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CANCER IN UTOPIA: POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ELEMENTS IN HUXLEY'S *ISLAND*

For years Aldous Huxley regarded utopians with disfavor. Their countries of the mind were compensatory dreams inspired by acute disappointment with reality. "My own feeling, whenever I see a book about the Future," Huxley wrote in *Do What You Will*, "is one of boredom and exasperation. What on earth is the point of troubling one's head with speculations about what men may, but almost certainly will not, be like in A.D. 20,000?" Despite the disclaimer, Huxley could not resist troubling his head about the future. The struggle between utopian and dystopian elements in his prophecies about the world to come remained a pervasive counterpoint in his thought and art. When *Island* appeared in 1962, Huxley's version of the earthly paradise received harsh treatment from readers whom *Brave New World* and *Ape and Essence* had taught to be sceptical of perfectibilitarians. Yet *Island* was not just another pious daydream. I have argued previously¹ that the novel embodies a collection of the right responses to problems that the brave new world handled badly. But there is even more to the novel than that. Unlike *News from Nowhere*, *Looking Backward*, and other positive views of the future, *Island* can be defended as a reasonably complex novel in which a would-be utopian's attempt at optimism is challenged by the possibility that his characters inhabit a Manichean universe. If evil exists even in the earthly paradise, then utopia as one customarily imagines it is an impossibility, unless one can redefine one's conception of perfection so as to include the negative factors that appear to compromise it. Unlike most utopians, Huxley tries to confront several inescapably negative factors in his perfect society, and these ultimately convince him that utopia is not of this world. Within the temporal order, the prevailing social myth will always be that of

paradise lost, of the perfect society somehow gone to ruin, although the individual can recover the paradise within, which Huxley defines as the reconciliation of the good and evil within the self. I do not wish to discredit the novel's many positive aspects. However, these have been the exclusive focus of all the discussions of the novel to date, while Huxley's insistence that the novel is really about "the precariousness of happiness, the perilous position of any Utopian island in the context of the modern world"² has been consistently ignored. One cannot overlook the presence and power of evil in Huxley's last complete novel, nor can one eliminate the author's suspicion that no temporal society can overcome them forever. Although *Island* is Huxley's conception of a model society, it also serves as the testing ground for some final questions: is utopia really possible? Will the rest of the world tolerate an ideal society, or is the nature of man and the universe too contaminated to leave such perfection alone?

Two misleading assertions generally accompany any discussion of Huxley's utopia. One is that *Island* is not a novel at all but an extended essay for which Huxley devised only the thinnest of plots. More so than in any other Huxley novel, the plot in *Island* is supposedly the simple vehicle for the novelist's thoughts. The other insists that *Island* is both synthesis and palinode. As synthesis it allegedly resolves the philosophical dualisms—real versus ideal, religion versus science, body against mind—that pervade Huxley's previous fiction. By dissolving the opposing elements heretofore at the heart of the ironist's vision, the novel deprives the ironist of his irony. Huxley's triumph as thinker and synthesizer, this argument implies, thus meant defeat for Huxley the creative artist. *Island* achieves philosophical significance at the cost of aesthetic value. As palinode the novel reportedly abandons Huxley's customary scepticism in favor of optimistic prophecy, thus making utopian speculation feasible once more.³

Read more imaginatively, *Island* emerges as a moderately sophisticated exercise in counterpoint, less successful than the technical experiments in *Point Counter Point* and *Eyeless in Gaza* but never as dull or as 'talky' as some have claimed. While the reader is introduced to Pala, forces within and without the island conspire to cause its downfall. Pala collapses at the very moment when both the reader and Will Farnaby, Huxley's protagonist, have sufficient information to appreciate its value. This gives the novel its poignant irony, for the

better the reader understands Pala, the closer it moves to destruction. The growth of the reader's comprehension and the acceleration toward dissolution become the novel's contrapuntal melodies. Worst of all, the prevalence of cancer in Huxley's utopia precludes optimism. Literal instances of this disease contribute to Huxley's metaphoric sense of a cancerous temporal world and of Pala as an ideal society insufficiently antiseptic. The history of Pala begins and ends with an emphasis on cancer. The first Dr. MacPhail miraculously removes the old Rajah's tumor in the 1840's. Slightly over one hundred years later, Will Farnaby's arrival helps to spread an infection already present in the island's future Rajah and its pro-oil minority. Far from being a dull moral tract or a one-sided hymn to the future, *Island* is a relatively suspenseful novel that grants the possibility of individual salvation while growing increasingly sceptical about the world's desire for a perfect society.

