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Charles Andrews

Whitworth University, [charlesandrews@whitworth.edu](mailto:charlesandrews@whitworth.edu)

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## Pledging Peace in Aldous Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza*

Charles Andrews  
Whitworth University

Nineteen thirty-six was a pivotal year for Aldous Huxley. Much of his energy prior to this year was spent writing the satirical novels upon which his reputation still rests, including *Crome Yellow* (1921), *Point Counter Point* (1928), and *Brave New World* (1932). Huxley produced many of his nearly fifty books under contractual obligations to write two or even three books per year, a pace that seemed to cause him little concern. Yet *Eyeless in Gaza*, his under-read masterpiece, took four years to complete. Begun in 1932, published in 1936, *Eyeless* is in most ways typical of Huxley's fiction—erudite, philosophical, and semi-autobiographical. His title alludes to Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, and his characters each take competing positions on the issues most important to Huxley and his cohort of artists and intellectuals: human relations, mystical spirituality, and radical politics. *Eyeless in Gaza* also shows off some of Huxley's most formally adventurous writing, particularly with regard to narrative chronology. Each of the novel's fifty-four chapters is set on a specific day between November 6, 1902 and February 23, 1935. Lacking any readily discernible regular pattern, the chapters jump back and forth within this thirty-three year range. The earliest dates show our main character Anthony Beavis as a young boy at his mother's funeral, by the 1910s we see him at Oxford, by the 1920s Anthony is a struggling writer, and by the 1930s he is in a love affair with Helen, is briefly involved in a Mexican revolution, and ultimately converts to pacifism.

Many critics focus on the novel's form, treating its convolutions as a stand-alone point of interest divorced from content.<sup>1</sup> The avant-garde time structure of the novel was part of the reason for Huxley's struggle with the text, and the consistent critical attention to this feature is understandable. In February of 1934 Huxley wrote to Mary Hutchinson, saying:

I dodder along with my book, rather exasperated because I can't quite get the formal relations between parts that I'm looking for...I am looking for a device to present two epochs of a life simultaneously so as to show their relations with one

another—and also their lack of relationship. For when one considers life one is equally struck by both facts—that one has remained the same and become totally different. (*Letters* 292)

Staging a contradictory, even self-defeating, narrative of discovery was Huxley's goal, but his aims were more than just producing a formally flashy *Bildungsroman*. The composition of this book may be seen as a form of spiritual discipline, a key component of his own conversion to pacifism as an article of faith. With *Eyeless in Gaza*, Huxley seemed to mark a new aesthetic, philosophical, and political direction. It is this new direction I will explore here to show how 1936 was not only a turning point for Huxley but also for the peace movement in the build-up to World War II. Huxley's pacifist activism provides a context for his narrative experiments that may allow us to better understand his complicated expression of a newfound politics.

Critics attentive to this new politics often diverge from formalist readings by regarding the book as essentially equivalent to the pacifist tracts Huxley wrote during the same period. George Woodcock confesses the disillusionment he felt with Huxley when as a young man he read *Eyeless* and found its narrative of "conversion to mystical religion" to be Huxley's suggestion "with obvious didactic intent—that such a spiritual evolution was not merely compatible with the pacifist and decentralist politics which he had recently been preaching in print and on public platforms, but was perhaps the only condition under which they could become effective" (3). In this interpretation, Huxley's supposed didacticism—made especially repellent by espousing a suspicious and/or foolish creed—overwhelms the novel's formal innovations and undermines Huxley's credentials as a prophet for some new libertarian society.

Disillusionment about Huxley among his peers seems to have been matched by his self-disillusion. His new political project was apparently short-lived. By 1938 he had abandoned Britain for the United States, where he lived the rest of his life as a screenwriter, public intellectual, narcotics voyager, and counter-cultural sage. But before entering this last phase of his life and career, at the pivot point of 1936, Huxley sought an integrated life of literary expression, personal discipline, and public peace activism. My argument here aims to show how Huxley's experimental literary pursuits, rather than being a separate function of his intellectual interests, were essential to his peace activism in the 1930s and to his on-going search for a coherent and totalizing system for living life well. Moreover, I take issue with the claims of Huxley's contemporaries and later critics that *Eyeless in Gaza* is merely didactic. The avant-garde form permits a much more tentative, complicated politics to emerge, one that presents self-questioning at the core of even a very active political effort toward peacemaking.

### Beyond "Case-Hardened"

Huxley's efforts to achieve his philosophical goals were a large part of his celebrity as a public intellectual and the last remnant of the Victorian Sages in the tradition of his grandfather Thomas Henry Huxley and his great uncle Matthew Arnold. Many of his practices have aged rather badly, such as his disastrous commitment to a quack who taught that physical exercises could cure his blindness.<sup>2</sup> Critical evaluations of his life tend to include his pacifist opposition to the Second World War in the same category as his other dubious, shameful, or laughable convictions. After all, Huxley's stated goal for human existence sounds less trenchant than his prophecies about social mechanization and insularity produced by technology. In his book *Ends and Means* he described "the ideal goal of human effort" as "liberty, peace, justice and brotherly love," and so demonstrates the difficulty of naming foundational values without cliché (1).

Many readers have detected in Huxley's inability to articulate a true Utopian vision (as he unsuccessfully attempted in his final novel, *Island*) the vestiges of his privileged, snobbish, satisfied life. Christopher Hitchens, in his less than glowing foreword to *Brave New World* calls the book "didactic and pedagogic and faintly superior" and written in "the tone of voice of an Etonian schoolmaster. It is also somewhat contradictory and even self-defeating" (xi). Thus, even Huxley's most widely read novel is packaged as a kind of smug failure. While the charges of superiority and didacticism in Huxley's works are not entirely refutable, it is at least worth noting that he was self-conscious about these problems. He frequently observed that he was not gifted as a first-rate novelist, and in 1925 he wrote to Mary Hutchinson that "I have lived so long and so exclusively in a private literary-intellectual world, that I am case-hardened" (qtd. in Murray 171).

