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## **'Pleasure too often repeated'<sup>1</sup>: Aldous Huxley's Modernity**

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In an essay published in 1923, Aldous Huxley suggested that 'of all the various poisons which modern civilization, by a process of auto-intoxication, brews quietly up within its own bowels, few are more deadly ... than that curious and appalling thing that is technically known as "pleasure".<sup>2</sup> By 'pleasure' Huxley here clearly meant something other than simple enjoyment. His use of inverted commas around 'pleasure' and his description of pleasure as 'curious and appalling' signal a profound and significant unease, which I will argue below can only be fully understood when considered in relation to Huxley's sense of the corruption of 'pleasure' by the forces of modernity as he perceived them in the early twenties.

Huxley goes on to argue in this same essay that pleasure has become something other than the 'real thing', has become 'organized distraction' ('Pleasures', p. 355), and to bemoan the emergence of 'vast organizations that provide us with ready-made distractions' ('Pleasures', p. 356). Pleasure thus appears to have become for Huxley not simply negative, but something other than itself (not real), and an experience that is both inauthentic and slightly sinister ('organized' and 'ready-made'). Huxley's profound suspicion about the nature of pleasure in the modern world means that an analysis of the structural and thematic role of the party in his fiction offers a particularly rich opportunity for a reconsideration of the broader arguments within his novels about the defining characteristics of modernity. These broader arguments, I will suggest, can themselves be more fully and productively understood only when put into

dialogue with the literary and cultural project we have come to call 'Modernism', represented (necessarily only partially) in this chapter through discussions of T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence and Sigmund Freud.<sup>3</sup>

Huxley was not alone in expressing a certain scepticism about the psychic and social meanings of 'pleasure' in the early twenties. One might, for example, reflect on the historical coincidence of Huxley's essay and Freud's innovative and disturbing essay of 1920, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'.<sup>4</sup> Freud's essay, by his own admission an exercise in 'speculation, often far-fetched speculation' ('BPP', p. 24), developed a radical critique of the inadequacy of psychoanalytic assumptions that 'the course taken by mental events is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle' ('BPP', p. 7). Using a variety of conceptual frameworks, from biology to clinical practice, Freud developed within this very influential essay a compelling argument for the importance of forces and energies that lay 'beyond' the pleasure principle, including not only the reality principle, but also the compulsion to repeat and the death instinct as fundamental aspects of the human psyche.

Huxley was, as one of his biographers makes clear, 'never an admirer of Freud',<sup>5</sup> but the coincidence of their separate critiques of 'pleasure' in the early twenties is not without significance. Both were responding to the need for new concepts and new forms of representation to enable an understanding of the social and individual traumas and legacies of the First World War. Freud's fascination with the role of the 'perpetual recurrence of the same thing' ('BPP', p. 22) within the psychic life of the traumatised individual finds its echo in Huxley's literary fascination with repetition, whether in the form of his literary deployment of obsessive citation, his fictional exploration of addictive and

repetitive sexual behaviours, or his critique of the psychic damage caused by coercive repetitive social rituals.

In examining the role of the party in Huxley's fiction, from Crome Yellow (1921) via Point Counter Point (1928) to Brave New World (1932), each of these aspects of his fascination with the compulsion to repeat will be explored, and the relation of these to the possibilities of pleasure the novels represent will be analysed. Huxley's fictional parties take many forms, from the 'house party', where all the characters within a novel are tested by their confinement within a specific and often oppressive time and space, to the dinner party and the drinks party, where the meeting and mingling of characters is both more staged and more transient. But in each case the party becomes a kind of fictional laboratory, where relationships, identities and desires are tested against Huxley's narrator's probing sense of immanent social crisis and personal collapse. Parties in each of these three novels are fictionally enabling events, providing a narrative device to highlight the tensions and conflicts that emerge from the interactions of their characters with the modern world. Parties are moments of intensity and also of profound instability, generating a mood and an affect that Huxley elsewhere describes as a kind of 'whizzing': 'What a life! I have been ceaselessly whizzing. ... What a queer thing it is. This whizzing is a mere mania, a sort of intoxicant, exciting and begetting oblivion. I shall be glad when it stops'.<sup>6</sup>

*'Oh, these rags and tags of other people's making!'*<sup>7</sup>

The 'whizzing' that so affects Huxley in his experience of the rhythms and intoxications of the modern world can be connected to the various forms of

compulsion to repeat that can be found in his novels. One key aspect of this repetition can be found in Huxley's use of literary quotation, which allows phrases and texts to circulate between and among his characters. In Huxley's novels, parties serve not simply to enable an interaction and mingling of people, but also to provide the conditions for repeated circulation and mingling of words, often in the form of quotations from or broader allusions to literary texts. In Crome Yellow, for example, quotations are deployed at parties extensively by a number of the key characters to express their fears, fascinations and desires, while they also serve to situate the action of the novel within a much larger historical and literary canvas:

'Under the spreading ilex tree...'

He tried to remember who the poem was by, but couldn't.

'The smith a brawny man is he

With arms like rubber bands.'

