

## **Burlap's Angels and Daemons** **Aspects of the Mansfield Myth in Aldous Huxley's** ***Point Counter Point***

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Among the continental writers who had a profound impact on major figures of English Modernism, the Russian classic F. M. Dostoevsky ranks highly. As Helen Muchnic points out, Dostoevsky's "cult-like" popularity (qtd. in Kaye 19) in Britain was fuelled by the publication of Constance Garnett's translations starting in 1912 (cf. Kaye 1–7). He was a presence few writers of the time could escape—Katherine Mansfield and John Middleton Murry were no exception. The latter published his monograph entitled *Fyodor Dostoevsky: A Critical Study* in 1916, and, parallel with that, Mansfield devoured the Russian writer's major novels (Mansfield 63–5)—an experience that would stay with her until the end of her short life (cf. Bényei 122). Peter Kaye even emphasises that the atmosphere of the period might be best described in Mansfield's own words: in a 1919 article of the *Athenaeum* she compares the London literary scene to the world of a Dostoevsky novel, teeming with "young gentleman-writers declaring (in strict confidence) that they were the real Dostoevsky" (Mansfield qtd. in Kaye 19). Indeed, as a fascinating episode of those times illustrates, Russianness or Dostoevsky's name became popular catchwords of modernity: the evening of Boxing Day, 1916, saw the acting out of a half-impromptu "Ibsen-Russian play" penned by Mansfield at Lady Ottoline Morrell's Garsington, in which both Mansfield and her husband featured—the latter as "a Dostoevsky character" (Alpers 227).

It is in this context that I would like to discuss a most curious phenomenon: Aldous Huxley, in 1916 an ardent participant not only in this Dostoevskian play but also in the Russian writer's cult-like admiration associated with Murry, launched, in his 1928 *Point Counter Point*, a harsh attack against his fellow writer by caricaturing him as Denis Burlap (Roston 381). Apparently, Huxley's satire is focussed on Murry's stomach-turning exploitation of his dead wife's legacy by creating the Mansfield Myth, which is clearly recognisable in Burlap's idolisation of his dead wife. In my analysis I will argue that this specific feature of Huxley's Murry critique is not only linked to a debate with Burlap's—Murry's—aesthetics, but it gains such prominence because Murry/Burlap is an epitome of Huxley's major target of criticism in *Point Counter Point*. It is

nothing else but “modern romanticism”—i.e. spiritual quest as a solution for the dilemmas of modern consciousness—summed up for Huxley at the time in Dostoevsky’s name. The factors pointing in this direction include Burlap’s echoing of Murry’s critical ideas growing out of his Dostoevsky study over the 1920s and his representation as a Dostoevskian figure. Through the half-comic fight of angels and demons for Burlap’s soul the Mansfield Myth and Murry’s Christian aesthetics, crystallised in his reading of Dostoevsky, are represented as two interrelated fictions that mutually discredit each other.

Huxley’s satire on “modern romanticism” in *Point Counter Point* is, to a great extent, a rejection of the Dostoevskian spiritual quest, which he saw—at the time—as a defining feature of diseased modern consciousness. In Robert Baker’s analysis it is a “sustained attack” on romanticism that “governs Huxley’s social satire” in his major works (4). With some simplification, the romanticism referred to here is an intellectual and spiritual approach to life at the cost of denying the body. Originally rooted in Platonic philosophy and most prominently embodied in ascetic Christianity, in Huxley’s view romanticism in its “inverted” or “modern” version results in the satanic and sadistic attitudes of the “looking-glass Christian”—the Marquis de Sade, Baudelaire or Dostoevsky (*On Art and Artists* 183). In his 1929 essay “Baudelaire” the analogy between the two latter writers is expanded upon in the context of Dostoevsky’s *Devils*, the novel *Point Counter Point* systematically rewrites.<sup>1</sup> Characteristically for the Dostoevsky reception of the era, Huxley identifies Dostoevsky’s most demonic characters with the author—in fact, he formulates his image of the writer solely on the basis of his demonic figures.<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand, Murry offers himself as an easy target for satire in this context because his critical output of the period, as William Heath emphasises, categorises him as a “subjective romantic” (53)—with a pronouncedly Christian twist. By 1924 Murry coined his own definition of romanticism, which is, according to Heath, “divorced from historical significance” (53). In his 1924 “Literature and Religion” Murry declares that great literature tackles a central issue that is religious in nature: the resolution of the paradox presented by the relationship of the I and the not-I, that is, the internal, spiritual world and the external world of necessity. A most acute awareness of this paradox is what defines for Murry modern, that is, rebellious post-Renaissance consciousness, which rejects “external spiritual authority” and “begins historically with the repudiation of established Christianity” (149–51) He calls this modern