"I don't yet have a very satisfactory story line to support the necessary exposition," Huxley complained while writing the novel. For the novelist of ideas, this was not a new problem. Huxley always acknowledged "the difficulty, the all but impossibility, of combining ideas with narrative."⁴ The need to make the novel do more than tell a story—a need he often discussed much too apologetically—set Huxley off from the so-called congenital novelist who seldom raised the fundamental questions about man's Final End and the purpose of life. *Island* is not merely a series of fascinating ideas held together by the minimum of plot. Huxley devised a story that would accentuate the novel's moral implications. *Island* actually has two plots. In the *expository plot*, Huxley gradually introduces Will Farnaby and the reader to the Palanese way of life. This is the only type of plot in most utopias. In the *action plot*, a cynical Farnaby conspires with a series of grotesques to ruin Pala. The conquest of Pala in the concluding pages by its militaristic neighbor, Rendang, is no after-thought, no sudden attack of pessimism. Plans for Pala's destruction begin almost simultaneously with the account of its merits. If this account occupies too much of the novel, its presence should not eclipse the book's less sanguine elements. By learning to admire Pala while contributing to its destruction, Will reveals himself as a true Manichean. The Manichean and the contrapuntalist both share a frame of mind that sees life in terms of opposites. To some extent the Huxley who builds a perfect

society only to disband it comes dangerously close to a Manichean world view in which there is a negative reaction to every positive force.

The conspirators Will works with—Murugan (a typical Huxley adolescent and Pala's future Rajah), the Rani (his sham-spiritualist mother), and Bahu (a Voltairean who is the representative of Colonel Dipa and Rendang)—desire to incorporate Pala with its militaristic neighbor in order to Westernize (i.e. industrialize) the island. Pala's untapped reservoir of oil makes this enterprise potentially profitable. Farnaby hopes to obtain the oil concessions for his boss, Joe Aldehyde, a newspaperman who also controls Southeast Petroleum. Realizing that such concessions would make it vulnerable to Western influence, Pala has observed a policy of not granting them. Farnaby's task is to locate (or create) a pro-oil minority on the island. Will is washed ashore at the start of the novel when his sailboat overturns off the coast, a providential accident for him, since Pala, the forbidden island, rarely admits visitors. As a journalist for one of Aldehyde's papers, Will is attending a conference of politicians, scientists, and trade missions in near-by Rendang when he has his timely accident. Once he has learned about the island, Farnaby experiences a conversion. Spiritual awareness and an acceptance of life's horrors gradually replace his cynicism and hatred of self. Before Pala, Will's attitudes are similar to the early Huxley's. During his sojourn on the island, he begins to resemble the Huxley of the later novels and essays. He refuses to join the conspirators at the crucial moment when Colonel Dipa's tanks commence their invasion. Nevertheless, by helping to ruin Pala, he provides one of the novel's major ironies: he is spiritually cured, yet partly due to him Pala succumbs. Farnaby can be seen as a diseased cell which the body of the Palanese state neutralizes too late. By then some of its other cells have been seriously infected, for Will gives Murugan and the Rani badly needed assurances of Western financial backing. Farnaby becomes a sort of perverse Everyman who unwittingly illustrates what Huxley considers a depressingly cyclical historical process: man is able to recognize and love the good only after he has helped to destroy it. The two overlapping plots—Will as a student in utopia and Will as a conspirator—emphasize the Manichean nature of man, his ability to know the best and choose the worst.

