

CANON AND CANONICITY IN HUXLEY'S *POINT COUNTER POINT*

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CONTRA CANONEM

“There have been times,” speculated the British writer John Wain in 1972 about the not-so-brave new world of Aldous Huxley's presumable future, “[...] when I wondered if he was going to disappear altogether” (qtd. in Watt 27). Half a lifetime later, one might all too easily turn the question around and ask where Wain himself has gone with the phenomenal reputation he once enjoyed. However, it would be both frivolous and beside the point here to belabor the reasons why Wain's epoch-making novel *Hurry on Down* (1953) was out of print for more than thirty years prior to its being recently reissued, as an anniversary homage of sorts, by a quaint little publisher specializing in fifties and sixties British literary memorabilia, and what, in general, has become of the writer-critic who could so dismissively speak of yesteryear's great. It would be of dubious taste and doubtful relevance to dwell on how John Wain, that forgotten hero of a forgotten culture war, has disappeared without a trace from the undergraduate reading lists of all major British, American, and continental universities. After all, if the longevity of a critic's reputation as a creative writer was the sole criterion of assessing the validity of his or her judgments, then a vast body of insightful observations would be wholly lost to posterity (who would in turn be obliged to take the worst critical fallacies of the opinionated great for gospel truth as has only too often been the case with all the embarrassingly misguided evaluations handed down in their time by D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, Vladimir Nabokov, and others of their stature). Worst of all for Huxley's tenaciously sympathetic readers, the senior Angry Young Man of old

may just have had a point to make in that flippantly irreverent observation of his about the future obscurity of the one he saw as standing for all his obnoxious elders.¹

This is not to say that Wain's dismissive attitude to Huxley has been fully borne out by what has in fact happened to Huxley's posthumous reputation. No, unlike his self-assured detractor, Huxley has not disappeared at all. The major documents of his prolific career as an intriguing novelist, an exciting essayist, a rather indifferent poet, and an even more questionable dramatist are all readily and universally available in recent editions brought out by some of the most highly regarded Anglo-American publishing houses,² who rightly count books bearing Huxley's name among their steadiest sellers. Also, even as the writer of *Brave New World*, *The Doors of Perception*, and *Island* retains a sizeable cult-following among successive generations of the Birkenstock-wearing youth, the more intellectually respectable attractions of the Huxley-phenomenon continue to generate a large body of very serious scholarly articles, dissertations, and monographic studies of considerable academic interest. Surveying my own, far from exhaustive, bibliography, I have found that no less than fifteen book-length works of scholarly exegesis have been devoted to Huxley's work in this less than decade-long new millennium alone. It is more than remarkable that all this is happening thirty years or more after Bernard Bergonzi gave full academic endorsement to Wain's impressionistic dismissal when declaring, in 1973, that "the writing of more books about Huxley [...] would be a work of supererogation" (qtd. in Ferns 5). Duly acknowledging Bergonzi's well-earned academic prestige, one may perhaps add, without risking charges of *ad hominem* argumentation, that the long list of contributors to the ever-growing corpus of Huxley-criticism includes such luminaries of international English studies as a David Bradshaw, a Chris Baldick, or a Harold Bloom.

In spite of the impressive quantity and occasionally very high quality of recent Huxley criticism, it would be unwise to conclude that a comfortable and indisputable niche in the modern English literary canon has now been secured for the Huxley oeuvre. It is not only the notoriously dubious place to which terms such as "modern," "English," "literature," and, above all, "canon" have been relegated in the now prevailing critical idiom that must recommend caution. Neither is it the formidable prestige of Huxley's earlier detractors—Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, André Gide, David Daiches, and Frank Kermode come to mind alongside those mentioned above—that shake whatever complacency the enthusiast might feel about the overwhelmingly favorable reception of Huxley's achievement. It seems just as superfluous to demonstrate the historical relativity of celebrity opinions as it would be futile to make yet another doomed attempt at resolving the involuted theoretical problems besetting the large issues of literariness, modernism, and canonicity. Rather than the imponderables of theory or the status of Huxley's noble enemies, it is his trustiest friends' predictable attitude that must

¹ The writing of this essay, a piece meant to be included in my "habilitation" dissertation, was greatly facilitated by research conducted as part of the umbrella project "Cultural Memory" supported by the Hungarian government's "OTKA" grant No. 71770 and coordinated by Professor Ágnes Péter. Special thanks are also due to my colleagues at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, and Miskolc University, North Hungary, for valuable suggestions made in various contexts, such as the Work in Progress Seminar sponsored by the Modern English and American Doctoral Programme of Eötvös Loránd University or the English Research Forum of Miskolc University run under the tutelage of Professor Péter Dávidházi and Dr. Attila Dósa, respectively.

