Marking and Remembering

Aldous Huxley

—1894-1963—

MENTION Aldous Huxley to the average reader and if he remembers him at all, he will probably say, "Oh yes, didn't he write *Brave New World*?" Occasionally, his name will appear in news stories in connection with his predictions made in that dystopian novel or his experiments with psychedelic drugs. It is unlikely that he will be recalled for much else. And yet perhaps much more than any other significant literary figure in the twentieth century, he embodies the ten traits of the man of letters as ideal human being.

1. Stoic Acceptance of Fate

First there is the ability to overcome personal adversity with a kind of stoic resignation. Although a brilliant student at Eton, Huxley became temporarily blind at sixteen, and so was prevented from preparing for a medical career. He took this affliction in stride and years later wrote with his typical grace, "Providence is sometimes kind even when it seems to be harsh. My temporary blindness also preserved me from becoming a doctor, for which I am also grateful. For seeing that I nearly died of overwork as a journalist, I should infallibly have killed myself in the much more strenuous profession of medicine." When a fire destroyed nearly all his valuable books and letters and manuscripts a few years before his death, he remarked, "It was quite an experience, but it did make one feel extraordinarily clean." And his second wife, Laura Archera Huxley, writes that when, in a moment of compulsive restlessness, she asked for a divorce, "Aldous looked at me, with such deep love, with such dissolving tenderness. He took my hand and kissed it; 'I caught a nymph,' he said, 'I must let her go,' and released my hand."

2. Intellectual Diversity

The second trait of the man of letters is a profound intellectual curiosity and diversity of interests. Huxley's favorite reading was *The Encyclopaedia Britannica.* Although noted chiefly for his brilliantly satiric novels, by no means was he limited to fiction. He was equally at home with his first love, science (he once said that if he would be given a choice of being either Michael Faraday or William Shakespeare, he would prefer to be Michael Faraday), semantics, music, painting, philosophy, religion, psychology, sociology, politics, history—and dabbled in other fields as well. His writings allude not only to the usual literary figures—Chaucer, Dante, Shakespeare, etc.—but also to Mozart, Michelangelo, Kropotkin, Cardinal Newman, Buddha, William Sheldon, Freud, Vico, etc. Besides his eleven novels, his works include collections of short stories, biographies, poetry, an encyclopedia of pacifism, philosophical tracts, an interpretive anthology of religious excerpts, screen scripts, commentaries on painting and music, lectures to college audiences. He even used his own blindness as a basis for a book on blindness. This

wealth of interests left little room for brooding or for boredom.

3. Rootedness in the Past

A third trait of the man of letters is a strong rootedness in the past. Not that Huxley was a blind conformist to tradition. He realized—as any thinking person must realize—that to improve the future one must know the past. Thus, he was knowledgeable not only in Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, but he knew, with Santayana, that unless we learn from the errors of history we are likely to repeat those errors. He recognized that a study of the past could improve the quality of life in the present. Sometimes the past could teach us to avoid tragic mistakes—the futility of wars, the need for decentralized governments, the importance of putting into political power people who are certified to be sane. Would Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini—not to mention some infamous leaders in power today—ever pass a sanity test? It seems strange that to get an electrician's license or a plumber's license, the applicant must fulfill certain requirements. To get control of a government, one needs no license but a manipulative skill in the licentiousness of power.

4. Awareness of Present

The fourth requirement facing the man of letters is a realistic awareness of the present. It is sometimes tempting for a scholar to isolate himself from the turbulence of the present by withdrawal to comforts of the past alone. Not Huxley! Long before it became fashionable to do so, Huxley vividly portrayed the dangers of overpopulation, exploitation of natural resources, and jingoistic nationalism. Time after time he warned us that unless we learn to curb our lust for material aggrandizement, we would be headed for perdition. With uncanny prophecy, his *Brave New World* (1932) portrayed the dehumanized world of the present—where, besides being overwhelmed with technological overkill, we are also being exposed to a psychological tyranny of the most subtle kind.

5. Awareness of Future

His awareness of the past, his attention to the present, and his scathing analysis of the soulless world he presented in his *Brave New World* did not blind Huxley to the possibility of a better world, and so in his last published novel, *Island* (1962), he projected a utopian nation. The encyclopedic knowledge that he had amassed during his lifetime he now tried to synthesize in his attempt to mold a perfect society: "Pharmacology, sociology, physiology, not to mention a pure and applied ontology, neurotheology, metachemistry, myco-mysticism, and the ultimate science...the science that sooner or later we shall all have to be examined in—thanatology." Mind, body, and spirit have been harmoniously united. The synthesis, however, turns out to be synthetic—and although Huxley had intended to create a utopia, the tale reveals his basic belief that utopia will continue to be unattainable. "Utopia" retains its etymological meaning, "Nowhere."