... Oh, these rags and tags of other people's making! Would he ever be able to call his brain his own? Was there, indeed, anything in it that was truly his own, or was it simply an education?' (CY, p. 135)

Crome Yellow meticulously presents and dissects the interactions between guests at a house party in a large country house, closely modelled on Garsington Hall, the home of Lady Ottoline Morrell, patron and supporter of a wide range of Modernist artists and writers including Huxley, D. H. Lawrence, Dorothy Brett and Mark Gertler.<sup>8</sup> Crome Yellow is often read simply as a roman à clef, and it is certainly not difficult to perceive the resonances of Huxley's contemporaries,

including Bertrand Russell, Dorothy Brett, and indeed Ottoline Morrell herself within the key characters in the novel. Crome Yellow is in that sense resonant with its contemporary post-war moment, reanimated through the process of fictionalisation and generating a series of echoes of contemporary attitudes and voices.<sup>9</sup> These contemporary echoes certainly generate one aspect of the experience of repetition that is so key both to the form and to the thematic concerns of this novel. But the novel is also profoundly and importantly interested in the echoes of history, embodied in the plethora of (mostly literary) quotations and illusions that litter the text, and constitute the discursive matter of its parties.

Huxley was not the only writer fascinated by the literary potential of citation in the early years of the twentieth century. Indeed, for many literary critics and historians a tendency to citation is the hallmark, much more generally, of Modernist writing itself. The critic Leonard Diepeveen argued in the 1990s, for example, that 'appropriation of previously existing material will be the aesthetic of this century'.<sup>10</sup> Diepeveen's particular interest was in the poetic writing of Modernism, and a poetic commitment to the productive power of citation can clearly be found throughout the period of high Modernism, particularly in the years just before and after the First World War when Huxley was developing his own aesthetic practice. Think, for example, of The Waste Land, published by T. S. Eliot (another regular visitor to Garsington Hall) in 1922. Early critical reception of The Waste Land foregrounded, and expressed a distinct unease with, its complex collage of disparate voices and quotations from literary texts. Edgell Rickword, for example, noted in 1923 that Eliot's 'emotions hardly ever reach us without traversing a zig-zag of allusion. In the course of his four hundred lines he

quotes from a score of authors ... To help us elucidate the poem Mr Eliot has provided some notes which will be of more interest to the pedantic than the poetic critic',<sup>11</sup> while Edmund Wilson, in a broadly positive review of the poem published in 1922, nonetheless referred to a risk that it would be seen as 'a puzzle rather than a poem' that 'depends too much on books and borrows too much from other men'.<sup>12</sup> But such deployment of citation as a central literary device was an integral aspect of Eliot's overall poetic project, and intersected in important ways with his understanding of literary innovation and its relation to literary tradition.

In his essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), Eliot had argued for the importance of a modern poet writing 'with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order,' suggesting further that the modern poet's 'significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.'<sup>13</sup> Such haunting of poetry by the literary texts of the past, and the palimpsestic presence within poetry of a rich array of earlier literary texts, were fundamental to Eliot's understanding of what was important about modern poetry. The point is developed further in Eliot's essay on 'The Metaphysical Poets', which was published in 1921 (the same year as Crome Yellow), where Eliot argued that 'the poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.'<sup>14</sup>

Citation, allusion and repetition were not only driving innovation in modern poetry; they were fundamental to some of the most important innovations within modern fiction in the same period. The circulation of

different voices and texts, and the presentation of ‘multiple simultaneous perspectives’<sup>15</sup> are, for example, fundamental components of James Joyce’s Ulysses (1922), a novel that renders the emotional, cultural and physical landscape of contemporary Dublin within a framework shaped by quotation from a dizzying number of texts, including the literary and the popular as well as the historical and the ephemeral.

Joyce’s polyphonic novel is both stylistically and formally radically different, of course, from Huxley’s fiction, and his literary seriousness is of quite a different order. But Joyce’s literary borrowings and repetitions do, nonetheless provide a context for the consideration of the deployment of citation within Huxley’s novels, the more so because for each writer the works of Shakespeare are a particularly rich and recurrent source. As one critic writing in the 1950s noted, ‘Joyce in Ulysses refers or alludes to Shakespeare or his works, or quotes from the latter, 321 times’.<sup>16</sup> No such forensic analysis of the frequency of allusions to Shakespeare within Huxley’s writing has been undertaken.<sup>17</sup> But it is nonetheless clear that Shakespeare has a privileged status within Huxley’s novels, providing a counterpoint to their account of modernity, and offering resources for an alternative moral universe (most explicitly in Brave New World). What is at stake for Huxley, across all three of the novels discussed in this chapter, is whether the texts of Shakespeare can be made to circulate in the modern world without becoming empty ciphers of hopeless anachronism, whether in fact things are ‘more real and vivid when one can apply someone else’s ready-made phrase about them’ (CY, p. 17). The perpetual recurrence of Shakespeare in Huxley’s novels in the form of allusion and direct quotation is fundamental both to their intellectual arguments and their literary style. As Mr



Barbecue-Smith puts it in Crome Yellow: 'turning over the pages of any Dictionary of Quotations or Shakespeare Calendar that comes to hand ... ensures that the Universe shall come flowing in, not in a continuous rush, but in aphorismic drops' (CY, p. 29). These accumulating drops of allusion and quotation conjure not simply a specific style of literary creation but also the characteristic universe of Huxley's fictional parties, where meaning emerges from the cumulative drops of fragmented conversation and quotation rather than presenting itself as continuous or coherent.

