

America in the 1930s and Aldous Huxley's After Many a Summer Dies the Swan

Lela Zhamurashvili

"One can't have something for nothing" [Huxley, 1989:235] – how frequently these words of Huxley are repeated in his novels and essays. Despite the difference in formulation, interpretation is always the same: one can't have something for nothing and humanity has to pay the price for material well being it has achieved through technological progress. Sometimes the price is much greater than the reward but humanity is not always aware of it. In "Mike Wallace Interview", broadcasted on ABC on May 18, 1958^[1], Huxley declares that one day humanity may fall victim to its own inventions. Technological advancement might have aided in improving the physical standard of living but sometimes the process is inverted and it leads to regress of spiritual values. In his fiction Aldous Huxley articulated that frequently improvement of standard of living was achieved at a significant cost. The price for super comfort and luxury is living in sterility, alienation and spiritual deprivation, loss of all sense of identity, meaning and purpose. In his essay "Notes on liberty and the boundaries of the promised land" Huxley wrote: "*Increase of material prosperity, increase of leisure, increase of liberty, increase of educational facilities are perfectly useless [...] a quickly reached maximum gives diminishing returns of happiness, virtue, and intellectual efficiency*" [Huxley, 1960:130]. It is not surprising that the writer mostly emphasized on America while discussing the mentioned point as it was just America where technological progress had its heyday.

Aldous Huxley left for the United States in April, 1937. He planned to live in California for a while but actually never came back to Europe for living. The first of Huxley's novels from his American years is *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*, which is also the first novel with American setting. The novel opens with description of California as Jeremy Pordage, an Englishman encounters with it. One can clearly feel the culture shock which Huxley experienced upon arriving in America. Huxley has Pordage survey a Californian landscape and one can vividly imagine the writer himself entering the postmodern world of high technologies. Newly arrived Jeremy Pordage is amazed with the sight of crass commercialism and bizarre spirituality, before meeting his new employer, millionaire Jo Stoyte. The Los Angeles streets mirror the spirit of America in a profusion of drugstores, hamburger bars and giant billboards. One after another, advertisements and billboards offer everything for physical and spiritual pleasure: "*Eats. Cocktails. Open Nights. [...] Do things, go places with Consol super gas. At Beverly Pantheon fine funerals are not expensive*" [Huxley, 1939:9]. The church, restaurants and lingerie shops are all equated. You can consume everything here. Moreover, the supposedly physical offerings of the

billboards ("Thrillphorm Brassiers", for instance) are as far removed from the simply physical as the "spiritual" offerings ("Go to Church and feel better all the week") are from the truly spiritual. The human ego has reached out and drawn all the forms of purity into clutch. There is no sign that the humanity will be ever able to get relieved. But it is just the beginning of degradation depicted in the novel as it becomes more and more intensive to the end.

Jeremy Pordage arrives in California to meet his new employer, Jo Stoyte, whose mansion makes his impression even deeper. The portal of the house is Gothic and a pillared lobby is Romanesque. The interior of the house is mixture of copied things, which indicates that the house owner has nothing uniquely and originally his own. Everything is imitation and the result of cloning. Jo Stoyte's mansion with its medieval architecture is a kind of fortress but its owner is so much afraid of death as people were afraid of plague and Dante's inferno in the middle ages.

A bronze nymph by Giambologna – a symbol of sensuality - is spouting two streams of water from her polished breasts in front of the house. In the great hall of the castle El Greco's "Crucifixion of St Peter" and Rubens's full-length portrait of Helene Fourment, dressed only in a bear-skin cape, confront each other from opposite ends of the room. Jeremy Pordage is bewildered with this indecent mixture of two extremes of death and sexuality: "*Jeremy looked from one to the other - [...] from unearthly flesh tints of green-white ochre and carmine, shadowed with transparent black, to the creams and warm pinks, the nacreous blues and greens of Flemish nudity. Two shining symbols, incomparably powerful and expressive – but of what, of what?*" [Huxley, 1939:36].

