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A Note on Huxley's Sketches for Leda and the Swan

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Whilst researching at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin for a paper on Katherine Mansfield and Aldous Huxley, I came across five letters from Huxley to Dorothy Brett.¹ Three were handwritten and two typed, the earliest dating from 7 October 1918 and the latest from 23 June 1930. They were of no real relevance to my research, but I was fascinated by some drawings enclosed with the third letter, dated 4 December 1918. Three of the letters (the first two and the last) were published in Grover Smith's edition of Huxley's letters,² but the drawings seem to have since been forgotten, and are published here for the first time.

The first two letters reveal that Huxley had planned that Brett would provide some illustrations for the poem "Leda," to be published in the collection of the same name in 1920. In the myth of Leda and the Swan, the God Zeus, transfigured into a swan, seduces the beautiful Leda, on the same night that she sleeps with her husband Tyndareus, the King of Sparta. Leda lays two eggs, producing two sets of twins: Helen and Polydeuces, the children of Zeus, and Castor and Clytemnestra, the children of her husband. The final section of Huxley's published poem describes the sexual act between Leda and the Swan:

[...] Couched on the flowery ground
 Young Leda lay, and to her side did press
 The swan's proud-arching opulent loveliness,
 Stroking the snow-soft plumage of his breast
 With fingers slowly drawn, themselves caressed
 By the warm softness where they lingered, loth
 To break away. Sometimes against their growth
 Ruffling the feathers inlaid like little scales
 On his sleek neck, the pointed finger-nails
 Rased on the warm, dry, puckered skin beneath;
 And feeling it she shuddered, and her teeth
 Grated on edge; for there was something strange
 And snake-like in the touch. He, in exchange,
 Gave back to her, stretching his eager neck,

For every kiss a little amorous peck;
 Rubbing his silver head on her gold tresses,
 And with the nip of horny dry caresses
 Leaving upon her young white breast and cheek
 And arms the red print of his playful beak.
 Closer he nestled, mingling with the slim
 Austerity of virginal flank and limb
 His curved and florid beauty, till she felt
 That downy warmth strike through her flesh and melt
 The bones and marrow of her strength away.
 One lifted arm bent o'er her brow, she lay
 With limbs relaxed, scarce breathing, deathly still;
 Save when a quick, involuntary thrill
 Shook her sometimes with passing shudderings.
 As though some hand had plucked the aching strings
 Of life itself, tense with expectancy.
 And over her the swan shook slowly free
 The folded glory of his wings, and made
 A white-walled tent of soft and luminous shade
 To be her veil and keep her from the shame
 Of naked light and the sun's noonday flame.

Hushed lay the earth and the wide, careless sky.
 Then one sharp sound, that might have been a cry
 Of utmost pleasure or of utmost pain.
 Broke sobbing forth, and all was still again.³

In the first of the five letters, dated 7 October 1918, Huxley writes:

My dear Brett. I trust you flourish in Bonnie Scotland. I picture you stumping out in mackintosh breeks to fish & in the intervals tearing the clothes off Mademoiselle's back & drawing her. At least, that's what I hope you're doing; for I am most excited to see the Swans begun & the Leda illustrations too. I have written a bit more of the poem—but hardly enough to send you yet. It is a description of Jove's visit to Venus, who is found reclining on a purple-draped couch (with folds arranged carefully à la Cézanne) attended by marvellously slender Cupids. I hope to get on to the actual outrage & the Swan himself soon. (*HRHRC*)

Here is the passage of Huxley's poem, described in the above letter:

O heavenly fair
 She was, and smooth and marvellously young!
 On Tyrian silk she lay, and purple hung
 About her bed in folds of fluted light
 And shadow, dark as wine.
 [...]

Two stripling cupids on her either hand
 Stood near with winnowing plumes and gently fanned
 Her hot, love-fevered cheeks and eyelids burning. (*Leda*, 11)

In the second, much longer, typed letter dated 1 December, Huxley offers more advice and detail:

I have succeeded in writing very little more of Leda, and have only just come to the point when the Swan approaches and does his worst. When that episode is finished, I will send you a copy of the whole thing as far as it has gone, for it will be the first part of the poem complete — — — the rest being concerned with the hideous problems of parentage which arise on Leda's production (do you think she cackled?) of the two eggs. (*HRHRC*)

The second part of the poem mentioned by Huxley above would be abandoned, and the poem as eventually published would only contain the original first part.

In the next handwritten letter, dated 4 December 1918, Huxley is now more focused on Brett's illustrations and how he thinks she might approach them:

Here are some scribblings of the culminating scene of Leda. I can't see it quite. The Swan must, I feel, have its wings out, or it will look like a goose. Besides wings are so lovely. Those Ingres pictures of ladies from behind are so lusciously good—& his *Odalisque* is marvellous.