The habit of quotation that is found in so many characters in Huxley's novels is explicitly linked to the complex legacy of forms of education (public school and Oxbridge) that we are told provide extensive knowledge of the past without however enabling effective engagement in the present. Denis Stone, an aspiring writer in Crome Yellow feels the weight of this explicitly:

'You have a bad habit of quoting', said Anne. 'As I never know the context or author, I find it humiliating'

Denis apologized. 'It's the fault of one's education. Things somehow seem more real and vivid when one can apply someone else's ready-made phrases about them. And then there are lots of lovely names and words ... you bring them out triumphantly, and feel you've clinched the argument with the mere magical sound of them. That's what comes of the higher education'. (CY, p. 17)

This legacy does not simply produce characters who are no fun at parties (who humiliate their interlocutors), but also creates a habit of self-delusion that for

many of Huxley's characters leads to an inability to understand the motivation for or meanings of their own actions. Walter Bidlake, in Point Counter Point finds himself in a very unhappy and destructive relationship because, as he muses, 'he had deliberately tried to model his feelings and their life together on Shelley's poetry', (PCP, p. 9). Walter had been warned against the folly of this by Philip Quarles, another writer, who cited Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 ('My Mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun') to demonstrate to Walter the dangers of taking literary texts 'too literally' (PCP, p. 10). But Walter was 'just down from Oxford and stuffed with poetry and the lucubrations of philosophers and mystics' (PCP, p. 11), and thus prey to delusion. Walter's lover, Marjorie, is also a victim of quotation, having imbibed knowledge from a wide range of texts without acquiring any significant understanding:

And then, he went on to reflect, she was really rather a bore with her heavy, insensitive earnestness. Really rather stupid in spite of her culture – because of it perhaps. The culture was genuine all right; she had read the books, she remembered them. But did she understand them? ... when she did break her silence, half her utterances were quotations. ... It had taken Walter some time to discover the heavy, pathetically uncomprehending stupidity that underlay the silence and the quotations'. (PCP, p. 13)

The relations between culture and stupidity intrigue many characters in Huxley's fiction, including those who mingle and chatter while 'Lady Edward Tantamount was giving one of her musical parties' (PCP, p, 24). This party

functions in Point Counter Point as a kind of biological or anthropological experiment. This experimental aspect is explicitly flagged up by the fact that while the large and noisy musical party is going on in the lower floors of Tantamount House, 'two flights up --- Lord Edward Tantamount was busy in his laboratory' (PCP, p. 35). Edward Tantamount is totally absorbed by 'the real task of his life - the great theoretical treatise on physical biology' (PCP, p. 39) whose profound significance came to him as a sort of revelation in his youth, overturning the lethargic and pointless state to which he had been condemned by 'All those years at Eton. Latin verses. What the devil was the good?' (PCP, p. 38). Lord Edward is overwhelmed by a moment of insight into the fundamental structures that underpin all life, and restlessly pursues the abstract and theoretical basis of such vitalism for the rest of his life. His laboratory assistant Illidge, who had 'certainly not been formed in any of the ancient and expensive seats of learning' (PCP, p. 4) (and is later revealed to be both a communist and a murderer) is busily engaged in a kind of primitive stem cell research on a newt while the party goes on below. But Illidge is then hurled precipitously into the party (after falling down stairs). Here his and Lord Edward's scientific endeavours are mocked through frivolous citation from Shakespeare:

'Eye of newt and toe of frog

Wool of bat and tongue of dog...'

She recited with gusto, intoxicated by the words. 'And he takes guinea pigs and makes them breed with serpents. Can you imagine it - a cross between a cobra and a guinea pig?' (PCP, p. 47)

The voice of Shakespeare's witch here suggests the dangerous and unnatural quality of Lord Edward's experimentation, with its troubling mingling of species, but this passage also points up the intellectual limitations of the young party guests who can see nothing but absurdity in such scientific endeavour, and are so readily intoxicated by words.