Huxley frequently uses the contrasts like this in the novel. The bedroom of Stoyte's child mistress, ex-show girl, Virginia Maunciple, is decorated in white. Virginia herself is wearing a white yachting-cap and white pyjamas. Huxley intentionally uses the colour of virginity and sanctity for woman who accepts the double morality of the Los Angeles billboards without question. He has ironically named her as Virginia – the name associated with virginity. Her relationship with "Uncle Joe" calls no moral scruples for her as in the world, in which she lived, it was axiomatic that living with a millionaire is the biggest achievement for a woman. Parents, friends, teachers, newspapers, radio advertisements – explicitly or by implication, all were unanimous in proclaiming this fact. To be such a man's mistress could not be wrong. On the other hand, interestingly enough, Virginia has a miniature shrine in her bedroom. She loves Our Lady, as she calls St. Mary, like a doll and plans to make a new mantle for her the next day: "*There, in a bower of artificial flowers, dressed in real silk clothes, with the cutest little gold crown on her head and six strings of seed pearls round her neck, stood Our Lady brilliantly illuminated by an ingenious system of concealed*

electric bulbs" (Huxley, 1939: 144). Later, in the same room Virginia and Doctor Obispo make love in presence of Our Lady.

Jo Stoyte's house with so many mutually irrelevant things in it, express mental condition, egocentrism and spiritual confusion of its owner. On one side of this enormous building there is a small and decent house of Propter, somehow demonstrating the absurdity of its neighbour.

This absurdity goes even further and manifests itself in Jo Stoyte's Personality Cemetery, a huge commercial enterprise on Beverly Pantheon. Peter Bowering, professor of University of London, calls it a temple of worship to all the gods of pleasure [Bowering, 1969:144]. The cemetery is equipped with super-modern mortuary furnaces, always ready for any emergency. The executive offices of West Coast Cemeteries Corporation are located in Tower of Resurrection. Only in the Children's Corner does the Infant Jesus appear alongside a medley of Peter Pan, alabaster babies and bronze rabbits. The tombs are decorated with erotic sculptures: "*Statues wherever you turned your eyes. Hundreds of them. [...] All nudes, all female, all exuberantly nubile. The sort of statues one would expect to see in the reception of a high-class brothel*" [Huxley, 1939:15].

The cemetery, with its nubile statues, perpetual soothing music and cosy chapels, epitomizes the attempts to evade the the nature of things and escape from death. Jo Stoyte makes effort to minimize, sentimentalize or otherwise distort the meaning of death. Death or the fear of death and search for immortality are the main themes of the book. Death and attitudes to it constitute the most frequently recurring note in the novel. Jo Stoyte tries to believe that he can achieve immortality and often repeats that "There is no Death". Doctor Obispo promises physical immortality and assures him that he has discovered elixir of life. Every gallery of the Pantheon has over its entrance a scroll which asks "*Death, where is thy sting?*" [Huxley, 1939:15]. Tower of Resurrection, too, subtly implants optimism of immortality in many visitors.

"And After Many a Summer Dies the Swan" is a satire of American cult of eternal youth, beauty and life. The book's title is taken from Alfred Tennyson's poem *Tithonus*", which is based on Greek myth about Tithonus. According to the myth, Eos, the goddess, who was in love with Trojan prince Tithonus, asked Zeus to grant eternal life to her lover and the god consented. But Eos forgot to ask also for eternal youth, so Tothonus lived eternally and withered. He was begging for death like the other mortal beings. Huxley used not only the title of Tennyson's poem, but the theme of immortality as well, which he interpreted in his own way. The theme of eternal youth and beauty is widely discussed in Huxley's essays too. In "Beauty Industry", for instance, he states that American women spend millions of pounds on their faces and bodies. As a result, "Old ladies", with white hair and wrinkles, are becoming rare and in a few years they

