

THE ART OF FICTION NO. 24

ALDOUS HUXLEY

Among serious novelists, Aldous Huxley is surely the wittiest and most irreverent. Ever since the early twenties, his name has been a byword for a particular kind of social satire; in fact, he has immortalized in satire a whole period and a way of life. In addition to his ten novels, Huxley has written, during the course of an extremely prolific career, poetry, drama, essays, travel, biography, and history.

Descended from two of the most eminent Victorian families, he inherited science and letters from his grandfather T.H. Huxley and his great-uncle Matthew Arnold respectively. He absorbed both strains in an erudition so unlikely that it has sometimes been regarded as a kind of literary gamesmanship. (In conversation his learning comes out spontaneously, without the slightest hint of premeditation; if someone raises the topic of Victorian gastronomy, for example, Huxley will recite a typical daily menu of Prince Edward, meal by meal, course by course, down to the last crumb.) The plain fact is that Aldous Huxley is one of the most prodigiously learned writers not merely of this century but of all time.

After Eton and Balliol, he became a member of the postwar intellectual upper crust, the society he set out to vivisect and anatomize. He first made his name with such brilliant satires as *Antic*

Hay and *Point Counter Point*, writing in the process part of the social history of the twenties. In the thirties he wrote his most influential novel, *Brave New World*, combining satire and science fiction in the most successful of futuristic utopias. Since 1937, when he settled in Southern California, he has written fewer novels and turned his attention more to philosophy, history, and mysticism. Although remembered best for his early satires, he is still productive and provocative as ever.

It is rather odd to find Aldous Huxley in a suburb of Los Angeles called Hollywoodland. He lives in an unpretentious hilltop house that suggests the Tudor period of American real-estate history. On a clear day he can look out across miles of cluttered, sprawling city at a broad sweep of the Pacific. Behind him dry brown hills rise to a monstrous sign that dominates the horizon, proclaiming hollywoodland in aluminum letters twenty feet high.

Mr. Huxley is a very tall man—he must be six feet four—and, though lean, very broad across the shoulders. He carries his years lightly indeed; in fact he moves so quietly as to appear weightless, almost wraithlike. His eyesight is limited, but he seems to find his way about instinctively, without touching anything.

In manner and speech he is very gentle. Where one might have been led to expect the biting satirist or the vague mystic, one is impressed instead by how quiet and gentle he is on the one hand, how sensible and down-to-earth on the other. His manner is reflected in his lean, gray, emaciated face: attentive, reflective, and for the most part unsmiling. He listens patiently while others speak, then answers deliberately.

—George Wickes & Ray Frazer

INTERVIEWER

Would you tell us something first about the way you work?

ALDOUS HUXLEY

I work regularly. I always work in the mornings, and then again a little bit before dinner. I'm not one of those who work at night. I prefer to read at night. I usually work four or five hours a day. I keep at it as long as I can, until I feel myself going stale. Sometimes, when I bog down, I start reading—fiction or psychology or history, it doesn't much matter what—not to borrow ideas or materials, but simply to get started again. Almost anything will do the trick.

INTERVIEWER

Do you do much rewriting?

HUXLEY

Generally, I write everything many times over. All my thoughts are second thoughts. And I correct each page a great deal, or rewrite it several times as I go along.

INTERVIEWER

Do you keep a notebook, like certain characters in your novels?

HUXLEY

No, I don't keep notebooks. I have occasionally kept diaries for short periods, but I'm very lazy, I mostly don't. One should keep notebooks, I think, but I haven't.

INTERVIEWER

Do you block out chapters or plan the overall structure when you start out on a novel?

HUXLEY

No, I work away a chapter at a time, finding my way as I go. I know very dimly when I start what's going to happen. I just have a very general idea, and then the thing develops as I write. Sometimes—it's happened to me more than once—I will write a great deal, then find it just doesn't work, and have to throw the whole thing away. I like to have a chapter finished before I begin on the next one. But I'm never entirely certain what's going to happen in the next chapter until I've worked it out. Things come to me in dribbles, and when the dribbles come I have to work hard to make them into something coherent.