How do you think of doing it? (*HRHRC*)

Enclosed with the letter are five pages of sketches, containing illustrative ideas for Brett. The first page contains two very roughly drawn pen and black ink sketches of a naked Leda with the Swan on top of her. In the top image, Leda's body has been roughly cross-hatched in red ink and underneath, also in red ink, Huxley has written: "Too much of a good thing!" On the second page, also in black and red ink, is a much larger sketch of a reclining Leda with her back to the onlooker, this time with the Swan, his wings outstretched, approaching her from the front, while in the distance, six naked female figures hold hands and dance in a line behind two trees. The wording in black ink reads: "See Ingres' studies of reclining figures from behind." The third sketch is the most detailed of all—again black and red ink, with red ink cross-hatched across Leda's naked body, which faces us, and the massive Swan, wings outstretched, with its back to us as it presses up to Leda and partly covers her body, leaving her arms, one breast and one leg exposed. In the background, a naked servant girl kneels, holding up some sort of awning-like structure, and in the top right is a view of a mountain

landscape. Across the bottom of the sketch Huxley has written in black ink: “A purple bath towel hides any indiscretions. In the right-hand background is an earthy Italian landscape.” The next sketch is much simpler, drawn in pencil and outlined in black ink, and depicts a scene similar to the third sketch, with Leda and the Swan in the same position, but without the awning and the servant girl, one tree moved to the front of the image, and a wider landscape view. Underneath, Huxley has written: “The background is silly here. There should be no distance. Perhaps figures.” The final sketch is a faint pencil drawing of three naked girls in a circle, arms outstretched, on the back of sketch three, the ink lines of which come through the paper, making the pencil drawing hard to see.

The next handwritten letter is dated 17 January 1919. It appears that Brett has in the interim period sent him two Leda drawings:

My dear Brett. I wd have written before to thank you at more length for the second Leda drawing, had I not been daily expecting you in London: for you said when you last wrote that you were coming early in Jan.; while Katherine was definitely certain that you were coming on the 6th. However, you are not here; so I imagine you are still in Scotland. I am sending this by Julian with a copy of Leda, Part I, for you to read & select the indecent passages from for illustration. Send it me back, please; for I have no other copy [...].

Meanwhile, thanks very much for the blue drawing. It is very lovely—the figures particularly: tho’ I’m not sure that the tree isn’t almost better in the first version. I long to see your drawing of the actual swan scene. Other possible things to illustrate are the Jupiter bedroom & the Venus boudoir—in the description of which, you will see, I have carefully mentioned the fact that the bed-curtains hung in Cézanne folds. Then there are the little glimpses of the world, seen from Jupiter’s god’s-eye view: the Chinese scene, or the people asleep in the shade of the dromedaries might be jolly.
(*HRHRC*)

In the end, no illustrations from Brett were used. The first UK edition of 1920 comprises 160 signed and numbered copies, with a frontispiece engraving of Leda from a painting by Michelangelo. The first American edition published in 1929, comprises 361 numbered and signed copies with a wood-engraved frontispiece and title vignettes by Eric Gill.⁴

Jerome Meckier’s essay on the poem contends that its subject matter is “recurring disillusionment,” which can be “construed as indirect advice to an elder brother [Julian] and a

prospective sister-in-law [Juliette] not to expect too much”.⁵ He goes on to state that “Leda” is “an important work in which Huxley formulated his first myth for modern times. [...] Huxley’s finest poem of ideas benefitted from a mythical method two years before *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* were published” (Meckier, 439-40).

Reviewing the collection in the *Athenaeum* (where Huxley was his assistant editor), John Middleton Murry is dismissive of the title poem. He notes:

Mr. Huxley has, we think, deceived himself. His reconciliation of opposites is unreal; and the reason why, being so clever, he has deceived himself is precisely that he is so clever. He has chosen his ground too adroitly, for the myth of Leda and the swan is one of the few that permit ugliness to assume the vesture of beauty.

In other words, it is a conjuring trick played with the incidentals of poetry. It has the air of being an advance upon the early Keats; it is in reality a long step backwards from him. It looks for a moment as though it were a kind of classical perfection of modern poetry, whereas it is an evasion of the problem that modern poetry, with all its stupid and intelligent hesitations, is trying to face.⁶

And yet, W. B. Yeats’s famous poem “Leda and the Swan” (1923), published in his 1928 collection *The Tower*, was inspired by Huxley’s earlier, much longer version. With the passage of time, Huxley’s “Leda” is viewed in a much more sympathetic light by Meckier:

“Leda” was designed to be ‘beautiful’ and ‘appalling,’ ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable,’ ‘perfectly serious’ and ‘perfectly ironic’—like modern life itself. Just as its beauty proves ironic, its irony can be considered beautiful: although disappointing and disillusioning, the poem is an aesthetically pleasing rendition of life’s ‘inhumanity’ [...].

In 1920, the era’s self-appointed, self-deprecating spokesman synthesized the postwar age; trustworthy despite being subversive and parodic, he raised the modern period’s lack of a plausible overview to the level of myth. (Meckier, 466)

¹ Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. Dorothy Brett Collection, Box 9, Folder 1. Five letters from Aldous Huxley to Dorothy Brett. Hereafter, *HRHRC*.

² Grover Smith, ed., *Letters of Aldous Huxley* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969).

³ Aldous Huxley, *Leda* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1920), 17-18. Hereafter, *Leda*.

⁴ Aldous Huxley, *Leda* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1929).

⁵ Jerome Meckier, “Aldous Huxley’s modern myth: ‘Leda’ and the poetry of ideas.” *ELH* 58: 2 (Summer, 1991), 439-69, (439). Hereafter, *Meckier*.

⁶ John Middleton Murry, “Leda.” *Athenaeum*, 4700, 28 May 1920, 699-700.