Most utopias bog down under the weight of "the necessary exposition", the extensive Baedeker the author must supply so that the

reader comprehends the *modus vivendi* of the ideal society. Utopias almost invariably become essays about the future. In Morris' *News from Nowhere*, the action stops permanently once the Guest encounters Hammond. From then on the old man explains the life style of an arts-and-crafts society in the twenty-first century. More's eponymous *Utopia* is really a lengthy lecture by Raphael Hythloday. *Island* never quite bogs down in this way. After falling while scaling a cliff, Will regains consciousness to the sound of mynah birds crying "Attention", just as Shakespeare's Ferdinand, washed up on a different isle, followed Ariel's music. Once rescued, Will is promptly put to bed by Dr. MacPhail and his daughter-in-law Susila, the Prospero and Miranda of Huxley's island. Farnaby's illness is not entirely the result of his minor accident. It also stems from his Western upbringing, his marital misfortunes, his love of money and hatred of self, and his morbid journalistic career, during which he has been, ominously, one of the "special correspondents on the trail of death", a lifelong witness to the essential horrors of existence. At this point exposition begins. Will learns about Pala through a series of lecture-conversations with, among others, Dr. MacPhail, Susila, Ranga, and Nurse Apu. He reads *Notes on What's What* by the old Rajah, Pala's founder, just as Winston Smith digests Goldstein's book in *1984* to learn more about the Party. Later, still limping, Will visits a typical Palanese family, tours a school, and witnesses an impressive initiation ceremony. By these expedients Huxley manages to include his ideas about the educational methods a perfect society might employ and the ideal family structure. He comments on the societal use of drugs, such as the *moksha* medicine (the truth-and-beauty pill), which opens the minds of the young to life's higher mysteries. But exposition in *Island*, extensive though it is, is more dramatic than the essay-like lectures in previous utopias because Huxley's exposition is Will's therapy. Pala tries to cure Will of the infection he represents, an infection compounded of cynicism and Western materialism. The lectures in the novel are tied to Will's lengthy convalescence, on which the safety of Pala also depends. Just as the Party in *1984* must ironically 'cure' Winston to preserve its integrity, the Palanese must genuinely heal Farnaby if their society is to convince the reader of its merit.

Unfortunately, Will's visitors also include Murugan, Bahu, and the Rani. Before his cure has seriously begun, he agrees to serve as their

go-between with the wealthy Joe Aldehyde. From Will's talks with Dr. MacPhail, Susila, and others, the reader learns about Pala's unique synthesis of Western technology and Eastern spirituality, about *maithuna* or the yoga of love, Mutual Adoption Clubs, and AI or artificial insemination. From Bahu, Murugan, and the Rani, one learns what will happen to Pala if it falls to Colonel Dipa: it will hasten toward the traditional and insane concept of a great society founded on oil, technology, and a powerful standing army. The struggle is simultaneously for Will's soul and for Pala's. As in all of Huxley's previous fiction, different attitudes come into conflict: Dr. MacPhail's practical utopianism jars against Bahu's total cynicism, Nurse Apu's healthy sexuality contrasts with Murugan's perversity, and the Rani's pursuit of the bogus Koot Hoomi is undercut by Susila's genuine spirituality. The reader witnesses a series of debates, a contest between heaven and hell. The forces of MacPhail (Prospero) combat the Rani and Bahu, cohorts of Colonel Dipa (or Caliban). By securing the oil concessions, Will can earn a year of freedom with pay, during which he can return to writing serious literature. If he responds to Pala's therapy, he may attain the spiritual freedom reserved for the enlightened. *Island* is thus as dualistic as Huxley's earlier fiction, for Will is exposed to the conflicting demands of East and West, Pala and Joe Aldehyde, heaven and hell. Although the Palanese are mentally and physically sound, living proof of the hypothetical validity of Huxley's formula for utopia, Will must choose between cynicism and belief, sickness and health.