INTERVIEWER

Is the process pleasant or painful?

HUXLEY

Oh, it's not painful, though it is hard work. Writing is a very absorbing occupation and sometimes exhausting. But I've always considered myself very lucky to be able to make a living at something I enjoy doing. So few people can.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever use maps or charts or diagrams to guide you in your writing?

HUXLEY

No, I don't use anything of that sort, though I do read up a good deal on my subject. Geography books can be a great help in keeping things straight. I had no trouble finding my way around the English part of *Brave New World*, but I had to do an enormous amount of reading up on New Mexico, because I'd never been there. I read all sorts of Smithsonian reports on the place and then did the best I could to imagine it. I didn't actually go there until six years later, in 1937, when we visited Frieda Lawrence.

INTERVIEWER

When you start out on a novel, what sort of a general idea do you have? How did you begin *Brave New World*, for example?

HUXLEY

Well, that started out as a parody of H. G. Wells's *Men Like Gods*, but gradually it got out of hand and turned into something quite different from what I'd originally intended. As I became more and more interested in the subject, I wandered farther and farther from my original purpose.

INTERVIEWER

What are you working on now?

HUXLEY

At the moment I'm writing a rather peculiar kind of fiction. It's a kind of fantasy, a kind of reverse *Brave New World*, about a society in which real efforts are made to realize human potentialities. I want to show how humanity can make the best of both Eastern and Western worlds. So the setting is an imaginary island between Ceylon and Sumatra, at a meeting place of Indian and Chinese influence. One of my principal characters is, like Darwin and my grandfather, a young scientist on one of those scientific expeditions the British Admiralty sent out in the 1840s; he's a Scotch doctor, who rather resembles James Esdaile, the man who introduced hypnosis into medicine. And then, as in *News from Nowhere* and other utopias, I have another intruder from the outside world, whose guided tour provides a means of describing the society. Unfortunately, he's also the serpent in the garden, looking enviously at this happy, prosperous state. I haven't worked out the ending yet, but I'm afraid it must end with paradise lost—if one is to be realistic.

INTERVIEWER

In the 1946 preface to *Brave New World* you make certain remarks that seem to prefigure this new utopia. Was the work already incubating then?

HUXLEY

Yes, the general notion was in the back of my mind at that time, and it has preoccupied me a good deal ever since—though not necessarily as the theme for a novel. For a long time I had been thinking a great deal about various ways of realizing human potentialities; then about three years ago I decided to write these ideas into a novel. It's gone very slowly because I've had to struggle with the fable, the framework to carry the expository part. I know what I want to say clearly enough; the problem is how to embody the ideas. Of course, you can always talk them out in dialogue, but you can't have your characters talking indefinitely without becoming transparent—and tiresome. Then there's always the problem of point of view: who's going to tell the story or live the experiences? I've had a great deal of trouble working out the plot and rearranging sections that I've already written. Now I think I can see my way clear to the end. But I'm afraid it's getting hopelessly long. I'm not sure what I'm going to do with it all.

INTERVIEWER

Some writers hesitate to talk about their work in progress for fear they'll talk it away. You aren't afraid of that?

HUXLEY

No, I don't mind talking about my writing at all. In fact, it might be a good practice; it might give me a clearer notion of what I was trying to do. I've never discussed my writing with others much, but I don't believe it can do any harm. I don't think that there's any risk that ideas or materials will evaporate.

INTERVIEWER

Some writers—Virginia Woolf, for example—have been painfully sensitive to criticism. Have you been much affected by your critics?

HUXLEY

No, they've never had any effect on me, for the simple reason that I've never read them. I've never made a point of writing for any particular person or audience; I've simply tried to do the best job I could and let it go at that. The critics don't interest me because they're concerned with what's past and done, while I'm concerned with what comes next. I've never reread my early novels, for example. Perhaps I should read them one of these days.

INTERVIEWER

How did you happen to start writing? Do you remember?