Both foolishness and an appetite for destructive forms of intoxication are found repeatedly in Huxley's novels, manifested with particular intensity at their many parties. Lucy Tantamount in Point Counter Point, for example, is represented as frivolous, morally vacuous, and constantly searching the momentary annihilation she derives from the intoxication of repeated but unsatisfactory sexual encounters, 'she had only to relax her will ... she would cease to be herself. She would become nothing but a skin of fluttering pleasure enclosing a void, a warm abysmal darkness' (PCP, p .225). The lure of intoxication as a response to the traumas of the post-war world was indeed noted by many writers of the twenties, including Freud who argued in 'Civilization and its Discontents' in 1929 that 'Life, as we find it, is too hard to bear. It brings us too many pains. ... In order to bear it we cannot dispense with palliative measures' including 'intoxicating substances, which make us insensitive to it'.<sup>19</sup> In Brave New World, published a few years after Freud's essay, Huxley will insist on the central role of intoxicating substances in deadening the existential suffering that is implicit in the human conditions, showing in the novel a world in which a narcotic substance, 'soma', is routinely administered to overcome the sense of loss or the desire for freedom that might otherwise emerge within the minds of its citizens: 'Lenina and Henry were yet

dancing in another world – the warm, the richly coloured, the infinitely friendly world of soma-holiday'.<sup>20</sup>

In Point Counter Point, Lucy Tantamount is used by Huxley to provide narrative coherence to his account of the party with which the novel begins: she links diverse characters through her many and varied conversations while also acting as the central focus of Walter Bidlake's (at this stage frustrated) erotic desire. At one point Lucy confesses to an elderly guest, Mrs Betterton, that she began going to the theatre at the age of six. Mrs Betterton is appalled by the negative consequences of such early exposure to theatrical pleasure:

She quoted Shakespeare.

‘Therefore are feasts so solemn and so rare,  
Since seldom coming in the long year set,  
Like stones of worth they thinly placed are...’

‘They’re a row of pearls nowadays.’

‘And false ones at that,’ said Lucy.

Mrs Betterton was triumphant. ‘False ones – you see? But for us they were genuine, because they were rare. We didn’t ‘blunt the fine point of seldom pleasure’ by daily wear. ... A pleasure too often repeated produces numbness; it’s no more felt as a pleasure. (PCP, p. 62)

The disjunction between Victorians and moderns, Mrs Betterton suggests, can be found in their different experiences of pleasure: too many feasts and parties, she argues, leads to a kind of ‘numbness’ and a pleasure that is false, that is ‘no more felt’. Mrs Betterton’s remedy would be fewer parties but Lucy disagrees,

suggesting rather that pleasurable diversions must become stronger to maintain their power. Where, Mrs Betterton asks, would that end: "In bull fighting? ... Or the amusements of the Marquis de Sade? Where." Lucy shrugged her shoulders. "Who knows?" (PCP, p. 63).

Such a drive towards excess as the inescapable consequence of false and palliative pleasures, or the result of too many parties, is fully embodied in the structure of Point Counter Point as a whole. Its search for the resources of adequate aesthetic expression become increasingly desperate as the novel progresses, driving it to its unsettlingly melodramatic conclusions in murder and the prolonged death of a child: 'and then suddenly there was no more music; only the scratching of the needle on the revolving disc' (PCP, p. 568). As an image of painful repetition, the technologies of modern world and the impossibility of the aesthetic, this is compelling: the compulsion to repeat finds its apotheosis here in the scratching of a needle.

*'Aldous Huxley held a group of listeners spellbound as he elucidated the history of sexual tastes over the last thousand years.'*<sup>21</sup>

Sexual energies circulate throughout Huxley's parties, as indeed they do throughout his novels. For Huxley, as for many of his Modernist contemporaries, sexual mores and behaviours were key indicators of the state of health of their contemporary culture. Thus, for example, in Eliot's The Waste Land the bleakness of the social and cultural landscape is expressed partly through a series of narratives and images of failed or degraded sexual coupling. In lines

such as: 'The time is now propitious, as he guesses/The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,/Endeavours to engage her in caresses/Which still are unreproved, if undesired'<sup>22</sup> Eliot represents the spiritual emptiness of the lives of the inhabitants of his waste land through their emotionally unsatisfying sexual couplings. Such failures to connect sexual behaviour and sexual desire will also be found in many of Huxley's characters, and the representation of sexual desire and behaviour within his novels forms part of a developing argument about the defining qualities of modernity, which Huxley increasingly associates with a growing chasm between the profound needs of the human individual and the manufactured distractions and pastimes of a modern commercial and industrialized society.

Huxley presents within several of his novels an explicit history of changing sexual behaviours and attitudes. In Crome Yellow, for example, a discussion of sexual mores takes place, led by Mr Scogan (a character often read as based on Bertrand Russell).<sup>23</sup> Mr Scogan speaks with enthusiasm of the sexual manners of earlier periods, 'the customs ... of every other century, from the time of Hammurabi onwards, were equally genial and equally frank' (CY, p. 78). Scogan argues that only in the nineteenth century did reticence about sexuality be come part of European culture, when 'the frankness of the previous fifteen or twenty thousand years was considered abnormal and perverse' (PCP, p. 78). One of the group enthusiastically agrees with his condemnation of the tendency towards reticence and repression in the nineteenth-century, and invokes with enthusiasm the impact on contemporary culture of the work of Havelock Ellis.<sup>24</sup> But Scogan argues that Ellis's scientific discourses on sexuality constitute part of the very problem of sexuality in the modern world, 'the reaction when it came ...

was to openness, but not to the same openness as had reigned in earlier ages. It was to a scientific frankness, not to the jovial frankness of the past' (PCP, p. 79). This 'scientific frankness', with the accompanying sense that sex is serious, and something that need to be analysed, is exactly what Scogan is objecting to.

