

**‘By curious sovereignty of art’:  
Wyndham Lewis and Nihilism**

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What do ascetic ideals mean? – With artists, nothing, or too many things.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887) III. 1

**In Shame of Simplicity**

In an earlier draft of this essay, I responded exclusively to an article by Shane Weller, ‘Nietzsche among the Modernists: The Case of Wyndham Lewis’, published in *Modernism/modernity*.<sup>1</sup> This is a magazine whose editorial, and other, standards have come to the attention of Lewis scholars before, and I was provoked in the first instance to criticize a combination of polemic and sophistry, presenting itself as a defining philosophical statement.<sup>2</sup> In the way of these things, however, the essay provoked a complementary reaction, which was to investigate what it might be concealing about the texts it was itself citing. This led to a fairly simple set of issues relating both to the Lewis-Nietzsche relationship, and, more importantly, to Lewis’s links with a mainstream of artistic tradition in respect of character and genre. Indeed, the simplicity of these issues provoked a suspicion to which some have perhaps grown accustomed, namely that academic discourse may be in shame of simplicity – a condition that necessitates a ‘garb of ideas’.<sup>3</sup>

In using that phrase, I have in mind Husserl’s description of the manner in which the ‘life-world’ is concealed by the development of scientific technique dedicated to increasing accuracy in the fields of measurement and prediction.<sup>4</sup> The ‘life-world’ appears in Husserl’s late work as a primitive, practical, pre-scientific realm that nevertheless subsists, and is associated with the subjective and the intuitive.<sup>5</sup> His broad theme is that science cannot know the life-world, and disdains to, yet lives upon it as upon its ‘subsoil’. In an amusing illustration of this, Husserl writes that Einstein’s use of Albert Michelson’s measurements depended on Einstein’s life-world relationship with his fellow physicist,

rather than a ‘theoretical, psychological-psychophysical construction of the objective being of Mr Michelson.’<sup>6</sup> As to the means of coming to know the life-world adequately, Husserl exercises himself about the requirement for a non-objective science in a manner that often has the reader pencilling ‘How about art!?’ in the margins of Husserl’s texts. Indeed, the persuasion to draw an analogy between Husserl’s theme and the situation of the arts is strong. This is because the development of a complex discourse of academic criticism in the last half century has seemed (to some) to conceal more than it discovers, even while taking pride in its own pseudo-scientific ‘rigour’; or to put it another way, the modern theorist ‘is more interested in what he or she is doing than what the author was doing.’<sup>7</sup> We need to find a way of talking about art that strives to be true to art’s own horizons, on the assumption that art is part of the life-world, a comparatively primitive condition that academic discourse often fails to leave as it found it.

With this requirement in mind, this essay received further stimulus from David Wragg’s article in the first number of the new *Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies*.<sup>8</sup> A note of weariness with the present state of academic criticism is combined in Wragg’s essay with an open-hearted and inspiring indication of how criticism may develop, by taking the view of the artist. In what follows, accordingly, I shall proceed both counter-polemically and in a manner committed to the elucidation of certain simple, but profound, concerns of Wyndham Lewis.

### **So Long, Philosophy!**

Weller begins his essay with a commonplace about Nietzsche’s growing influence in the early twentieth century. But the first of Nietzsche’s numerous expositors to be named is Alfred Baeumler: a Nazi professor of philosophy in Berlin. The second is Martin Heidegger: ‘Reacting against Baeumler’s reading of Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger delivered a major series of lectures on the philosopher between 1936 and 1940 at the University of Freiburg, culminating in a critical analysis of Nietzsche’s conception of “European nihilism.”’<sup>9</sup> The third name on Weller’s list is Wyndham Lewis:

Within the ambit of English Literature, however, perhaps no writer of the first half of the twentieth century has more often

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been seen as under the influence of both Nietzsche's thought and his style than Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957). Indeed, for almost all commentators on Lewis's oeuvre, Nietzsche remains an absolutely decisive figure, although the precise nature of Nietzsche's influence on Lewis has tended to be conceived in two, more or less diametrically opposed, ways.<sup>10</sup>

As the non-sequitur 'however' admits, the selection of this particular trinity is tendentious, a forensic juxtaposition of names that suggests that Lewis, of course, belongs with Baeumler and Heidegger, distinct as they are from the 'ambit of English Literature'; and distinct from such other early expositors of Nietzsche as Karl Jaspers, Karl Löwith, and Max Scheler in Germany, and Thomas Common, John Davidson, Havelock Ellis, A. R. Orage, and W. B. Yeats in England.<sup>11</sup>

