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Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza*: The Role of Time and Narrative in the Depiction of Personality

László Kajtár

- 1 In 1936, the Spanish Civil War broke out, and, on the very same night, Aldous Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza*¹ was published (Woodcock 15). The beginning decades of the 20th century saw an era of cultural and artistic ebullience and experimentation. Huxley's early satirical novels are usually praised because they paint an accurate picture of the intellectual atmosphere of the 1920s (Hoffman 137). However, when the deadly satirist chose to take the path of pacifism and mysticism, the consensus became that after (and even in) EG, Huxley took his intellectualizing tendencies too far and thus the 'novel of ideas' started losing its 'novel' part.² This paper is an attempt not at resetting the status of the novel in the canon, but at providing a field of interpretational possibilities that, if their consequences are taken seriously, would question the basis of judgments which depend on the canon. It is one of the paper's aims to question the notion of 'the novel of ideas' and its theoretical implications and conditions by referring to a more up-to-date framework, terms and ideas, and taking a closer look at the "unique linguistic universe" (Lodge 69) of Huxley's novel and its interaction with the reader. Using the notions of time and narrative to describe the intersection of the novel's and the reader's world, we are able to question the traditional realist view of naïve mimesis and representation.
- 2 The relevance of these notions to modernist literature is obvious. Modernism's obsession with the experience of time manifests itself through many narrative techniques, for example, the overuse of 'retroversion' and 'anticipation' (Bal 54) and achronic narratives. The novel is a primary genre in which these experiments with and interpretations of time and change take place.³ Paul Ricoeur even has a category for "stories about time": these are the stories that project "an experience in which time as such is thematized" (Ricoeur 268).⁴ The reason why novels are able to communicate with us is because they present a general knowledge about the way we make sense of our experiences in and of time. The intersection between reader and text is characterized by these sense-making procedures.

- 3 EGi is a particularly fine example of an alternative and unique configuration of time. It demonstrates its power through the depiction of personality. Jerome Meckier says that it is the most multiple *Bildungsroman* written in English (Meckier 151). This paper focuses on the life of the main character, Anthony Beavis and shows that the notion of narrative identity is actually very useful for interpreting his role and against any argument that would subsume EGi under the category of a 'novel of ideas' that gains its strength from an outdated 'representationalist' framework and a naïve view of the relationship between literature and life. However, if "modernist fiction lost touch with the real world", as it is often accused to have done (Stevenson 213), or if it is "discontinuous with real life" (Lodge 42), we have the chance to take advantage of it, to embrace what Huxley calls the "super-truth" of good fiction (Huxley 1960, 97). EGi is not a 'novel of ideas' but a problematic work that questions the relationship of literature and life. Huxley's super-truth is not a truth that corresponds to some state of affairs in the world but one that is performed by the creative act of writing and storytelling.

Unity and identity – The first deception

"Life and all being are one." (EG, LIV, 498.)

- 4 EGi can be and was seen as a didactic novel, a novel of teachings, which disproves Anthony Beavis's theory of the discontinuity of the self (Woodcock 198). "What right had the man of 1914 to commit the man of 1926?" – Anthony asks himself (EG, XII, 121.) His main theory is that personality is not static: persons are just series of states which have nothing in common. The narrative refutes this, seems to move from Anthony's detachment to commitment, from intellectual escapism to responsibility, from fragmentation to unity and from egoism to selflessness. In the end, in the last chapter Anthony realizes that every separate and individual being is one in a deep unity of existence.
- 5 Who then is Anthony Beavis? That is what the reader should learn from the narrative of EGi. EGi can, in fact, be seen as a demonstration of the narrative identity thesis: our identities and personality are 'readable' from the stories we tell about ourselves. In EGi's case, it is another kind of demonstration: Anthony's identity is discoverable from the story told about him. The fragmented and achronic time structure of the novel could be seen as a guideline, using Wittgenstein's famous expression: the ladder that should be thrown away once we climbed up on it. However, while we need "the ladder", we might as well examine its sense-making procedures.
- 6 EGi has four main timelines: the first one covers the time from the funeral of Anthony's mother in 1902 to 1904, the meal with Anthony's father and his new wife, Pauline. The second lasts from 1912, the Eton years of Anthony, Mark and Brian until 1914, Brian's suicide. The third basically consists of the party at Mary Amberley's place in 1926 and the last episode is in 1931, the year Anthony asks Helen (already the wife of Hugo Ledwidge) out to dinner. The fourth takes up more than half of the novel (28 chapters to be exact) and depicts the events of 1933, Anthony's break-up with Helen, Anthony's trip to Mexico with Mark, Anthony's diary entries and the last Chapter that is dated February 23rd, 1935. Taken separately these timelines themselves are linear, therefore we cannot pronounce the novel overly experimental: the experiment lies in their fragmentation and combination. The way each line is interrupted by another depicts chaos, a chaos of the mind. On the other hand, the dating of each chapter and the dramatic configuration of