Excessive discourse about sex (especially if accompanied by seriousness) is always treated with suspicion in Huxley's novels, though they are themselves saturated with representations of and arguments about sex. Such a dialectic between the aspiration towards a 'jovial' understanding of sex in 'the spirit of Rabelais and Chaucer' (PCP, p. 79) and the simultaneous compulsion to produce analyses and scientific accounts of human sexuality is, it would later be argued by the French historian Michel Foucault, a fundamental characteristic of modernity.<sup>25</sup> Foucault's very influential history of sexuality engages closely both with the desire to historicise we find in Huxley and with his sense of the ambiguous legacies for individual subjects of the development of scientific discourses on human sexuality. Foucault would not agree with Scogan's account of the reticence of the nineteenth century in relation to sexuality, but his extensive inquiry into the history of sexuality does offer a framework for understanding Huxley's suspicion of the modern desire to know and to control human sexual behaviours: 'what is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they confined sex to a shadowy existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum' (HS, p. 35).

Huxley's sense of how much is at stake in the nature of modern sexual mores and behaviours is, however, profound, and the impact of his friend and contemporary, D. H. Lawrence, on the way this is represented in his fiction is significant. Lawrence's own novels, essays and poems stage a series of conflicts



between different understandings and manifestations of the nature of human sexuality, associating modernity consistently with failures in and aberrations of the basic human need for sexual passion and fulfilment. For Lawrence, the damage that is done by an overly self-conscious modern kind of sexuality is profound, and requires vigorous challenge. As he was to express this in an essay published in 1922, 'drive her back into her own true mode. Rip all her nice superimposed modern-woman and wonderful-creature garb off her, reduce her once more to a naked Eve.'<sup>26</sup> Huxley articulates within his novels many ideas and arguments about the distortions of human sexuality within the modern world derived from Lawrence's work, for example creating in the character of Mark Rampion in Point Counter Point a representation of 'some of Lawrence's notions on legs'.<sup>27</sup> Rampion repeatedly polemicizes against what the novel represents as sterile, aberrant or destructive forms of modern sexual behaviour:

Rampion brought his hands together with a clap and, leaning back in his chair, turned up his eyes. 'Oh, my sacred aunt!' he said. 'So it's come to that, has it? Mystical experience and asceticism. The fornicator's hatred of life in a new form.

... But I don't want to be three-quarters dead. I prefer to be alive, entirely alive. It's time there was a revolt in favour of life and wholeness. (PCP, pp. 154-5)

Throughout Point Counter Point there are many examples of behaviour that embodies the distortions of modernity Rampion so energetically condemns. Lucy Tantamount, for example, is an enthusiastic party-goer, 'the more the merrier

was her principle; or if “merrier” were too strong a word, at least the noisier and more tumultuously distracting’. (PCP, p. 159) This urgent need for distraction drives her repeated sexual encounters where she seeks to seduce only then rapidly to reject a whole series of lovers, ‘There was nothing of the victim about Lucy; not much even, he had often reflected, of the ordinary woman. She could pursue her pleasures as a man pursues his, remorselessly, single-mindedly, without allowing her thoughts and feelings to be in the least involved’ (PCP, p. 199). The need to conquer and reject a series of sexual partners becomes Lucy’s way of not feeling, of distracting herself from anything other than physical sensations that are momentarily pleasurable.

The novel contains many other examples of sexual behaviours that are represented as unhealthy, from obsession to frigidity to infantilism. Maurice Spandrell, for example, displays both obsession and infantilism in his energetic pursuit of vice. He displays a desperate need for sexual conquests, despite his basic distaste for sex, as a way to fill the void in his life that seems to have begun at the point that his widowed mother remarried. Spandrell says of sex that ‘I found it disappointing – but attractive all the same. The heart’s a curious sort of manure heap; dung calls to dung’ (PCP, p. 373), a sentiment that is both caustically understood and explicitly challenged by Mark Rampion, ‘that’s the trouble with you, Spandrell. You like stewing in your disgusting suppurating juice, you don’t want to be made healthy’ (PCP, p. 124). Rampion’s language of disgust and suppuration here seems to mirror the very emotions by which Spandrell finds himself paralysed, underlining the fact that while Huxley is adept as laying out symptoms of the disease of modern sexuality as he perceives it, he

cannot find a narrative space outside the framework of modernity from which to offer another sustainable vision.

