

## Stating the Obvious? Lewis's Critical Reception: Pedagogy, Criticism and Hermeneutics

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Maria Ollivère's valuable piece in the 2008 *Wyndham Lewis Annual* begs a number of questions about reactions to Lewis in Academia, and in what follows I would like to offer a few comments, and to put Lewis's present relative neglect into a rather wider context.<sup>1</sup>

That Lewis is no longer taught in British Universities is no doubt generally true, though I would be interested to know how often, and to what ends, his work was studied in the past. But the idea that his work and its critical reception are unfamiliar should in itself deter nobody when we are so used to curriculum revision and canon reformation. The availability of the material should also present few problems if one's University library has copies of the relevant texts – even a page or two of *BLAST* (1914-1915) can prompt students to expand and think through their responses to modernism. To be sure, where curricula decisions are concerned serious problems arise in an era of galloping rationalizations in Higher Education, but there are ways of getting Lewis onto the agenda. For undergraduates the intrinsic difficulties of his work, when well presented, do not exceed those of Eliot, Pound, Cubism, Futurism, or a number of other writers and *isms* which are taken to be the stock-in-trade of modernist syllabi. As with all difficult and problematic material, everything depends on the quality of the teaching and the ideas put into play. Granted, some Lewis texts, such as *Enemy of the Stars* (*B1* 1914) are distinctly awkward to 'sell' (my apologies for the market jargon), but I have taught *Tarr* (*T1* 1918) with a reasonable degree of success, even using the Penguin edition to save students money, and the visual art of the *BLAST* years fits nicely into an exploration of intertextuality in the context of the period. One does, of course, have to limit one's horizons. It is indeed hard, when time is always at a premium, to deal adequately with those big books of cultural criticism written in the 1920s. One way around this problem is to adopt a synoptic approach to key issues, taking material from a number of sources in order to synthesize a provisional viewpoint, which students

can absorb with furrowed brow, and, one hopes, a measure of informed critique.

So far so good, but I suspect the real difficulty with getting Lewis onto modules lies with what Alan Munton calls ‘the expectation of a stock response on the part of the reader’.<sup>2</sup> When degree programmes are increasingly pre-programmed to churn out graduates, when they have to satisfy tick-box criteria of excellence, and when the emphasis falls increasingly on ‘transferable skills’ (with all the ‘vocational’ implications), anything that does not fit the template is going to be pushed to the margins. In this situation, and with teaching preparation time in short supply, it is all too easy to roll out one’s tried and trusted notes on *The Waste Land* (1922), *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), or whatever, rather than attempt the laborious process of doing sufficient duty to a complex body of relatively new work, whose modernist, even postmodernist, credentials must be established and defended. And here, if Lewis does get taught, there are ready-made responses, some of them put about by front-line theorists who should have known better, Fredric Jameson being a classic example.<sup>3</sup> I vividly recall one of my own finals papers – I was the only one to take the Lewis option under R. T. (Bob) Chapman – in which I got away with describing Lewis’s work as a species of ‘hand-me-down Nietzschean right wing existentialism’ (how vividly I recall the phrase!), which probably sounded impressive, but is obviously inadequate, as I have tried to show over the years when going into print.<sup>4</sup>

Pedagogically, the problem here is a kind of gravitational pull towards the synopsis, the ideologically tidied up, the prescriptive judgement, the moral imperative, and the summary assessment of complexity, especially when the parameters of historiography have been expanded by developments in what goes loosely under the banner of ‘theory’ – I’ll come back to this weasel word later. My suspicion is that, unlike other modernists, Lewis’s work has not been domesticated – a good thing. But substituting for this process is too often a kind of ideological or political closure which presents his work as problematic, even at times unpalatable, for the wrong reasons. My experience of teaching Lewis’s texts is that many students are put off because the present imperatives of higher education prevent an exploration of the contexts which would make the symptomatology of his work comprehensible. Lacking the pre-digested content one finds in ‘critical’ summaries of Eliot, Pound, Woolf, Picasso, Marinetti, et. al., students are confronted by a set of more-or-less experimental representational practices that can only be addressed through critical publications which

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(like mine) are often too ramified for undergraduates, even some postgraduates, to grasp. Ergo, one finds oneself reflecting ruefully on the prospects for Lewis when goal-directed facility on degree programmes too often passes for critical quality, and where signs of intelligence are measured by an ability to satisfy protocols dictated by the expediencies of a bums-on-seats, students-as-units-of-resource, type logic. This merely impoverishes the exploration of modernism (or anything else), in favour of a check list of already established evaluative criteria. So in the case of *The Waste Land*, any student who can organize some coherent remarks about discursive registers, linguistic juxtaposition, the displacement of poetic voice and point of view, intertextuality, and the possible impact of the First World War in the context of 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), is almost guaranteed a first class result. And such an answer is not too difficult, because it is all set out in so-and-so's guide to the poem, available in the University bookshop, or online. All that is needed is a suitable degree of comprehension, plus a respectful inclusion of texts on the module's Short Loan list to show that the appropriate additional reading has been attempted. In my *Wyndham Lewis Annual* review of Andrzej Gąsiorek's commendable short book on Lewis, I hinted at this problem: has anyone yet written the equivalent of the everything-you-need-to-know-about-Woolf (or whoever) type text for the Enemy?<sup>5</sup> One can almost guess what it would say in order to satisfy such a ridiculous brief.