This "case-hardening" and intellectual isolation dogged Huxley throughout his life, but his peace work in the mid-1930s can be seen as his most substantial effort to push beyond his elitist milieu and to engage political realities. In 1934, while Huxley was still wrestling with his unfinished novel, he began active involvement with the most important affiliation of his political life: the Peace Pledge Union. The genesis of this activist group was a sermon by the prominent liberal clergyman Harry Emerson Fosdick of New York City, who preached on Armistice Sunday of 1933 about renouncing war "for its consequences, the lies it lives on and propagates, for the undying hatred it arouses, for the dictatorships it puts in the place of democracy" (qtd. in Morrison 8). This charge was taken up whole-heartedly by the well-known Anglican Canon H.R.L. Sheppard who published an open letter in the *Manchester Guardian* on October 16, 1934, inviting men to join the largely female peace movement by signing this resolution: "We renounce war and never again, directly or indirectly, will we support or sanction another" (qtd. in Morrison 100). By the second day

after this publication, thousands of postcards had arrived at Sheppard's door, including one from Aldous Huxley.

The 1920s had seen a proliferation of anti-war and pacifist movements with names like the No More War Movement and the No Conscription Fellowship, but few were as large as the PPU, which at its peak claimed about 136,000 members.<sup>3</sup> Part of the reason for this growth was the deliberate minimalism of its official requirements; membership entailed simply signing the one sentence resolution. The openness of its official pledge allowed anti-war people of all stripes to unite. Early members included former soldiers like Siegfried Sassoon and Edmund Blunden, Marxists like John Middleton Murry, Christian pacifists like Rose Macaulay, and many other artists, intellectuals, and religious leaders including Storm Jameson, Bertrand Russell, Max Plowman, and Vera Brittain. The broad appeal of the PPU also, perhaps, constituted its liability, since there was no consensus about the basis for the membership's pacifism nor (more importantly) were there consistent ideas about how the group should proceed. Within the broad umbrella category of "anti-war movements" were internationalists who believed that a multinational police force was the best hope for peaceful coexistence, and these members might work alongside Tolstoyan, absolute pacifists who resisted any form of coercion.

The history of the British peace movement between the world wars is quite complex and marked by arcane disputes, unseemly alliances, and ultimate failure. Even the name "British peace movement" is somewhat misleading since it is a catchall description for the many small pacifist and anti-war groups who are linked only by a similar ultimate objective. Historical studies of pacifist groups between the world wars tend to portray their efforts as, at best, sincere but misguided and at worst contributors to the Third Reich's victories.<sup>4</sup> After all, the twentieth century is notable for its unsurpassed bloodshed rather than its remarkable narratives of prevention. However, recent scholarship has begun to uncover the lesser known counter-narratives to the dominant histories of totalitarianism. Jay Winter describes the many "openings" in the twentieth century where "minor utopias" emerged and briefly gave hope for possibilities of peace (2). Events like the 1937 Paris World's Fair used art and technology as a means toward unifying people through exhibiting the best of human creativity. It was here that Picasso's *Guernica* was displayed, proclaiming what he called his "abhorrence of the military caste which has sunk Spain into an ocean of pain and death" (qtd. in Winter 83). And the centerpiece of the fair was its Pavilion of Peace representing the horrors of war and offering a venue for international veterans of World War One to announce their commitment to nonviolence. Winter's description of the expo also examines the contradictions and "eloquent silences" of this pacifist display, noting the space granted to Nazi and British imperialist propaganda. These failures

tell us much about the limitations of peaceful internationalism, but also suggest the lengths to which well-meaning people throughout Europe desired to amend for the tragedy of the Great War and prevent its duplication. The PPU, which failed to achieve its primary objective—the prevention of another war—inhabits a place in twentieth-century history much like that occupied by the Paris expo. Minor, perhaps, but not insignificant. The minor utopian energies were eclipsed by what Winter calls the “major utopias” perpetrated by Hitler and Stalin, and public memory has lost sight of much of the optimism felt by anti-war advocates in the mid-1930s who saw their numbers increasing and believed that alternatives to war were possible (1).

Two key facts are neglected in the simplified narrative that regards 1930s British pacifists as mere appeasers or fascist sympathizers. The first is the evidence that Britons on the whole were widely in favor of nonviolent collective security. Absolute pacifism was (and remains) a minority position, but in the years between the world wars the general British public believed that international efforts to curtail violence without submitting to militaristic nations was the ideal. David Cortright describes the effectiveness of the Peace Ballot campaign, which was “one of the largest and most successful mobilizations of peace sentiment in history” (77). This campaign polled an astonishing 38% of adult British people about their views regarding the League of Nations, decrease of armaments, abolition of military and naval aircraft, and other measures seeking international and cooperative forms of collective security and violence reduction. The Peace Ballot was conducted during 1934 and 1935 by the League of Nations Union (LNU) and shows that realistic peace-minded measures were supported by the majority of those surveyed.<sup>5</sup> In other words, only absolute pacifism should be seen as eccentric while during the 1930s war resistance was normative, although there was little consensus about precisely what this resistance should look like in practice.

