CONCLUSIONS

It is now time to generalise.

Realism:

The most salient quality of Huxley as a critic, it is apparent from his various reactions and statements, is what may be called realism; meaning thereby the broadest and most inclusive acceptance of things as they are. That is a quality Huxley finds in Chaucer above all other poets. It is Chaucer's supreme greatness that he takes men and things as he finds them, provided each follows what he calls the 'law of one's kind'. The great poet is not a critic, only a sort of godlike spectator; he only 'looks on and smiles'. There is, here, no intrusive judgment; rather, a total suspension of all judgment. Huxley calls it, variously, Chaucer's 'quiet agnosticism' and 'scientific scepticism'. And thereby hangs a tale. Huxley would want a great writer to approximate, if not rival, the perfect objectivity of the man of science.

In the same spirit, Huxley is ready to forgive Shakespeare much because of his occasional realism; for Shakespeare's romantic young ladies, far from believing in platonic love, can be quite Rabelaisian. Swift is much
to blame because of his refusal to accept reality. In
Swift and Shelley Huxley sees two forms of escapism — the
one culminating in misanthropy, the other in an anaemic
and feckless idealism. How different from this is the
brave, all-inclusive acceptance of Rabelais! It was the
same with Tolstoy, who did not tell the whole truth about
Anna Karenina — the drab physiological details of a great
passion. It was the same, again, with Shaw, whose Utopian
fancies about the Superman were only the obverse of a
refusal to accept Man. It is the present that matters, says
Huxley, not the future. Hence all Utopias — Shaw's and
Wells's futuristic Utopias, as well as Chesterton's retro­
spective Utopia — are attempts to run away from the
present, and nagging, reality. On the other hand, Huxley
admirers the unflinching realism of Mrs. Warren's Profession,
in which Shaw administers a much-needed shock to puritans.
Lawrence is admired for the same reason — for his whole­
hearted acceptance of the body. Huxley, however, demurs
at the four-letter words which are part of the Laurentian
therapy, and also at Lawrence's stress on the body at the
expense of knowledge.

If Lawrence erred in distrust the intellect and
its conquests, there is the kind of scientist who errs in
advocating an excessive mental specialisation. For all
his admiration for science, it is part of Huxley's realism that he believes the arts to be as necessary as science; and so, too, philosophy and religion: they are all means to the one end — at one time, Huxley called it, Liberation. Huxley admires French art for the same reason that he admires Chaucer and Rabelais — for its acceptance of things as they are. Also, the epic — and the epic novel — is superior to, for instance, tragedy, for precisely the same reason: that they tell the Whole Truth. Whatever you may want to do with it, life must be accepted. It is a virtue of Edward Lear, the author of the Nonsense Rhymes, that he thought 'life worth living'. The one kind of 'realism' Huxley disapproves of — in literature and painting — is the realism that, in literature, is typified by Dorothy Richardson.

Huxley's realism is antithetical to both romanticism and classicism. This is the widely accepted pattern. Huxley would not, apparently, agree with Abercrombie's view that the only true antithesis is between realism and romanticism and that both are contained in classicism.¹ Huxley's realism is more akin to naturalism. He describes himself as "a non-classical, naturalist writer". Classicism Huxley feels, with its insistence on "elimination,

¹. Vide Romanticism, Lascelles Abercrombie; Martin Secker, 1926; p.33.
concentration, simplification," is essentially an escape from "that infinitely complex and mysterious thing, actual reality".\(^1\) It is the business of the non-classical naturalist writer, on the other hand, to render, in literary terms, the quality of immediate experience. The cutting out of all "the complex particularities of a situation" is a mere artistic shirking.

The enemies of realism, according to Huxley, are many. Tragedy, as we have seen, is one. The 'chemical purity' of Tragedy is gained at the expense of the Whole Truth — of reality. If Ben Jonson's reaction from the prevailing romanticism was a virtue, and his psychology truer than Shakespeare's, his realism was compromised by his love of satire. It was the same with Shaw's 'self-defeating' propaganda and with the later Tolstoy's rampant didacticism. It was Chesterton's incorrigible romanticism that betrayed him again and again — his religious enthusiasm in the case of St. Francis of Assisi and the middle ages; his political enthusiasm in the case of democracy. Enthusiasm is never a safe guide; and enthusiasm is of the essence of romanticism. Huxley remarks on the two romanticisms in art: excessive representation is one; the other is excessive abstraction, as in Cubism. All excess is

\(^1\) 'Vulgarity in Literature': Collected Essays; Chatto & Windus, 1960; pp. 109-10.
romantic. To take one example, Hindu art is defective: it has too much metaphysics for good art. One of the most paradoxical of Huxley's remarks is that the romantic style is fit only for comedy.