will be extinct. Huxley believes that the cult of beauty is symptomatic of changes in our attitude toward physical values. But outer beauty is not enough for achieving completeness and harmony. To support his viewpoint, Huxley provides an example of porcelain jar, the beauty of which is a matter of shape, of colour, of surface texture. The jar may be full of honey or stinking slime. Likewise, the surface of the human vessel is affected by the nature of its spiritual contents. Because of that, Huxley predicts that the campaign for prolonging the appearance of youth and beauty will be a failure: "*Successful in prolonging the appearance of youth, of realizing or simulating the symptoms of health, the campaign inspired by this cult remains fundamentally a failure*" [Huxley, 1960:235]. In "And After Many a Summer Dies the Swan", Propter philosophically preaches that completeness and harmony can be achieved by detachment from material values, cult of eternal youth and existence in time. Propter regards the time as a main source for evil and believes that existence in historical time is potential evil: "*Time is potential evil, and craving converts the potentiality into actual evil*" [Huxley, 1939:90]. Goodness and completeness exist only without attachment to time: "*A temporal act can never be more than potentially good, with a potentiality... that can't be actualized except out of time*" [Huxley, 1939:90]. Because of lust and time nothing can be achieved on human level except the evil and the world is in hopeless situation. Sitting under the large eucalyptus tree, Propter closes his eyes and repeats Cardinal Berulle's answer to the question: "What is man?". Read thirty years ago, Cardinal's words "Nothingness surrounded by God" seem more eloquent now than ever. Than Propter makes his own decision - to perceive the ego as something permanent is the height of human ignorance as it is only a fiction, a kind of nightmare, madness made to fetish. First of all, attachment must be overcome. Propter declares that a man obsessed with time cannot achieve the ideal which means liberation from ego, time and lust, liberation by means of union with God. As long as the attachment and bondage of any kind exists, there will always be a barrier between a human and God.

Actually, all the characters of the novel act against Propter's preaching. In his article, "Amor Dei in Hollywood", published in 1940, Edgar Johnson (professor of English at the City College of New York), states that the relation between Propter and the others is the key to Mr. Huxley's theme. "*And the reason is that Huxley is interested in the people only as ingredients in the philosophic pill he has been preparing for his own consumption*" [Johnson, 1940, published in *Aldous Huxley, the Critical Heritage*, ed. Donalt Watt, 1997:331]. There is the moral choice between the psychological eternity of mystic i.e. "timeless good" and the promised longevity of the scientist i.e. existence in time, the evil presented by Doctor Sigmund Obispo. In the interview published by French magazine - Paris Review, Aldous Huxley explains that he named this character after Sigmund Freud. This, once more, expresses the writer's attitude to scientific and technological progress. Doctor Obispo promises immortality through scientific achievements. He believes in

limitlessness of human potentials and uses Jo Stoyt, who is a "barrel of hairy flash" for him, in his experiments. Obispo is against natural laws and thinks that scientific achievements can change duration of life, productivity period, etc. not only in humans but in animals as well. Professor Keith May compares Obispo with Mephistopheles [May, 1972:152]. The doctor seduces Virginia for imposing his will upon her: *"For it was a fact that he personally found an added pleasure in the imposition of his will upon the partner he had chosen"* [Huxley, 1939:116]. Naturally, this kind of relationship cannot be productive. Virginia is afraid of childbirth. Huxley ironically comments that Jo Stoyte is a baby for her. The nymph by Giambologna with water-spouting breasts at the entrance of the palace indicates sterility that Virginia brings about. Sex technique, which Obispo teaches to Virginia, includes not only the movements of body but maximal suppression of consciousness as well. Virginia is one of those who do not believe that one can't have something for nothing. She wants to have everything for feeling pleasure and security. She feels the need of liberty but her body does not allow her to get relieved. This is just the case which Propter speaks about when he declares that a human wants liberty but cannot overcome the bondage of body. Virginia feels some spiritual hunger. She has got a shrine in her bedroom and prays before going to bed. She makes a very interesting gesture before making love with doctor Obispo: she runs to the shrine and draws curtains. But the body is much stronger and suppresses this vague spiritual needs: *"Virginia had been one of those - [...] not sufficiently conscious of her personal self to realize its ugliness and inadequacy, or the fundamental wretchedness of the human state"* [Huxley, 1939:161]. Virginia knows that *"He who would save his life must lose it"* [Huxley, 1939:161] and she chooses the way of self-oblivion for liberation. However, it is not actually liberation. On the contrary, each attempt of self-oblivion brings acuter sense of personality. Addiction or self-annihilation used for forgetting reality, never brings relief: *"But like all the other addictions, [...] the addiction to pleasure tends to aggravate the condition it temporarily alleviates"* [Huxley, 1939:162].