Those who want to teach Lewis are therefore caught in a double bind: on the one hand they correctly believe that his work deserves inclusion on modernist modules, while on the other they want to guard against domestication, with the result that Lewis's texts lurk with 'attitude' outside the carefully negotiated boundaries of consumption. It is far easier, then, to let it stay where it is, while according it the odd passing reference in order to 'contextualize' the accepted exegesis. The fact that a serious study of Lewis demands a multidisciplinary approach is a further complication. How many students are going to be sufficiently *au fait* with recent developments in English studies and the history of art (to name the two obvious reference points) to undertake the task, even at a preliminary level? Only last year I was asked to help supervise an MA student who subsequently abandoned a thesis on Lewis because she found the range of his work bewildering, and the best critical material too forbidding.

Lewis's non-pedagogical critical reception is perhaps less easy to unravel. Though his notorious political gaffes had been seized on by

critics before *Fables of Aggression* appeared in 1979, Jameson's book – a trial run for what became *The Political Unconscious* of 1981 – did a lot of damage by concatenating too many bits of textual evidence in favour of an overarching theory which said more about the author's theoretical ambitions and political investments than the multiple values of Lewis's work. This was, in other words, a classic example of critical decisionism – a book written to an ideological agenda, whose complexities short-changed the complications of its subject-matter by overwriting them with its own. It opened the doors for other books keen to make a villain of Lewis, presenting him as a thoroughly suspect author whose texts are worth reading only as warnings of how modernism's political aspirations could go disastrously wrong. This has certainly skewed Lewis's latter-day reception and distorted the hermeneutic processes necessary for understanding his work. Too many writers on Lewis seem insufficiently concerned about the closures evident in their own analyses, and many remain blind to what Paul Edwards called the 'fissiparous' nature of Lewis's output and especially its tendency to undo some of its putatively founding presentiments in what I can only describe as a series of auto-deconstructive hermeneutic strategies.<sup>6</sup> As an example of the latter, one only has to look at the Black Sparrow edition of *Tarr* to realize that the artistic/aesthetic philosophy ascribed to its eponymous 'central' figure is anything but secure, and that the book, as Lewis shaped it in 1918, is simply incoherent in political terms. Or what about Vorticist art, where the curious proto-Bakhtinian admixture of Futurism, Cubism, and Expressionism *ipso facto* destabilizes any authoritative modernist viewpoint? I've often felt that reading Lewis is like entering a hall of mirrors, where philosophical and political positions are being rehearsed, rather than rigorously maintained, even though some things – the distaste for what we now call 'mass' cultural phenomena, for example – are pretty constant. But even here, *BLAST*'s dialogic relationship to popular cultures is by no means straightforward.

This scenario can cause problems for Lewis's advocates too. A – perhaps *the* – key issue concerns what we make of 'incoherence'; this involves some knotty questions about what we think modernisms are doing when they pronounce upon the world of modernity. Put another, and somewhat loaded way, to what extent do readers of Lewis go looking for reasons to close down incoherence for the sake of celebrating his works' critical insights and thus to argue for his importance in the canon of great artists/writers/cultural critics? The best move here – or so it has always seemed to me – is to explore the

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symptomatology of incoherence, and to see it as a hermeneutic virtue. This has the immediate advantage of decoupling authorial intention from results (old hat now anyway), of displacing any attempts to institute a great man theory of modernism (ditto, or should be), of locating any analysis firmly in the problematic of modernism's historiographies (where one really needs a working knowledge of several kinds of poststructuralism, as well as Frankfurt School Critical Theory – again I'll come back to this later), and of acknowledging – Jameson was right about this – that a meta-commentarial focus must aim to situate the analysis in its own ideological frames, thus to rid it as far as possible, of any pretensions to critical mastery, while admitting the existence of recuperative blind spots. Done well – and it's not at all easy – such a move links the analysis to its texts while maintaining an appropriately reflexive critical distance. This is especially important where Lewis is concerned precisely because of his marginality, since what one thinks his work can tell us about both the virtues and pitfalls of modernism will be partly conditioned by that fact. Clearly, on this account, hagiography is inadmissible, and so is that kind of reading which simply finds Lewis to be politically reproachable. Obviously, no act of criticism is value-neutral, and Lewis needs his supporters, but we should be scrupulous about why we think him worth the effort, and what kinds of historical and political awareness we bring to bear when we attempt to re-draw the maps of modernism. This is a real difficulty: one is faced with the need to understand many contexts in order to mount a reasoned argument, and it is all too easy to find oneself adrift in areas which appear to demand a book length study of their own as a form of preparation. (I have always cited the importance of Nietzsche in this respect.)