**Paradox:**

Paradox is Huxley's way of making critical statements appear fresh and personal, and unusual critical views appear acceptable. When he repeats, without acknowledgment, Wilde's famous epigram that life imitates art, Huxley appropriates it by giving it a characteristic twist: what life most imitates is bad art. When he repeats (also without acknowledgment) Wilde's paradox about Nature imitating art, Huxley establishes it with such wealth of fresh illustrations, that we are convinced it is Huxley's own. It is in a similar vein that he declares that art is spoiled by knowledge; all he means is that the practice of an art like painting is affected for the worse when the artist is jolted out of his tradition and style by the scholar's knowledge of other schools and styles. It is a paradox again when Huxley states that Wordsworth made the language of poetry, not more colloquial, but less; or when he defends the imprecision of Shelley's poetry and, for a different reason, the imprecision of Shakespeare's use of science; or when he justifies obscurity in poetry.
It is the same when Huxley finds modern poetry, with its claims of sophistication and up-to-dateness, not only not sufficiently adult, but not sufficiently modern; or that Dadaism failed by not being nonsensical enough.

The close, almost organic, relation between art and religion has long been a commonplace of art history. Huxley gives us a shock when he asserts that religion has little influence on the quality of art; or when he declares that what he calls 'vision-inducing landscapes' are more truly religious in their effect than the so-called religious art. Here paradox is an instrument of discovery; as, for instance, where Huxley, speaking of representational art, says that the non-representational elements of a picture tell a story of their own. Paradox, again, gives point to a very individual view of the novel — when Huxley informs us in sober earnest that the best way of preparing oneself to be a novelist is to keep a pair of cats.

Comparative Criticism:

Comparative criticism has, since the time of Quintillian, long been one means of achieving clarity and precision in critical assessment and appreciation, as well as of arriving at general principles of critical theory. Huxley, with his vast erudition and easy command of it, would naturally be expected to use this instrument of
criticism with unusual frequency and effect. And he does.
In order to bring out the precise quality of Chaucer which
Huxley most admires — his broad and tolerant realism —
Chaucer is contrasted with two of his near contemporaries — Langland and Dante. Instead of Chaucer's calm and good
humoured acceptance, there is Langland's reforming zeal
and Dante's rigorous ethic and dogmatic belief. If Anatole
France has much in common with Chaucer, he lacks Chaucer's
complete understanding of character and his imaginative
power to get inside another.

We have already seen how Huxley compares together
Swift and Shelley and contrasts Swift with Rabelais; or
how he compares Jonson's psychology with Shakespeare's. In
discussing Shelley's views on marriage, the encyclopedic
Huxley contrasts Shelley's attitude with Blake's and
Milton's. While Milton justifies polygamy with the Bible
and Blake with myth of his own invention, Shelley needs no
justification except his personal preference — a sort of
rake's progress. In the same way, Shelley's imprecision
is contrasted with Swinburne's, Dickens's treatment of an
emotional situation with Dostoevsky's, Strachey's biogra-
phical approach with Voltaire's, and Edward Thomas's
attitude to nature with Wordsworth's (but only by implica-
tion). Speaking of Tolstoy's views on proletarian cleanli-
ness, Huxley is easily reminded of Gandhi's views on the
same subject. Instead of urging bathers to stop washing as Tolstoy does, Gandhi, Huxley says, worked indefatigably to help non-bathers wash themselves.

Huxley has elaborate observations on the differences between classical and modern art; between art and science; between forms of literature like epic and tragedy; and he has some acute ones on the widely different way in which people react to drama and the novel. Writing on the fine arts, he is ever comparing: Maya art with Indian art, Mexican art with Guatemalan, Chinese art with Japanese, Moghul art with Hindu, Brunelleschi with Alberti, Goya and Callot, Piranesi and Hogarth, Beethoven and Verdi. Comparison is of the essence of judgment; and this method of comparison and contrast serves two different purposes in Huxley: it lends a sharper edge to his criticism; and it charms with variety and, sometimes, with sheer brilliance.

But while Huxley makes abundant use of the comparative method, he does not let himself be carried away by it into seeing facile parallels and even more facile contrasts. It seems to me a more important qualification of Huxley as a critic that he has an eye for an author's, or artist's peculiar gift — that which distinguishes him from all the rest and imparts to him his uniqueness, his originality; and that, at the same time,
he can put his finger on an author's, or artist's, characteristic limitation or defect.

Thus, for instance, while he decides that Ben Jonson's chief title to greatness lies in his anti-romanticism, he does not hesitate to say that Jonson's chief defect is his cruel humour. The characteristic merit of Wordsworth's poetry is not in its philosophic depth or its intimations of a preternatural experience, but in its sheer *emotional* truth. Huxley knows Lawrence's 'peculiar gift' to be that he was more sensitive, more highly conscious than most gifted people — that he could 'smell people's souls'. But he is equally clear-eyed in locating Lawrence's limitations as artist; particularly, his seeming lack of awareness of any intellectual environment, and his over-playing of instinct at the cost of personality and character.