The second key fact in revising the stereotypical view of 1930s pacifism pertains to the frequently raised problem of appeasement. Cecelia Lynch has shown that scholarly assessments of pacifism often overlook the fact that “there was no clear official alternative in the early (or late) 1930s to peace movement positions,” and the Tories as well as Ramsay MacDonald’s National government espoused no path other than “passivity” (96). The notion that peace activists were unified in favor of appeasement or simple concession to Hitler’s aggression denies the substantial efforts by the peace movement to counteract the imminent world war through nonviolent means. Many peace activists were the first to insist upon collective security rather than the concessions of leaders like Neville Chamberlain.<sup>6</sup>

In the years leading up to the Second World War, a large percentage of the British populace held anti-war convictions, including a belief in the need to reduce armaments. What exactly this anti-war position meant

in practice was quite varied, of course, and the general resistance to future conflicts did not clarify the ambivalence about methods and core beliefs. Beyond broadly stated conviction, disputes emerged among and within various organizations attempting to provide a voice for nonviolent politics. Martin Ceadel categorizes the many twentieth-century British peace groups based on two features: “*inspiration* or basis” and “*orientation* or attitude towards society and the problem of war prevention” (*Pacifism in Britain* 11). Many forms of inspiration for pacifism appeared to be in direct conflict, and unlikely partnerships were made of people such as sectarian Christians who believed in special revelations from God and Marxian communists who saw international violence as an obstacle to class-based progress. Alongside these differing motivations, orientation may have been an even more serious obstacle to the uniformity of the British peace movement. After all, strange bedfellows are by definition united through common objectives rather than common bases. Much as 1936 was a watershed year for Huxley’s art and politics, that year marked the high point of the peace movement, and from a certain perspective its last great moment before lengthy decline. Ceadel observes that widespread polarization occurred in the peace movement and in Britain at large because of three crucial events: German remilitarization of the Rhineland, Italian conquest of Abyssinia, and eruption of the Spanish Civil War.<sup>7</sup> This triple threat to British non-violence provoked heated debates about accommodation, appeasement, sanctions, and rearmament. Internal polarization—mirroring the polarization of British popular opinion—would severely diminish the effectiveness of the PPU and lead to its collapse as a serious voice in the national dialogue.<sup>8</sup>

Huxley became a key figure in the pacifist literature of the time, and his reputation parallels that of the peace movement—rising success and popularity through the 1920s, peaking in the mid-1930s, and suffering considerable decline in the years since. The exact reasons for Huxley’s initial interest in the PPU remain somewhat mysterious. One of the challenges for any research on Huxley is the fire that swept through his California home in 1961, consuming much of his personal writing and letters. But we can infer that the elimination of war was a major component of a larger project: his restless search for a totalizing philosophy sufficient to renew society in radical ways. We can also determine a few important events and intellectual discoveries that shaped Huxley’s thought. In his youth, Huxley attempted to enlist in British armed service during the First World War, but he failed the medical examinations due to his eye conditions. As the war dragged on, he became a conscientious objector and performed alternative service at Garsington Manor, Lady Ottoline Morrell’s estate, clearing brush and doing other yardwork, sharing this post with Bertrand Russell and John Middleton Murry.<sup>9</sup> Russell’s pacifist writings, particularly his *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (also called *Why Men Fight*) writ-



ten in 1916, were early influences on Huxley's thought. Also crucial to his political and spiritual formation was his friendship with Gerald Heard, the philosopher and ethicist with whom he intended to co-author his treatise *Ends and Means* (1937).<sup>10</sup>

But despite dabbling in pacifism through the 1920s, Huxley's convictions were not especially ardent until the mid-1930s with his reading of Richard Gregg's *The Power of Nonviolence* (1934) and his joining of the Peace Pledge Union. Gregg was a disciple of Gandhi who sought to translate Gandhi's practices into western contexts, and his writings influenced many in the peace movement, though "Greggism," as his theories were sometimes called, sparked controversy among peace activists for its hint of superstition and spiritualism.<sup>11</sup> The basic premise of Gregg's system was "moral jiu-jitsu" which avoids counter-violence and instead "offers resistance, but only in moral terms" (44). This highly disciplined, Eastern influenced, meditative system that required great personal fortitude and stamina was precisely the methodology Huxley desired. The traits promoted by Gregg manifest in *Eyeless in Gaza* as the noteworthy characteristics of the novel's guru-figures and the aspirations of its protagonist, Anthony Beavis.

Huxley tested the waters gradually, refusing at first to speak publicly about his peace work as he hoped to avoid what he called "a campaign of religious and ethical preaching against war" (qtd. in Dunaway 17). But under continued pressure from Heard to enact what was becoming known as the "New Pacifism," Huxley moved closer towards that very preaching and religiosity that he initially avoided.<sup>12</sup>

As he was becoming more invested in the PPU, Huxley witnessed a Blackshirt rally on June 7, 1935, with Oswald Mosley speaking. Civil protestors at the event were beaten by Mosley supporters in front of Huxley, a brutal reminder that nonviolent activism carried serious consequences and that Huxley's pacifism was not merely formed in a world of abstract ideas secured by his privileged isolation. In his first public speech on behalf of the PPU, Huxley acknowledged the need for all people to face the empirical realities of violence: "Warlike passions burn most fiercely in minds which think about the problems of peace and war in terms of generalizations and abstractions...when those human beings are thought of merely as members of a class which has previously been defined as evil, then killing becomes a simple matter" (qtd. in Dunaway 21). This statement suggests not only a personal, ethical position, but also commends the novelist's art to the realm of peace activism by working always in specifics. The attention paid in *Eyeless in Gaza* to Anthony and his soul's journey may be an effort to generate sympathy for an enemy class, the peace worker whose views are deemed disastrous and even treasonous.

Anthony's spiritual and political journey shows the influence of Huxley's own mentors and a willingness to embrace positions disdained by



the mainstream religious and national institutions. A key figure for Huxley, as for many PPU members, was their leader Dick Sheppard whose personal charisma has often been noted as a persuasive force over those who knew him. For founding members like Sybil Morrison, Sheppard's untimely death in October of 1937 was a blow difficult to overcome: "sitting quietly at his desk with his head upon his arms as though asleep his much strained heart had given out; Dick Sheppard, that man of many parts was dead, and there was no-one to replace him" (26). Morrison's account of the PPU makes the best of this situation, claiming that the rank and file members were the true backbone of the organization, but there can be little denying that Sheppard's presiding presence was the key energy source for its activism. Huxley used Sheppard as the model for Reverend John Purchas in *Eyeless in Gaza*, whom Anthony describes as someone

who takes Christianity seriously and has started an organization of pacifists. Purchas by name. Middle-aged. Slightly the muscular-jocular Christian manner. (How hard to admit that a man can use clichés and yet be intelligent!)...The aim is to use and extend Purchas's organization. The unit is a small group, like the Early Christian *agape*, or the communist cell. (*Eyeless* 12)

Like Purchas, the real-life Sheppard was adamant that the PPU should take Christian community and evangelistic techniques as its model, but that its inspiration should be non-theological. This Christianity emptied of its theological content and deployed for political or even secular-mystical ends had great appeal to Huxley for its spirituality unfettered by outworn tradition or specified deity.