The novel includes subplot of Earl of Gonister which appears as parallel narrative in the second part of the book. Literary critics call the novel a hybrid work as it is a mixture of realistic and fantastic elements. The second part of the book shows Jeremy Pordage working on Huberk papers for cataloguing of which he is employed. This way the writer prepares the reader for fantastic events which take place at the end of the novel. Jeremy Pordga discovers the diary of Fifth Earl of Gonister written in the eighteenth century. The Earl's autobiography proves Obispo's theory about immortality. The papers provide evidence that a diet of the raw intestines of carp helps with maintaining eternal youth and sexual energy. Appearance of Gonister's diary serves as a hint that the Earl is still alive. This kind of message can be seen in previous episodes too when Propter speaks to Pete Boone, a young assistant of Obispo, about the results of immortality achieved through scientific progress. Propter asserts that this kind of life will be a regress rather than the transcendence for union with God. By

the end of the novel, Jo Stoyte, mad with jealousy, shoots Doctor Obispo, but mistakenly he kills Pete Boon. Pete is a single character of the novel that can be influenced by Propter's preaching and achieve union with God but he is murdered before Propter's efforts of enlightenment can succeed. George Woodcock evaluates Pete Boone's death as a triumph of darkness [Woodcock, 2007:184]. The scene, when Jo Stoyte is looking for a gun to kill Obispo, is very interesting. He tries to go down for several times but he cannot, despite the fact that there are two elevators in the palace. Huxley puts too much emphasis on elevator and thus expresses his ironic vision of modern attitude to technological advance once more. Jo Stoyte is eager to take a gun and kill Obispo but he wastes his time by waiting for elevators. Finally he decides to climb but breathless after only two floors, he runs back to elevators. At last, the elevator button responds and again the writer depicts a very interesting scene which makes the episode of murder comic. In elevator Jo Stoyte is observing the young lady in painting and despite the intention of murder, his mind becomes involved with mathematical calculations: "*The distance of her left eye from the left side of the picture was to its distance from the right side as one is to the square root of two minus one; and the distance of the same eye from the bottom of the picture was equal to its distance from the left side*" [Huxley, 1939:216]. Even the murder cannot be committed without science in mechanical world.

After the murder Doctor Obispo takes Jo Stoyte and Virginia to England where in the cellars of Gonisters they find out that the Earl is still alive and immortality is achievable. Jo Stoyte is a successor of his predecessor, Gonister, like whom he believes that there is no spirit and spiritual salvation. Two centuries before, the Earl had written that the human is doomed to perennial solitude in the wicked world. Pleasure cannot be shared like pain: "*From solitude in the Womb, we emerge into solitude among our Fellows, and return again to solitude within the Grave. We pass our lives in the attempt to mitigate that solitude [...] We reiterate the act of love; but [...] propinquity is never fusion. [...] We couple [...] between the bars of our cages*" [Huxley, 1939:174]. Sense of solitude is the same as a sense of life. At the same time, solitude is proportional to power. The more power we have, the more intensely do we feel our solitude, and accordingly, the longer is our life. Like Lucifer, Gonister rivals God. Instead of seeking to lose a sense of time, he tries to master time, and becomes time's principal victim: "*Above the matted hair that concealed the jaws and cheeks, blue eyes stared out of cavernous sockets. There were no eyebrows; but under the dirty, wrinkled skin of the forehead, a great ridge of bone projected like a shelf*" [Huxley, 1939:252].