Throughout the novel Huxley assembles what he considers the components for a model society. He fashions into a synthetic whole his favorite ideas from his own reading and writing of the past twenty-five years. *Ends and Means*, *The Olive Tree*, and *The Perennial Philosophy*, to name only three, contained suggestions for many of the positive elements found in *Island*. Oriental mysticism, Sheldonian classifications of individuals by temperament and physique, genuinely progressive education, decentralization of government, and *coitus reservatus* as a means of birth control—these and many other ideas become parts of the master plan for the perfect society. Throughout it all, Huxley remains a curious utopian who undermines as he builds. In addition to such grotesques as the Rani and Colonel Dipa, who are as reprehensible as any character from Huxley's earlier, more cynical fiction, there is the presence of cancer, a negative element no amount of social planning or

mystical enlightenment can eradicate. That this disease survives in utopia raises the possibility that contamination may be inherent in the nature of temporal things. If so, utopian perfection is an illusion, even if individuals, like Will, can find salvation. Just as God and Milton's garden had its forbidden tree, edenic Pala has untapped reservoirs of oil. Will is wrong to think of Pala as a "place where the Fall was an exploded doctrine" because the "tree in the midst of the garden" turns out to be "the Tree of Consumer Goods", the cancer of materialism. Murugan avidly reads the "Newest Testament", the "Spring and Summer Catalog" of Sears, Roebuck and Co., a treasure house of possessions the future Rajah hopes to purchase with profits from oil.⁵

The power of cancer in Huxley's final novel is unmistakable. Will's Aunt Mary died of it when Will was much younger, and so does Lakshmi, Dr. MacPhail's wife. Aldous' mother and his first wife also died from this disease, and they may have provided the models respectively for Aunt Mary and Lakshmi. Huxley himself was suffering from cancer as he wrote.⁶ In addition to functioning as an actual disease in *Island*, cancer also becomes Huxley's metaphor for an ineradicable sickness in temporal man and his world, a sickness too essential an element of life for any society, no matter how perfect, to withstand indefinitely. Despite his utopian synthesis of ideas developed over a quarter of a century, Huxley cannot overcome his sense of life as a dualistic process in which there is a counter for every point. The best somehow contains the seeds of its own demise: Pala is contaminated by the oil beneath its surface. This substance brings out all the non-utopian elements in human nature. "Our enemy", says Susila, "Is oil in general." When the Rani contends that "Pala's smooth bright skin concealed the most horrible rottenness," she is alluding to the liberated sexual habits of the Palanese, but her remarks readily apply to the island's mineral deposits and the presence of herself and her son. Describing the extent of the oil, Murugan says that the island "is fairly oozing with the stuff", as though from running sores.

Pala's oil and the greed it generates remind one of the "quap" George Ponderevo found on Mordet island in Wells' *Tono-Bungay*, a novel Huxley once read but did not like.⁷ Quap, George noted, is "cancerous...a real disease of matter" that easily spreads. He likens the decay of matter that constitutes quap to the decay of culture in society. After his experiences on Mordet island, Ponderevo has

nightmares visions of "atomic decay". He is haunted by "a grotesque fancy of the ultimate eating away and dry-rotting and dispersal of all our world." A similar vision, implied and hence less crudely expressed, pervades Huxley's utopia, a vision of matter, society, and individual life itself as a process of disintegration. Will is haunted by the death of his Aunt Mary even as he becomes convinced of Pala's value. He challenges his spiritual tutor, Susila: "But what about the presence of cancer, the presence of slow degradation?" "One thinks one's something unique and wonderful at the center of the universe," says Will, "but in fact one's merely a slight delay in the ongoing march of entropy." In *Island* this ongoing march counterbalances the excellence of the Palanese and Will's convincing conversion. Although an ideal society can be envisioned, Huxley feels there is little chance of its replacing the present situation. Pala is just a "slight delay" in the world-wide spread of industrialization and Colonel Dipa. Oil is as valuable as quap, and since the greed it inspires is infectious, oil itself can be regarded metaphorically as an infection. Quap for Wells, oil for Pala, and the decadent materialism both represent are to matter itself what Colonel Dipa is to politics and the Palanese or what cancer is to Lakshmi and Will's Aunt Mary.