HUXLEY

I started writing when I was seventeen, during a period when I was almost totally blind and could hardly do anything else. I typed out a novel by the touch system; I couldn't even read it. I've no idea what's become of it; I'd be curious to see it now, but it's lost. My aunt, Mrs. Humphry Ward, was a kind of literary godmother to me. I used to have long talks with her about writing; she gave me no end of sound advice. She was a very sound writer herself, rolled off her plots like sections of macadamized road. She had a curious practice: every time she started work on a new novel, she read Diderot's *Le Neveu de Rameau*. It seemed to act as a kind of trigger or release mechanism. Then later, during the war and after, I met a great many writers through Lady Ottoline Morrell. She used to invite all kinds of people out to her country house. I met Katherine Mansfield there, and Siegfried Sassoon, and Robert Graves, and all the Bloomsburies. I owe a great debt of gratitude to Roger Fry. Listening to his talk about the arts was a liberal education. At Oxford I began writing verse. I had several

volumes of verse published before I turned to writing stories. I was very lucky; I never had any difficulty getting published. After the war, when I came down from Oxford, I had to make my living. I had a job on the *Athenaeum*, but that paid very little, not enough to live on; so in spare moments I worked for the Condé Nast publications. I worked for *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*, and for *House and Garden*. I used to turn out articles on everything from decorative plaster to Persian rugs. And that wasn't all. I did dramatic criticism for the *Westminster Gazette*. Why—would you believe it?—I even did music criticism. I heartily recommend this sort of journalism as an apprenticeship. It forces you to write on everything under the sun, it develops your facility, it teaches you to master your material quickly, and it makes you look at things. Fortunately, though, I didn't have to keep at it very long. After *Crome Yellow*—that was 1921—I didn't have to worry so much about making a living. I was already married, and we were then able to live on the Continent—in Italy until the Fascists made life unpleasant, then in France. We had a little house outside Paris, where I could write without being disturbed. We'd be in London part of every year, but there was always too much going on; I couldn't get much writing done there.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that certain occupations are more conducive to creative writing than others? In other words, does the work you do or the company you keep affect your writing?

HUXLEY

I don't believe there is an ideal occupation for the writer. He could write under almost any circumstance, even in complete isolation. Why, look at Balzac, locked up in a secret room in Paris, hiding from his creditors, and producing *La comédie humaine*. Or think of Proust in his cork-lined room (although of course he had plenty of visitors). I suppose the best occupation is just meeting a great many different kinds of people and seeing what interests

them. That's one of the disadvantages of getting older; you're inclined to make intimate contacts with fewer people.

INTERVIEWER

What would you say makes the writer different from other people?

HUXLEY

Well, one has the urge, first of all, to order the facts one observes and to give meaning to life; and along with that goes the love of words for their own sake and a desire to manipulate them. It's not a matter of intelligence; some very intelligent and original people don't have the love of words or the knack to use them effectively. On the verbal level they express themselves very badly.

INTERVIEWER

What about creativeness in general?

HUXLEY

Yes, what about it? Why is it that in most children education seems to destroy the creative urge? Why do so many boys and girls leave school with blunted perceptions and a closed mind? A majority of young people seem to develop mental arteriosclerosis forty years before they get the physical kind. Another question: why do some people remain open and elastic into extreme old age, whereas others become rigid and unproductive before they're fifty? It's a problem in biochemistry and adult education.

INTERVIEWER

Some psychologists have claimed that the creative urge is a kind of neurosis. Would you agree?

HUXLEY

Most emphatically not. I don't believe for a moment that creativity is a neurotic symptom. On the contrary, the neurotic

who succeeds as an artist has had to overcome a tremendous handicap. He creates in spite of his neurosis, not because of it.

INTERVIEWER

You've never had much use for Freud, have you?

HUXLEY

The trouble with Freudian psychology is that it is based exclusively on a study of the sick. Freud never met a healthy human being—only patients and other psychoanalysts. Then too, Freudian psychology is only concerned with the past. Other systems of psychology, that concern themselves with the present state of the subject or his future potentialities, seem to me to be more realistic.

