CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

There are many ways in which one could approach Huxley. One could select any one literary genre he has cultivated — for instance, the novel or the essay — for intensive analysis and appreciation. One could, more ambitiously, trace Huxley's evolution as man and writer, from aesthetic hedonism to a qualified mysticism. One could study him as a purveyor of ideas, or an educational philosopher, or even — by himself, or in comparison with Wells — as a scientific populariser. One could, perhaps, if that were permitted, compile an immense bibliography of his innumerable references and allusions, or, more naively, a kind of concordance to his complete works. Aldous Huxley the Aesthete; Aldous Huxley the Mystic; Aldous Huxley and D.H.Lawrence; Aldous Huxley and Indian Thought; Aldous Huxley and Gandhi; Aldous Huxley, a Study in Heredity; Aldous Huxley and Democracy — or War — or Education. The possibilities are endless.

My aim in this thesis is neither a study in evolution, nor a critical appreciation, nor an essay in comparative criticism. It is a, more or less, analytical

presentation of Aldous Huxley as critic of art and literature. Huxley has no set and lengthy study — of any considerable length — of literature and art. But his mind recurs, again and again, to one or other of those subjects, whatever else he is writing about; and that, not only in his numerous essays, in his travelogues and more or less philosophical and didactic works, but also in his imaginative work, and specially in his novels.

This thesis does not, therefore, profess to be a profoundly critical study of Huxley as a critic of art and literature, nor an inquiry into the origins of his critical ideas. Nor is it, on the other hand, a simple anthology of his scattered pronouncements on the themes of literature and art. It is an attempt at synthesis as well as analysis, aiming at as direct a presentation as possible of Huxley's ideas on literature and art. It has involved selection, condensation — but not without due regard to the force and eloquence of Huxley's own style — and correlation. It has also produced (as almost a by-product of these processes) an essay in generalisation in respect of Huxley's broad critical positions and of his character as critic.

Aldous Leonard Huxley was born in 1894, right in the centre of the Aesthetic Decade; but though he passed
through a pronounced phase of what may be described as cynical hedonism, he had too much of his ancestry in his blood to rest there. A grandson of Thomas Huxley and a grand-nephew of Matthew Arnold must have a different destiny. There was a time when he intended to become a doctor; and he did become a sort of what his great-uncle called 'physician of an iron age', though perhaps not in the same degree as Goethe. At twenty-five, he was on the staff of the Athenæum. This was the beginning of a long career in literary journalism: his numerous essays, published here as elsewhere, and collected in a succession of volumes with such titles as On the Margin, Along the Road, Brief Candles, Music at Night, etc., are the main, though not the only, source of his critical pronouncements on all kinds of subjects, including literature and art. For Huxley was essentially, and primarily, an essayist of a high order; his very ambition to inaugurate a new 'novel of ideas' is itself the dream — and escape — of a predestined essayist.

One distinction, and measure of importance, of Huxley as a writer is that he was, in a high, sublimated sense, a populariser. As one who, through many literary channels, has something to say on most of the questions
that concerned and exercised the minds of his contemporaries, he was a major influence upon the young intellectuals of his time. Combining immense erudition with wit, and a critical intelligence with an unusually readable style; combining, above all, a seemingly inexhaustible curiosity with the possession of a sense of values—his popularity grew from year to year and, to the end, never suffered a decline. And yet, it has been wittily and truly remarked that Huxley was, at once, a best-seller and an 'unpopular' writer; in other words, he was not popular at the 'popular' level. Though a populariser, Huxley was not an entertainer; he was a highbrow, an apostle of ideas, of culture, of civilized values.

****

While Huxley's writings cover an immense range of subject-matter — literature, painting, architecture, music, science, philosophy, religion, education, politics, etc., — and adopt an astonishing variety of literary forms — the essay, the novel and short story, drama, biography, history etc. —, I have, in this thesis, chosen to consider him only as a critic of art and literature. Even in this deliberately restricted field, Huxley's range and versatility are amazing; his scholarship, almost

1. Vide his essay, 'Foreheads Villainous Low', in Music at Night.
beyond belief; his grasp of central ideas and values, at once flexible and firm. Where his ideas change with his knowledge, he unblushingly records the change. His entire literary career is an object-lesson at once in literary evolution and in intellectual integrity.

Above all, Huxley's significance to his generation is, perhaps, that he stood as a rare example of a man of letters who had a real — and more than a merely imaginative — grasp of modern science; that he was one of the few modern writers who was profoundly aware of its significance for good as well as for evil; one, particularly, for whom the dangerous gulf between the 'two cultures'\(^1\) did not exist. However, that is not what immediately concerns us here.

But even in thus severely restricting the scope of my research, I must not forget Huxley's own views on the whole subject of teaching literature, of examinations in literature, or research in literature. Huxley, who got a degree in English literature at Oxford, not only agrees with Walter Raleigh that the teaching of literature verges on the absurd, but adds, in his characteristic

---

emphatic way, that it "often oversteps the verge and tumbles headlong into the most grotesque absurdity." ¹

He also questions the validity of examinations in literature, and also in the fine arts. Literature and art, he says, appeal as much to the affective and conative as to the merely cognitive side of man; to make an examination in one or other of these really valid, we would have to convert them into "parodies of the exact sciences."

They have, true, non-literary and non-artistic aspects — of social and economic history, of psychology, of philosophy, of techniques of expression. Indeed, great writers and great artists have a great deal to teach the scientific investigator. But the essence of the instruction in literature and the arts is to teach to read the great original books or look at the great masterpieces of art, and thereby educate the sensibilities to a total experience of art and literature.²

Huxley's observations on research are equally clear-cut and depressingly peremptory. "Where research is not original, but consists in the mere rearrangement of existing materials, where its object is not scientific,

¹ 'Literature and Examinations': The Olive Tree; Chatto & Windus, 1947; p.110.
but literary or historical, then there is a risk of the whole business becoming merely futile;— and more to the same effect. Huxley, accordingly, blames the universities for encouraging research, "not only in those cases where research was worth making, but on all sorts of entirely unprofitable subjects as well."  

It is to be hoped that Huxley's spirit will not smile at this modest attempt to abstract from his voluminous writings, and to assess, his criticism of literature and art, and dismiss it as "entirely unprofitable."

---

1. 'Education': Proper Studies, Chatto & Windus, 1933; pp.134-36.