This revisionary, political faith seemed to many of Huxley's peers merely idiosyncratic and quirky, and his self-fashioning as a secular mystic was regarded with derision and even suspicion. Graham Greene wrote in a book review for the Catholic periodical *The Tablet* in 1936 that he approved Cyril Connolly's parody of Huxley as a man "gone a little 'gamey' and on the verge of discovering pacifism and a personal religion" (95). For Greene, who took his religion with a heavy dose of obsession and penance, the idea of Huxley's ethereal and somewhat amorphous spirituality could only seem deranged. As Huxley began to publish more widely his newly unfolding beliefs, his arguments opened debates that were erupting throughout Britain about the impending war. Huxley quickly moved from mere signatory to leading member of the PPU, writing what would become its first official tract entitled *What Are You Going to Do About it? The Case for Constructive Peace*. This essay drew the ire of many people, notably those on the left like Cecil Day Lewis who published his rejoinder pamphlet called *We're Not Going to Do Nothing* which accused Huxley of constructing "a great, big,

beautiful idealist bubble—lovely to look at, no doubt; charming to live in, perhaps: but with little reference to the real facts and inadequate protection against a four-engined bomber” (3).

In addition to the frequent charge of hopeless idealism, pacifism in the 1930s always has about it the specter of pro-Fascist, pro-Nazi sentiment, the logic being that resistance to war equals concession to tyranny. Rebecca West later reflected in her book *The Meaning of Treason* that the PPU was “that ambiguous organisation which in the name of peace was performing many actions certain to benefit Hitler” (qtd. in Morrison 51).<sup>13</sup> The specific actions Huxley called for seem today less treasonous than naïve, as Day Lewis pointed out. Huxley saw Italy’s conquest of Abyssinia as clearly evil, and suggested, simply, that: “the great monopolistic powers should immediately summon a conference at which the unsatisfied powers, great and small, should be invited to state their grievance and claims” (*What are you...?* 27). Obviously, this grand conference idea never took hold of the public imagination. But, if nothing else, Huxley’s pamphleteering shows his abhorrence of the isolationist position as a form of “negative pacifism” assumed casually, perhaps, by people refusing to fight only because it would cause their own discomfort. A bad peace, like that achieved in Versailles, or the events occurring in Abyssinia and Czechoslovakia cannot be the goal of the constructive pacifist. In his *Encyclopaedia of Pacifism*, Huxley wrote that “non-violence does not mean doing nothing. It means making the enormous effort required to overcome evil with good” (80).<sup>14</sup> Or, as he put it in an earlier speech: “The only hope lies in the pacifists being better disciplined than the militarists and prepared to put up with as great hardships and dangers with a courage equal to theirs” (qtd. in Dunaway 21).

### Huxley Agonistes

In *Eyeless in Gaza*, pacifism and mysticism coalesce as the engines of that enormously difficult work required by the agent of active non-violence. Anthony seeks a form of meditation derived from various threads of Catholic thought interwoven with strands of Buddhism and Hinduism, all of which will be “Ends in themselves and at the same time means for realizing some of that goodness in practice” (432). Huxley’s rummaging through a variety of religious sources for political usefulness echoes other modernists’ search for religion capable of addressing the needs of a spiritually bankrupt age. Eliot, Lawrence, Yeats, and Pound all searched in different ways for a revitalized religious presence in modernity, and Huxley expresses through Anthony something like this preoccupation. However, Huxley foregrounds the political dimension of this search. While Eliot’s “Shantih Shantih Shantih” obliquely responds to the lack of peace in Eliot’s world, Huxley explicitly attends to the political possibilities inherent in religious thought. On Christmas Day, 1934, Anthony Beavis writes in his journal: “The funda-

mental problem is practical—to work out systems of psychological exercises for all types of men and women. Catholicism has many systems of mental prayer—Ignatian, Franciscan, Liguorian, Carmelite and so on. Hinduism, Northern, Southern and Zen Buddhism also have a variety of practices. There is a great work to be done here. Collecting and collating information from all these sources” (431-32). The practices of various traditions may be borrowed, stripped of their specific spiritual content (such as worship of a God), and used for a multifaceted pacifist project responsive to the unique needs of individual members.

Along with methodological diversity, the centerpiece of Huxley’s thought as expressed through Anthony is valuation of means rather than ends. Much of Huxley’s thinking was energized by this ends/means dichotomy, and peace activism, despite its insistence upon creating a nonviolent world, was for Huxley still a matter of process rather than result. World peace ceases to be simply a goal, pursued whatever way seems most effective. Rather, pacifism becomes a faith, a set of practices worthy in themselves and not undertaken simply because they are productive. Huxley’s voice in this regard joins other members of the pacifist community, such as Max Plowman, whose book *The Faith Called Pacifism* articulates the creedal nature of peace activism: “What now seems to be growing more and more clear is the realization that peace cannot become the reigning condition so long as the present order of values obtains. If we want peace we have got to discover new values, assert our faith in them, and order our activities in accordance with our faith” (35). One might be tempted to see in Plowman and Huxley’s views a naïve ideological retrenchment where instead of making a case for the pacifist position and offering a realistic solution to violence, they simplistically resort to religious fantasy. But I would argue that casting peace activism in religious terms was a way to reframe the debate about pacifism beyond what we see in Huxley’s exchange with Day Lewis. Rather than being a matter of doing something versus doing nothing, peace work becomes the grounding for a set of life practices undertaken for their inherent goodness and out of a commitment to a cause beyond oneself. Huxley explained his theory of religious pacifism in a letter written late in December of 1935:

I have come to the conviction that nothing can possibly work or get us out of our present state except complete pacifism of the Quaker or Buddhist kind. The implications of this are, of course, fundamentally religious...some simpler conception of an underlying spiritual unity, realized through the practice of meditation...for it is only by translating the fundamental religious ideas of human unity into political terms...that we can escape from destruction. (*Selected Letters* 313-14)

Thus, what appears to be personal conviction and private discipline is actually a form of political action.