² E.g., Faber and Faber, HarperCollins, Norton, Penguin, and Vintage.

give one pause: the defensive position that even the most self-confident of Huxley's apologists almost instinctively occupy.

The routine procedure followed by virtually all who find Huxley's work worthy of their best exegetical-evaluative efforts can be easily summarized. The strategy invariably involves the same opening gambit: a dutiful survey of such standard reservations made by Huxley's critical adversaries as those concerning his novels' "bloodless characters," "meager plot-lines," "excessive philosophizing," the writer's "half-hearted and derivative experimentation," his "wordiness," his "didacticism," etc. The evidence thus acknowledged of Huxley's not being a "congenital novelist" is then followed by the equally unavoidable exercise in challenging and disproving whatever adverse criticism is deemed *really* important. This is then followed by a gesture of conciliatory dialectics, whereby the validity of all that is perceived as irrelevant to the agenda of the Huxley apologist is graciously acknowledged. Needless to say, the move concluding such exercises in critical validation is that of demonstrating how Huxley's entire oeuvre or—more frequently—a period, work, or group of works within that oeuvre displays qualities that outshine whatever regrettable weaknesses the writer's overall achievement may be seen to suffer from. Here are some typical examples of pre-emptive criticism coupled with apologetic vindication: Huxley, as we are often told, is not a true, instinctive artist of the Lawrence-type but a superbly intelligent satirist (see Meckier, *Satire* throughout). Also, while Huxley's experiments do not measure up to those of Joyce, et al., the comprehensive vision of his later fiction more than compensates for the absence of technical sophistication (see Ferns). Furthermore, Huxley, while fully conversant with the Joyce–Eliot tradition, really belongs to an alternative, continental canon of modernism: the one represented by Hermann Hesse and, mainly, Thomas Mann (see Firchow, *Reluctant* throughout).³ Finally, some of his critics commend Huxley's thirties-style social responsibility (Bradshaw and Baker throughout), or his role as a forerunner of the sixties counter-culture (Ferns), all of them downplaying the importance of his perceived shortcomings as a "pure artist."

It could be objected here that the rhetorical pattern of most laudatory Huxley criticism outlined above does not look very different from strategies of vindicating the canonic status of practically *any* writer applied by virtually *any* critic. It is to be noted, though, that the difference is that with Huxley, the defensive maneuver—moves aimed at surveying, bracketing, and denying any unfavorable criticism—tends to consume far more intellectual energy than whatever critical resources are expended on any offensive operations in which Huxley's positive values are asserted. Put another way, Huxley's friends tend to concentrate on belittling the failures rather than upstaging the successes of their "hero."

With Huxley's coevals or older contemporaries occupying a firmer position in the modernist canon, the ratio of timorous defense and unreserved laudation is usually inverted. In standard histories of English literature published in the past thirty years or so, there is incomparably less space and critical acumen devoted to setting forth arguments refuting or relativizing possible charges of deeply entrenched class snobbery, blatant racial or sexual prejudice, supercilious cultural elitism, gratuitous obfuscation, or dubious originality than to demonstra-

³ No wonder that the late Péter Egri, who devoted much of his considerable talents as an academic critic to proving how Thomas Mann excelled James Joyce as the exemplary, because constructive, modernist, found Huxley worthy of an elaborate essay appended to a short-story collection in Hungarian (see Egri).

tions of the richly rewarding experience of repeated readerly exposure to texts by Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and the other hallowed names of the modernist pantheon. With Huxley, the approach is almost always the opposite. There is, however, at least one refreshing exception to this rule. What is probably the only dissenting note heard outside the club of Huxley experts is struck by Peter Conrad in the modernism chapter of his *Cassell's History of English Literature*. Although he cannot apparently afford *entirely* to dispense with the usual caveat that Huxley “seems more technically conventional than Joyce” (629), this maverick tutor of Christ Church College is able to muster up the courage to state, and then to demonstrate in ample detail, that the writer of *Point Counter Point* (1929) “was in fact much more of an imaginatively agnostic modern” than the one who authored *Finnegans Wake* (629).

It would fall outside the scope of this piece to examine the full implications of Peter Conrad’s “preposterous” claims about Aldous Huxley’s having actually gone farther, in the Harold Bloomian sense of the word, than Joyce himself. Forgoing the gesture of all comparative evaluation, I will rather concentrate on Huxley alone, borrowing in the meantime the unselfconscious strategies of assertion from Joyce’s (or Woolf’s, or Lawrence’s, or Eliot’s) scholarly critics to claim for *Point Counter Point* the canonic status that I am convinced its originality of quasi-musical composition and suggestive imagery deployed to convey a consistently fractured, and indeed surprisingly *postmodern*, worldview deserve. In other words, I will not go out of my way to counter gloating prophesies of literary doom made by John Wain and others, desperately to argue how Huxley should *not* be forgotten. Instead, I propose to offer additional evidence to support the contention that on account of *Point Counter Point* alone he deserves being remembered, or better still, being reread.