Throughout the novel Dr. MacPhail's wife is dying of cancer, "slowly wasting to extinction". Symbolically, Lakshmi is at the center of the novel. Huxley parallels her deterioration and the island's. Pala is both a utopia and the story of the vulnerability of any ideal. The novel exposes the fragility, perhaps even the futility, of utopia at the same time that it describes the society its author would establish were such an endeavor possible within the temporal order. Instead of obeying the Rani's final summons before Colonel Dipa's invasion, Will hastens to Lakshmi's death-bed. To Murugan, who comes for him, Will explains: "I have a prior engagement. With someone who is dying." The someone is both Lakshmi and Pala. This time, however, by taking the trail toward death as he so often did as a journalist, Will is disassociating himself from the extinction of Pala. His cure narrowly precedes Pala's decline. Lakshmi has mastered the *ars moriendi*, and Will thus aligns himself with those who have learned how to die instead of with those who know how to kill. If the world is as inherently imperfect as parts of *Island* imply, then the religious question—how should one die?—becomes more important than the utopian one—what is the best way to

live? In a tainted world, as Dr. MacPhail seems to realize, "thanatology" may be the most important science. By going to Lakshmi Will severs all connection with the action plot and moves thoroughly into the expository one. From here on the action swirls around him while he continues to learn. Spiritually at least, through the Buddhism of the Palanese, one can retain (or recover) health and integrity.

On the way to the hospital, Will asks the child, Mary Sarojini, if she knows "what cancer is?" She replies that "it's what happens when part of you forgets all about the rest of you and carries on the way people do when they're crazy—just goes on blowing itself up and blowing itself up as if there was nothing else in the whole world." Cancer thus reveals itself as a malicious variant of Huxley's perennial target: the self-centered ego, the preoccupation with the temporal, physical self that permits the individual person—or a single cell in a larger body—to conduct itself as if the part were the whole. Mary's definition of cancer makes this disease the perfect metaphor for any nation practising self-aggrandisement. Rendang, as it puffs itself up to swallow Pala, represents the cancerous spread of war and annexation characteristic of world history. Though afflicted with cancer, the dying Lakshmi is anything but egotistic. Instead, she struggles to unite herself with the Clear Light that represents the world of the spirit. Instead of trying to absorb it, as Dipa does Pala, she endeavors to have it absorb her.

Dr. MacPhail prematurely boasts that Pala, due to its strategic isolation, avoided "the plagues of popery...and fundamentalist revivalism." Rendang, explains Ranga, succumbed by turns to Arabs, Portuguese, Dutch, and English; but Pala escaped all of "these infestations". Until now, no missionaries have proselytized in Pala, no Western imperialists have exploited the island. The twofold pattern of religious and economic harassment, the key to much of world history, has not operated as yet in Pala. But no modern society, Huxley fears, can resist contamination indefinitely. Infestation is inevitable. Will observes a flock of invading engineers, armament technicians, and oil-men at a cocktail party in the Rendang Foreign Office and christens the gathering "the cyanide of the earth". Will's arrival on Pala is in itself the penetration of a healthy political and economic body by a contaminated and contaminating cell. Initially, Will is himself a member of the cyanide party, though he shares Huxley's unrelenting bitterness about the way the world is brutally mismanaged by men with perverse

priorities. In one sense, Dipa's invasion is Farnaby's writ large. A representative of the exploitation-minded, materialistic West, Will aggravates the infection already latently present on Pala in the persons of Murugan and the Rani, both of whom have spent long intervals in the Western world. Before Will's coming, Pala remained healthy by means of isolation, a sort of self-imposed quarantine. Thus they isolate Will almost immediately upon his arrival. But Bahu quickly recognizes in Will a fellow disease-carrier: "Both of us", he says, are "victims of the same twentieth-century plague". Both are victims of and agents for purely materialistic societies. Pala avoided several missionary and imperialistic infestations, but the island cannot effectively quarantine itself forever. That, essentially, is the tragedy for any would-be modern utopia. Will's arrival signals the breakdown of Pala's immunity to the spread of oil companies, Western technology, and all the attendant evils they bring when regarded as ends in themselves.

