

Two Essays

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The Huxley Heritage

WHEN I saw that somebody had written a book on Mr. Aldous Huxley, there flashed across me the memory of a text of Scripture; such a text as has often struck me as curiously precise considered as a prophecy of certain modern things. Let there be no natural movement of panic or alarm. I have not found Mr. Huxley in the Book of Revelations, disguised as the star that turned all the waters into worm-wood; I am not often mistaken for the man who thinks Mussolini is the Little Horn; I fancy he would make sure that his own horn was more exalted; I do not want to prove that Bolshevism is the Beast; I dislike Bolshevism but I know at least three things more beastly; I am blind even to so obvious an occasion as that of identifying the Red Peril with the Scarlet Woman. I only mean that there does happen to be a phrase in the Bible which is unique in describing the interesting position of a very interesting man. I admire him very much; I do not regard him as immediate evidence of the world's end; though I do think there is something in what I once said of his philosophy; that he is a wit at his wits' end. Few would actually identify Huxley with Holy Scripture, except perhaps in a certain frankness of speech; and indeed I remember a race of grim old atheists in Fleet Street who disclosed an unsuspected delicacy, by blushing in pub-

lic every week over the blasphemous indecorum of the Hebrew Scriptures. But my own association of ideas is more particular and, it might appear, accidental. Anyhow, the whole historical position of Mr. Huxley strikes me as summed up with strange exactitude in this one sentence: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes; and the children's teeth are set on edge."

Mr. Huxley's grandfather was a great man; I was going to say that he had a great grandfather, when I suddenly foresaw that the printers would make a hash of it with a hyphen. He invented Agnosticism, as a name if not a thing; he had a strong English style and a stoical sincerity less firm in the other agnostics. But to some extent Huxley, and much more Herbert Spencer, and infinitely more the infinite army of agnostics, had something I can only call a desperate decency. In the matter of sour grapes, their action was the exact reverse of that of the fox in the fable. The fox said that the sweet grapes he could not get were sour. The agnostic said that the sour grapes he could get were sweet. All that Victorian generation of scientific sceptics assured us again and again that science satisfied them, that scientific ethics would be strictly ethical, that the world had not really lost anything in losing its creeds. They were assuring us, because they were assuring themselves. Old Huxley faced the facts better than most; but about certain social developments he went with the rest. They ate sour grapes; but they would not say they were sour.

And now returning to my text (as the preacher would say) can anybody find a finer or more exact choice of words, in the whole dictionary, for describing the whole generation of critics like Mr. Al-

dous Huxley, than saying that their teeth are set on edge? I have all possible respect for Mr. Huxley's teeth; I willingly and warmly admit that they mostly bite people who ought to be bitten; I have even greater respect for his eyes and ears and brains. But nobody who appreciates them, nobody who really admires them, will deny that they are all on edge. He seems to me to have come to the edge of everything; and that is what I meant by saying that his wit was at its wits' end. But it is true, even in the sacred sense of science; true even if we invoke the new sacred name of psychology. It is true very largely of the whole generation of which he is the most vivacious representative. There was an age of Puritan morality in which men got things on their conscience. There was an age of Utopian idealism in which men got things on the brain. We are living in a new world, in which men get things on their nerves.

In the distance between us and Dickens, what I note chiefly is the loss of gusto and the growth of disgust. It has nothing to do with any arguments *de gustibus* or about what things are really disgusting. Dickens described people as merely disgusting; but he was not merely disgusted. He made people out more monstrous than they really were; and then enjoyed the monstrosities. But this new school of caricature describes normal people as they normally are; and then reacts against them with an abnormal irritation. The old satire dealt with something that stood out in a startling manner, like the red nose of Mr. Stiggins; but the new satire is suddenly irritated with an ordinary nose, if it happens to have a pimple on it, or even happens to have a fly on it. The children's

teeth are on edge; and sometimes even the noise of the human voice sounds to them like the screech of a pencil on a slate.

It were vain to pretend that my explanation is not provocative or controversial. I think this unnatural nervous condition is due to the fact that our fathers or grandfathers refused to recognize a fact; that the supernatural is natural, in the sense of normal. They tried to keep their morality and lose their religion; they tried to pretend that it made no difference to abandon the whole idea of a purpose in things; and the result has been that their descendants are living at a strain, even more painful than theirs. A man who has a morality and has not a religion is like a man permanently standing on one leg. It can be done; but after a century or so it begins to get on the nerves. "The fathers have eaten sour grapes; and the children's teeth are set on edge."

Euthanasia and Murder

THERE is no law against a man biting off his own nose, unless it be a law of nature; nor even any police regulation against his hanging himself up by the hair or whiskers to talk to his friends and family in greater discomfort. There are penalties for suicide but, though I have no suicidal habits myself, I fancy they must be rather hard to apply; since they could only be sharpened into the legal and logical paradox of hanging a man to cure him of wanting to be hanged. But I do not believe that the Code Napoleon has any definite penalty for anybody who chooses to stick pins in himself or stand on one leg all day; and I am credibly