INTER CANONES

The first reading of *Point Counter Point* will convince the novice to Huxley’s work that the author’s critics had every reason to describe this particular novel of the English novelist as his “most experimental” (Woodcock 156), “most ambitious” (Baker 99; Meckier, *Satire* 80) and his “most important” (Firchow, *Satirist* 93) contribution to twentieth-century fiction. True, not even the least sophisticated of the novel’s readers today will find anything extraordinary about the jump-cut and montage techniques Huxley appropriated from the emerging idiom of his era’s fast-developing art of cinematography. The juxtaposition of contrary or parallel plotlines highlighted in the title will be no less familiar to compulsive viewers of television serials now routinely exploiting the quasi-musical technique referred to in the novel’s title.⁴

Also, those with somewhat more refined literary tastes will be only too fast to trace the novel’s vaunted fugue-like structures to the Sirens episode of Joyce’s *Ulysses* or to

⁴ It can be argued, as my colleague Marcell Gellért has graciously suggested to me, that Huxley and his fellow modernists themselves must have had more respectable sources of inspiration to turn to than the then lowly art of cinematography. King Lear or Hamlet could equally well have supplied the writer of *Point Counter Point* with patterns of quasi-musical juxtaposition resulting from the alternation of inter-illuminating parallel plotlines as anything he may have seen in the picture theaters.

André Gide's *Les faux-monnayeurs*, a novel whose self-conscious metafictionality can be—and has in fact been, with clockwork regularity—invoked as a possible inspiration for related phenomena observable in Huxley's somewhat later fiction. It would be tempting to contest the skepticism implied in the former type of observations by rehearsing theories of how once-revolutionary innovations of avant-garde art and literature have a tendency to descend, in time, into the lowly media of popular entertainment, commercial jingles, tabloid headlines, and soap operas. One could also observe how little this unavoidable process of commercial popularization can do to compromise the prestige of the exalted original.⁵ It is similarly hard to resist temptations of reviewing, and possibly adding to, evidence shored up by researchers of the Huxley oeuvre of how some alternative sources and indeed a process of slow evolutionary “autogenesis” constitute a much likelier hypothesis than theories of deliberate multiple borrowings from the most obvious formalist sources when it comes to explaining the presence of innovative modes of composition or self-reflexive discourses in *Point Counter Point*.⁶ But as such indulgence in comparative apologetics has been ruled out in the foregoing, I will now focus on the novel itself to find what it is to which the novel owes its status as a most remarkable piece within and outside the “Huxley canon.”

One look at the novel's title will reveal what is a commonplace of Huxley criticism, namely that the compositional technique of counterpoint in particular and the idea of music in general must be, in the words of Jerome Meckier, a major “structural principle and dominating metaphor” of *Point Counter Point* (*Satire* 24). The hint in the title is first substantiated by the emphatic presence of music in the second chapter, a grand opening preceded by the two-voice “overture” of chapter one. Having left, with Walter, a fugitive father-to-be bent on escaping what he has come to regard—to borrow Edmund's resounding words from *King Lear*—as the dull, stale, tired bed that he shares with his common-law wife Marjorie, the stifling atmosphere of the Bidlake-Carling ménage behind, we find ourselves in the midst of a glittering function of London's high society. The setting of chapter two, the novel's actual opening, is an imposing aristocratic residence in Pall Mall, where a private concert is hosted by the lord and lady of Tantamount House. To the fashionable guests gathered for the event, the masterly rendering of Bach's *Orchestral Suite in B Minor for Flute and Strings* serves as no more than yet another pretext to exchange the latest gossip while flaunting their spurious enthusiasm for the celebrated flutist Pongelioni's virtuoso performance. The narrator, however, exploits to the full the opportunity provided by the

⁵ A handy illustration could be Anthony Burgess's suggestion of how Gerard Manley Hopkins's idiosyncratic compounds crop up in cornflake advertisements, how echoes of Joycean word-play are heard in radio shows, and how the interior monologues of *Ulysses* have inspired the “think-tape” technique of television plays and documentaries (*Here Comes* 26). In connection with Huxley himself, P.E. Firchow notes how fictional simultaneity has, by now, “gained the honorable status of narrative cliché as the ‘meanwhile back at the ranch’ trope” (*Reluctant* 180).