*Eyeless in Gaza* demonstrates Huxley's effort to imagine the possibilities of full-blown commitment to pacifist mysticism. In the novel, Dr. Miller, the physician/anthropologist/mystic who mirrors Reverend Purchas by guiding Anthony toward proper spiritual disciplines, counsels him: "When you pray in the ordinary way, you're merely rubbing yourself into yourself. You return to your own vomit, if you see what I mean. Whereas what we're all looking for is some way of getting beyond our own vomit" (423). In Miller's mouth, Huxley places the very critique that is so often leveled at his own mystical turn—that it was merely a retreat and an abandonment of the world's real problems in favor of some introverted escape. Miller endorses thinking, and eating, like a Buddhist, telling Anthony that his diet of meat, alcohol, and cigarettes has left him with "intestines ... ripe for fascism and nationalism" (425). The personally disciplined, monastic lifestyle is thus, paradoxically, a mode of political action. Fighting fascism begins at home, and in the bowels.

Huxley's contemporaries, and even partners in the peace movement, found this notion of politicized self-discipline ridiculous. Huxley's use of "Greggist" methods proved divisive for even the core members of the PPU such as Sheppard and Plowman, who ridiculed the training programs held by Huxley and Gerald Heard as "Yogi-Bogie exercises" (qtd. in Ceadel, *Pacifism* 253).<sup>15</sup> Huxley's persistence with these practices was a contributing factor in the PPU's diminished capacity to hold sway in public policy. The popular writer Beverly Nichols, formerly a pacifist fellow-traveler, described the ranks of pacifists as being filled with "religious cranks, who appeared at the front door clothed in white draperies, waving banners and proclaiming that they had a Message...medical cranks, who believed that you could stop man fighting by altering his diet" (10). While Huxley may not seem to recognize fully the crankish element of his beliefs, he does show through Dr. Miller his awareness that moral discipline can appear to be little more than self-indulgence. He counters with an assertion that failing to examine oneself leaves a person susceptible to the dangerous ideologies of militaristic nationalism.

Although many of Huxley's views are expressed by the novel's characters, the book never devolves into a series of homilies or set of political tracts. Anthony is clearly a stand-in for Huxley in many ways and shares many of Huxley's own views, but the experimental form of the novel accentuates the process of political awakening and the struggle to achieve a viable pacifist way of life. Huxley may lack the proper sense of irony or even self-awareness when it comes to his mystical, pacifist politics, but the modernist form of *Eyeless in Gaza* embeds self-questioning and struggle as core aspects of Anthony's journey. Thus criticism of heavy-handed didacticism in

*Eyeless in Gaza* (as in Huxley's other novels) accepts too easily Anthony's conversion narrative and diary entries as the unequivocally authoritative moral answer to the questions posed by Huxley's narrative form. I argue, in contrast, that Huxley's effort to show both progress and stasis through disjointed chronology renders Anthony's views part of an on-going process of accepting pacifist inspiration and developing a workable pacifist orientation.

Jerome McGann has praised *Eyeless in Gaza* as an under-read gem in an overlooked strain of modernist writing that shies away from the mythical structures and polished artistry of canonical works like *Ulysses*. Instead of a modernism manifested in "an ideal—or a tyranny—of the aesthetic," novels like Huxley's are, for McGann, "a form of writing where failure stalks in every word" (316). The intensely subjective text evokes Anthony's failure to fully commit to his convictions, fearing as he does at the novel's end the threatening hate-mail from "A Group of Patriotic Englishmen" who warn him: "If you make any more of your dirty pacifist speeches, we shall deal with you as you deserve...You do not deserve this warning, but we want to behave sportingly even towards a skunk like you" (464). These comically mild-mannered bullies still cause Anthony great alarm, and he wonders whether he can manage to continue his peace work or whether he might retreat, as Huxley ultimately did, from the world of physical danger. Huxley provides an idiosyncratic, self-interrogating form without a corresponding mythical order that might root his aesthetic in an identifiable tradition. *Eyeless in Gaza* does not present a reworked Buddhist, Hindu, or Christian mythology in order to reestablish some kind of ancient tradition, but rather offers, in part through its experimental forms, the self in conflict seeking a discipline capable of pacifying the world.

Anthony's views in any given chapter of the book are opposed or contradicted in preceding and following chapters, showing his internal development to be a series of false starts and missteps rather than a gradual accumulation of personal virtue culminating in enlightened Nirvana or any other pure existential plane. For example, chapters sixteen through eighteen take us from June 19, 1912, to May 26, 1934, to December 8, 1926, in a succession that begins in Anthony's youthful, bourgeois naiveté, passes through musings on "peace literature," and ends with the General Strike. In all of these phases we are made aware of Anthony's struggle to develop political maturity. The twenty-year-old Anthony of chapter sixteen strolls with his friend Brian Foxe, using garrulousness to cover his guilt for having gotten drunk with other friends rather than keeping his promise to join Brian at the Fabian Society meeting the previous day. Brian is a true believer in the Fabian political philosophy, and he tells Anthony through stammering speech that "B-being a scholar or an artist—it's l-like purs-suing your own p-personal salvation. But there's also the k-kingdom of G-god. W-waiting to be realized" (93). Anthony age twenty doubts that Fabianism

is the realization of the kingdom of God, but he has no alternative and offers instead a sophomoric stream of chatter on subjects literary, philosophical, and political: "the poetry of Edward Thomas as they walked down Beaumont Street; in Bergson opposite Worcester; crossing Hythe Bridge, in the nationalization of coal mines" (157).