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<sup>1</sup> Huxley reads its main character, Stavrogin, remodelled in his own novel as Spandrell, in terms of psychopathology (perversion, abjection, masochism, solipsism and monomania) resulting from the unhealthy liberty and dominance of intelligence (*On Art and Artists* 178–9).

<sup>2</sup> This reading deserves comparison with D. H. Lawrence’s similar interpretation of the Russian novelist as an embodiment of diseased modern “mental consciousness,” also based on the identification of the writer with his most troubled fictional characters (Kaye 44–5).

consciousness, in turn, Romantic (155–8).<sup>3</sup> Throughout the essay Dostoevsky is one of the most often mentioned examples of Romantics in the wider sense (e.g. 158). Not by chance: the germs of this train of thought are clearly recognisable in Murry's Dostoevsky monograph, mostly in his constant emphasis on the disembodied, purely spiritual nature of Dostoevsky's heroes.<sup>4</sup> Even in that text, he almost idolises the most troubled, rebellious—and demonic—Dostoevskian characters (Svidrigaylov and Stavrogin), whom he identifies with Dostoevsky (58–9; 198). Thus there seems to be an almost straight line leading from Murry's reading of Dostoevsky as a creator of rebellious spirits, through his concept of romanticism and modern consciousness, to his notoriously religious phase in his thirties (Frank Lea qtd. in Kimber 85).

On the other hand, Murry might have lent himself easily to Huxley's critique because in the eyes of some contemporaries he was actually identified with Dostoevsky. Burlap as editor of the *Literary World* evokes the *Athenaeum* years of Huxley's actual contact with the Murrys, 1919 and 1920. It was the heyday of Dostoevskian influence in Britain, during which Murry featured in Huxley's world as a "Dostoevskian character." The novel, however, was written in 1927–28, and thus much later events were layered over Huxley's personal reminiscences of Murry from 1916–20.<sup>5</sup> The first of these, Huxley's relationship with D. H. Lawrence, might have had a central role in both the formulation of Huxley's Dostoevsky critique and the reinforcement of Murry's rejection as a Dostoevskian character. As Peter Kaye describes, back in 1916 Murry's posturing as the "amanuensis" of the Russian classic was most sharply criticised by Lawrence, his close friend then.<sup>6</sup> In their heated debates Lawrence identified the "acolyte," Murry with Dostoevsky himself (35–44). By 1925–26, however, allegiances were shifted: the Huxleys and the Lawrences, both having broken with the Murrys, established a close attachment to each other (cf. Cushman passim). Its deep impact is clearly palpable, among other things, in the close affinity between Lawrence's and Huxley's Dostoevsky critique. One cannot stop wondering whether Lawrence's Dostoevskian vision of the Murrys, so biting and fictionalised in *Women in Love* (cf. Alpers 206), also influenced Huxley's

<sup>3</sup> Historical Romanticism is only a sub-period within this larger era which is characterised by a momentary mystical resolution of the above paradox ("Literature and Religion" 155).

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Dostoevsky's characters are "disembodied spirits," whose "bodies are but symbols" (*Fyodor Dostoevsky* 47).