INTERVIEWER

Do you see any relation between the creative process and the use of such drugs as lysergic acid?

HUXLEY

I don't think there is any generalization one can make on this. Experience has shown that there's an enormous variation in the way people respond to lysergic acid. Some people probably could get direct aesthetic inspiration for painting or poetry out of it. Others I don't think could. For most people it's an extremely significant experience, and I suppose in an indirect way it could help the creative process. But I don't think one can sit down and say, "I want to write a magnificent poem, and so I'm going to take lysergic acid." I don't think it's by any means certain that you would get the result you wanted—you might get almost any result.

INTERVIEWER

Would the drug give more help to the lyric poet than the novelist?

HUXLEY

Well, the poet would certainly get an extraordinary view of life which he wouldn't have had in any other way, and this might help him a great deal. But, you see (and this is the most significant thing about the experience), during the experience you're really not interested in doing anything practical—even writing lyric poetry. If you were making love to a woman, would you be interested in writing about it? Of course not. And during the experience you're not particularly interested in words, because the experience transcends words and is quite inexpressible in terms of words. So the whole notion of conceptualizing what is happening seems very silly. *After* the event, it seems to me quite possible that it might be of great assistance; people would see the universe around them in a very different way and would be inspired, possibly, to write something about it.

INTERVIEWER

But is there much carryover from the experience?

HUXLEY

Well, there's always a complete memory of the experience. You remember something extraordinary having happened. And to some extent you can relive the experience, particularly the transformation of the outside world. You get hints of this, you see the world in this transfigured way now and then—not to the same pitch of intensity, but something of the kind. It does help you to look at the world in a new way. And you come to understand very clearly the way that certain specially gifted people have seen the world. You are actually introduced into the kind of world that Van Gogh lived in, or the kind of world that Blake lived in. You begin to have a direct experience of this kind of world while you're under the drug, and afterwards you can remember and to some slight extent recapture this kind of world, which certain privileged people have moved in and out of, as Blake obviously did all the time.

INTERVIEWER

But the artist's talents won't be any different from what they were before he took the drug?

HUXLEY

I don't see why they should be different. Some experiments have been made to see what painters can do under the influence of the drug, but most of the examples I have seen are very uninteresting. You could never hope to reproduce to the full extent the quite incredible intensity of color that you get under the influence of the drug. Most of the things I have seen are just rather tiresome bits of expressionism, which correspond hardly at all, I would think, to the actual experience. Maybe an immensely gifted artist—someone like Odilon Redon (who probably saw the world like this all the time, anyhow)—maybe such a man could profit by the lysergic-acid experience, could use his visions as models, could reproduce on canvas the external world as it is transfigured by the drug.

INTERVIEWER

Here this afternoon, as in your book, *The Doors of Perception*, you've been talking chiefly about the visual experience under the drug, and about painting. Is there any similar gain in psychological insight?

HUXLEY

Yes, I think there is. While one is under the drug one has penetrating insights into the people around one, and also into one's own life. Many people get tremendous recalls of buried material. A process which may take six years of psychoanalysis happens in an hour—and considerably cheaper! And the experience can be very liberating and widening in other ways. It shows that the world one habitually lives in is merely a creation of this conventional, closely conditioned being which one is, and that there are quite other kinds of worlds outside. It's a very salutary thing to realize

that the rather dull universe in which most of us spend most of our time is not the only universe there is. I think it's healthy that people should have this experience.

INTERVIEWER

Could such psychological insight be helpful to the fiction writer?

HUXLEY

I doubt it. After all, fiction is the fruit of sustained effort. The lysergic-acid experience is a revelation of something outside of time and the social order. To write fiction, one needs a whole series of inspirations about people in an actual environment, and then a whole lot of hard work on the basis of those inspirations.

INTERVIEWER

Is there any resemblance between lysergic acid, or mescaline, and the "soma" of your *Brave New World*?