events (for example, the suicide of Brian is first hinted at in Chapter III and is only shown in Chapter LII) suggests an order, an order not readily visible and not obvious on the surface.

- 7 “The thirty-five years of his conscious life made themselves immediately known to him as chaos – a pack of snapshots in the hands of a lunatic.” (EG, III, 18.) – this is Anthony in 1933 after a seemingly random remembrance of his friend Brian’s suicide, triggered by the odor of his lover’s skin in the sunshine. This is a perfect example of the sense-making procedures of the achronic narrative and it is paradigmatic of the structure of the novel itself. The connections in EG are not ordinary: they seem to be chaotic because they do not follow the cause and effect order of the ordinary timeline. The structure of EG mirrors this central position of individualized, experimental conception of time. At first glance, the structure suggests a conception of personality that seems like one without a central core; as John Atkins says: “There are no personalities in this world, whether Huxley’s or our own, but only states.” (Atkins 105) However, this is illusory and the interpretation falls into the trap of Anthony’s “self-justifying fiction”. (Wasserman 191) Anthony has his own conception of personality that he plans to develop in his *Elements of Sociology*: “And why do we imagine that we have coherent experiences and personality? Because our minds work slowly and have very feeble powers of analysis.” (EG, XI, 112-113.) Huxley, in this light, is a master of deception: he makes the reader think, throughout most of the book, that the fiction of Anthony, the protagonist is identical with the fiction of the implied author.
- 8 On the contrary, the narrative’s extraordinary structure and the jumps in time emphasize connections and coherence that are deeper than our ordinary consciousness, the one our ordinary, linear time-conception recognizes.⁵The thematic lines of, for example, the death of Anthony’s mother and the betrayal of Brian Foxe “transcend” the fragmentary structure. The early death of Anthony’s mother (which is also an autobiographical element) sets the narrative in motion. The novel begins with Anthony, looking at a snapshot of his mother (EG, I, 1.) This scene gathers its significance three chapters later, when we see Anthony, his father and Uncle James travelling to Anthony’s mother’s funeral in 1902, 31 years before the events of the first Chapter. Anthony, the “[p]oor, motherless child”, as his father thinks of him (EG, IV, 28.), is destined to be haunted by his mother for the rest of his life: his mother’s saying, “[r]eeking with germs” (EG, IV, 29.) and the contrast between his mother’s beauty and his humiliation when ice skating (EG, IV, 31.) forms the basis of Anthony’s detachment from the bodily world and his introverted self: he stared into “the horror and absurdity of existence” (Woodcock 36-38).
- 9 The betrayals committed by Anthony begin at the Bulstrode school and their victim is mostly Brian Foxe, the stammering ‘Horse-Face’ is the only one who does not adopt the distanced sham-sympathy that all the boys handle Anthony with and becomes the only true friend of Anthony despite Anthony’s betrayals. The major betrayal being Anthony’s seduction of Joan Thursley, Brian’s girlfriend. To examine this major betrayal in more detail, it must be remembered that many storylines intersect, many characters come together to enact this tragic event. First, because of the death of Anthony’s mother, Mary Amberley becomes an oedipal mother-figure for Anthony and, in turn, is able to push him into betraying his friend just “out of sheer perversity” – as she later puts it regretfully (EG, XXXIV, 357.) The second line is Joan’s relationship with Brian. This relationship is doomed by Brian’s fatherlessness, his affection – again an oedipal motive – for his