Much more central than politics to this phase of Anthony's life is his sexual awakening with a woman ten years his senior. Anthony goes from Brian to a romantic boat ride with Mrs. Mary Amberley, which includes a Lawrentian description of their physical intensity displaced onto the mechanics of boating: "Handling his long pole with an easy mastery of which he was proud, he felt, as he watched her, exultantly strong and superior. She was a woman, he a man. He lifted his trailing punt pole and swung it forward with a movement of easy grace, of unhurried and accomplished power. Thrust it down into the mud, tightened his muscles against its resistance" (168). Two chapters later, this fervid boating is entirely replaced by Anthony's revulsion at Mary's middle-age (she is in 1926 now forty-four) and her gauche friend Beppo Bowles who "popped over [to Berlin] to get away from the General Strike" and to revel in the transgressive sexuality available in Germany (175). While chapter sixteen shows Anthony's insouciance, chapter eighteen depicts the political shallowness of members of an avant-garde who relish any blandly fashionable transgression of middle-class values but who disdain the collective politics of striking workers.

Overt discussion of pacifist views is sandwiched between these other phases of Anthony's political growth, making pacifism a point in his journey rather than a final stop. Inserted between chapters depicting the young and the aging Anthony's political irresponsibility is one of the several diary entries written by Anthony, himself now having reached the "revolting" age of forty-four, deep into his pacifist conversion. In chapter seventeen, Anthony tests his vocation while presenting himself as a sage. He attacks the religious function of chauvinistic nationalism and its propensity for violence: "One of the great attractions of patriotism—it fulfills our worst wishes. In the person of our nation we are able, vicariously, to bully and cheat... with a feeling that we're profoundly virtuous" (171). The diary chapters do offer Huxley the chance to indulge in the essay form that he favored over novel-writing. Yet there is a tentative quality to his writing here, and the views of Anthony are quickly subsumed in the overall structure of the book, shifting as it does from May of 1934 to December of 1926 and highlighting the casual dismissiveness Anthony's circle has toward the General Strike, the selfishness of their loves, and the casual intellectualism of their reading habits (Gibbon, Bergson, minor poetry, etc.). The diary form allows Huxley to present Anthony's thought as a spontaneous work in progress as he formulates his views: "Good international policies are projections of individual good intentions and benevolent wishes, and must be of the same kind as



good inter-personal policies. Pacifist propaganda must be aimed at people as well as their governments; must start simultaneously at the periphery and the centre" (172). These speculations about the relationship between individual conversion and changing state policies seem half-baked, as does a later proposal that universal love is the key to international peace. Huxley appears to overstate the power of individual choice here, but the surrounding chapters demonstrate the power of systems and even internal desires over the free will of an individual. The diary chapters do not stand out as the triumphal, definitive statement to which the other chapters humbly defer. Incidents and ideas in the novel are not merely props for Huxley's mystical social statements, and the succession of chapters creates a sense that no single proposition is entirely sufficient or dominant. The novel is unambiguously in favor of pacifism, but the formal complexity allows Anthony's pacifist awakening to emerge as a key feature in the landscape of his life rather than the sole focus of the narrative.

The fractured chronological form of *Eyeless in Gaza* allows Huxley to explore another principle that he found central to pacifist practices—unity, which demands that we see all things as interconnected. Peace activism in small areas of life (dietary and sexual habits, for example) affects larger scale politics like governments and national conflicts. In his development of the fractured chronology which produces unexpected unity, Huxley enters the time-philosophy debates that preoccupied many modernist writers. The dismissive reference to Bergson in Anthony's conversations with Brian, for example, signals Huxley's alignment with modernist notions of time felt as disjunction and fragmentation rather than some vital flow. Wyndham Lewis' assault on Henri Bergson and all writers he (supposedly) influenced—Stein, Joyce, Woolf, Sorel, etc.—is the most hostile and expansive version of this position.<sup>16</sup> Lewis claimed that Bergson's influence on creative art was a blind submission to the "Great God Flux" which sapped his contemporaries of their truly revolutionary capacities. In a characteristically venomous blast, he wrote in 1926 that "It is the plunge into the stream of life, smashing the watchtowers, Baudelaires, 'light-houses' (as the futurists recommended), identifying yourself with the fluid and the natural [...] that produces the typical conventional *modernist*, false-revolutionary tendency [...] I can hardly imagine any way in which he [Bergson] is not against every form of intelligent life" (338). Though their attitudes, assumptions, and aesthetics differ on almost all counts, Huxley seems to align with Lewis. His novel opens with Anthony perusing his old photo album, sourly observing that certain women's fashions so attractive at one time now seem distinctly "anti-aphrodisiac" (1). Though *Eyeless in Gaza* is a book of memories, these memories emerge like the snapshots in the novel's opening chapter—less nostalgic than embarrassing and distasteful. These memories build upon each other not as a smooth, steady progression from one moment to the



next, but rather jostle together like jagged fragments. Although meditation is ultimately one of Anthony's, and Huxley's, treasured practices, valuable as a political weapon in the pacifist arsenal, the idea of self-analysis receives much rough handling through the novel. Huxley puts in Anthony's mouth a scathing description of Proust:

that asthmatic seeker of lost time squatting, horribly white and flabby, with breasts almost female but fledged with long black hairs, for ever squatting in the tepid bath of his remembered past. And all the stale soap suds of countless previous washings floated around him [...] And there he sat, a pale repellent invalid, taking up spongefuls of his own thick soup and squeezing it over his face [...] (6)

Anthony finds in Proust a failed Tiresias: not quite androgynous, unable to be fully enchanted, and certainly unable to be authentically visionary. Here in one form of contemplative modernism, self-reflection is just the sort of bad prayer Dr. Miller criticizes, a return to one's own excretion. Like Wyndham Lewis, Huxley attacks the modernist aesthetic of Bergsonian flow, preferring a splintered, satirical approach to the novel. Huxley gives us no overall blessing for contemplation, and the time structure adds to his contradictory vision of spiritual discipline.