<sup>5</sup> This overlaying is highlighted by Huxley's method of blurring together two slightly distinctive historical-biographical periods in *Point Counter Point* through his two fictional alter egos, Walter Bidlake and Philip Quarles (Firchow 530). The former character—a young writer involved in the tedious chore of producing reviews for Burlap—clearly associates Huxley's literary apprenticeship mentioned above (cf. Alpers 216–35, 290–306; Murray 111–21). However, Quarles—a mature writer just back from India with his wife and a five-year-old son—points to the years 1925–26 in Huxley's life (cf. Murray 173–85).

<sup>6</sup> In fact, it was Murry's excessive praise and somewhat idiosyncratic reading of the Russian classic as a "prophet" that caused a major break between Murry and Lawrence (Kaye 35–44).

understanding of Murry as the embodiment of Dostoevskian, diseased modern consciousness. The other sad event that played a crucial role in the shaping of Burlap's character was Mansfield's death in 1923. The Mansfield industry working at full power by 1925–27 served as a convenient target<sup>7</sup> and an easy tool for the revelation of the falsity behind Murry's "Dostoevskian" spiritual stance both as a critic and a human individual.

It is so because certain elements of the Mansfield Myth, whose constants were formulated by Murry on its emergence, right after Mansfield's death (cf. Meyers 24–5), seem to reverberate the terms and rhetoric of his religious-romantic aesthetics: the myth seems to be both a product and a justification of Murry's critical theory. First and foremost, Murry's accent on spirituality clearly finds its echo in depriving Mansfield of her body.<sup>8</sup> As several critics have pointed out, what remains of her in the myth is a disembodied spirit (Meyers 19–21; Kimber 81)—an "otherworldly" creature (Kimber 74), an angel. But this angel, if she also wants to be an artist of the higher order, must also embark on a religious/spiritual quest. And indeed, as Gerri Kimber does not fail to emphasise, the transformation of Mansfield's whole artistic career into a systematic mystical quest was so successful, that her reception in France, for example, is often spoken about in terms of hagiography (72–84). Nevertheless, to rank among the greatest, she must also be a Romantic; hence, as it has been often noticed, she is mentioned consistently together with Shelley, Keats and Blake (Meyers 32, cf. Murry, "Katherine Mansfield" 54–64).<sup>9</sup>

Needless to point out, it is the satirical representation of this mythologising in Huxley's novel that most prominently identifies Burlap with Murry. Burlap creates a fictional image of his dead wife, Susan, as a child-like, fully spiritual, angelic creature—a household saint—in a "more than usually painful series of [...] always painfully personal articles" (Huxley, *Point Counter Point* 172). Susan is replaced by a "phantom" (Huxley, *Point* 73) whose sole importance is that she is a major prop for authenticating Burlap's narcissistic role-playing as the devout admirer of absolute spiritual beauty. The role involves wallowing in grief and producing "abject" scenes—self-humiliating emotional outbursts.<sup>10</sup> The phantom and the disgusting scenes result from a process which Huxley tellingly describes through an analogy with the "churning up" of emotions in the

<sup>7</sup> Huxley also gave vent to his distaste for it in the essay "The Traveller's Eye View" in 1925 (qtd. in Kimber 75).

<sup>8</sup> A body, that was not only prominently physical—because ill—but also transgressively so: a female, lesbian and somewhat promiscuous body torn not only by the romantic and mentionable illness of tuberculosis but also by STD.

<sup>9</sup> Her aesthetically perceived death in the myth evokes instances of the cruellest romantic treatment of the female body: Poe's fascination with the death of the child-like beautiful woman as the most proper subject matter and inspiration for art.

<sup>10</sup> They are highly reminiscent of Dostoevskian novels, a connection clearly indicated by the phrase "spiritual masturbation" (Huxley, *Point* 173), which features both in the novel and Huxley's Baudelaire essay.

meditations of a Jesuit novice to evoke “a vivid, mystical and personal realisation of the Saviour’s real existence and sufferings” (Huxley, *Point* 173).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Huxley gives a sharp-eyed description of Murry’s creation of the Mansfield Myth as hagiography in his rather distasteful personal outpourings sold as literary criticism.