mother, Mrs. Foxe, who, of course, expects and returns it. The third line is, naturally, the friendship of Anthony and Brian. Anthony aggravates the betrayal by being unable to claim responsibility and confess to Brian who is driven to suicide by Joan's letter. The personalities, as we can see, that are partly revealed enter into a sort of 'dialogue' and enact the important crises and events.⁶ This partial exposure is enough to make the reader infer the end and calls attention to the depiction of personality.

- 10 In Chapter XII, Anthony's quasi-relationship with Helen Ledwidge is tested by the dog's body crashing onto the roof. Something unimaginable but real such as this incident that covers their naked bodies in blood is able to drive Helen away, and push Anthony to question himself, as the critic Jerry Wasserman observes:

In the days following the dog's fall Anthony begins to see through his own fictions for the first time. Like Milton's Samson Agonistes in the soliloquy from which Huxley took his title, Anthony becomes willing to admit that his blindness and bondage may be his own fault. (Wasserman 193)

- 11 Above, it becomes understandable how the novel depicts Anthony's personality, offering a narrative identity that is actually truer, more adequate than his own conception of personality and himself. In order to accomplish this, Huxley deceives the reader, by shaping the novel's narrative to imitate Anthony's theory, in order to show its weaknesses, which results in beating Anthony's theory on its own ground. The effectiveness of the fragmentation and combination lies in its ability to hold the reader in a state of suspension. This brings the narrative sense-making techniques in focus. The situations do not make sense at first: the reader has to engage in a questioning of the narrative to discover the meaning, constructed by the very same narrative (Kermode 46).
- 12 Therefore the reader goes through the fragmented time and the narrative, jumping from one linear timeline to another, finding out how Anthony is saved in the end. For example his former, abstract world of thoughts is unveiled as cowardice and instead of purity it is will to power used in the wrong way: "I used to think I had no will to power. Now I perceive that I vented it on thoughts, rather than people." (EG, XIII, 138.) The narrative and our interpretation go from unconscious self-deception through an epiphany to the realization of the true self. Wasserman describes it accordingly: "The self exists in disparate forms at different moments; but ultimately it is the same self. We work at sorting out the book just as Anthony struggles to resolve the chaos of his life." (197) Anthony's diary is the document, the proof of change. One of the most important aspects of change is the way he 'escapes' his very own, solipsistic, intellectual world that, from the point of view of salvation, is unveiled as compensation, even for Anthony himself. In his diary entries, he makes the reader anticipate the discrepancy between his self-image and his 'real' self. Many of Huxley's critics note one of his most sustained thematic lines, the reconciliation of the different parts of the self: the body, the soul and the mind (Atkins 151-152). Miller is the catalyst of Anthony's reconciliation, not creating a new Anthony but bringing to light a concealed but wholesome personality (Woodcock 202-203).

Multiplicity and diversity – The second deception

- 13 The ending of EG was interpreted as a weakness by many critics.⁷ The reader understands that Anthony's self-image was 'wrong' before his conversion and a 'true' self emerges from the story that Anthony himself realizes after the revelatory meeting with Miller in

Mexico. In the end EG as a 'novel of ideas' was seen as finding its defining idea in pacifism and mysticism. Although, it was argued above that there is such a deep structure hidden beneath the illusory fragmentation, this chapter of the paper conceives the structure not as the end of interpretation but another beginning. Therefore it has to be shown that the ending is 'implausible' for a purpose: the purpose being to make the reader accept certain insoluble tensions and to make the reader question the structure that his or her interpretation projected into the text.