Unlike other members of the cyanide party, Will, early in the novel, solicits Susila's aid in curing himself. He describes himself truthfully as an "undersirable alien". A genuine Manichean, he is pulled in the direction of good and evil simultaneously, as is the novel he is in. Part of Will wants to learn more about the Palanese, while his other half merely wishes to remain long enough to negotiate an oil deal for his boss. Eventually, Will makes a full confession of his involvement with Joe Aldehyde. "You'd be justified in deporting me tomorrow", he concludes. "Not now that you've changed your mind", Susila assures him. Will the persistent cynic, the man who refuses to take 'yes' for an answer, is cured in spite of himself. Huxley, the would-be utopian, portrays a perfect state while also endorsing Will's contention that "islands of decency" are always surrounded by "the Essential Horror". The "basic and ultimate facts", Will insists, "are always no. Spirit? No! Love? No! Sense, meaning, achievement? No!" The pattern Will outlines is the pattern of history and Huxley's novel. Fortunately, Will finds a way out of that pattern, though Pala for all its perfection, cannot. What happened to Aunt Mary, an event Will Describes as a "masterpiece of irony", happens to Pala:

Here was a soul that radiated goodness and love and heroic charity. Then, for no known reason, something went wrong. Instead of flouting it, a little piece of her body started to obey the second law of thermodynamics. And as the body broke down, the soul began to lose its virtue, its integrity.

As did Aunt Mary's body, Huxley's novel and the ideal society it creates also obey the second law of thermodynamics. The crucial difference between Pala and Aunt Mary, of course, is that the island, like Lakshmi, retains its spiritual integrity as it collapses. Perhaps it will one day resume its utopian role unlikely though this seems as long as Murugan and Dipa rule.

In the novel's opening chapter, Will, still dazed by his fall, recalls the heaven-and-hell experiences he had with Babs, the girl for whom he gave up his wife. The recollection is the first of several distinctly Manichean experiences in the novel. The strawberry-pink alcove in Babs' room was illuminated by flashes from a sky sign advertising Porter's Gin. The first flash, in royal crimson, meant that for "ten miraculous seconds the flushed face so close to his own glowed like a seraph's transfigured." The second flash, however, was a sickly green, producing "another revelation—but of death, of the Essential Horror". It transformed Babs' seraphic body into a "cadaver". The experience generated by the *moksha* medicine Will takes in the final chapters is objectively little different. In depicting heaven, *Island* never forgets hell. But by the time he takes the medicine Will has come to terms with himself; he has developed the ability to accept both halves of life, hell as well as heaven, and to accentuate the latter whenever possible. The knowledge that one is a Manichean, simultaneously drawn to evil as well as to good, does not mean that one has to do both or that one's choice of the latter is somehow compromised. As the old Rajah wrote in *Notes on What's What*, the individual is really "the reconciliation of yes and no" and not "the Manichee" he thinks he is. Will thus broadens his conception of perfection to include the presence of negative factors. Unfortunately, no society seems capable of reconciling yes and no. Huxley's conviction that evil is ubiquitous does not condemn the individual to a Manichean existence, but it rules out any chance for utopia in this world. In transcending his Manichean outlook by learning to accept both halves of himself, Will no longer allows his unattractive aspects to undermine belief in his capacity for good. But a society's unattractive elements can, and in *Island* do, undermine its ability to function. *Island* therefore offers salvation primarily on the personal level. Surely this is a curious conclusion for a utopia. The individual need not function as a Manichee but the world appears to remain irreparably split.

Vijaya contends that only the *moksha* medicine can banish dualisms, for under the influence of this drug "there's a reconciliation....A fusion, an identity. Beauty made one with horror." Those who think that Huxley found a panacea in drugs should attend more closely to the complex episode in which Will takes the medicine, the final stage of his cure. He experiences heaven *and* hell, just as he did with Babs, for both are realities. Reconciliation is achieved mainly in that Will learns to believe in the former and to suffer the latter. As does Huxley, he tries not to see them only as a counterpoint in which one undercuts the other. This, one must emphasize, is not so much a fusion as an act of the will, which may explain Farnaby's surname. Perfection for Huxley involves making beauty one with horror, a perception of life's inescapable unity, in which, for the individual, the horrible cannot eclipse the beautiful. The latter is the stronger because it can accept the former. Such a perception, however, cannot carry over into the social and political sphere. Although the Palanese have always shared Will's newly discovered world view, they are powerless to resist Colonel Dipa or even to become one with him except through submission. As a utopia, they are out of business. Politically speaking, horror consumes beauty. In the temporal order, no fusion of them seems possible outside the consciousness of the enlightened individual.