Stoyte too, prefers to live in time. Upon seeing withered Gonister and his housekeeper, he confusedly asks: "*But what's happened to them?*" "*Just time*", Obispo answers [Huxley, 1939:253]. After hesitating for a while, Jo Stoyte makes decision: "*I mean, it wouldn't happen at once... There'd be a*

long time while a person..." [Huxley, 1939:254]. For him, the time is essential; time, much time... And the result is evolutionary regress, the heaven degraded to simian being, awaiting for Doctor Obispo and Stoyte in Gonister's underground cage. Virginia, who now has to believe that one can't have something for nothing, is with them. Huxley shows the relationship of Gonister and his housekeeper as logical extension of Virginia's sexual relationship with Obispo. Disgusting sex of two ape-like humans is absurd parody of Obispo and Virginia. *"The Fifth Earl rose to his feet, stretched, scratched, yawned [...] making [...] a curious humming noise. [...] Suddenly, with a ferocious yell, the Fifth Earl sprang forward [...] into the darkness. There was a rush of footsteps, a succession of yelps; then a scream and the sound of blows and more screams; then no more screams, but only a stertorous growling in the dark and little cries"* [Huxley, 1939:254].

One may consider this episode as the climax of Huxley's attitude to unhealthy sex which appears as early in his novels as in *Antic Hay* and *Point Counter Point*. Literary Critic, Peter Bowering expresses his doubts that Huxley would ever have conceded the existence of a sexually normal being. He refers to the words of Havelock Ellis, according to which there cannot now be natural sex as self-consciousness has made it impossible [Bowering, 1969:157].

In abovementioned "Mike Wallace Interview", broadcasted on ABC, Aldous Huxley states: *"All technology is in itself moral and neutral. These are just powers which can either be used well or ill"* [2]. "And After Many a Summer Dies the Swan" demonstrates that in case of misuse, the result can be devastative and humanity may suffer degradation instead of progress.

Huxley was severely criticized for depicting a human like this. Anthony West, a biographer of D. H. Lawrence, called the novel a record of spiritual failure. In "Amor Dei in Hollywood", Edgar Johnson wrote: *"Huxley does not love, and does not want to love humanity [...] Huxley has found in the love of God a substitute for all but a lip-service love for human beings"* [Johnson, 1940, published in *Aldous Huxley, the Critical Heritage*, ed. Donald Watt, 1997: 331]. Interestingly enough, Harry Lorin Binsse, translator of works by Kant, gives absolutely different evaluation of the novel. He says that we must be grateful to Huxley for his philosophy. On the other hand, Lorin Binse's review of the novel, like that of other critics', is negative in terms of artistic value. He criticizes Huxley for replacing the characters with orators. This mainly applies to Propter, whose philosophical monologues in the novel are really very extensive and sometimes cover the several pages. In terms of artistic value, "And After Many a Summer Dies the Swan" is actually less worthy than Huxley's previous novels; however, it is not clear whether it was the writer's artistic failure or just intention of Huxley. As George Woodcock states it, the form of novel becomes debatable because of ideas expressed in the novel by Propter: *"Art can be a lot*

of things; but in actual practice, most of it is merely the mental equivalent of alcohol and cantharides” [Huxley, 1939:132].

Despite the artistic form, “And After Many a Summer Dies the Swan” is a very significant novel as the absurd actions in Jo Stoyte’s castle are interesting comment on American lifestyle which admired and attracted lots of people worldwide.

[1] http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/multimedia/video/2008/wallace/huxley_aldo_us.html

[2] http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/multimedia/video/2008/wallace/huxley_aldo_us.html

References

- | | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Bowering P
1969 | Aldous Huxley: A Study of the Major Novels, New York, Oxford University Press. |
| Huxley A
1939 | After Many a Summer Dies the Swan, New York, Harper & Brothers |
| Huxley A
1989 | Brave New World, New York, Harper Perennial |
| Huxley A.
1960 | Music at Night and Other Essays, London, Chatto and Windus |
| May K.
1972 | Aldous Huxley, London, Elek |
| Sion R.T.
2010 | Aldous Huxley and the Search for Meaning, Jefferson, North Carolina, McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers |
| Johnson E.
1940 | Review in Kenyon Review, ” published in Aldous Huxley, the Critical Heritage; London and New York, 1975, reprinted in 1997 |
| Woodcock
G
2007 | Dawn and the Darkest Hour; Black Rose Books, Montreal, Canada |