The most compelling and complex writing about Maurice Spandrell in the novel is found in the passages where his childhood is remembered:

He went on sipping, meditatively, remembering and analysing those quite incredible felicities of his boyhood. ... He had gone ahead. At the outskirts of the wood he halted to wait for his mother. Looking back, he watched her coming through the woods. A strong, tall figure, still young and agile ... she was the most beautiful and at the same time the most homely and comforting and familiar of things. (PCP, pp. 232-3)

This grasping after the apparent security of the 'homely and comforting' triggered by a rather disturbing memory of the momentary loss and eroticised recovery of his mother, resonates interestingly with another text by Freud. His 1919 essay on 'The Uncanny' opens with a philosophical and etymological exploration of the significance of the 'heimlich' (or homely), and its semantic relations to the word 'unheimlich' (or uncanny). Freud concludes that the root word 'heimlich', 'is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different: on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed.'<sup>28</sup> This kind of dialectic movement between the familiar and the hidden, which seems to be at the core of Spandrell's intense, moving, and yet disturbing childhood memory, is for Freud the driving energy behind the experience of the uncanny. The uncanny

is the psychological state generated by experiences of liminality and repetition, exemplified for Freud in the literary figure of the double, or in the encounter with technological innovations such as automata. The uncanny here become an affective state with a peculiarly modern character, with particular significance for the experience of its parties. The dialectic between 'home' and 'not-home', the experience of disturbing and unsettling repetitions, and the recurrence of the familiar that had been repressed are all part of the uncanny experience of the Modernist party: 'Bidlake turned and saw Mrs Betterton ... Bidlake had to pretend he was pleased to see her after all these years. It was extraordinary, he reflected as he took her hand, how completely he had succeeded in avoiding her' (PCP, p. 60). The return of the repressed indeed.

Spandrell's uncanny memories recur later in the novel, becoming associated with his teenage reading of pornography focussed on young girls, 'what shame he had felt, and what remorse!' (PCP, p. 371) and his attempt to ward off these feeling of desire and shame by thinking about his mother, and indeed praying to her to help him resist temptation. This subtle and painful psychological battle with himself is cut short by his mother's remarriage: she is no longer available to him and he is left damaged and disgusted with himself and the world. The uncanny gives way to the obsessive and the destructive as the defining qualities of his psychological and sexual being. Mark Rampion makes it clear that such a psychological state can ultimately lead to nothing other than death. Rampion makes the metaphorical statement, 'He refuses to be a man. Not a man – either a demon or a dead angel. Now he's dead' (PCP, p. 567) just moments before Spandrell does in fact suffer a sudden and violent death.

Spandrell's death does at least offer some kind of dramatic conclusion to the destructive paralysis of his character. Huxley creates a much more sobering end both for the novel as a whole and for the sexual passion of Denis Burlap, editor of the Literary World. Burlap is represented as believing in abstractions, and as absorbed in a rather solipsistic attempt to give expression to 'the necessity of believing in Life' (PCP, p. 206). Such striving for abstraction and the infinite is not kindly treated by Huxley in his novels of this period. Burlap's intimate relationship with Beatrice Gilray is unconsummated for much of the novel, and when they do make love it is 'as it were dis-embodiedly', since 'to make love as if from the Great Beyond – that was Burlap's talent' (PCP, p. 538). The novel ends with a distinctly infantile erotic moment between them:

That night he and Beatrice pretended to be two little children and had their bath together. Two little children sitting at opposite ends of the big old-fashioned bath. And what a romp they had! The bathroom was drenched with their splashings. Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven. (PCP, p. 569)

Huxley's choice to end the novel with such an ironic Kingdom of Heaven gave no comfort to D. H. Lawrence. On reading Point Counter Point soon after its publication in 1928 Lawrence said that it 'made him ill – not for the caricature of himself and Frieda as Mark and Mary Rampion – but for its brittle sex, rape and murder'.<sup>29</sup> Lawrence's point here is that Huxley exemplifies the power of the modern world to corrupt sexual desire all too well, and his novels thus risk becoming a symptom rather than a critique of modernity, embodying as they do

the very brittleness and alienation Lawrence sees as so characteristically modern. Huxley reflected in 1922 that 'we live today in a world that is socially and morally wrecked. Between them, the war and the new psychology have smashed most of the institutions, traditions, creeds and spiritual values that supported us in the past (Complete Essays, p. 33), and the wreckage is clearly perceptible in Huxley's parties, where 'people want to drown their realization of the difficulties of living properly in this grotesque contemporary world ... try to forget themselves in fornication, dancing, movies' (PCP, p. 419).

Brave New World (1932) continues Huxley's critique of the social and psychological impacts of modernity, suggesting that it is in the experience of desire and the nature of pleasure that these will be most profoundly experienced. As Huxley expressed this a number of years after publishing the novel, 'within the next generation I believe that the world's rulers will discover that infant conditioning and narco-hypnosis are more efficient, as instruments of government, than clubs and prisons.'<sup>30</sup> Brave New World presents a society in which individuals are spared (or denied) the complexities of human sexual relationships and the responsibilities of freedom through the imposition of conditioning and narcotic regimes that require regimented forms of sexual and social behaviour. In this brave new world, 'home' has been dismantled as a social and affective space, because it had come to be seen as a place of psychological oppression and perversion: 'Our Freud had been the first to reveal the appalling dangers of family life' (BNW, p. 33).

