Editorial

In my editorial for the first issue of The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies (2010) I asked why it is that Lewis’s work is still so often subjected to reductive readings. I called for a ‘critically responsible scholarship’ in the hope that such scholarship would address the complexity of Lewis’s painting and writing. Criticism shouldn’t shirk the responsibility of confronting and debating the objectionable aspects of Lewis’s work, but its engagement with these aspects needs to be honest, fair-minded, and attentive to the nuances of Lewis’s thought.

Well, it’s been an interesting twelve months. During the last year Lewis has received a good deal of attention. In June 2011 the exhibition titled The Vorticists: Manifesto for a Modern World arrived at Tate Britain. Later in the year James Fox presented a three-part art documentary titled British Masters on BBC Four. The opening segment of this documentary dealt with Lewis’s painting in the years leading up to and during the First World War; it also briefly discussed BLAST.

The Vorticists exhibition was widely reviewed, and, as we would expect, critical opinion about its merits was divided. That is as it should be. But a depressing feature of much of the commentary was just how ill-informed it was. Once again, we were faced with critics whose negligible knowledge of Vorticism and Lewis’s role in it merely encouraged them to pontificate all the more loudly about them both. As Alan Munton points out in his penetrating review of The Vorticists in the present issue of The JWLS, Laura Cumming (writing for The Observer) was a notable exception to the prevailing muddleheadedness. Considering Lewis’s assertion that Vorticism ‘was what I, personally, did, and said, at a certain period’ (WLA 451), Cumming observes that this claim ‘is not without its merit’ when we compare the various Vorticists’ efforts ‘to Lewis’s single-mindedness as ringleader, recruiting sergeant, megaphone, exemplar and theorist of England’s only homegrown avant-garde movement.’ This is an accurate description.

British Masters proved to be far more controversial than the Tate show. This was for entirely understandable reasons. The programme offered a reductive account of Lewis’s contribution to British
modernism and, even worse, misrepresented Lewis’s views, thereby making it appear that he believed the opposite of what he actually said and wrote. Writing for The Telegraph, John Preston objected to Fox’s whole modus operandi on the grounds that it falsified the available evidence: ‘Fox’s approach was plain: if the material doesn’t fit the thesis, just chop off the awkward bits round the sides and hope nobody notices.’ Preston didn’t discuss Fox’s treatment of Lewis; he was troubled by the overall direction taken by the programme. Paul Edwards focuses on the programme’s presentation of Lewis in ‘Big Englander’, his critique of British Masters in this issue of The JWLS; James Fox offers a ‘one-part apologia, one-part apology’ for his account of Lewis in British Masters in his ‘Response to Paul Edwards’. Readers will be able to make up their own minds about the whole sorry affair.


More work of this kind needs to be done. I am therefore pleased to be able to draw our readers’ attention to a forthcoming conference – Wyndham Lewis: Networks, Dialogues, and Communities (31 November – 1 December 2012) – which will be held at the Institute of English Studies in London. The conference aims to explore the ways in which Lewis belonged to and influenced twentieth-century cultural networks. It seeks especially to consider the numerous ways in which Lewis positioned himself as a relational thinker and creator, as well as to explore his complex influence upon subsequent generations of artists, musicians, writers, critics, and theorists. The conference thus invites papers that take as their focus the dialogic, collective, and interpersonal sides of Lewis’s oeuvre. For more information, please contact Nathan Waddell at wyndhamlewis2012@hotmail.co.uk

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