One of the difficulties in coming to terms with Lewis is that no one example of his work represents a stable, free-standing aesthetic or political attitude, even if we consider texts produced around the same date. That group of works which might loosely be gathered under the umbrella of Vorticism is a case in point. It would be foolish to locate a unified politics across *Tarr*, *Enemy of the Stars*, *The Crowd* (M P17; 1914-15), *Composition* (M 125; 1913), 'The Meaning of the Wild Body' (CWB), and the *Timon of Athens* (1913) works, because each signifies in its own way, and because each act of signification would need to be violently *reduced* to a political position to establish the looked for coherence. On the other hand, Maria Ollivère's argument runs the risk of marginalizing those readings which, since they cannot encompass the breadth and depth of analysis required, opt for more selective approaches. There are

two basic problems here. Firstly, Ollivère's final paragraph hints at an Archimedean critical position which is simply unavailable. I will touch on this issue again below, and in conclusion. Ergo, it is important to understand what the critical reception of Lewis is doing when it becomes explicitly political. Any act of critical recuperation is based on some sort of preconceived set of assumptions, and Jameson's notion of 'meta-commentary' eventually breaks down under the logic of a *mise-en-abyme*, or an infinitely regressive series of attempts to explain the assumptions behind the critical act. At some point any interpretation has to rest on an unexamined set of core principles, which it is then the duty of another critic to identify. This is a gradualist model of critical progress, albeit one that is subject to the usual strictures on the impossibility of completion. It is certainly preferable to what I'm tempted to call *the imperative of hasty pronouncement*, precisely because in Lewis's case it frustrates the establishment of an apparently clear-cut political identity for both text and critic.

The second problem is that the kind of fully contextualized approach which is strictly necessary to begin to get to grips with the implications of Lewis's work is logically bound to keep that work away from mainstream debates, in order to preserve Lewis's outsider, or self-declared Enemy, status. One cannot have it both ways. Either Lewis will become domesticated, canonized, and admitted into the academic milieu, in which case something will be lost, or his work will remain on the margins, in which case the gain of non-incorporation will very likely be at the expense of the work's immurement in the political ghetto defined by its detractors. (This is, of course, a classic dilemma of any avant-garde which wants its irruptive marginality to be socially meaningful.) The only other alternative is to corral the politics and to concentrate on the texts' 'safer' aspects – for example, a formalist analysis of Vorticist art which ignores its awkward sociological dimensions. This is less likely in the light of the 'new' art histories, but could still be attempted using a kind of neo-Greenbergian logic, where Lewis's aesthetic defence against the depredations of modernity would in/conveniently annexe the very sociological ground of the critiques on which it otherwise depends. But at present this is hardly likely to gain credibility, except perhaps as a desperate move to recoup a space for the damage done by modernity to Kant's sense of a critically alienated aesthetics.<sup>7</sup>

A crucial issue here surrounds Ollivère's use of the term 'versatility' to describe Lewis's output.<sup>8</sup> If I am correct in thinking that at

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its best his work explores, rather than defines, political positions and implications, such versatility complicates all those readings – selective or more fully contextualized – that seek a final destination for modernism. As anyone who has worked seriously on modernists texts knows only too well, their very nature argues against neat definitions and explicatory narratives. When even a term like ‘avant-gardism’ has multiple meanings and usages, we surely do not want to restrict the possibilities for Lewis’s contributions to debate. So while I agree about the politically unacceptable aspects of *Paleface* (1929), and while Lewis’s book *Hitler* (1931) deserves what it generally gets, there is much more to Lewis’s modernism than his own less perceptive or politically judicious remarks will tolerate. A decent critique of Lewis will therefore recognize that his work is in many respects divided against itself – as is all creative work that strives to avoid too narrow an understanding of its subject-matter. We simply have to acknowledge – and this problem has been intensified by developments in the ‘post’ disciplines – that ideological short-cuts are not just undesirable but actively damaging to intellectual activity, which should be flexible enough to cope with multiple perspectives but rigorous enough to follow through the implications of its own arguments. This is why *Fables* is such a frustrating book. On the one hand its theoretical ambitions, especially when seen in the context of Jameson’s other work (I’m thinking immediately of *Marxism and Form* (1971), *The Political Unconscious*, (1981), *Late Marxism* (1990), and the two volumes of collected essays (both 1988), can be liberating, but on the other hand, its partiality towards Lewis is in the end a real impediment. *Fables* remains for me a touchstone of how ‘not’ (see below) to deal with Lewis, and for that reason alone it has a kind of symptomatic value. My point is that, like Lewis’s work, criticism has a ‘moment’ which tells us about its interpretative investments. In presenting its case, the decisions made about what to include, and what to exclude, can be as valuable as the texts being discussed; in this sense the customary boundaries between object text and critical analysis start to break down. A good example of this process occurs in the analysis of some ‘popular’ cultures, where the critical reading can be more interesting and rewarding than the text appears in ‘itself’ to be, even if the former has provoked the latter.