Huxley is also a keen-eyed perceiver of the connection between the angelic Mansfield image and Murry’s spiritual-romantic-Dostoevskian posturing as a literary critic: Burlap’s catchword is spirituality both in his fictional narrative of his dead wife and in his critical credo. Just as with Murry’s reputation, in which according to Meyers the handling of Mansfield’s heritage discredits his stance as a literary critic (38), in the novel these two versions of “spirituality” mutually undermine each other. One of them, the angelic Susan’s narrative is a cover-story that both saves Burlap from the effort of building up mature emotional-sexual relationships, and serves as his major tool for seducing women into his bed both before and after his wife’s death:

he had such a pure, *child-like and platonic* way of going to bed with women, that neither they nor he ever considered that the process really counted as going to bed. [...] Susan died [...]. [In front of Ethel Cobbet] he plunged into an orgy of regrets, [...] of repentances, excruciating for being too late, of unnecessary confessions and self-abasements. [...] A broken-hearted *child* in need of consolation, he would have liked to lure his consoler, *ever so spiritually and platonically*, into a gentle and delicious incest. (Huxley, *Point* 174–5, emphasis added)

Burlap’s other version of spirituality, his critical credo also reeks of inauthenticity: he portentously sounds it to everyone willing to listen, ridiculously regurgitating his own editorials, like pre-written theatrical roles. This is the impression he makes right from his first appearance: his introduction during a literary discussion with a Mrs Betterton at a party. During the evening, Burlap declares that “A great artist [...] is a man who synthesises all experience”, yet “there are more spiritual than bodily experiences,” and by implication these are the “great subjects” that define great artists (Huxley, *Point* 67–8). Presumably, under the influence of their lofty discussion Mrs Betterton sees Burlap’s face as “spiritual” and therefore “beautiful” (Huxley, *Point* 67), while young Walter Bidlake, who has just faced the same ideas in the proof of next

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<sup>11</sup> As Jeffrey Meyers highlights, these elements point to Huxley’s acute perception of such components of the Mansfield machinery as “the falseness of the cult,” “Murry’s pitiful exploitation of his grief”, the “emotional immaturity and childish role-playing of both Murry and Katherine” and “the destructive aspect of Murry’s ‘mystical’ love [described] in the metaphor of sexual perversion” (17–8).

week's editorial, cannot help but find them "rather ridiculous" (Huxley, *Point* 69).<sup>12</sup>

The inauthenticity of Burlap's spiritual stance—and by implication the untenable nature of the kind of spiritual-Dostoevskian solution Murry embodies for Huxley—is further underscored by at least two most Dostoevskian motifs in Burlap's character. The first is his split consciousness represented through the devil as his hallucinatory double. It is a distinctive feature of a favourite Dostoevsky character for Murry: Stavrogin. Similarly to Ivan Karamazov's devil it indicates his irreversible identity crisis and ontological insecurity. In Burlap's case the motif is devoid of the tragic Dostoevskian overtones: his own petty devil evokes a parodistic, sacrilegious morality play as a rather ironic reflection of Murry's own reading of Dostoevsky's novels as tragic "moral allegories" (Heath 56).<sup>13</sup> Rather comically, Burlap has the annoying habit of talking to one as if "he were addressing some little personage invisible to everyone but himself [...] his private daemon, perhaps; an emanation of himself, his Doppelgänger" (Huxley, *Point* 66). Whenever Burlap pronounces one of his hypocritical, sententious statements, his other, sceptical, ironic, and honestly immoral self—his demon or devil—interferes. Thus, when Burlap rejects the idea of a cynic as a great artist in the discussion quoted above, in his thoughts, the "mocking devil" immediately chips: "Though why you want to make an impression [...] unless it's because she's rich and useful, goodness knows" (Huxley, *Point* 67).<sup>14</sup> A sign of Dostoevskian-romantic self-division, rebellion and ontological crisis, the devil turns into a comic device for revealing Burlap's rather unextraordinary hypocrisy. This is also a caricature of Murry's—and Dostoevsky's—affiliation with established Christian churches, since Burlap is the one character in the novel who is most consistently associated with an overtly religious stance, more particularly with Catholicism.