- 14 The document of Anthony's salvation, his diary occupies fourteen chapters of EG. They are all from 1934, after the journey in Mexico and the meeting with Miller. They represent Anthony's changed state of mind and his break with his past that was ruled by his 'detachment'. Until the end, the reader does not really understand them, until then, reading the novel is accepting Anthony's former viewpoint, that is mediated to him or her through 'free indirect discourse'. In the end, the diary entries claim their rightful position: they speak the authoritative voice of the present, the truth that declares the past a lie. However, Anthony's diary is not to be fully trusted. It is again a deceptive device that Huxley employs. The true self, the transformed Anthony that emerges in the end, should be seen just as false, fictive and contingent as the one before. On a general level, every narrative identity escapes the true-false opposition of a correspondence view that relates the truth of statements to state of things in the world.⁸ The voice of the diary, despite its apparent authority, is the same old voice: Anthony does not prove in the novel that his latest theory of pacifism is not just a theory born out of compensation. In addition, Anthony, struggling with his former detachment, actually does the same as before; he tries to cut his past away from himself. Moreover, Anthony follows another pattern that is his heritage: he is again unable to accept responsibility, he accepts it only through Miller as he echoes Miller's words.
- 15 The ending can be seen as marked by the overwhelming (quasi-)presence of Miller, the strange, pacifist doctor whose 'deus ex machine' appearance is suspicious and he seems merely a voice for Huxley. However, "[i]f Miller lacks credibility, Anthony's conclusions as his protégé must also be suspect. And since so much of the novel, including its structural logic, seems to depend on our accepting Anthony's final point of view, it would appear that Huxley could hardly allow critical detachment in the end." (Wasserman 194) The glorious moment of Anthony's siding with Miller in a debate against Mark Staithes (EG, LI, 473.) is also a gesture of throwing away responsibility: instead of trying to figure out his identity for himself, Anthony adopts Miller's diagnosis of him that was given at their first meeting in Chapter XLIX and adopts his views as well. This seems to be EG's last word.
- 16 However, the last chapter might be read differently. In Chapter LIV, Anthony has to face a threat alone: "If only Miller were here to give advice and encouragement! But Miller was in Glasgow." (EG, LIV, 496.) The last chapter is in 'free indirect discourse' (not a diary entry) and it ends with: "Whatever it might be, he knew now that all would be well." (EG, LIV, 504.) The text ends here. Every readerly guess about what happens after this remains speculative and not interpretative.⁹ Instead of guessing, it is important to ask the question: why did Huxley stop here if the ultimate message was pacifism and Anthony's conversion? What Meckier says rings true, "[t]he whole novel has been a prelude to the course of action Beavis will now take and which the reader will comprehend because he knows how Beavis has developed" (Meckier 152) – just not true in the way he intends it. The whole novel has been a prelude to something that is missing which makes the novel a

prelude to uncertainty. And yes, the reader will comprehend uncertainty because he knows that Beavis has not yet reached an absolute identity. This is the satire of Huxley's egotistic eccentrics, proving that the counterpoint did not disappear in EG (Meckier 17).¹⁰ We argued that there it is possible to transcend the fragmentary combination of timelines and discover an order that sustains it. Now it seems that we cannot transcend the fragmentation in the interpretative process and we have to question the text again, this time not for a unifying principle but to discover the function of the uncertainty.