⁶ J. Meckier relates the technique of counterpoint to Lawrence's *Women in Love*, which he finds to be a much more important inspiration behind the original “musicalisation” of *Point Counter Point* than anything Huxley may have learnt from André Gide (*Satire* 81, 88, 141). Firchow finds rudimentary forms of counterpoint appearing as early as in *Crome Yellow* (1921) and *Those Barren Leaves* (1925), the first predating *Ulysses* (1922) and the second appearing in the same year as Gide's *Les faux-monnayeurs* (see Firchow, *Satirist* 96).

musical party to weave some of the novel's central themes into the fabric of the participants' conversations and his own reflections. The conceptual motifs thus orchestrated here include the contrapuntal relationship of high art to daily life, pure science to power politics, character to destiny, love to aging, and aging to death, to mention but the most salient themes thus introduced. All these oppositions can then be summed up in the episode's resounding metaphors which contrast the amateur biologist Edward Tantamount's vision of the "universal concert of things" with the terrifying recognition suggested in the narration that the harmony underlying the "the human fugue [of] eighteen hundred million parts" may never be audible to terrestrial ears (*Point* 23; ch. 2).

Musicality in one form or another remains a commanding presence throughout the entire novel. Now it functions as an auditory reinforcement, now as a contrast to the major developments of the narrative and the ideas that the meager story carries as a subordinate vehicle. Further, music serves as the source of trans-medial inspiration for various art forms—mainly that of the novel—its notes finally to be sounded in an attempt to facilitate some of the characters' doomed efforts to communicate the incommunicable. That is, for example, how music—or classical music, to be more precise—becomes the main object of intellectual hypocrisy for the aristocratic and patrician philistines displaying themselves at the concert, as Walter's skeptical old father John Bidlake remarks with unsparing perspicuity. That, too, is how chords of the B-minor suite overheard by Lord Edward in his laboratory reverberate, as noted above, in the mind of the old dilettante with echoes of a Claude Bernardian, and possibly Pythagorean, if not Drydenian, music of the spheres that the starry-eyed scientist-manqué believes to harmonize "the total life of the universe." In a more overtly religious interpretation than whatever the old vivisectionist's pseudo-Darwinian transcendentalism would allow for, the idea of celestial music is desperately embraced as the tangible proof of a caring God's existence and, by implication, the promise of at least a meaningful damnation by Maurice Spandrell. This Baudelairean Satanist's conception of music's supernatural powers is wholly unacceptable to the earthy vitalism embodied in the character of the novel's other centrally positioned writer-figure, Mark Rampion. For the outspoken novelist-painter, whose character is obviously based on Huxley's friend D.H. Lawrence, the *Heilige Dankgesang* movement of Beethoven's celebrated *String Quartet No. 15 in A Minor* is just a symptom of a sickly, bodiless spirituality, in fact, "a hymn in praise of eunuchism" (*Point* 435; ch. 37).

Contrary to what may be suggested, among other key episodes, by the scene involving Rampion and the ill-fated Spandrell (the thought-tormented villain commits virtual suicide to the accompaniment of his favorite piece by Beethoven), it is not only the knaves and the fools of the novel who find in music a serviceable correlative to what they hold dearest. Music, or musical composition, turns out to be the last resort for the "non-congenital" novelist who, like Philip Quarles in *Point Counter Point* or the real-life model of this most transparently autobiographical character, finds himself lacking in every essential skill—that of telling a compulsive story or of drawing plausible, flesh-and-blood characters—making a born story-teller of the Dickens–Tolstoy category. As Philip sums up the compensatory formula of fictional musicalisation in his diary for later—or, as is the case with the novel he himself appears in, for earlier—use, the solution lies in abrupt transitions from one mood to another, in the frequent modulations of style, and in the statement and then the development through repetition and variation of theme, all transposed, as it were,

from sheet music to printed page. The self-revelatory passages in the novel's oft-cited twenty-second chapter describing the techniques and potentials of fiction thus musicalised are there, among other things, to alert us to the possibility that where we believe to have seen characters involved in the action of the story, we have in fact witnessed the modulation of various literary keys.