Finally, the utter falsity of Burlap's spiritual stance is revealed by a second Dostoevskian motif: the archetypal crime in several of his texts, driving a child/woman to suicide. Among other Dostoevskian characters, Stavrogin drives a child to take this fatal step in *Devils* by sexually abusing her, while arguably in *The Idiot* Mishkin's inability to acknowledge Nastasya Philippovna as a physical

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<sup>12</sup> The ironic intertwining of Burlap's two fictions of spirituality is further emphasised by the fact that in this scene he mentally relegates Mrs Betterton—a woman of much material wealth, but of rather limited understanding, ungainly appearance and adulterous past—"to the side of the angels" (Huxley, *Point* 67) simply because she provides a faithful audience to his posturing as a prophet of spirituality.

<sup>13</sup> Burlap's dividedness is the first piece of information about him: he is both "a movie villain and St Anthony of Padua" (Huxley, *Point* 67) and his *epitheton ornans* is his "Sodoma smile" (Huxley, *Point* 69). The latter is an ingenious pun on the two meanings of Sodoma: the more well-known Biblical one, and a reference to a Renaissance painter, contemporary of Leonardo da Vinci—by implication a painter associated with the Gioconda smile.

<sup>14</sup> To add to this irony, it is right after this comment that Burlap recognises Mrs Betterton as an angel.

and sexual being is also a major factor in her suicidal return to Rogozhin, which leads to her murder. Huxley repeats Murry's reading strategy of blurring the boundaries between all kinds of Dostoevsky characters—saints and villains (cf. Kaye 38)—here: Burlap drives Ether Cobbett to suicide under the cover-story of a Mishkin-like pure spirituality, but his real motifs are those of Stavrogin-like seduction. In fact, Ethel kills herself not because she is seduced, but because she is ultimately rejected, though it is so because seeing through the hypocrisy of Burlap's platonic love—the thing that makes her fall for him in the first place—makes it impossible for her to succumb to his advances. Burlap manages to lure Ethel, his dead wife's schoolmate, to London with his pathetic role of the grieving widow, but she takes it too seriously and falls in love with him because of the romantic image Burlap creates about Susan. Naturally, she finds his narrative of pure spirituality incompatible with his attempts to start an affair with her, and working for him as a secretary she becomes a burden after rejecting his advances. The novel culminates with Burlap's summoning up his courage to finally get rid of her when he has found his ideal partner: Beatrice, who takes part willingly in his game of childlike innocence and spirituality; she idolises him—and most platonically goes to bed with him. Ethel's love for Burlap—and thus ultimately her suicide after her dismissal—is the product of his fiction of spirituality. Thus her story makes a powerfully ironic comment on the mortally harmful aspects of what Huxley conceives to be Dostoevskian spirituality.

This might suffice to illustrate that Huxley's satire on Murry in *Point Counter Point* is far from being an arbitrary personal attack that has lost all its significance for today's readers. It seems to be rather an organic part of Huxley's concern with modern consciousness, with the dilemmas the individual has to face in the modern world, and with the function of literature in their representation and potential resolution. One kind of solution—spiritual quest—was summed up in the name of Dostoevsky at the time, but for the Huxley of the late 1920s it appeared to be unacceptable. He satirises Murry as the closest thing available to the original. The creation of the Mansfield Myth—the figurative destruction of the female body which serves as a stage for the poet-creator to parade on as a prophet of spiritual truth—made Murry an easy target both because it repeats a Dostoevskian motif and because it simultaneously sums up and undermines Murry's critical stance. Not that Huxley's regurgitation of Lawrence's gospel of blood-consciousness through Rampion as his mouthpiece in the novel stood the test of time. However, his ingenious satire clearly illustrates how devastating myth-making is at least in one respect. Huxley never associates Burlap's wife, Susan, with literature. Thus he most effectively demonstrates how Katherine Mansfield, the brilliant woman writer disappears—within five years of her death—behind the angelic figure of the Mansfield Myth in fictional and non-fictional worlds of critical debate, male rivalry and devilish counterfeit. The mythical angel—similarly to that other, more famous “phantom” of Virginia Woolf—kills.

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