Before administering the drug, Susila asks Will what they should talk about while he is under its influence. "What about the good, the true, and the beautiful? Or maybe", he grinned, "the ugly, the bad and the even truer." The drug induces visions of both but it does not assert that either is "truer". While listening to Bach's Fourth Brandenburg Concerto, Will enjoys a positive vision of life as an harmonious orchestra, an image that balances the picture of an orchestra gone haywire that was central to the theme and structure of *Point Counter Point*. Suddenly, however, hell replaces heaven, and Will is on a Manichean trip. A lizard scurries across the floor and a "glow of sheer evil" radiates "from every gray-green scale of the creature's back". Evil glares "out of everything he looked at". At this point Huxley introduces the novel's most memorable image, the one that stays in the mind long after one has forgotten exactly how the Palanese system of education works or how one learns the yoga of love. Earlier, when Will and Dr. MacPhail observed a mantis (*Gongylus gongyloides*), MacPhail commented, "If it's a female, she eats her lovers." Will now sees a

female mantis devouring its mate in the act of love. The mantises are a Manichean symbol of evil within good, of man's ability—and Will's—to destroy what he ought to love. The lizard then devours the mantis. In the "inner light" of the *moksha* medicine, Will sees "an endless column of tin-bright insects and gleaming reptiles" who march from "some hidden source of nightmare towards an unknown monstrous consummation.... Eating and being eaten-forever," a prospect much worse than the satiric "Outline of History" Mark Rampion sketched in *Point Counter Point*, a zoological vision not even Philip Quarles could match. The drug experience enables Will to resign himself to the enormous joke of existence and the essential horror of eventual death because in Susila's face he finds a corrective vision, the essence of love.⁸ In Babs' alcove, the sickly green flash undercut the one in royal crimson. Both flashes are preserved in the drug experience but their order of occurrence is reversed. The lizard replaces Bach but then Susila's face replaces the lizard. The reversal typifies the change of emphasis evident throughout the second half of Huxley's career. For society, an endless column of tin-bright insects; for the enlightened individual, the face of love.

In the concluding pages of *Island*, Will's nightmare vision becomes a reality. Still under the drug's influence, he hears the sounds of Colonel Dipa's tanks. Paradise is definitely lost. Although Will (Ferdinand) may have a future with Susila (Miranda), Dr. MacPhail, Pala's Prospero, is shot by the invaders. One cannot dismiss the sound of 'fail' in his name. Unlike Shakespeare's *Tempest*, *Island* begins and ends with upheaval. The squall that over-turned Will's boat is minor compared to the commotion caused by Colonel Dipa. As do Prospero's revels and all insubstantial pageants, Pala fades away. Huxley cannot believe strongly enough in the world's capacity for good. By proclaiming the United Kingdom of Rendang and Pala, Murugan confirms a marriage of heaven and hell, the devouring of the lover by its mate. Pala is the forbidden island because man and his world apparently do not want it to exist, because there may be a cancer gnawing at the heart of temporal things, a universal entropy that makes man and his world healthy and sick simultaneously.

Island is Huxley's most successful synthesis. It is also a contrapuntal novel. While Will learns to reconcile the good and evil within himself and in the surrounding world, the novel is pulled in the opposite

direction by Pala's failure to survive, by Huxley's unwillingness to falsify what he considered the basic fact in the temporal, historical process: the succumbing of the ideal to the real, the noble to the ignoble, Pala to Rendang. Will transcends the historical process; Pala can do so only temporarily. The novel's two plots capture this essential dichotomy as the exposition plot leads to personal salvation and the action plot terminates with societal collapse. That Will contributes to the collapse while on his way to enlightenment further emphasizes the Manicheanism that constantly challenges and finally modifies the novel's utopian mood.⁹ What happens to Pala confirms Will's world view prior to his conversion, and what happens to Will confirms Pala's. Religiously and philosophically the later Huxley identified with the mystics; politically and sociologically he remained a Voltairean. Although the Palanese are right about Will's potential for enlightenment, Bahu, the novel's cynical Voltairean, is correct about Pala's potential for survival. "So long as it remains out of touch with the rest of the world", he explains, "an ideal society can be a viable society." But touch contaminates and touch is inevitable. Cultivating one's own garden will not work if someone else desires to annex it.