Essentially, any critical act tells us why and how particular texts are valued, over and above the ostensible reasons given. To take an example from Ollivère, Kathy J. Phillips’s readings of Lewis clearly belong to a problematic, because highly selective and apparently pre-

programmed, kind of critical practice which Ollivère rightly sets out to expose.<sup>9</sup> That the sort of reading advanced by Phillips keeps appearing is depressing, though it may contain valuable insights en route to its reductive conclusion. For example, Ollivère's remark that Phillips's interpretation of 'The French Poodle' (1915 *CWB*) gives 'a virtually non-existent character' (Dolly) an unwarranted importance might be held to open the door to another kind of (psychoanalytic? Machereyan?) reading, in which narrative marginality may take on hitherto unexamined significance.<sup>10</sup> The germ of such a reading appears in Phillips but, through one of those inevitable blind spots, is not pursued.

The critical relationship between Phillips and Ollivère is also interesting. Since Ollivère's article is what one might describe as 'theory light' it tends to follow a well legitimated practice of critical authority, instead of putting into play arguments which would call its own assumptions into question as part of the critical process, which is what, I think, Jameson's practice of 'meta-commentary' is ideally intended to do. I really don't mean to be too critical here. The question is whether a piece of criticism moves things on, whether it is productive to our understanding of the interactions that take place when a reading meets a text. In that sense, my response to Ollivère's piece indicates that it does a useful job (which is only another way of saying that a good reading will generate further insights) not just because of what it contains but also because of what it omits. It is part of a hermeneutic series, not an end-stop to debate. Jameson's *Fables* is again a good example of such a text, even if its complex theoretical apparatus may have put a lot of people off. Strong misreadings are usually better than weak ones because they provoke intentionally corrective and corrigible reactions. I don't want to sound too Hegelian about this (especially in the light of Derrida) but there is certainly a case for arguing that, at its best, the academic *corrida* gets us closer to the truth (that damned elusive category) than cliquey dis/agreements about the significance of Lewis's special insights into modernity, rival modernisms, or whatever, and that it does this by an inevitably jagged process of critical accretion. I would say, however, that 'theory' has delivered insights that are still too often ignored by critics who seem to think it acceptable to carry on as if the whole theory-thing was just an aberration, like critical flat earthers who cannot face the implications of thoroughly problematized 'postmodern' metaphysics, and the consequent challenges to comforting assumptions about value and authority.

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This still leaves us with the thorny issue of what counts as a significant reading, who gets to sanction it, and why. It is virtually impossible to prevent what one might call ‘centres of legitimation’ from developing around authors and texts, since academia trades on hierarchies, and the processes of inclusion/exclusion. Getting one’s ideas into print while doing one’s Ph.D. is a classic case in point, and in these circumstances a well-argued riposte to published work is strategically necessary, provided it is *dans la vrai* (Foucault) or paradigmatically acceptable (Kuhn), according to current criteria. The situation of ‘theory’ is interesting in this context. When I was trying to place my monograph on Lewis I was told by one notable publisher that ‘theory’ (I used rather a lot of it, and for various purposes, but my respondent did not care to differentiate) had had its day, and this, together with the lack of sales potential for a book length study on Lewis by a relatively obscure academic, meant that there was no reason to offer a contract. The actual argument of my study was, it seems, a secondary consideration. So, yes, I agree with Ollivère’s remarks about market forces, and any attentive reader of Lewisian critical history will need to develop a sharp sense of how and why opinions and counter-opinions are formed, of why some work gets into print and some decent work (like Pam Bracewell’s Ph.D. thesis on *Time and Western Man*) languishes on academic library shelves.<sup>11</sup>

In the end, it is hard to escape the conclusion that critical opinion is structured by forces other than, or at least in addition to, those which would focus on the tests of relevance, significant difference, and quality of argumentation. ‘Twas always thus. At the same time, it would be foolish to maintain that the three criteria I mention are simply secondary to institutional pressures. In reality there is a constant negotiation between ideological and other argumentative processes, and one just has to accept that one’s work will be judged according to tried and tested protocols, until the existing paradigm breaks down. The paradigm – the regime of ‘truth’ if you will – I would like to see would open up Lewis to approaches which are not hidebound by prescriptive or pre-packaged findings, which admit well argued and innovative readings of the work, but which situate themselves in relation to hermeneutic issues that have unexpected or unexplored significance. We don’t need to keep being reminded of Lewis’s failures when anyone sensitive to history quickly finds out where the texts are questionable and where at their worst they are politically and morally objectionable – this is a first base, not the finishing line. We are, after all, supposed to be skilled at developing

extended and penetrative arguments, which is one of the fundamental tenets of an educational process. What we really need to know is how and why such characteristics can be seen to have come about in a body of work which contains so many other productive things. The problem with readings motivated by condemnation and knee-jerk accommodations to politically sanctioned lines of enquiry is that they risk doubling the closures that Lewis himself was sometimes tempted to provide. And this is to no-one's long term benefit, even if it may go down well on the right kind of job application.