6. Sense of Humor

And yet despite the seriousness with which Huxley viewed the many problems of the world, he never took himself too seriously and certainly never pompously. He could puncture the solemnity of foolish romance by writing,

> *And here we sit in blissful calm*
> *Quietly sweating palm to palm.*

He also recalled a Russian historian's comment that the ideal life would consist of picking one's nose while watching the sunset. Thus, aesthetic longings could be satisfied without neglecting physical needs. Of course, some people may say, "We cannot afford the sense of húmor in these days of grave crisis." Perhaps if we

had more of a sense of humor, there would not be so many grave crises.

7. Civility and Personal Decency

Added to all of these qualities must be a sense of personal decency and morality. Recent years have witnessed the growth of courses in assertiveness training. I recall seeing a cartoon in which a sign outside the door of an Assertiveness Training office said: "Out to lunch. Will be back whenever I damn please." Well, barbarism is not always funny. Life is barbaric enough without our adding to it by being discourteous and excessively aggressive. Despite the Swiftian irony in his novels and essays, Huxley was essentially a very decent person. All the people who reminisced about him when he died (and there is an excellent collection of these reminiscences edited by Sir Julian Huxley, Aldous' distinguished brother) testify to his essentially decent nature. Shortly before his death, as his widow noted about him in her book, he told an audience, "It is a little embarrassing that, after forty-five years of research and study, the best advice I can give to people is to be a little kinder to each other." One could listen to worse advice.

8. Commitment to Society

Huxley was more than a nice person who affected only the lives of his friends. He had a sense of commitment to society. He was opposed to both World Wars and was actively involved in fighting for his pacifism. He wrote pamphlets, gave talks, joined organizations—just as he continued doing for a variety of other causes all his life. Despite his innate shyness, he recognized that words by themselves mean little unless translated into action. He did not, however, allow his pacifist stance to blind him to the realities of existence. In a letter to John Atkins in 1955, he wrote: "I don't think that the pacifist position will ever be generally accepted on religious or ethical grounds—but it may be forced on the world by the logic of technological advance. Meanwhile the best way to further peace is [for a writer] to call attention to the psychological and demographic factors making for war."

9. Precision in Language

Although Huxley knew that words, unless followed by action, are powerless, he recognized the need for precision in language. It is his remarkable knowledge and use of language which marks the ninth trait of the man of letters. Like George Orwell, he knew that language can be used to obfuscate, to agitate, to inspire. Obviously, the language one employs in imaginative literature is not the same language one should employ in the quotidian world of politics, government, interpersonal involvement. Concrete language should replace euphemistic abstractions. Using clear language may be difficult but as he tells us in his *Perennial Philosophy* (1945), this "guard of the tongue...the most difficult and searching of all mortifications...is also the most fruitful."

10. Sense of Transcendence

Lastly, and above all, the man of letters as ideal human being must be aware of the transience of life and the spirituality which underlies all material existence. Like Spinoza, whom Huxley admired very much, Huxley eventually became a God-intoxicated man. Not god or religion in a narrow ritualistic or creedal sense. Even though he tended to lean to Eastern religion, particularly, to Buddhism, Huxley tried to combine the best inherent in all religions. He wanted to achieve a union with the Godhead because he recognized that the goodness of life is really the godliness of life. He realized that without a sense of transcendence, life becomes pointless.

Although he knew for a long time before his death that he was suffering from

terminal cancer, he did not allow this knowledge to curtail either the congeniality he showered upon his family and friends, or his intellectual creativity. A day before his death, he finished an essay on "Shakespeare and Religion." Death held no dark fears for him; for his life was filled with beatific enlightenment.

We could use more of his kind today.

— Milton Birnbaum

Cleanth Brooks

—1906-1994—

WE FIRST MET in the summer of 1953, before I entered the Yale Graduate School that fall. And he and his mother, whom he was visiting in Memphis, while his wife, the beloved "Tinkum," was visiting her own people in New Orleans, came out to spend the day with us in Ripley. Though I was taking classes in French and German at Vanderbilt, preparing for the doctoral language exams, I had come home for the weekend, to meet this man about whom I had heard so much and with whom my family had unusual ties. Because he had spent part of his young life in my home town: his father, for whom he was named, had been the Methodist pastor there and had joined my parents in matrimony in 1922. And he was supposed to have baptized me, but by the time I put in my appearance, he and his family had moved to Louisiana. But "Brother" Brooks's memory lingered on there, and my father characterized him as a sanctified man if there ever was one and easily the most beloved pastor ever to occupy the Methodist parsonage. But he had been dead for some time now and his son had gone on from LSU to teach at Yale and had been very helpful with advice and counsel when I was seeking admission to the English graduate program there. But now I was to behold him in the flesh for the first time and, frankly, was scared to death.

As it turned out, he and his mother arrived very early that morning: the distance from Memphis out to Ripley was much shorter than they remembered. And I was still in the shower when they arrived. But my mother just seated them on the front porch, provided Coca-Colas—her usual strategy in an emergency—and went ahead supervising our cook with preparations for lunch. But in due course I ventured out onto the porch and there they were, relaxed and ready for the visit and, like all Southerners, ready to start talking. And of course it all began with their memories of the town and the various people they had known, mostly Methodists of course, until I had made bold to tell Mr. Brooks about the year of graduate study I had just finished at Vanderbilt, which I thought would be the safest thing to do because he had known some of my teachers there in the old days of the Fugitives and the Agrarians—the twenties and the thirties. And I even showed him the M.A. thesis I had done under the supervision of Donald Davidson, whom of course he warmly remembered.