HUXLEY

None whatever. Soma is an imaginary drug, with three different effects—euphoric, hallucinant, or sedative—an impossible combination. Mescaline is the active principle of the peyote cactus, which has been used for a long time by the Indians of the Southwest in their religious rites. It is now synthesized. Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD-25) is a chemical compound with effects similar to mescaline; it was developed about twelve years ago, and it is only being used experimentally at present. Mescaline and lysergic acid transfigure the external world and in some cases produce visions. Most people have the sort of positive and enlightening experience I've described; but the visions may be infernal as well as celestial. These drugs are physiologically innocuous, except to people with liver damage. They leave most people with no hangover, and they are not habit-forming. Psychiatrists have found that, skillfully used, they can be very helpful in the treatment of certain kinds of neuroses.

INTERVIEWER

How did you happen to get involved in experiments with mescaline and lysergic acid?

HUXLEY

Well, I'd been interested in it for some years, and I had been in correspondence with Humphrey Osmond, a very gifted young British psychiatrist working in Canada. When he started testing its effects on different kinds of people, I became one of his guinea pigs. I've described all this in *The Doors of Perception*.

INTERVIEWER

To return to writing, in *Point Counter Point* you have Philip Quarles say, "I am not a congenital novelist." Would you say the same of yourself?

HUXLEY

I don't think of myself as a congenital novelist—no. For example, I have great difficulty in inventing plots. Some people are born with an amazing gift for storytelling; it's a gift which I've never had at all. One reads, for example, Stevenson's accounts of how all the plots for his stories were provided in dreams by his subconscious mind (what he calls the "Brownies" working for him), and that all he had to do was to work up the material they had provided. I've never had any Brownies. The great difficulty for me has always been creating situations.

INTERVIEWER

Developing character has been easier for you than creating plots?

HUXLEY

Yes, but even then I'm not very good at creating people; I don't have a very wide repertory of characters. These are difficult things for me. I suppose it's largely a question of temperament. I don't happen to have the right kind of temperament.

INTERVIEWER

By the phrase “congenital novelist” we thought you meant one who is only interested in writing novels.

HUXLEY

I suppose this is another way of saying the same thing. The congenital novelist doesn't have other interests. Fiction for him is an absorbing thing which fills up his mind and takes all his time and energy, whereas someone else with a different kind of mind has these other, extracurricular activities going on.

INTERVIEWER

As you look back on your novels, which are you most happy with?

HUXLEY

I personally think the most successful was *Time Must Have a Stop*. I don't know, but it seemed to me that I integrated what may be called the essay element with the fictional element better there than in other novels. Maybe this is not the case. It just happens to be the one that I like best, because I feel that it came off best.

INTERVIEWER

As you see it, then, the novelist's problem is to fuse the “essay element” with the story?

HUXLEY

Well, there are lots of excellent storytellers who are simply storytellers, and I think it's a wonderful gift, after all. I suppose the extreme example is Dumas: that extraordinary old gentleman, who sat down and thought nothing of writing six volumes of *The Count of Monte Cristo* in a few months. And my God, *Monte Cristo* is damned good! But it isn't the last word. When you can find storytelling which carries at the same time a kind of parable-like meaning (such as you get, say, in Dostoyevsky or in the best of

Tolstoy), this is something extraordinary, I feel. I'm always flabbergasted when I reread some of the short things of Tolstoy, like *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. What an astounding work that is! Or some of the short things of Dostoyevsky, like *Notes from Underground*.

INTERVIEWER

What other novelists have especially affected you?

HUXLEY

It's awfully difficult for me to answer such a question. I read individual books that I like and take things from and am stimulated by. . . . As a very young man, as an undergraduate, I used to read a lot of French novels. I was very fond of a novelist who is now very much out-of-date—Anatole France. I haven't read him now for forty years; I don't know what he's like. Then I remember reading the first volume of Proust in 1915 and being tremendously impressed by it. (I reread it recently and was curiously disappointed.) Gide I read at that time too.