- 17 As we are primarily concerned with the depiction of personality and construction of identity, we have to describe the consequences to them in detail. Following Peter T. F. Raggatt, we can say that Anthony's identity, the person who he is, is not complete in the end of the novel: "the life story could never be encompassed by a monologue." (Raggatt 15) "With this view narrative identity is more like a cacophony of competing interests or warring historians than a nucleus with a single voice." (Raggatt 32) On the grounds of literary theory, this view of narrative identity fits nicely in a Dostoevskian-Bakhtinian, "polyphonic" framework. Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan concludes her study with the statement that there are dangers if we intend to fully integrate a personality into a higher narrative framework (12). The 'free indirect discourse' that Huxley ends the novel with is a perfect conclusion of a novel that only imitates the authority of the present voice by quoting Anthony's diary. The novel is mainly polyphonic: Huxley shows us the consciousness of many characters in every scene where they interact.¹¹ The focalization is almost always character internal, the narrator character-bound.¹² Thus, these narrative techniques support a suspicious reading, rather than one settling down at an obvious ideology behind the text.
- 18 Since focalization and narrative configuration are, in a way, rhetorical techniques to reach the reader, it is probably a good idea to interrogate Huxley's rhetoric. In advance, we can rely on Ricoeur's analysis: the rhetorical processes during which the author sacrifices his own position make the text look like a medium-less story. As the author disappears behind the implied author, the implied reader is manifested in the real reader. The goal of the author is to make the reader identical with himself, to communicate his worldview as effectively as he can. This frightens the reader and creates a distance that is also the tension in which the reading takes place. The impact of the work depends on the reader's level of immersion.
- 19 We cannot discover traces of this rhetorical strategy in Miller, neither can we in the redeemed Anthony. In EG neither the Anthony of 1934 and 1935, nor Miller are capable of being the vehicle of the rhetoric described above. This paper argues that the suspicious reader, made ready by modernism to engage the novel in a less naïve way, can and will search the text for a more believable and more convincing position of the 'implied author' than Miller and Anthony, a position that is worth communicating with.
- 20 We can support our claim that Anthony and Miller are not able to carry the 'implied author's' position in many ways. First, Anthony's journey is the reader's own and to making him a vehicle for the author as well would result in a premature supposition of unity between reader and author, therefore the reader will not have a 'proper' place to enter the novel's world. Second, Miller and his 'deus ex machina' entrance in 1934 come too 'late' to fully support the position of the implied author. True, he is mentioned already in the second chapter, but only through Anthony's diary, which, as we have seen, is ambiguous. Third, Miller does not have any problem with the medium, he takes speech

for granted, as does Anthony. However, an author should be fully aware of the problems concerning a text and literary communication. Huxley was certainly aware of them.

- 21 On the other hand, there is a much more subtle and much more effective position that is suitable for the implied author: Brian Foxe. Brian is a ghost-like entity who follows Anthony throughout his life and the time-structure of the novel will not let us forget his death: his body is found in Chapter LII. The relationship of Anthony and Brian can be seen as a paradigmatic instance of the relationship of the reader and the author. On a symbolic and allegoric level, Anthony's motherlessness and Brian's fatherlessness is interpretable to support this. In addition, Brian's stammering is both an effective device (the depiction of stammer is a strong stimulant of imagination) and a hindrance of communication which makes it analogous with the author's medium: the literary text.
- 22 Moreover, Brian is the one who keeps the narrative in motion. Throughout the novel, he makes Anthony question himself. The most horrifying aspect of the dog-incident which makes Anthony question himself is that it reminds Anthony of Brian's suicide: "Brian in the chalkpit, evolved by that salty smell of sun-warmed flesh, and again dead at the cliff's foot, among the flies - like that dog..." (EG, XII, 134.) Brian, with his love of birds, his commitment to fulfill the kingdom of God and his honesty (even in the matters which bother him) becomes a perfect candidate for carrying the poetics of "Whole Truth".
- 23 The depiction of personality, therefore, shows a tension in EG: between order, unity, identity and chaos, multiplicity and diversity. The narrative and time-structure are perfectly adequate to the purposes of expressing a tension like this: the interpretation goes from illusory order to deeper chaos, from illusory chaos to deeper order and this strange, loosely meant hermeneutic circle starts again. Anthony's seemingly finished identity is to be questioned again and again. The personality of Anthony only makes sense in the dialogue between him and Brian: this dialogue is constitutive both for the narrative identity of Anthony and for the reader's motive to question Anthony's identity. In the end, the only word that is pictured by the novel and in the novel as a breakthrough is a breakthrough of Brian to Anthony:

Brian suddenly laid his hand on Anthony's arm. The fingers travelled down the sleeve, then closed round the bare wrist; and thereafter, every time his stammer interposed itself between his feeling and its object, his grasp tightened in a spasm almost of desperation.

'I'm so t-terribly s-sorry about your m-mother,' [...]. (EG, VI, 58.)