Shakespeare is to Huxley, as to Shaw, a magician of words; he has, however, no philosophy to speak of; his thoughts are confused, his sentiments commonplace; he has only a few 'good' characters — that is, characters perfectly conceived. However, while denying Shakespeare a coherent philosophy, Huxley allows him a metaphysic, though only by implication. Shakespeare's psychology, too, is, as we have seen, not as true as Jonson's.
Dickens Huxley charges with sentimentalism ('emotionalism', as he calls it), and resultant vulgarity. Edward Lear is a poet; Strachey's limitation was that he had no understanding of saints and mystics.

Realist that he is, committed to a doctrine of not shrinking from the truth, Huxley is rarely, if at all, influenced by sentiment to gloss over the defects of the authors and artists he most admires. Thus, for instance, while he admires Chaucer almost to idolatry, Huxley spots out the one flaw in *Troilus and Criseyde* — how the traditional ending of the story, which Chaucer adopts, is not consistent with the character of the heroine as conceived and portrayed by him. Also, for all his real admiration for Lawrence's genius, he refuses to accept Lawrence's exaltation of primitiveness and the resultant Noble Savage.

Nor is he led by love of mere modernity to claim too much for either modern art or, modern science. He agrees whole-heartedly with Wordsworth's view of the relation between science and poetry: science can be the subject-matter of poetry only when science has become familiar to us and a part of our emotional experience. Huxley has nothing but contempt for the Freudian view of the genesis of art;¹ also, unlike many modern critics, he is

¹ Vide Chapter II, p. 18-19.
not too much impressed by the influence of environment and time upon literature and art: the one decisive element, he decides, is genius.

**Scientific Bent of Mind:**

Huxley has said that if he could be born again and choose what he should be in his next life, he would like to be a man of science. He prefers the non-human world of science to the world of art with its "personal relationships and emotional reactions". Intellectual contemplation is what he would most enjoy; knowing, rather than feeling.¹

In this life, however, Huxley is, inescapably, an artist, only one with a scientific bent of mind. To this he owes a good deal of his objectivity. While Huxley’s attitude to science is somewhat ambivalent, as soon in *Brave New World* and *Science, Liberty and Peace*, and in his declared (and almost Ruskinian) abhorrence of the mechanised mass-production of art, and of the various by-products of science, like materialism and utilitarianism, his conception of art seems to have changed through the years; for while he says that art is not discovery of reality, he also allows that great art furnishes us information about the nature of the world.² In the aesthetic experience he finds an analogue of the mystic experience.

Speaking of art in the broadest sense of the term, Huxley declines to take sides in such controversies as whether art is expression or communication, or whether representation or non-representation is more vital in art. He takes the same and 'synthetic' view that communication and expression are both equally valuable, and that representation and non-representation are both necessary.

Huxley sees the genesis of art in the human predicament — dualism, conflict and consequent suffering. There is no holiness in poetry; for holiness denotes a triumph over conflict; also, there is a clear incompatibility between art and cynicism.

Huxley refuses to recognise a clear-cut division between one kind of literature and another, between books and no-books; all communications, he declares, are literature. He has not anything very original to say (though he says it) on the influence of literature on our lives and opinions; while what he says about truth in literature is no more than a text-book commonplace. Literature, writes the unabashed 'populariser', is the art of making statements movingly.

Huxley is less unoriginal when, from trying to define literature, he proceeds to draw a distinction between

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1. Vide Chapter II, p. 57.
literature and science. While all communications are literature, their potentialities for beauty vary. While science is concerned with the systematisation of the more public of human experiences, literature's main concern is with man's more private experiences. Their treatment of their material also differs; science deals with abstract generalisations, literature with the unique and concrete fact. They also differ in their use of language. Both literature and science, however, have a common goal; the reduction of multiplicity to unity.

There is one respect in which science is at a disadvantage compared with literature: science gets out of date. Huxley shrewdly points out that science — that is, the facts and theories of science — in poetry must tend to render poetry periodically obsolete. On the other hand, men of letters, notably poets, insist on remaining out of date, by refusing to learn and adopt the new findings of science. Huxley cites the notorious case of the nightingale: it is not Philomela, but the male nightingale, that sings, and sings for far other reasons than romance and the sweet pain of love.

Huxley owes other critical insights to his scientific temper and interests; for example, when he shows that Nature-worship (as in Wordsworth) is possible only in a temperate climate, not in the tropics, where
Nature shows too clearly her tooth and claw. So much depends on geography and climate. It is the same with painting. Tropical landscapes are rare, because it is difficult to reproduce the brilliant colours (and not only because of the hot sun and the insects).