It is tempting to argue – with all due respect – that certain readings of Lewis are now so bandwagon predictable that a moratorium ought to be declared. Ollivère's remarks on Charles Ferrall's approach are interesting here.<sup>12</sup> Her claim that Ferrall's reading 'perhaps demonstrates most eloquently Lewis's current status, subjecting his work to scrutiny under the convenient lens of politicised literary and critical readings, and therefore accessible only as a small part of the modernist *sparagmos* (tearing apart), with the consequences that the field is narrowed for academics and students alike' (59) is fine as far as it goes, but the implication that some sort of proper approach to Lewis will restore his work to undergraduate critical neutrality begs the question of what kind of contextualized readings might inform the process, and how they might declare *their* framing devices. Therefore, in the present circumstances any response to Ferrall is also bound to be inadequate *to some degree*.<sup>13</sup>

If Ferrall does indeed conclude that Lewis's texts celebrate modernity's sterility then this is a weak misreading, suggesting too convenient a fit between victim and victimized. It is an argument, mounted to counter Lewis's ethos of critical detachment, which overreaches itself, even as it simplifies the evidence in fear of critical incompleteness. On the other hand, all of us use a working frame to mobilize debate, even if it turns out to be as simple as Paul Edwards's assertion in *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* that 'Modernism [...] [is] a continuation of Romanticism by other means' – a comment which the rest of Edwards's argument tends to subvert by constructing a palimpsest through which 'Romanticism' becomes ever more obscure.<sup>14</sup> We all need a set of working hypotheses to get an argument going: it's what happens next that makes the difference between critical slavery and relative intellectual autonomy; between staging, however ingeniously, an already legitimated argument, and real critical progress. The quasi-Hegelian protocols of academic argumentation are an issue in

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this context, with all their imperatives of reason, truth, and logic, directed towards conclusions and the specifications of history. I sometimes wonder if one of the best ways of responding to Lewis might be another work of art, in the same way that the composer Robert Simpson held that Beethoven's Razumovsky quartets could be understood – at least from the composer's perspective – through another example of the medium, when a second order language is *ipso facto* finally reflexive of its own means.<sup>15</sup> How many commentators on Lewis can claim to understand his visual art from the 'inside', as practitioners? So much depends on what we expect a second order academic critical analysis of Lewis to reveal, beyond academia's basic urge to keep itself in business by piling up additions to the library. Again, Derrida's work on philosophy, language, and signification can tell us a thing or two about what criticism and 'theory' can and cannot do when they attempt to account for art and aesthetics. Wittingly or unwittingly, Lewis seems to have anticipated a deconstruction of his own text when in *Time and Western Man* he avers that an argument about philosophical legitimacy is based on aesthetic criteria (*TWM* 134). How often is this point really explored, and its implications followed through?

Perhaps I can expand a little on the kind of approach which I think yields dividends by referring briefly to the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, because Gadamer's interest in the critical hermeneutics of historiography demonstrates what is at stake when Lewis can be seen to be part of a much bigger modernist dilemma than some of his commentators are willing or able to acknowledge.<sup>16</sup> Gadamer's departure from nineteenth-century conceptions of history (in Dilthey, for example) is both an advance and a problem for interpretation, when in lax conceptual hands it appears to open a door to epistemological relativism, or to the neo-pragmatist line taken by Richard Rorty. For present purposes it doesn't matter very much where one locates the *problem* of a truly self-critical historiography (some obvious examples being Nietzsche's ontogeneticism, Freudian psychoanalysis, the works of Heidegger, Foucault, Kuhn, Derrida, Gadamer himself), and it should be noted that Gadamer's approach to some extent picks up on what is latent in earlier hermeneuticists, beginning with Friedrich Schleiermacher.<sup>17</sup> What I have in mind concerns the fact that questions about the identity and progress of some core modernist assumptions – assumptions which derive from the ground of Enlightenment progressivism, and the revaluations of art and aesthetics in that context – are inseparable from questions about how we know what we know,

and consequently how an intervention in the accepted order of things can be framed. Gadamer's enquiries into the possibility of objective knowledge, and the implications for systems of representation which might hold a brief for transparency, are themselves best seen as expressions of a philosophical modernity driven to extreme acts of self-questioning – acts which arguably belong more to art and aesthetics than to science or metaphysics, as conventionally understood. The shaping power of interpretation may provide us with historical knowledge, but that knowledge comes at the price of an increasing awareness of how the written is inseparable from the writing. It is this move that lets in both the kind of politicized criticism we find in Jameson and his various acolytes, *and* the necessity for that criticism to be critiqued when, by definition, it serves its own interests.