INTERVIEWER

Several of your early novels, *Point Counter Point* especially, appear to have been written under the influence of Proust and Gide. Is this so?

HUXLEY

I suppose some of my early novels are faintly Proustian. I don't think I shall ever experiment again with the kind of treatment of time and remembrance of things past that I used in *Eyeless in Gaza*, shifting back and forth in time to show the pressure of the past on the present.

INTERVIEWER

Then in some of those early novels you also make use of musical effects, much as Gide does.

HUXLEY

The marvelous thing about music is that it does so easily and rapidly what can be done only very laboriously in words, or really can't be done at all. It's futile to even attempt to write musically. But I've tried in some of my essays—in *Themes and Variations*, for instance. Then I've used the equivalent of musical variations in some of my stories, where I take certain traits of character and treat them seriously in one personage and comically, in a sort of parody, in another.

INTERVIEWER

Were you much taken with Joyce?

HUXLEY

Never very much—no. I never got very much out of *Ulysses*. I think it's an extraordinary book, but so much of it consists of rather lengthy demonstrations of how a novel ought *not* to be written, doesn't it? He does show nearly every conceivable way it should not be written, and then goes on to show how it might be written.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of Virginia Woolf's fiction?

HUXLEY

Her works are very strange. They're very beautiful, aren't they? But one gets such a curious feeling from them. She sees with incredible clarity, but always as though through a sheet of plate glass; she never touches anything. Her books are not immediate. They're very puzzling to me.

INTERVIEWER

How about Henry James? Or Thomas Mann?

HUXLEY

James leaves me very cold. And I find Mann a little boring. He's obviously an admirable novelist. You know, I used to go every summer to the place described in *Mario and the Magician*, and it seemed to me that I never got any sense of the place out of Mann. I knew it very well: the coast where Shelley was washed up, under the mountains of Carrara, where the marble comes from. It was an incredibly beautiful place then. Now, needless to say, it's all become like Coney Island, with millions of people there.

INTERVIEWER

Speaking of places, do you think your own writing was affected when you transplanted yourself from England to America?

HUXLEY

I don't know—I don't think so. I never strongly felt that the place where I lived had great importance to me.

INTERVIEWER

Then you don't think the social climate makes much difference to fiction?

HUXLEY

Well, what is "fiction"? So many people talk about "fiction" or "the writer" as though you could generalize about them. There are always many diverse members of the group; and fiction is a genus of which there are many species. I think that certain species of fiction quite clearly call for a certain locale. It's impossible that Trollope could have written except where he did write. He couldn't have gone off to Italy like Byron or Shelley. He required the English middle-class life. But then look at Lawrence. At the beginning you would have said that he had to stay in the Midlands of England, near the coal mines. But he could write anywhere.

INTERVIEWER

Now, thirty years later, would you care to say what you think of Lawrence as a novelist and as a man?

HUXLEY

I occasionally reread some of his books. How good he is! Especially in the short stories. And the other day I read part of *Women in Love*, and that again seemed very good. The vividness, the incredible vividness of the descriptions of nature is amazing in Lawrence. But sometimes one doesn't know what he's getting at. In *The Plumed Serpent*, for instance, he'll glorify the Mexican Indians with their dark life of the blood on one page, and then on the next he'll damn the lazy natives like a British colonel in the days of Kipling. That book is a mass of contradictions. I was very fond of Lawrence as a man. I knew him very well the last four years of his life. I had met him during the first World War and saw him a certain amount then, but I didn't get to know him really well till 1926. I was a little disturbed by him. You know, he *was* rather disturbing. And to a conventionally brought up young bourgeois he was rather difficult to understand. But later on I got to know and like him. My first wife became very friendly with him and understood him and they got on very well together. We saw the Lawrences often during those last four years; they stayed with us in Paris, then we were together in Switzerland, and we visited them at the Villa Mirinda near Florence. My wife typed out the manuscript of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* for him, even though she was a bad typist and had no patience with English spelling—she was a Belgian, you know. Then she didn't always appreciate the nuances of the language she was typing. When she started using some of those four-letter words in conversation, Lawrence was profoundly shocked.