At the climax of *Brave New World*, the argument between Mond (Wells) and the Savage (Lawrence) is a standoff that Huxley was unable to resolve. In fact, he seems to have written the novel to expose a permanent counterpoint, neither party being able to persuade or drown out the other. Something similar occurs in *Island*, though less dramatically. Susila and Dr. MacPhail have their way with Will while Murugan and the Rani have theirs with Pala. The difference is that Huxley's sympathies in *Island* are never in doubt the way they were in *Brave New World*. Still, he cannot award a total victory to either of the novel's two camps. Though Will has finally matured into a suitable inhabitant of the perfect society, Pala has become utopia in reverse. Originally a denizen of hell washed up on the shores of paradise, Will now possesses the paradise within but has been deprived of his ideal context.

No matter what the ultimate force in the universe may be, no matter what one contends is man's Final End, the temporal order remains bound by the second law of thermodynamics, of which cancer, whether in the individual body or the body politic, is a graphic illustration. Ironically, Huxley has finally found the ideal recipe but he is still

sceptical about the world's ability to take 'yes' for an answer. *Island* shows what a perfect society could be like under impossibly ideal circumstances. The novel also demonstrates why utopia must always mean "nowhere".¹⁰

Footnotes

1. Jerome Mechier, *Aldous Huxley: Satire and Structure* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), Chapter 7.
2. See Huxley's letter to Ian Parsons for 19 January 1962 in Grover Smith, ed., *Letters of Aldous Huxley* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 928. Huxley asks Parsons to reproduce on the jacket a painting "suggestive of the book's subject", such as Van Gogh's "Fields under Storm-clouds". The cover of the first edition of *Island* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962), from which all quotations in this essay are taken, shows that Huxley's suggestion was not followed.
3. For the views summarized in this paragraph see Donald Watt, "Vision and Symbol in Aldous Huxley's *Island*," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 14 (October, 1968), 150; Peter Bowering, *Aldous Huxley: A Study of the Major Novels* (London: Athlone Press, 1968), p. 232; Joseph Bentley, "The Later Novels of Huxley," *Yale Review*, 59 (Summer, 1970), 518; Charles Holmes, *Aldous Huxley and the Way to Reality* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1970), pp. 133, 197; and Robert Elliott, *The Shape of Utopia: Studies in a Literary Genre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 153.
4. See the letters to Humphrey Osmond for 6 May 1959 and Philip Wylie for 9 June 1949 in Smith, pp. 869, 568.
5. In a letter to Parsons for 16 January 1962 Huxley revealed that the quotations from Sears Roebuck were from an actual catalogue. He adds that Roosevelt "is said to have advocated free distribution of S-R catalogues in Communist countries, to convert the inhabitants, not to Christianity, but Consumerism." Smith, p. 928.
6. See the accounts in Laura Archera Huxley, *This Timeless Moment* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968), pp. 244-5, 247, 261.
7. See the letter to Robert Nichols for 18 January 1927 in Smith, p. 281.
8. Inspired by the *moksha* medicine, Will does have a visionary experience of a state beyond opposites where Good and Evil are wedded. This is not a mystical experience. Will sees this state as a possibility but does not gain participatory knowledge of it. Drugs can take him only so far, which is probably as far as Huxley himself ever got.
9. In *Aldous Huxley's Quest for Values* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1971), p. 117, Milton Birnbaum asserts that in *Island* one witnesses "a reaffirmation of the spirit of Manicheism", but he does not elaborate.
10. I suspect that for most readers *Island* will remain an unsuccessful novel, one in which there is too much talk and too little action, as if the essayist had indeed swallowed the novelist, Huxley's final novel will never rank among his best. But an awareness of its struggle with plot and an appreciation of its coherent imagery (cancer, the mantis, heaven versus hell) may save it from the oblivion too many critics have predicted. Even in a novel of debatable excellence a major writer will reveal a certain depth and skill that ought not to be overlooked, especially when its few admirers have tried to make *Island* simpler and more affirmative than it is. My text throughout has been the Chatto and Windus first edition (1962).