Such modulations, as we are to conclude from Philip's account, can perhaps be best observed in the "reduplication" of writer-figures. The novel's three otherwise very different men-of-letters all fail in their efforts to bridge the gap separating the life each is given to live from the artistic-philosophical credo he proclaims. A glaring example illustrating the discrepancy between words and deeds is the case of the holier-than-thou biographer of saints, Denis Burlap, a middle-aged bachelor whose favorite pursuit seems to be the corruption of virgins past their prime, one of whom he even drives into suicide. Meanwhile, the cold, overly intellectual, and rather shy Philip Quarles gives hardly more than ineffectual lip service to the ideal of the full, all-round personality of the "complete man" who should, *pace* D.H. Lawrence, do what he will. Even this most winsome of the three, the emphatically Lawrentian Mark Rampion, comes through as quite a bit of a "gas bag" with his unceasing harangues about one's obligations to the sacredness of one's innermost self of savage blood-instincts in the comfortable security of his cozy local club.

Another instance of Huxley implementing Philip Quarles's formula of quasi-musical modulation and variation "by reduplicating situations and characters" is when different characters of the novel representing a wide variety of types appear in identical or very similar episodes (*Point* 296; ch 23). For example, the theme of seduction associated with the figure of Burlap reappears in situations centering on the sanctimonious hagiographer's openly misogynous counterpart Spandrell, who engineers his sordid affairs to cause as much psychological damage as he possibly can. In like manner, the motif of carefully planned-out but eventually frustrated attempts at adultery is given the repetition-with-a-difference treatment of musical variation in parallel, and largely simultaneous, episodes involving the younger Quarleses—Philip and Elinor. Wife and husband both go well beyond merely playing with the idea of cheating on the other as they each take deliberate, if eventually ineffectual, steps to start an illicit affair. One of the couple, Philip, goes out to a party where he deploys all his wits and charms to win, in vain as it turns out, the favors of the physically most arousing but temperamentally ice-cold socialite Molly d'Exergillod. Meanwhile, the other Quarles, Elinor, meets her admirer Everard Webley and encourages, in an apparently coquettish but in reality rather half-hearted manner, the approaches of the proto-fascist leader modeled on the notorious Sir Oswald Mosley. While in each case it is the woman—Molly in the one, Elinor in the other—whose reluctance finally thwarts the ardent suitor's advances, the two members of the same couple appear in dissimilar parts in their amorous encounters: whereas Philip plays the part of active initiator, Elinor assumes the role of the passive agent in their respective affairs.

Of the two frustrated attempts, it is Elinor's involvement in a failed extramarital relationship that deserves more attention here. The bloodcurdling conclusion to the Webley-affair presents the reader with what is possibly the most remarkable literary equivalent of musical repetition that the novel has in store. What can be witnessed here is the inverted imitation of one melodic line or, as is the case in an experimental novel like *Point Counter Point*, one line of action or train of thought, by another. Exasperated with her husband's

utter emotional frigidity, Elinor eventually gives in to the chief British Freeman's entreaties, and acquiesces in the idea of a secret appointment, this time in her own, temporarily vacated, house. It is here that things take a horrid turn. As Elinor must hurriedly leave London to take her maternal place on the side of little Phil, who has fallen suddenly and very seriously ill, her unsuspecting beau is not only disappointed in his ardent expectations but falls into a trap set by two secret plotters against his life, Illidge and this embittered working-class scientist's sadistic-anarchistic abettor Spandrell. The coolly objective scientific terminology employed in the paragraph setting forth a detailed discussion of how the murdered leader's body will gradually decompose into its basic chemical constituents provides a distant but clearly recognizable echo to an earlier description of a strikingly similar nature in the novel. The overview of the successive phases in the pregnancy of the unhappy Marjorie Carling in chapter one relies on a very similar dehumanizing juxtaposition of a strictly bio-chemical approach with the worldview and diction of poetry and philosophy, as the contrast employed in the passage concluding the episode of Webley's rendezvous with death demonstrates. The two descriptions are worth quoting one after the other at some length on account of their combined (dis)harmonic effect. Here is the description of Marjorie and her future baby:

She looked ugly, tired and ill. Six months from now her baby would be born. Something that had been a single cell, a cluster of cells, a little sac of tissue, a kind of worm, a potential fish with gills, stirred in her womb and would one day become a man—a grown man, suffering and enjoying, loving and hating, thinking, remembering, imagining. And what had been a blob of jelly within her body would invent a god and worship; what had been a kind of fish would create and, having created, would become the battle-ground of disputing good and evil; what had blindly lived in her as a parasitic worm would look at the stars, would listen to music, would read poetry. A thing would grow into a person, a tiny lump of stuff would become a human body, a human mind. (*Point 2*; ch. 1)

And here, in an inversion of the original "voice" sounded with the not inconsiderable delay of thirty-two chapters, is what was once Everard Webley:

Behind the screen lay the body. [...] The hive was dead. But in the lingering warmth many of the component individuals still faintly lived; soon they also would have perished. And meanwhile, from the air, the invisible hosts of saprophytics had already begun their unresisted invasion. They would live among the dead cells, they would grow, and prodigiously multiply and in their growing and procreation all the chemical building of the body would be undone, all the intricacies and complications of its matter would be resolved, till by the time their work was finished a few pounds of carbon, a few quarts of water, some lime, a little phosphorus and sulphur, a pinch of iron and silicon, a handful of mixed salts—all scattered and recombined with the surrounding worlds would be all that remained of Everard Webley's ambition to rule and his love for Elinor, of his thoughts

about politics and his recollections of childhood, of his fencing and good horsemanship, [...] his incapacity to whistle a tune correctly, his unshakeable determinations and his knowledge of Russian. (*Point* 392-3; ch. 33)

It is of passing interest only that music plays very different parts in Webley's freshly concluded past and in Bidlake junior's as yet distant future, that in one, music is of less than marginal, in the other of central importance. Much more remarkable than that is the formal relationship that holds between our two bio-spiritual descriptions. When the two are set side by side as is done above, or even better, superimposed on one another as they may well be in the memory of the attentive reader, then something truly curious will take shape. What is little more than a palindrome-like repetition at first sight will come to look—or sound—like that favorite of mathematically minded music lovers: the first of the ten canons in *Musikalisches Opfer*, Bach's collection of sophisticated contrapuntal compositions elaborating, "in strict canon," on a simple musical theme provided by his son Carl Philip's patron, King Frederick II of Prussia.⁷ Yes, the result of the arrangement of the related quotations printed above is clearly reminiscent of the same melodic line played backward and forward simultaneously in what is known, since at least the *Musical Offering* as the *retrograde canon*.⁸

It could be objected to the idea of the trans-medial isomorphism suggested here that while Bach's *canon cancrizans* plays the king's theme backward and forward simultaneously, the inversion of the imperial theme of life and death in the Webley-episode follows its first sounding in the Marjory's-baby episode by several hundred pages. And yet, the suggested superimposition of the two may not be entirely gratuitous. The structural and metaphoric function of Bach's music in the novel—the B-minor suite in particular—has already been noted. Of more interest in this respect is the fact that *Point Counter Point* contains at least one instance of a clearly canon-like treatment of parallel "melody-lines" woven around the same theme. This instance is constituted in the sequence of events leading up to the point where Elinor is obliged to cancel, without warning, her appointment with Webley. What happens at the house in her native Gattenden is something that comes very close indeed to the second simplest form of imitative counterpoint in music, i.e., the canon. Here, as in the musical genre offering the closest analogy, two identical voices starting at different times and possibly each at a different pitch arrive at a clear ending after

⁷ An early account of how J.S. Bach accomplished, at the prompting and with the help of Frederick the Great, this feat of virtuoso composition is given by Nikolaus Forkel, the musician's first biographer (qtd. in Boyd 240). The anecdote is placed in a far broader context by D.R. Hofstadter. The phenomenally influential postmodern polymath uses *The Musical Offering* as a central metaphor to illustrate what he means by a "strange loop," the connecting link between the arts, higher mathematics and artificial intelligence, and even provides a literary analogy of the crab canon in a Lewis Carroll-style dialogue that is set out first forward and then backward making perfectly good sense either way. Huxley would have found it fascinating (see Hofstadter 199-203).

⁸ I thank Teodóra Wiesenmayer for the idea, among some other very sensible practical suggestions, that my insistence on the importance of the retrograde canon in *Point Counter Point* should be related to the work of J.S. Bach.

creating surprising harmonic twists in the composition.⁹ This effect of the musical canon is created in *Point Counter Point* by the drastic changes occurring in the medical condition of both Elinor's ailing father and her diseased son. The phases of excitement, depression, intolerable pain, unexpected improvement, and inevitable expiry in the unstoppable course that little Phil's meningitis takes are replicated with the mad consistence of a pathetically fallacious fate in the progression of his grandfather's terminal illness—the cancer of the intestine that is to end the life of Bidlake senior. Starting successively, the soprano melody of little Phil's meningitis and the counter-melody of Old Bidlake's cancer in bass-baritone achieve their mutual resolution in the simultaneous deaths of grandson and grandfather.