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NOTES

- ¹ Abbreviated as 'EG' in the rest of the paper. The page numbers given in the text refer to the following edition: Huxley, Aldous, *Eyeless in Gaza*, London, Vintage Books, 2004.
- Unfortunately, Meckier falls into this trap as well. He says that EG contains “the seeds of Huxley’s dissolution as a novelist” and that “[i]ntellectualizing the novel can go too far.” (Meckier 159). See also Woodcock 20-22 and Hoffmann 136.
- On literature as a testing laboratory for possible human realities: Jens Brockmeier and Rom Harré, “Narrative: problems and promises of an alternative paradigm,” in *Narrative and Identity – Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture*, ed. Jens Brockmeier, Donal Carbaugh (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: The John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2001), 54.
- Or, differently put: “Fiction, in this sense, always has a secret about time, a knowledge which necessarily lies beneath the surface, and yet which also refuses the very idea of surface and depth which the notion of fictional knowledge offers.” (Currie 136)

5. "Huxley demonstrates the human necessity for transcending time" (Quina 636)
 6. "Huxley is not concerned with showing 'the slow development of personality', but wants to focus our attention on a crisis, psychological and moral, leading to a conversion; his vision is not evolutionary but climactic or mutative. And the second idea is that the technique is not imposed on the story from outside as a clever device, but consistent with, and indeed evolved from, Huxley's conception of time, consciousness, and change." (Vitoux 213)
 7. George Woodcock says that the conversion and Miller's figure are implausible because meditational experience can not be put into words (205). Meckier says EG "settles for Anthony Beavis's final conception of all the different events of his life as an interrelated whole." (61) And also criticizes Huxley for Miller being "shadowy" and "colorless" and EG turns out to be puzzle-solving (157). Anthony becoming the "all-engulfing consciousness": Vitoux 217.
 8. On the fictive nature of the identity constructions: "our history constitutes a drama in which we are a leading character, and the meaning of this role is to be found only through the recollective and imaginative configuring of that history in autobiographical acts. In other words, in narrating the past we understand ourselves to be the implied subject generated by the narrative." (Kerby 7).
 9. "But it resolves nothing at all. In the end we don't know whether he actually goes to speak at the pacifist meeting; or if he does, what might happen if he were physically attacked as had been threatened. Nor can we even guess for how long he might maintain his newly found faith." (Wasserman 203)
 10. Cf. "The temporal self-distance of retrospect is a lie which reveals the truth, and this renders the truth a matter of temporality rather than simple presence." (Currie 64)
 11. Mary Amberley's party in Chapters XIV, XVIII and XX is a central scene of polyphony.
 12. About focalization: Bal 104-105. The narrator: Bal 122.
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ABSTRACTS

This paper presents an analysis of Aldous Huxley's 1936 novel, *Eyeless in Gaza*. Generally, the point is to show that the novel very rarely received criticism that does not seem outdated by now. By describing the protagonist's character and the interconnectedness of time, narrative and personality, it will be demonstrated that Huxley was a master of deception and that *Eyeless in Gaza* is a much more complicated text than it is traditionally thought to be.

Cet article propose une analyse du roman d'Aldous Huxley publié en 1936, *Eyeless in Gaza* [*La Paix des profondeurs*]. L'objectif de l'étude est de montrer que le roman a été presque toujours analysé à travers des commentaires qui semblent désormais dépassés. En révélant les principaux éléments du caractère du protagoniste et leurs relations au temps et à la narration, nous chercherons à démontrer que Huxley était le maître de la tromperie et que *La Paix des profondeurs* est une oeuvre bien plus complexe que ce que la critique a pu en dire.

AUTHOR

LÁSZLÓ KAJTÁR

Is a student of philosophy and English literature. After having earned degrees in both, he is ready to begin his doctoral career. His research focuses on borderlines between the philosophical and literary language and discourse. With an interdisciplinary method, he investigates the exciting concept and phenomenon of 'narrative'. Based on the disciplines of philosophy, literary studies, narrative psychology, aesthetics and narratology, he aims to provide an original contribution to the study of the aforementioned fields