INTERVIEWER

Why did Lawrence keep moving around so much?

HUXLEY

One reason he was forever moving on is that his relations with people would become so complicated that he'd have to get away. He was a man who loved and hated too intensely; he both loved and hated the same people at the same time. Then, like a great many tubercular people, he was convinced that climate had a great effect on him—not only the temperature, but the direction of the wind, and all sorts of atmospheric conditions. He had invented a whole mythology of climate. In his last years he wanted to go back to New Mexico. He had been very happy there on the ranch in Taos. But he wasn't strong enough to make the trip. By all the rules of medicine he should have been dead; but he lived on, supported by some kind of energy that seemed to be independent of his body. And he kept on writing to the end. . . . We were there, in Vence, when he died. . . . He actually died in my first wife's arms. After his death his wife Frieda was utterly helpless and didn't know what to do with herself. Physically she was very strong, but in the practical affairs of life she depended on Lawrence entirely. For instance, when she went back to London after his death to settle his affairs, she stayed in a particularly dreary old hotel, simply because she had stayed there once with him and didn't feel secure in any other place.

INTERVIEWER

Certain characters in your novels seem to have been based on people you knew—on Lawrence and Norman Douglas and Middleton Murry, for instance. Is this true? And how do you convert a real person into a fictional character?

HUXLEY

I try to imagine how certain people I know would behave in certain circumstances. Of course I base my characters partly on the people I know—one can't escape it—but fictional characters are oversimplified; they're much less complex than the people one knows. There is something of Murry in several of my characters,

but I wouldn't say I'd put Murry in a book. And there is something of Norman Douglas in old Scogan of *Crome Yellow*. I knew Douglas quite well in the twenties in Florence. He was a remarkably intelligent and highly educated man, but he had deliberately limited himself to the point where he would talk about almost nothing but drink and sex. He became quite boring after a time. Did you ever see that collection of pornographic limericks that he had privately printed? It was the only way, poor fellow, that he could make some money. It was a terribly unfunny book. I didn't see him at all in his later years.

INTERVIEWER

Lawrence and Frieda are represented in Mark and Mary Rampion of *Point Counter Point*, aren't they? You even follow the story of the Lawrences quite closely in many particulars.

HUXLEY

Yes, I suppose so, but only a small part of Lawrence is in that character. Isn't it remarkable how everyone who knew Lawrence has felt compelled to write about him? Why, he's had more books written about him than any writer since Byron!

INTERVIEWER

How do you name your characters? Do you pick them at random, like Simenon, out of telephone directories? Or are the names meant to convey something? Some of your characters in *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* have odd names; do these have any particular significance?

HUXLEY

Yes, names are very important, aren't they? And the most unlikely names keep turning up in real life, so one must be careful. I can explain some of the names in *After Many a Summer*. Take Virginia Maunciple. That name was suggested to me by Chaucer's manciple. What is a manciple, anyhow? A kind of steward. It's the

sort of a name that a movie starlet would choose, in the hope of being unique, custom-made. She's called Virginia because she appears so virginal to Jeremy, and so obviously isn't in fact; also because of her devotion to the Madonna. Dr. Sigmund Obispo: here the first name obviously refers to Freud, and Obispo I took from San Luis Obispo for local color and because it has a comical sound. And Jeremy Pordage. There's a story connected with that name. When I was an undergraduate at Oxford, Professor Walter Raleigh (who was a marvelous teacher) had me do a piece of research on the literature connected with the Popish Plot. One of the authors mentioned by Dryden under the name of "lame Mephibosheth" was called Pordage. His poetry, when I read it at the Bodleian, turned out to be unbelievably bad. But the name was a treasure. As for Jeremy, that was chosen for the sound; combined with Pordage it has a rather spinsterish ring. Propter came from the Latin for "on account of"—because, as a wise man, he is concerned with ultimate causes. Another reason why I chose the name was its occurrence in a poem of Edward Lear, "Incidents in the Life of My Uncle Arly." Let's see, how does it go now?