The novel's world of frequent and organised sexual coupling and the systematic consumption of narcotics relies substantially on parties, where the values and rules of the society are enacted and reinforced. Once every two

weeks, all citizens are required to attend a 'Solidarity Service', where 'synthetic music', and compulsory consumption of the narcotic 'soma' lead on to a collective singing of a 'Solidarity Hymn': 'Ford, we are twelve; oh make us one/Like drops within the Social River' (BNW, p. 70). The point is clearly made here that Fordism, as a economic and social system of mass production developed in the early twentieth century, underpins the development of these modern forms of power that stress conformity, and require intoxication to make them bearable.<sup>31</sup> Fordism as a social system is explicitly linked in Brave New World to anxieties about the messiness and unpredictability of human sexuality; anxieties associated explicitly with the legacy of Freud: 'Our Ford – or our Freud, as, for some inscrutable reason, he chose to call himself whenever he spoke of psychological matters' (BNW, p.33). Ford and Freud are both represented as agents of modernity, contributing to the dehumanization of the individual by seeking to remove the unpredictable and the inefficient from their lives.

The Solidarity Service moves from singing to increasingly frenetic dancing, and culminates in the ritual performance of the 'Orgy Porgy' song":

Orgy-porgy, Ford and fun  
Kiss the girls and make them One.  
Boys at one with girls at peace;  
Orgy-porgy gives release. (BNW, p. 73)

Frequent and impersonal sexual coupling is apparently undertaken as a tribute to Ford, who is represented as an enabler of conformity and social stability, and it offers both 'fun' and a kind of peace: "Yes, everybody's happy now," echoed

Lenina. They had heard the words repeated a hundred and fifty times every night for twelve years' (BNW, p. 65). The compulsion to repeat has here become socialized and deployed on an industrial scale. The name of 'Lenina' is, of course, not innocent in this context: Huxley suggests at various stages in the novel some possible parallels between the ambitions and techniques of the Soviet Union and the radical aspirations of the ideology of his brave new world expressed so systematically by Mustapha Mond with his confident belief that 'our civilization has chosen machinery and medicine and happiness' (BNW, p. 207). Choosing machinery, medicine and happiness leads to a regimentation of human behaviour and relationships, and renders them both brittle and synthetic. Parties in this world are simulacra of the parties represented in Huxley's earlier novels, and even the food and drink are synthetic: 'he moved among his guests ... begging them to sit down and take a carotene sandwich, a slice of vitamin A *pâté*, a glass of champagne surrogate' (BNW, p. 152).

There is a grotesque quality to this synthetic party, rendered more acute by the humiliation of its host when his key guest fails to turn up, leaving him 'pale, distraught, abject and agitated' (BNW, p. 152). This capacity of parties to humiliate and to distress is repeatedly acknowledged by a range of characters in Huxley's novels. For example, Henry Wimbush, in Crome Yellow, says that 'I shall be glad ... when this function comes at last to an end ... the spectacle of numbers of my fellow-creatures in a state of agitation moves in me a certain weariness' (CY, p. 157), while Denis Burlap announces his desire to leave a party early in Point Counter Point thus: "'It's the crowd," he explained. "After a time, I get into a panic. I feel they're crushing my soul to death. I should begin to scream if I stayed," He took his leave.' (PCP, p. 82). Parties here seem to generate



exhaustion, panic, and a visceral urge to scream. They have become a coercive social ritual that threatens to 'crush the soul to death'.

A similar sense of the psychological dangers of enforced sociability can be found also in D. H. Lawrence's writings. For example, in The Rainbow (1915), Will Brangwen is represented as traumatised by the potential impact of social rituals on himself and his idea of marriage: 'She was going to give a tea party. It made him frightened and furious and miserable. He was afraid that all would be lost that he had so newly come into.'<sup>32</sup> The party for Lawrence as for Huxley has become a place where the alienation of the individual from the social is experienced most acutely, and the very fabric of the party is thus transformed into a kind of threat. Walter Bidlake captures this perception in the following passage from Point Counter Point:

A jungle of innumerable trees and dangling creepers – it was in this form that parties always presented themselves to Walter Bidlake's imagination. A jungle of noise; and he was lost in the jungle, he was trying to clear a path for himself through its tangled luxuriance.

... And all those voices (what were they saying? '... made an excellent speech...'; '... no idea how comfortable those rubber reducing belts are till you've tried them ...'; '... such a bore ...'; '... eloped with the chauffeur ...'), all those voices ... Oh, loud, stupid vulgar and fatuous.  
(PCP, pp. 65-6)

Lost, overwhelmed by quotations that are stupid and fatuous: Bidlake's imagining of this party coincides very precisely with Huxley's overall vision of modernity and its highly compromised pleasures.