As I've argued before with respect to Jameson, attempts to establish a ground of (political) meaning cannot simply be abandoned to relativisms, and they are certainly *not* morally remaindered. But they *have* become problematic in epistemological terms. Gadamer's point that we are historical beings precisely because we are both the subjects and creators of history is the key one in the present context. (Althusser's notion of semi-autonomy with respect to ideology comes to mind here too.) A strong hermeneutics, and therefore a strong misreading, should in theory be more aware of its limitations, even as it expresses the desire to outwit them in the cause of establishing critical legitimacy. Is not this latter the desire we see repeated over and over again in Lewis's work, even as it is thwarted by that same work's modernist agendas? If, as Gadamer argues, the only history we can write springs from our own mis/conceptions about the constitution of knowledge, truth, and logic, we are surely in a better position to interrogate the pitfalls of that awareness. The dialogue that Gadamer wants to establish between a text and its interpreter is less a matter of imposition, as some analysts of power relations, over-reliant on Foucault, have claimed, than an open-ended exploration of how meaning can be configured in such a problematized 'neo-Hegelian' situation. The one constant here is the text itself, which can be interpreted and re-interpreted according to the protocols, critical investments, and institutional parameters operating in the present tense. Except that, properly understood, there is no text 'itself' when its identities are necessarily multiple and contingent. In effect, the text is a product of a history which it cannot fully focus, and which subsequent commentators scrutinize in the cause of their own, more or less understood, and historically bound, critical agendas. The

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analysis of ‘power’, or of any other putatively hypostasized concept, then becomes part of the problem, as we continue to seek the truth, the moment of revelation, the absolute clarity, the compelling argument, or the final signified which will deliver us from all the confusion.

Clearly, in these circumstances any convenient link between Lewis’s work and its critical history becomes insecure, when the former always interrogates the latter for its own blindnesses, overdeterminations, and political insufficiencies. This is not simply to turn the tables between text and critic, but to implicate both in a complex process of misreading. Thus any specification of a politicized Lewis will be faced with problems it had better address if it is not to seem prejudicial and foreclosed. This is where those commentators on Derrida score when they point out that deconstruction is better understood as a practice of rigorous reading, rather than a formulaic assault on binary thinking, as we find in arguments which want simply to collapse the boundaries around philosophy and literature, such that the two categories become interchangeable in a sort of textualist free-for-all. From Gadamer’s perspective, this is also where the work of art becomes so important: it provides a model of signification that cannot rightfully be subdued to closure, even as it remains vulnerable to misuse or, *in extremis*, violent assimilation. To take an obvious example from canonic modernism, only an ideologically loaded argument would read Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902) as a text whose politics can be satisfactorily elucidated and defined. A secure reading of this text will surely acknowledge that its sense of history is already ‘postmodernist’, if by that we mean that it challenges the idea of closure at every turn. On the other hand, who would want to sideline Chinua Achebe’s propositions about the text’s ‘racism’ when such dubious content (note the scarequotes, which put the term under erasure) is undeniably a component of the novella?<sup>18</sup>

The weakness of this scenario has often been identified, including by those readers of postmodernism who find the whole Nietzschean-inspired edifice of critical relativism to have evacuated morality in the cause of referrals to reflexive signification – with Wittgenstein’s idea of ‘language games’ often cited as a case in point. To his credit, it is this weakness that Jameson sought to address in *Fables*, without managing to establish a secure passage from the represented to the real. It is the weakness that Christopher Norris finds in Gadamer when he uses Derrida and de Man to interrogate inadequate theorizing, such that deconstruction becomes in the right hands a sort of super-critical agency

for unmasking error and for revealing the lack of insights in inadequate, and now devalued, interpretations. This is very awkward territory. When in *What's Wrong with Postmodernism* Norris claims that a particular reading of an argument by Paul de Man is unequivocally 'wrong on several counts' it sounds, just for a moment, like a response to students who want an answer to impossibly difficult questions – a yearning for the security that his critical apparatus, by its own logic, will not permit (notwithstanding that some of its target arguments can be shown to be misconceived or ideologically invested.)<sup>19</sup> Of course, Norris has moved on since 1990 but the issues he identifies are surely relevant to an academic discourse which wants to situate Lewis in that post-Kantian dialogue between rational and aesthetic categories as a crucial 'moment' of modernity's philosophical recuperation. It is also worth pointing out again here that Nietzsche's supposed errors need to be tested against the provisionality and rhetorical self-sufficiency of his own utterances. The fact that his writings have for so many become the key figure in crisis thought is testament to the challenges posed by his role as hermeneuticist. Robert B. Pippin, among others, has warned us about the dangers of judging Nietzsche and his supposed epigones too summarily. If, as Pippin argues, Nietzsche 'insists on the omnipresence of irony in his work' it is not at all clear how we get from pronouncements on women or eugenics to outright condemnation.<sup>20</sup> This, I take it, is why Nietzsche has been important to the kind of deconstruction advocated by the rationalist Norris, whose writings in this area have been so focused on exposing the inattentive readings of inadequate philosophers and critical theorists.<sup>21</sup> In short, Nietzsche is not simply the *Überspokesman* for modernity gone wrong, but a thinker who poses problems for modernity's definition and critical assessment, including his own texts. Lewis's *The Code of a Herdsman* (1917) becomes a rather more interesting piece in this context.