With a straightforward chronology, *Eyeless in Gaza* might have suggested a simplistic message where Anthony's progression of life experiences would culminate in spiritual and political sagacity. But the disjointed narration fractures this simplistic moral and accentuates another key feature of the novel's complex expression of pacifism: the recurrent images of bloodshed. A consistent presence of violence permeates the novel and contributes to the unity of all things despite the palpable disjunction of time. In Brian Foxe's suicide, Anthony's mother's early death, the newspaper reports of young men killed in the Boer War, and many other moments of carnage, Anthony's life is shot through with violence that he scarcely has the resources to endure. One notable example is the famous (or notorious) "dog episode" which occurs early in the text (though its setting on August 30, 1933 makes it one of the later events of the story). Anthony and his lover Helen are interrupted during their tryst by the "clattering roar" of an aeroplane above them. Anthony curses the plane, disturbed partly by its noise and partly by its viewpoint: "These damned machines!...They'll have a nice God's-eye view of us here...David and Bathsheba" (113). His guilty conscience is pricked along with his irritation at being bothered during love-making. But the scene takes a magical realist turn as the air is "punctuated" by "a strange yelping sound," an explosive thud a yard from where they are lying, and the sight of "a red pool at their feet [in which] lay the almost shapeless carcase of a fox terrier" (113). Anthony tries to quip away

his discomfort, saying “Yet another reason for disliking dogs” and telling the blood-spattered Helen that she looks like Lady Macbeth (114). Helen, in shock and horror un-mollified by Anthony’s humor, flees his side and ends their affair. It would be tempting to see bursts of violence like this one as Huxley’s condemnation of war through negative imagery. However, the absurd violence undoubtedly has a purifying effect by forcing the pair to face their illusions. At the same time, the dog scene surrealistically foreshadows war trauma with an image similar to the cow’s skull on the beach at the beginning of *Jacob’s Room*. But whereas Woolf slipped the skull image into the quiet texture of her descriptions, Huxley makes this event hilarious and bizarre, foregrounding the violence rather than the psychological effect. Susan Venter has an even more favorable view of the dog scene, arguing that it portrays Huxley’s turn away from the idiosyncratic religion of his friend D. H. Lawrence: “the death of the dog implies the symbolic death of ‘the animal’—that ‘mystique’ of the body postulated by Lawrence” and thus suggests that “meaningfulness replaces meaninglessness” (19). As a blood rite, the dog scene is certainly evocative, and some form of cleansing does occur for Anthony and Helen, but reading this moment simply as an effective ritual neglects the problematic linking of horrific violence with a pacifist conversion. If bloodshed has ritual properties, can even function as a means toward wholeness, then what basis can be given for saying that properly conducted warfare cannot have this same purification rite? Huxley offers us a contradictory tableau that undermines simple mythological or religious readings. The struggle for authentic peace-making intimately unites the pacifist with the world’s violence which cannot be easily controlled or contained by the narrative.

The dog episode displays its contradictions which resurface even as the novel concludes with Anthony’s lyrical glorification of Unity as his foundational belief:

Frenzy of evil and separation. In peace there is unity. Unity with other lives. Unity with all being. For beneath all being, beneath the countless identical but separate patterns, beneath the attractions and repulsions, lies peace. The same peace as underlies the frenzy of the mind. Dark peace, immeasurably deep. (471-72)

He sees unity in his commitment to the Organization, to the pacifist cause, to his comrades, to Helen his former lover who is now a friend wavering on the brink of pacifism, and even in enemy love. And unity is the term he finds to link several of the novel’s striking scenes of bloodshed: “in the drunken Mexican’s pistol as in the dark dried blood on that mangled face among the rocks, the fresh blood spattered scarlet over Helen’s naked body, the drops oozing from the raw contusion on Mark’s knee” (467). Through the

blood and violence and political mistakes of Anthony's life, he struggles to achieve a worthwhile pacifist presence. Rather than a conclusive endpoint, pacifism is a journey like monasticism, placing Anthony outside mainstream national and religious identities. As Huxley wrote during his own conversion, pacifism "entails devoted and unremitting personal service for the cause... peace is the by-product of a certain way of life" (qtd. in Dunaway 22). The form of *Eyeless in Gaza*—a certain way of writing—attempts to portray that impersonal yet somehow purposeful organization of life. A disjointed yet unified life emerges through the shifts back and forth in time and our experience of Anthony's vacillating philosophy, religion, politics, and erotic loves.

No simple didacticism, *Eyeless in Gaza* evinces through every chapter an enduring struggle with personal convictions, public actions, physical desires, and intellectual pursuits. The novel's title lifts from Milton the image of Samson, blind and bound, caught in slave labor for the very tribe he was prophesied to vanquish for Israel's freedom:

...O glorious strength  
 Put to the labour of a Beast, debas't  
 Lower then bondslave! Promise was that I  
 Should Israel from Philistian yoke deliver;  
 Ask for this great Deliverer now, and find him  
 Eyeless in Gaza at the Mill with slaves,  
 Himself in bonds under Philistian yoke (443-44)

For a supposedly didactic novel, Huxley's choice of title is curiously ambiguous. Thematising bondage and sightlessness as the conditions of the protagonist would seem to contradict the enlightenment and sage-like contentment discovered by Anthony as an antidote to the slaveries of the modern world. Huxley's lifelong problems with eyesight persistently emblemized his struggles to be a successful visionary, and this ocular theme echoes in the choice of title. The Samson of Milton's chamber drama bewails his incapacity to fulfill the salvation of Israel by his hand, much as Anthony is caught at the end of the novel with dedication and perseverance but without clear sight about how he might proceed. In other words, the agony of this process is more pronounced than the success of the mystical pacifist visionary.