The nature, and more importantly the name, of Bidlake's illness cannot be easily overlooked when it comes to the issue of Huxley's peculiar brand of canon-style composition. The fact that the old painter suffers from an illness, progressive even in its temporary regression, whose name is of the same derivation as that of the medieval Latin term used to designate Bach's—and as I believe Huxley's—canon is in itself an indication that there may in fact be some underlying analogy between one character's fatal disease and the structural relationship between the lives and deaths of another two. The etymology binding *cancer* to *cancrizans* points to the same sideways or, as the popular misconception has it, backward crawling crustacean equipped with large and powerful claws with which it grabs its prey that lent its name to the crabwise-moving retrograde canon, also known as crab canon, on the one hand and the vaguely crab-shaped tumor, or cancer, retaining its malignant hold on its host to the end, on the other. No wonder that James Joyce, modern literature's *il miglior fabbro* in musical experimentation, uses the quaint coinage “bellycrab” in a reference to the cancer of the intestine in *Ulysses* (316.102; ch. 14).¹⁰ If the Joycean association based on the shared etymology interconnecting the various episodes brought together above appears to be fanciful, then there is yet another curious coincidence—if coincidence it is—to consider. John Bidlake's bitter realization that “the one thing fresh and active in his old body, the one thing exuberantly and increasingly alive was death” springs from a disturbing metaphor which is also related to cancer (*Point* 313; ch. 24). The image forcing itself upon Bidlake's tortured consciousness establishes yet another link, identical in its tenor to that of the Marjorie's-baby and Webley's-body sections, between living and dying. The ailing artist cannot help thinking of his mortal disease as “death in the form of a new life growing and growing in his belly, like an embryo in a womb” (*Point* 313).

Although cancer is far from being the only cause of death, decay, and decomposition in the novel, *tumor cancrizans*, to use an apt-looking pseudo-Latinism here, is certainly one of the governing metaphors in *Point Counter Point*. A vaguely proleptic episode occurring in chapter eleven has Walter Bidlake receive a letter from his daughter with a remark in it reminding the old painter of his long-dead son buried in California. As it will be remembered, the unnamed Bidlake offspring died of the disease that is, unbeknownst to

⁹ This rudimentary description of the musical canon relies on a definition in *The NPR Curious Listener's Guide to Classical Music*, an accessible introduction to the topic for the layperson (Smith 54).

¹⁰ See the interpretation offered for bellycrab by Gifford (411). Whether Joyce coined the term on the analogy of Old English kenning or the curious compound is another indication of the depth to which Joyce was indebted to the language once spoken by Leopold Bloom's ancestors—the Hungarian word *rák* refers both to the clawed crustacean and the disease—is an issue I will leave to the Joycean expert to decide.

his father at the time the melancholy recollection occurs to him, eventually to be the eldest Bidlake's own end. Another passage even closer to the novel's beginning, in that most important second chapter, presents the amateur vivisectionist Lord Edward speculating on the mysterious principles of creation. That aging, latter-day parody of Frankenstein assumes the inscrutable laws of nature to be underlying the fundamental difference between the orderly, in a sense music-like, self-reproduction of a healthy living organism—that of a newt as the case happens to be—and the haphazard proliferation of cancerous cells.

Music appears in conjunction with mortal disease for the last, most memorable, occasion when Rampion uses the image of the deadly tumor as the vehicle of a viciously forceful simile. In the very last chapter, the Lawrentian guru of Philip Quarles compares the effect of the abstract spirituality he believes to “emasculate” Beethoven's *Heilige Dankgesang*, and in general to devour the *élan vital* of the natural human instincts, to a malignant growth. “This damned soul,” he bursts out, “this damned abstract soul—it's like a kind of cancer, eating up the real, human, natural reality, spreading and spreading at its expense” (*Point* 435; ch. 37; emphasis added). Considering the frequent recurrence of the cancer-metaphor as an emblem of biological, psychological, and social dissolution or even of cosmic entropy in the Huxley-canon, from *Point Counter Point* on through *Eyeless in Gaza* and, most emphatically, *Island*, one might even extend the musical analogy to include the overarching use of *leitmotif* in the Wagnerian sense of the word.¹¹

PER CANONEM

There is a great difference between the use of the *leitmotif* in the works of the German Romantic composer and those of the modern English novelist, needless to say. It is not only the farfetched analogy between Huxley and Wagner that may rightly seem doubtful—one should not press a point too hard—but, above all, the equally tenuous parallel between *Point Counter Point* and the other, especially the later, novels by Huxley. Although there certainly *are* some very important motifs recurring throughout Huxley's long career as a novelist, the four decades separating his earliest from his last novels would be too long a period for any unqualified consistency to persist even in the work of a far less versatile and agile mind than his. Whether the changes occurred gradually or cataclysmically (is it Darwinian evolution or Thomas Khun's revolution?), whether the career can be broken down into two, three, four, or more self-contained phases (each model has its scholarly proponent), whether there is a discernible pattern (a dominantly ascending or descending trajectory, say) or a haphazard movement dissipating its momentum in all possible directions (the most attractive proposition for the uncompromising poststructuralist) is another matter. What to me appears most clearly discernible is a general darkening of mood as one