Sometimes, instead of geographical, Huxley's approach to literature is biological; his farmyard theory of fiction is only one example; again, Huxley feels little repulsion for Renoir's predilection for an art of 'the pap and the buttock'.

Knowing as we do Huxley's naturalism and consequent abhorrence for all forms of escape, we are pleasurably surprised to find that he does not fully agree with Bacon's view of poetry as "submitting the shows of things to the desires of the mind." On the contrary, Huxley says that the poetry of wish-fulfilment is only one sort of poetry—there is another. A good deal of poetry "doth buckle and bow the mind unto the nature of things", as Bacon put it; that is, renders, and passes judgments on, actual experience.

Huxley seems to see the essence of tragedy in its poetry only; stripped of its poetry, he says, tragedy will be no better than a report in the Lollico Gazette. Huxley must be using the word 'poetry' in a special sense; for
we do get good tragedy in prose and, sometimes straight from life. A whole essay — perhaps a whole thesis — could be written on Huxley's remark that there is no catharsis in modern tragedy. Less controversial is his view that between tragedy and comedy there is not only a difference of point of view, but another — participation as against looking on. But is there not a certain amount of 'looking on' in tragedy too; and a good deal of participation in certain forms of 'intellectual' comedy?

It should be clear by now that Huxley's forte is not bold abstract generalisation or pure speculation in the realm of the arts. Most of his theorising is part of a learned and sensitive man's reaction to concrete specimens of literature or art. He actually declares himself suspicious of all aesthetic theory.\(^1\) There are no general rules, he says, only particular cases. However, he will muse — eloquently — on the nature of the different arts, in definitions which, being too wide and general, do not really define; as for instance, when he speaks of the power of music to express the inexpressible; or repeats a truism, like proportion being the soul of architecture; or even when, after the modern fashion, he describes the arts in

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\(^1\) Cf. Huxley's remark: "The world of Platonic Ideas is the most comfortable and sanitary of dug-outs". Texts and Pretexts.
terms of time. Music, Huxley says, is a device for working directly upon our experience of time; in another connection, he speaks of painting as converting time into space, of spatialising time. For the rest, his theory is more implicit than explicit. But it must be a certain firm grasp of theory that gives us some of his most brilliant insights; as, for instance, when he explains pre-Columbian architecture in America by the character of the natives' 'astronomical' religion; or when he places his finger (with only a slight apology) on the weakness of the Taj Mahal. Huxley is also bold enough to say that art is not necessarily a reflection of the age, and how there is no connection, for example, between baroque art and 17th century Catholicism; also, that tradition in art is not primarily a matter of geography and sociology — only of genius. He refuses to see any close connection between baroque in music and baroque in architecture in the same age; the one comes from a desire for more direct expression of feeling; the other is interested, above all things, in the now, the startling and so forth, ever straining after the impossible and unheard-of; and the presence of the one does not necessarily imply the presence of the other.

More interesting are Huxley's brief attempts to seize the peculiar quality of an artist: Piero's passion
for solidity; Brunelleschi's airiness and Alberti's massiveness; El Greco's 'calculated distortion'; Constable's gift for rendering the spiritual reality in landscape; the power of Beethoven's music to lay bare to us "the blessedness at the heart of things"; the 'civilised' quality in Wren's architecture. He will, similarly, remark on Latour's use of the 'single candle' for lighting his pictures; Rubens's astonishing love for greatness and rumps at once; or Piranesi's 'metaphysical prisons'.

A quite surprising feature of Huxley as critic is his conservatism. This sounds like a daring paradox, when said of a writer of inexhaustible curiosity and an equally inexhaustible power of absorbing new experiences. Somehow, we fall into thinking of Huxley as a modern of the moderns; but of his persistent conservatism there is, in the face of the evidence, no question at all. His favourites in poetry are Chaucer and Wordsworth, though he quotes Wordsworth more than Chaucer. His favourite architect is Wren; his favourite composer, Beethoven. He does not care for art which is all form and no subject; hence his elaborate apologia for the elder Breughel, who suffered 'literature' in his painting. Huxley has made extensive fun of Cubism, in his novels as well as in his essays; and Surrealism, he thinks, is only a modern form of regression to boyhood. He
will, naturally, have no truck with psycho-analytic theories of art. Most of psycho-analytic literature he finds "cbscene and certainly nonsensical". Modern music — and a good deal of modern life — is only an intrusion of barbarism into civilisation.¹ Huxley's general attitude to literature and art may be briefly defined as aristocratic; he never lived down his bourgeois origins and upbringing, his high family traditions, his Eton and Oxford education. He actually thinks houses should be built for grandeur and not merely for comfort. Though shy of theory, he possessed (rather than believed in) at least some absolute standards, and was convinced that the most fundamental of them, even in art, were moral. No wonder he has been described as a sad symptom of the failure of the intellectual in time of crisis.²