Like the ancient Medes and Persians, Always by his own exertions He subsisted on those hills; Whiles, by teaching children spelling, Or at times by merely yelling, Or at intervals by selling "Propter's Nicodemus Pills."

Pete Boone doesn't mean anything in particular. It's just a straightforward American name that suits the character. Jo Stoyte, too—the name simply means what it sounds like.

INTERVIEWER

You seem to have turned away from satire in recent years. What do you think of satire now?

HUXLEY

Yes, I suppose I have changed in that respect. But I'm all for satire. We need it. People everywhere take things much too

seriously, I think. People are much too solemn about things. I'm all for sticking pins into episcopal behinds, and that sort of thing. It seems to me a most salutary proceeding.

INTERVIEWER

Were you fond of Swift as a young man?

HUXLEY

Oh, yes, I was very fond of Swift. And of another book, a wonderfully funny book, one of the few old books that have stayed funny: *The Letters of Obscure Men*, the *Epistolae obscurorum virorum*. I'm sure Swift must have read it; it is so much his method. In general, I get a great deal out of the eighteenth century: Hume, Law, Crebillon, Diderot, fielding, Pope—though I'm old-fashioned enough to think the Romantics are better poets than Pope.

INTERVIEWER

You praised fielding long ago in your essay "Tragedy and the Whole Truth." Do you still believe that fiction can give a fuller view of life than tragedy?

HUXLEY

Yes, I still believe that tragedy is not necessarily the highest form. The highest form does not yet exist, perhaps. I can conceive of something much more inclusive and yet equally sublime, something which is adumbrated in the plays of Shakespeare. I think that in some way the tragic and comic elements can be more totally fused. I don't know how. Don't ask me how. If we get another Shakespeare one of these days—as I hope we will—perhaps we'll see. As I say in that essay, Homer has a kind of fusion of these elements, but on a very simple-minded level. But, my goodness, how good Homer is, anyhow! And there's another really sublime writer who has this quality—Chaucer. Why, Chaucer invented a whole psychology out of absolutely nothing: an incredible achievement. It's one of the great misfortunes of English literature

that Chaucer wrote at a time when his language was to become incomprehensible. If he had been born two or three hundred years later I think the whole course of English literature would have been changed. We wouldn't have had this sort of Platonic mania—separating mind from body and spirit from matter.

INTERVIEWER

Then, even though you have been writing fewer novels in recent years, you don't think less highly of the art of fiction than you used to?

HUXLEY

Oh, no, no, no. I think fiction, and biography and history, are *the* forms. I think one can say much more about general abstract ideas in terms of concrete characters and situations, whether fictional or real, than one can in abstract terms. Several of the books I like best of what I've written are historical and biographical things: *Grey Eminence*, and *The Devils of Loudun*, and the biography of Maine de Biran, the "Variations on a Philosopher." These are all discussions of what are to me important general ideas in terms of specific lives and incidents. And I must say I think that probably *all* philosophy ought to be written in this form; it would be much more profound and much more edifying. It's awfully easy to write abstractly, without attaching much meaning to the big words. But the moment you have to express ideas in the light of a particular context, in a particular set of circumstances, although it's a limitation in some ways, it's also an invitation to go much further and much deeper. I think that fiction and, as I say, history and biography are *immensely* important, not only for their own sake, because they provide a picture of life now and of life in the past, but also as vehicles for the expression of general philosophic ideas, religious ideas, social ideas. My goodness, Dostoyevsky is six times as profound as Kierkegaard, because he writes *fiction*. In Kierkegaard you have this Abstract Man going on and on—like Coleridge—why, it's *nothing* compared with the really profound

fictional Man, who has always to keep these tremendous ideas *alive* in a concrete form. In fiction you have the reconciliation of the absolute and the relative, so to speak, the expression of the general in the particular. And this, it seems to me, is the exciting thing—both in life and in art.