It is not my purpose here to suggest a way out of this alarming labyrinth, which structures the way many of us still think about modernism. Just getting what, by now, are almost historical issues into some sort of focus is hard enough, without trying to cement their relevance to Lewis. But the task must be undertaken, for without it the very mechanisms we use to decide on the vexed question of Lewis's value cannot properly be set in motion. And that is my point about 'theory' – the idea that it has had its day may or may not be true in the academic market-place, but the questions it has raised cannot be avoided if we want to think through the problem of how to go on with our

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hermeneutic endeavours. If it was at some point possible to produce a naive reading of Lewis (an Idiot's Guide, if you will) it is certainly no longer justified when his work can be seen to be so deeply embedded in the issues raised by Gadamer and others. There is a critical imperative at work here, even as it becomes problematic: locating a text, or a series of texts, in the appropriate philosophical/critical-theoretical contexts is one way of specifying the 'right' kind of reading, and we must be alive to the possibilities this positioning might close off. So I say again: though the various critical-theoretical contexts I have identified over the years seem to me to be essential to an understanding of what Lewis was about, there are obviously others which deserve to be explored. My point is that Lewis, despite some inchoate 'philosophizing' when he tried to engage openly with certain kinds of metaphysical and epistemological awareness, belongs to a crucial domain of thought about modernity which is pretty much inescapable, not just because of its influence on academia (welcomed or derided), but because it raises some searching questions about art, aesthetics, and critical consciousness not often adequately addressed by those homing in on less palatable, or morally reprehensible, aspects of the work. What we need is a kind of hermeneutics that would be able to supersede the limitations of this whole post-Enlightenment 'thing', at which point a new sense of history would emerge, and I suspect a good many of our present interests would be happily consigned to the flames. A concerted 'green' revolution might offer a way forward, though the likelihood is that it will be reactively driven by some pretty dark necessities. Then again, utopia, like nostalgia, never was what it used to be.

J. M. Bernstein's discussion of aesthetic alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno in *The Fate of Art* offers another pertinent angle on all this. When Kant gave to aesthetic perception an epistemology different from rationality, or what Bernstein calls 'truth only cognition', he foretold the plight of a certain kind of thinking in an increasingly instrumentalized academic arena. In this sense Lewis's marginality is perhaps more symptomatic than one might realize, obliging us to be especially careful when introducing his work to the curriculum. The core issue might be set out as follows: If truth-only cognition is both a deformed (because partial and incomplete) conception of truth and constitutive of modernity, then philosophy cannot say what is true without abandoning itself to that which it seeks to criticize. Alternatively, if the critique of truth-only cognition and modernity is lodged outside what truth has become, and hence is marginal and

external to the accomplishments of modernity, then in remaining loyal to its object, in its conceptual fidelity to art, philosophy loses the capacity discursively to understand and explain. This is the constitutive aporia of aesthetic modernism: in remaining fully discursive it betrays what reason and truth could be, what art and aesthetic discourse remain a promise of; but if it abandons the rigours of full discursivity it necessarily falls silent, an inmate in the refuge and prison of art.<sup>22</sup>

On this basis, and without wishing to over-simplify a complex scenario, it could be argued that the aggressivity of Lewis's Enemy persona is an index of how the outsider to modernity is also part of that modernity's unfolding when rational and aesthetic components invest each other. The ineffability of art then becomes a diagnostic tool for the analysis of rationalized systems which close down, or in a Marcusean sense merely facilitate by tolerable sanction, all those difficult questions about the value of the Enlightenment. This throws us back on the central question of why and how a study of Lewis can be made profitable in a rationalized world. How can art be made to interrogate the deformations and depredations of modernity as these inform and structure the institutions of learning, which these days tend to normalize activity for the sake of their survival? It is all too easy to neglect such difficult and intellectually time-consuming matters in the face of pragmatic considerations, when the issuing of degree certificates becomes a primary concern. The pressure to 'explain' difficulty in the lecture and seminar room can be almost overwhelming lest one 'short-changes' students' chances of socially useful graduation, while in the area of postgraduate research Lewis's apparent lack of critical-political mileage beyond the obvious closures can be disabling. It seems to me that Lewis's apparent 'uselessness' in a more developed aesthetic sense – the sense that gets beyond the closures of Jameson and his acolytes – is precisely what gives his work diagnostic leverage over modernity, to include his own attempts to surmount it through fantasies of objectivity and critical completion. Perhaps this is the best of Lewis after all: what Bernstein refers to as the non-autonomous autonomy of 'nonconceptual form [as] resistance to identity thinking – a form that is harassed by the desire for meaning, for example in engaged and committed art, and by the will to interpretation'.<sup>23</sup> Except, of course, that engaged and committed art is also part of Lewis's story when his work does not stake its all on aesthetic autonomy. Ergo, the general trajectory of Richard Cork's ground-breaking study of Lewis was correct in being unable to reconcile the two strands in Lewis's thinking, though it was unable to

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say why the stand-off was so important.<sup>24</sup> Whether these issues can now successfully be broached in academia must remain an open question.

