision is essentially the result of a strong will power, which curbs the restless mind, and makes it fit to receive grace. Huxley had 'knowledge,' but no 'understanding' of the mystical experience. "Knowledge," says Huxley, "is always in terms of concepts and can be passed on by means of words or other symbols." 'Knowledge,' therefore, can be acquired, but 'understanding,' according to Huxley, "is not conceptual, and therefore cannot be passed on. It is an immediate experience, and immediate experience can only be talked about (very inadequately), never shared." Though Huxley could never experience the primordial reality, he at least remained a believer in its existence. What Huxley wrote about Maine de Biran who, according to Brander, "was nearer his [Huxley's] own condition," best sums up Huxley's philosophical position:
After having lived first as an agnostic, then as a would-be gnostic, a seeker of a direct experience of the divine, our philosopher ended as a believer. He was dying, he needed support, and belief, as he had remarked long before, is the great source of strength. Whether it does, or can, lead the believer to that knowledge of God in which alone, to use the words of the Anglican Prayer Book "standeth our eternal life," is another question.19

Huxley admits the distinction between knowing and experiencing when he remarks: "Known truth isn't the same as experienced truth."20 But he seems to say - if you do not have the Beatific Vision and fail to know reality, the occasional awareness of it may be accepted as a sufficient proof of its existence. By gathering the minor experiences of others, one may, if not existentially, at least intellectually, arrive at a synthetic view of existence. Huxley wrote to his second wife, Laura Archer:

"But even if the final All Rightness of the world may never be vouchsafed to us as a permanent experience (only perhaps in flashes), I believe we can do quite a lot - you complimenting me, I complimenting you - to achieve a relative all rightness for ourselves and a few other people in the midst of the awful all wrongness of what Keats called 'the giant misery of the world.'21

Being an empiricist of the spirit, Huxley was always ready to modify his opinions in the light of new experience. Whatever could be conducive to human good and increase human awareness was acceptable to him. Though he had come to
acquire a belief in mysticism, he could never accept the belief in paradises, eternal fire, and after life.

In a letter to John Yale, Huxley sums up his religious position:

...I am not a religious person - in the sense that I am not a believer in metaphysical propositions, not a worshipper or performer of rituals, and not a joiner of churches - and therefore I don't feel qualified or inclined to tell people in general what to think or do. The only general advice I can give (apart from exploring individual cases on an ad hoc basis) is that people should use their common sense, act with common decency, cultivate love and extend and intensify their awareness - then ask themselves if they know a little more than they did about the Unknown God.

The advice is certainly of a pragmatic agnostic, not that of a mystic. Island, which constitutes Huxley's valedictory message, advocates tantric agnosticism. The people of this imaginary, tropical island are tantriks, for they believe that man is a triphibian-body, mind and spirit, and that any means that can help transcend the human consciousness toward the Clear Light of the Void is good. They are agnostics, for they do not believe in God, and other insoluble metaphysical propositions. In a letter to Reid Gardner, Huxley confesses: "I remain an agnostic who aspires to be a gnostic - but a gnostic only on the mystical level, a gnostic without symbols, cosmologies or a pantheon." He only aspired to be a gnostic, but could never be one. Had he attained the mystical experience,
he would never have remained an agnostic. Huxley could not transcend his rationalism, and therefore, despite his belief in the existence of the Divine Ground, he remained, in the phrase of Jocelyn Brooke, "an impenitent rationalist." The rational agnostic may believe in intuition as a valid means of knowing the super-sensuous reality, but as long as he does not have any intuitive grasp of reality, he remains an agnostic. The moment the agnostic rises above his logic-chopping faculty, and intuitively apprehends reality, he no longer remains agnostic, and becomes a mystic. Since Huxley failed to have an intuitive understanding of the Upanisadic truth - tat tvam asi, he remained an agnostic. Huxley, however, went beyond his illustrious grandpater's scientific agnosticism, for he came to believe that science without religion, cannot provide humanity its gnomic wisdom, and that mystical experience alone can provide a unified vision of life, by fusing faith and reason into a unity.

Huxley remained an agnostic, for he failed to unite the two cultures - the scientific and the religious. It seems, rightly observes Greenblatt, "as if the spirits of his two famous ancestors, T.H. Huxley and Matthew Arnold, were locked in a mortal embrace in Huxley's soul." If he failed to unite the two and remained, according to Ghose, "a divided being," the fault perhaps lay in his intellectual inheritance, which never allowed him to
move with steadfast devotion towards the kingdom of God. It was as an agnostic that he urged his fellow "men of letters and men of science, further and further into the everexpanding regions of the Unknown." Huxley, the rational agnostic of the thirties, in his search of God, ends as a religious agnostic - religious, for he had come to acquire the belief in the divine reality, and agnostic, because he could never have the intuitive experience of the same.

Huxley's literary career, thus surveyed, represents the dilemma of the modern, Western intellectual who inherits a schismatic consciousness from his culture. Torn between faith and reason, like most of his contemporaries, Huxley started his career as a writer on a note of intellectual agnosticism. His analysis of the human situation revealed to him the fact that most of the spiritual maladies of modern man were due to an absence of any satisfactory philosophical framework. The agnostic came to believe that mystical experience alone could provide man an integral vision of life. Faith and reason coalesce into unity in the mystical experience. The agnostic, therefore, dabbles in mysticism. He tries to seek the mystical experience through meditation, sex and drugs, but fails to have any first hand experience of the spiritual reality. He finally accepts tantric agnosticism as a philosophical framework, for it best suits his rational mind. Huxley,
thus progresses from early intellectual agnosticism to the tantric agnosticism of his later life. Despite his interest in, and advocacy of, mysticism as the only valid philosophy for modern men, Huxley, in his quest of the Absolute, ended as an agnostic.
Notes


6 The frequent occurrence of the phrase "rational idealist" in *Ends And Means* shows that Huxley wrote the book from the point of view of the rational idealist, not that of the mystic. See for instance, pp. 68, 231, 234, 236, 244.

   Again in his essay "Modern Fetishism," Huxley says that the relic worship is not justifiable"in terms of rationally idealistic philosophy." *The Olive*, p. 106.

7 George Woodcock writes that "there were aspects of his life, such as his anxiety for theatrical success, which showed that he never attained complete non-attachment ..." *Dawn*, p. 265.


9 Huxley, *Island*, p. 76.


12 Woodcock, Dawn, p.256.
15 John Atkins, Aldous Huxley, "Introduction," p.XVI.
16 Huxley, Ends, p.287.
18 Brander, Aldous Huxley, p.205.
20 Huxley, Eyeless, p.124.
21 Laura Archera Huxley, This Timeless Moment, p.98.
22 ibid., p.935.
23 ibid., p.935.
24 Jocelyn Brooke, Aldous Huxley, p.28.
26 Ghose, Aldous Huxley, p.168.