But as the conversation deepened (my mother had come out onto the porch by now and was engaged with Mrs. Brooks in remembering old times), he began to speak about the current state of affairs in literary criticism but mainly about the New Criticism and the salubrious effect it was having on the scene. And I remember most of the conversation with some accuracy: I felt as though I were for the moment a part of history and I didn't want it to get away from me. And, among

other things, he said, "Literature is no substitute for anything else: it's not a substitute for life or religion or politics. Of course when I was coming along, there were only two ways to read a poem: one, in the light of the author's biography, the other, in the light of literary history. But as to whether it was a good poem or a bad poem, nobody ever had anything to say."

And of course I thought right then that the word had gone out from on high about the whole matter, and I've never really changed my mind about it since. It's an autonomous discipline we serve, and it's not a beautifully decorated envelope to send the plain prose thoughts (*ideas*) through the mail in—a view which implies downright condescension toward literature as such. But I have no doubt that despite Derrida and all the rest it will come back again in its inevitable truth. But the same old heresies will of course go right on, still repeating themselves and seducing the same people they always have. No real news there at all. And almost the last time I ever saw him—a year ago—it was something like this that I tried to tell him—that he shouldn't be unduly depressed (I thought he was) by all the critical modes of the moment: it was like the French observation that the more things changed, the more they stayed the same. And he somewhat ruefully agreed, though he implied that he thought the return to the integrity of the old formalism was long overdue.

But in this, as in all else, he was eminently down to earth, always sane and sensible—sometimes I thought almost too much so. And always he could see innumerable sides to most every question: his most familiar phrase whether in argument or analysis was always "on the other hand." And always his judgments about things both temporal and spiritual were wise and shrewd—and always politic. (And again, I sometimes thought too much so.) But of course his experience had taught him that always you had to live in this world now, no matter what your future destination. Soft-voiced and courteous, he could nevertheless be very firm about matters of conviction and unyielding when he thought they were being discounted or debased. And this was especially true where judgments about politics and religion, as well as criticism, were concerned.

This is not the place to rehearse all his many professional achievements, but it should be noticed that, above all else, he was first and last a *teacher* and, as his mother pointed out to me that day we met, a *dedicated* one. And very happily he continued to teach as a visiting professor at a number of universities (including here at the University of Tennessee) long after he retired from Yale. And whenever I had the chance, I used to sit in on his classes, as I had done in the old days at Yale (ironically, I never took one of his courses there), and found him just as quietly persuasive as ever. And of course the students loved him. Even this past March, I believe, he gave a lecture in London, then continued overseeing a number of editorial projects in which he was involved after he returned home. Always faithful, always true, he continued to the very end.

A staunch churchman, he had an enormous influence on me when I, like many another young man, was wrestling with my faith, believing yet doubting too. And it was he more than any other that influenced my decision to leave the Methodist Church and become an Episcopalian—not so much by argument and persuasion as by the example he set, the witness he bore. And he surely above all others could understand my decision because it was the one he had made himself. I think we both felt the Methodist Church just wasn't Methodist, indeed Wesleyan enough; and I believe we both felt we weren't repudiating anything fundamental in our Methodist heritage by leaving. In turn we both became dis-

tressed at many of the current trends in the church of our adoption, but our respective demurrers have, on the whole, been of a moderate nature, I believe.

Everyone, of course, will have his favorites amongst his prodigious output, but I suspect that for me *Understanding Fiction* (1943) ranks as one of the greatest. It, along with *Understanding Poetry* (1938) on both of which he collaborated with his lifelong friend, Robert Penn Warren, literally revolutionized the teaching of literature in our schools and colleges for over thirty years—mostly along the lines laid down in the principles of the New Criticism. They taught literature as literature and nothing else. And I can speak from sad experience when I say the methods currently in vogue do anything but that, with gender studies, ethnic studies, multicultural considerations, and such like running amok over all else. And it would be a brave professor in any graduate program today who would venture to ask any student what Dickens or Hardy novels he had actually *read* instead of contenting himself with merely imbibing what had been written *about* them. And finally there is his great volume on Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels—the book we were all waiting for. Perhaps that's my favorite of them all. And again, as he might have said himself, he shows us that Faulkner's work persuades us not because of what *we* make of it but because of what *it* makes of itself. Surely, that's what a proper appreciation, indeed respect for literature demands. Anything less, finally, is contempt.

Well, he's gone now; but his monument, his legacy is not far to seek, in the generations of students (and I think all of us were in that category) whom he taught, whether in the classroom or in his textbooks and scholarly works, and finally in his life itself. And speaking only for myself, I can hardly think of a wiser or nobler one in our literary history.

—*Robert Drake*