To conclude. One could argue that Ollivère's final paragraph is in the end rather naive if it expects the circumstances described therein to be open to correction, at least in the world we currently know. In her final paragraph Ollivère says: 'As this article has hoped to demonstrate, the consequences of presenting only the material that is deemed likely to support specific arguments will prompt further critical selectivity by the readers of texts that have already been unevenly handled, and exacerbate existing misconceptions, to the detriment of Lewis's already debilitated academic reputation'.<sup>25</sup> This sounds rather naive: *all* arguments are loaded by specific interests, however they may be disguised as value-neutral, or in service to the holy grail of objectivity. That Lewis has been attractive to some readers for the reasons that others have found him objectionable tells us as much about readers' interests as it does about the content of Lewis's texts. Since this situation is hermeneutically, and therefore politically, unavoidable it is important that we seek in Lewis's work those things which alert us to the problems of establishing critical legitimacy, so that his legacy does not solidify into merely reductive interpretations and paradigmatic restrictions. Hopefully, we can then learn more about the processes and assumptions of interpretation than we currently understand. This, I would submit, maintains a proper respect for the complexities and dangers of the task in hand, and maintains a sensible relationship between the texts and their interpreters. Above all, such attempts at progress must try to historicize their own pre-conditions. It is desperately important that we continue to imagine a different kind of world from the one Lewis delineated, whose 'postmodernist' extension we now inhabit, and this can only be done using the tools bequeathed to us by a thoroughly problematized Enlightenment. The Enemy was, apart from anything else, a protestor and a dissident – one who often refused to stand in line. The risks are obvious, and he sometimes succumbed to error, but his attempts to analyse modernity and its representational practices remain important for our sense of how we arrived at the edge of the abyss. In a spirit of critical solidarity I would therefore underscore Ollivère's final sentence, as an index of the damage inattentive and instrumentalized commentaries can do to something as complex and disturbing as Lewis's work: 'Since commercial criticism functions, increasingly, as a barometer for the future of academia, its consequences would best be observed with caution, and some concern'.<sup>26</sup>

**Notes**

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- <sup>1</sup> Maria Ollivère, “‘The Game of Labelling’: Lewis in Academia Today”, *Wyndham Lewis Annual* 13 (2008): 54-65.
- <sup>2</sup> Alan Munton, ‘Fantasies of Violence: The consequences of not reading Wyndham Lewis’, *Wyndham Lewis Annual* 5 (1998): 31-49. As quoted in Ollivère, “‘The Game of Labelling’”, 54.
- <sup>3</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, The Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).
- <sup>4</sup> Robert T. Chapman’s *Wyndham Lewis: Fictions and Satires* (London: Vision Press, 1973) remains a useful undergraduate primer on Lewis’s writings, if read with an eye to later developments in the critical field.
- <sup>5</sup> Andrzej Gąsiorek, *Wyndham Lewis and Modernism* (London: Northcote House/British Council, 2004) as reviewed by David A. Wragg, ‘Advanced Introduction’, *Wyndham Lewis Annual* 12 (2005): 80-84.
- <sup>6</sup> Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 1.
- <sup>7</sup> Some idea of what might be at stake here can be found in J. M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).
- <sup>8</sup> Ollivère, “‘The Game of Labelling’”, 64.
- <sup>9</sup> Kathy J. Phillips, *Manipulating Masculinity: War and Gender in Modern British and American Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), as cited in Ollivère, “‘The Game of Labelling’”, 60.
- <sup>10</sup> Ollivère, “‘The Game of Labelling’”, 60.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 59. Pam Bracewell, *Space, Time and the Artist: The Philosophy and Aesthetics of Wyndham Lewis*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Sheffield, 1990.
- <sup>12</sup> Charles Ferrall, *Modernist Writing and Reactionary Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
- <sup>13</sup> Ollivère, “‘The Game of Labelling’”, 59.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.
- <sup>15</sup> Rather than writing about Beethoven (Simpson was an exemplary exponent of musical analysis, as is revealed by his books on Nielsen and Bruckner, and by his contributions to radio programmes about music) the idea is to produce another work which explores Beethoven’s compositional and aesthetic processes in the Razumovsky quartets. Simpson’s fourth, fifth, and sixth quartets are dedicated to this aim. At the time of writing they remain available as Hyperion CDs.

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<sup>16</sup> Two texts which seem important to begin with here are Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982) and Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> See Patrick Brantlinger, 'Heart of Darkness: Anti-Imperialism, Racism, or Impressionism?', *Criticism* 27. 4 (Fall 1985): 363-85. Brantlinger sets out the problem of locating a coherent political position in Conrad's text in such a way that the novella becomes an exemplary article of conflicted modernism. Such an approach seems more useful than a more conventional 'textualist' deconstructive reading of the kind we find in Perry Meisel, *The Myth of the Modern: A Study in British Literature and Criticism after 1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 262.

<sup>20</sup> Robert B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 87.

<sup>21</sup> See Norris's explication of Paul de Man in *Paul de Man: Deconstruction and the Critique of Aesthetic Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1988), especially his remarks on de Man's notorious early writings in *Le Soir*, 177ff.

<sup>22</sup> Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, 9-10.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Cork, *Vorticism and Abstract Art in the First Machine Age* (2 vols) (London: Gordon Fraser, and Berkeley: University of Californian Press, 1976).

<sup>25</sup> Ollivère, "The Game of Labelling", 64.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.