The party in Huxley's novels provides, as we have seen, a privileged narrative space for the exploration of key aspects of modernity as perceived by him in the twenties and thirties. In this chapter I have analysed the fictional treatment within three novels of a series of social and aesthetic questions that are to some extent peculiar to Huxley, yet which also resonate with a much broader series of cultural engagements with the possibilities of pleasure in a modern world profoundly marked by the experience of the First World War. Huxley's parties are marked by the compulsion to repeat, as texts circulate and re-circulate through quotation and allusion, sexual energies encounter various forms of paralysis and obsessive return, and the repetitions and rituals that enable and constrain social relations achieve particularly visible and significant expression. Parties in this version of the modern world are both profoundly unsatisfactory and completely unavoidable, expressing as they do both the contradictions and the seductions of modernity. As Walter Bidlake, speaking for many of Huxley's characters, finally observes: 'There was a part of his mind that ... wanted him to give up the party and stay at home. But the other part was stronger' (PCE, p. 6).



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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Aldous Huxley, Point Counter Point (London: Vintage Books, 2004), p 62.
- <sup>2</sup> Aldous Huxley, 'Pleasures', in Robert S. Baker and James Sexton (eds.), Aldous Huxley: Complete Essays: Volume 1, 1920-1925 (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000), 354-357 (p. 355).
- <sup>3</sup> For interesting mappings of the current critical significance of 'Modernism', see Geoff Gilbert, Before Modernism Was (London, Palgrave, 2004) and Tim Armstrong, Modernism: A Cultural History (Cambridge: Polity press, 2005).
- <sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume XVIII (1920-1922), ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), pp. 7-64.
- <sup>5</sup> Nicholas Murray, Aldous Huxley: An English Intellectual (London: Abacus, 2003), p. 435.
- <sup>6</sup> Aldous Huxley, Letter to Ottoline Morrell, 21 June 1917, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas at Austin.
- <sup>7</sup> Aldous Huxley, Crome Yellow (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 134.
- <sup>8</sup> See Miranda Seymour, Ottoline Morrell: Life on the Grand Scale (London: Faber and Faber, 2008).

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- <sup>9</sup> For discussion of some of the discomfort generated by these echoes of contemporary voices, see Sean Latham, The Art of Scandal: Modernism, Libel Law and the Roman à Clef (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- <sup>10</sup> Leonard Diepeveen, Changing Voices: The Modern Quoting Poem (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. viii.
- <sup>11</sup> Edgell Rickword, 'A Fragmentary Poem', Times Literary Supplement, 20 September 1923.
- <sup>12</sup> Edmund Wilson Jr., 'The Poetry of Drouth', The Dial, 73 (Dec. 1922), 611-16 (p. 613).
- <sup>13</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in Frank Kermode (ed.), Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 37-44 (p. 38).
- <sup>14</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', in Kermode (ed.) Selected Prose, 59-67 (p. 65).
- <sup>15</sup> Hugh Kenner, 'Joyce's Ulysses: Homer and Hamlet', Essays in Criticism, vol. 2 (1952), 85-104 (p. 93).
- <sup>16</sup> William Peery, 'The Hamlet of Stephen Dedalus', The University of Texas Studies in English, vol. 31 (1952), 109-119 (p. 109).
- <sup>17</sup> Wikipedia does provide an account of the quotations from Shakespeare that can be found in Brave New World, which apparently number 45 ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_quotes\\_from\\_Shakespeare\\_in\\_Brave\\_New\\_World](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_quotes_from_Shakespeare_in_Brave_New_World)), accessed 15 July 2012.
- <sup>19</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Civilization and its Discontents', in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume XXI (1927-1931) ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), p. 75.

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- <sup>20</sup> Aldous Huxley, Brave New World (London: Vintage, 2007), p. 66.
- <sup>21</sup> Virginia Nicholson, Among the Bohemians: Experiments in Living 1900-1939 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003).
- <sup>22</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land' lines 235-38 in The Waste Land and other Poems (London: Faber and Faber, 2002).
- <sup>23</sup> Margaret Moran, 'Bertrand Russell as Scogan in Crome Yellow', Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature 12:3 (1984), 120-27.
- <sup>24</sup> Havelock Ellis published a series of influential studies of human sexuality between the 1890s and the 1930s.
- <sup>25</sup> See Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: An Introduction. Volume 1, first published 1976, translated by Robert Hurley (London: Vintage Books, 1990).
- <sup>26</sup> D. H. Lawrence, Fantasia of the Unconscious (New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1922), p. 284.
- <sup>27</sup> Aldous Huxley, Letters of Aldous Huxley, ed. Grover Smith (London: Chatto and Windus, 1969), p. 340.
- <sup>28</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"' in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 217-256 (p. 223).
- <sup>29</sup> Brenda Maddox, The Married Man: A Life of D. H. Lawrence (London: Sinclair Stevenson, 1994), p. 466.
- <sup>30</sup> Aldous Huxley, Letter to George Orwell, 21 October 1949, in Letters, ed. Grover Smith.

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<sup>31</sup> For an interesting theoretical account of the psychological impacts of Fordism, see Bernard Doray, From Taylorism to Fordism: A Rational Madness (London: Free Association Books, 1988).

<sup>32</sup> D. H. Lawrence, The Rainbow (London: Vintage Classics, 2011), p. 139.