### Pacifist Afterlife

By the time Europe had fully embarked upon the Second World War, many leading figures in the PPU and other parts of the peace movement abandoned the pacifist convictions they held so fervently in the 1930s. Beverley Nichols, whose pacifist screed *Cry Havoc!* of 1933 had been widely admired throughout Britain, made an about-face publishing *Men Do Not Weep* in 1941 where he imagines an autobiographical novel called "Death of a Pacifist" which celebrates the legions of ex-pacifists in barracks "forming threes in

khaki" (7). John Middleton Murry, Storm Jameson, Rose Macaulay, and many others also gave resignations, publicly declaring their former ignorance and newfound realism in matters of warfare.

But Huxley was not among them. His retreat from pacifist activism was quieter, more private. He maintained interest in pacifism, but his efforts turned toward rebuilding civilization after the war. He affirmed his brother Julian's 1941 pamphlet "Reconstruction and Peace," and he would offer his own brief commentary on rebuilding society in the book *Science, Liberty, and Peace* (1946).<sup>17</sup> His final novel, *Island* (1962) was still part of this effort to imagine a world without violent, technocratic wreckage. The British peace movement and Huxley's activism were never again as forceful as they were in 1936, and this year marks a high point for their struggle. As Huxley wrote to Leonard Woolf, the "pacifist way may not succeed; but on the other hand it might. And if it succeeded only partially, the international atmosphere wd [sic] be cleared" (*Letters* 401). Though pacifism seemed to die for many 1930s activists, efforts toward a just internationalism as a form of violence reduction suggest that the ideals of anti-war activism persist in a kind of afterlife evident in modern peace-building. Huxley's great novel of 1936 remains a testament to the struggle for personal and political unity through chaotic and fragmentary modernist forms, literary expression that enacts the confusing, difficult work of not just pledging but living for peace.

### Notes

1. See S. Krishnamoorthy Aithal, who conducts an elaborate reordering of the chapters as evidence for a claim that Huxley composed the novel chronologically and then shuffled the chapters. Aithal idiosyncratically suggests that the order of the chapters lends itself to six groups that correspond to the letters in "HUXLEY" or "BEAVIS." For examples of less far-reaching analyses which connect formalist readings to Huxley's philosophical influences, see May and Wasserman. David King Dunaway also repeats the apocryphal story that Huxley drafted the novel chronologically and cut his typescript with scissors. See Dunaway's "Introduction" to *Eyeless in Gaza*.
2. In a lengthy letter of 30 July, 1939 to his brother Julian, Aldous describes this commitment to the "Bates Method" (*Letters* 441-43).
3. The exact number for this peak membership fluctuates depending on the source. This figure comes from the most reliable expert on British peace movements, Martin Ceadel. See *Pacifism in Britain 1914-1945*.
4. Mark Gilbert, for instance, chronicles "the strikingly equivocal nature of the Peace Pledge Union's (PPU) views of Hitlerite Germany" and notes that "apologist tendencies were widespread among the PPU's leading intellectuals and writers" (493).
5. Even the most contentious issue on the ballot, which poses a hypothetical last resort of military measures for an attacking nation, was supported by

about 58% while approximately 20% renounced this idea and another 20% refused to answer. This data suggests a deep ambivalence within the British public about further warfare except as the very last resort. See Cortright for full results of the survey plus detailed analysis of its implications (76-79). See also Ceadel's *Semi-Detached Idealists* (317-19).

6. See Cortright for peace activism against appeasement (79-81).

7. See Ceadel *Semi-Detached Idealists* (326-27).

8. Despite its apparent failure, it is worth noting that the PPU still exists today and calls itself the "oldest secular pacifist organization in Britain." More information can be found at its website: <[www.ppu.org.uk](http://www.ppu.org.uk)>.

9. For more on this phase of Huxley's alternative military career, see Dunaway, *Huxley in Hollywood* (14-17).

10. The working relationship between Huxley and Heard has been the subject of several studies. See, for instance, Nugel and Eros.

11. Despite his eccentricism, Gregg's influence was surprisingly long-lasting. Martin Luther King was an admirer of the book and supplied a foreword for one of its later editions, writing "I hope [*The Power of Nonviolence*] gets a wide readership, particularly among those, in this country and throughout the world, who are seeking ways of achieving full social, personal and political freedom in a manner consistent with human dignity" (9).

12. Heard's manifesto for the new pacifism can be found in *The New Pacifism* edited by Gerald Hibbert, which contains essays by many writers including Huxley, Beverly Nichols, and A. A. Milne.

13. West's book began its life when she reported on the treason trials of William Joyce and John Amery for *The New Yorker*. Her first book-length study of what she called the "story of disloyalty" (West vii) was called *The Meaning of Treason* and was published in 1949 and a revised, expanded version called *The New Meaning of Treason* appeared in 1964. Sybil Morrison notes that the quoted line from the 1949 text was removed from subsequent editions of the text "after a lengthy correspondence between the General Secretary [of the PPU] and the publishers" (51). Morrison tartly adds: "Rebecca West herself consistently refused to see the General Secretary or to make any apology" (51).

14. Ceadel calls this isolationist position "quasi-pacifism" adopted by anyone who accepts fighting as long as they are not involved with it (*Pacifism in Britain* 10).

15. For further analysis of the controversies within the PPU over Gregg's method of "moral jiu-jitsu," see Ceadel's *Pacifism in Britain* (252-57).

16. Lewis's lengthiest treatise against Bergson, et. al. is *Time and Western Man* (1927).

17. See *Letters* 471-72.

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