¹¹ A closer, if not in any obvious sense musical, analogy could be found in the parallel use of the cancer metaphor in H.G. Wells's *Tono-Bungay*, a novel Huxley is documented to have read (see Meckier, *Modern Satirical* 353 n6). The “suppurating” oil deposits that attract the cancerously growing profit-hungry capital investment to the utopian republic of Pala in Huxley's *Island* reminds Meckier of “quap,” that fast-spreading “cancerous [...] disease of matter” found on Mordet Island in Wells's novel (see Meckier, *Modern Satirical* 298). I thank Professor Aladár Sarbu for calling my attention to the Wells connection here.

proceeds from the light-hearted mockery of the earlier social comedies—informing *Crome Yellow* (1921) and *Antic Hay* (1923) but also felt in *Barren Leaves* (1925)—which declines into the more savage satires in Huxley’s dystopian masterpiece, *Brave New World* (1932), and to an almost heroic desperation regarding the social, if not indeed the human, condition expressed with the jarring tonalities of *Point Counter Point*.

How the metaphysical impasse reached by Huxley with this mid-career novel of his may or may not have been transcended with the equally exciting but conceptually much more focused experimentation of *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936) or with the somewhat less inspiring mysticism and downright didacticism of the later novels is a question that I must leave unanswered here. What is certain is that the disappointed contemporary critics of *Point Counter Point*—with Huxley’s most desperately sympathetic readers among them—had some very good reasons to be upset. That Huxley’s wife was ravaged by the unmitigated pathos of little Phil’s death can be attributed to some very personal reasons. Maria Huxley had every right to feel outraged as a mother of a sickly child whose somewhat altered portrayal and vicarious killing in the novel was later described by Arnold Kettle as an instance of pathological masochism on the part of the novelist (see Murray 204; Kettle 168). The anxiety to which D.H. Lawrence gave voice in a letter to the writer of *Point Counter Point* was of an altogether different origin. Although Lawrence later vented his anger at the Rampion-portrait with his sardonic poem “I am in a Novel,” his very strong reservations voiced in the letter were motivated by much more than the offended vanity of one misrepresented in a *roman à clef*. Having struggled through all the gratuitous suffering, the violent or ethically inexplicable deaths, and the universal pointlessness represented in the novel, Lawrence could not help asking the vexing question: “*caro*, how are we going to live through the day?” (letter to Huxley qtd. in Watt 172)

Virginia Woolf may have overstated the case somewhat when concluding, in a diary entry on her responses to Huxley’s then latest work, that ideas will *never* coalesce in a novel, but she certainly got it right with respect to *Point Counter Point*. For all the clever counterpoint, the ingenious modulation and variation in local compositions played off in every direction, there does not emerge anything like the “sweet harmony” of the heavens memorably described by Lorenzo in *The Merchant of Venice* (see Shakespeare 250; V.i.57, 64-5). In Huxley’s musicalised novel of ideas, one will not even find the “music of ideas” heard by I.A. Richards in T.S. Eliot’s philosophical poetry (Richards qtd. in Russo 274). What we have in place of heterogeneous concepts combining, as they are supposed to do in the exemplary Eliot poem, into Richards’s “coherent whole of feeling and attitude” is the cacophony of somewhat mismatched voices in a fragmented crab canon. Here is how Miklós Kállay, a Hungarian contemporary of Richards’s and Huxley’s, sums up what in fact happens in the novel: “The various philosophical ideas, ethical precepts, political and social credos start off and progress, now chasing each other as though in a canon, now embracing in syncopated patterns, then again breaking up or confusing one another, precisely in the manner of contrapuntal melodies in a musical composition”(55).¹² And yet, we

¹² Mint az ellenpontozott melódiák a modern zenében, úgy indulnak és haladnak itt, hol kánonszerűen egymást kergetve, hol szinkopáson ölelkezve, hol egymást rontva és egymást kuszálva a különböző eszmeáramlatok, erkölcsi meggyőződések, ideológiák, politikai és társadalmi hitvallások. (The author’s translation.)

should not regret if eventually no harmony prevails, if the fugue, referred to in chapter two, of “eighteen hundred million parts”—above six thousand million by now—remains inaudible to the ears of those playing it. This should not prevent *Point Counter Point* from occupying, or if occupied retaining, its place in the literary canon of our post-humanist era—despite all the gloomy prophecies made by John Wain and other literary doomsayers. To the condition of celestial music it may vainly aspire, Huxley's musicalised fiction can still stir us *per canonem*.

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