Weller supposes the 'diametrically-opposed' interpretations of Nietzsche's influence on Lewis to consist of, on the one hand, deprecation of Lewis's inclination towards elitist individualism (as typified by John Carey), and, on the other hand, celebration of Lewis's critical and deconstructive energy (as typified by Paul Edwards, Toby Foshay, and Andrzej Gąsiorek).<sup>12</sup> Weller continues:

For all their obvious differences, however, both of the above takes on Lewis – that is to say, the attack on and the defence of Lewis – tend to obscure the many complications and paradoxes of Lewis's response to Nietzsche's thought. These complications and these paradoxes are at their greatest when it comes to the question of nihilism – that "uncanniest of guests" ("*unheimliche aller Gäste*"), according to Nietzsche. Indeed, it is the fate of this concept in Lewis's own work that marks an indebtedness to Nietzsche that is arguably more significant than any other.<sup>13</sup>

What is being promised here is 'philosophy', and in the most urgent and exaggerated terms. No one till now has grasped the Nietzsche-Lewis relationship in its essentials, because no one has seen that the concept 'nihilism' is its essence. One's immediate objection to this may be to ask: "To what extent are *concepts* of any sort the principal issue with Lewis?" Granted, Lewis is an artist with an inclination for critical and philosophic activity, correctly described by Wragg as 'inchoate'.<sup>14</sup> But is Lewis to be judged in terms of concepts, or do such judgements commit

the error of irrelevance? One version of this error was the subject of Nietzsche's complaint in the epigraph with which I began, deriving from the principal discussion of nihilism (in the context of ascetic ideals) outside the *Nachlass*: the concepts that occur persistently to philosophers do not occur in the same way to artists. This complaint acknowledges a constitutive difference of interest between artist and philosopher that any serious attempt at discussion of Nietzsche and Lewis is obliged to observe. This point, however, raises the question of how seriously, or with what kind of seriousness, this relationship should be taken, and the related question of what kind of relationship it is.

I have tried several times to make some sense of this question, and am not convinced that a philosophically-led interpretation is apt.<sup>15</sup> If we consider the relationship in *Tarr* (1928), for example, we may suppose that it is to a degree manifested in the conversation of Tarr and Kreisler, a conversation conducted in bad German by Tarr, in which, among other things, Nietzsche is made light of – in much the way that he is in the post-coital chat of Tarr and Anastasya Vasek (*T2* 273). This is interesting because it gives us some idea of the sound of intellectual chat and café culture, and an image of the circulation of ideas in the early twentieth century – not because it is decisively penetrated by a Nietzschean concept. Certainly, it may be objected that the style of these humorous and aggressive chats is itself 'Nietzschean', but this does little to substantiate the claim about conceptual indebtedness. Indeed, any attempt to isolate the Nietzschean concept of asceticism in *Tarr* is confronted by the narrative's 'as-it-suits-him' attitude to its protagonist's guiding idea. Conceptually, the novel is not coherent.

Wragg himself acknowledges this, but would be ready to take advantage of the problem of incoherence in Lewis because it saves the latter from a 'great-man' or canonical destiny, and still gives the critic plenty to do hermeneutically, provided the critic has played his or her part by mastering Adorno and Derrida.<sup>16</sup> One may feel that there is a call for the application of Occam's Razor here, impressive in quantity and conscientiously collected as Wragg's theoretico-philosophical investments may be – though not yet sufficient, since to write adequately about Lewis, one would also need to have prepared by writing a book about Nietzsche first.<sup>17</sup> This too is impressive in its way, though it is an attitude haunted by the spirit of Mr Casaubon (since to write a book on Nietzsche, one would have to write one on Schopenhauer first, and Goethe as well – and so on), or what Nietzsche

himself described as the compulsion to “trundle” books’.<sup>18</sup> Yet, as Wragg’s essay develops, it seems that this demand for groundwork is not propaedeutic, but valedictory.

In contrast, evidence of book trundling in Weller’s essay is small, the promise of philosophy being uncluttered by the almost total absence of primary citation from Nietzsche, contextual commentary on the concept of nihilism, or discussion of Heidegger. Many readers may feel at home with streamlining of this type; it will be familiar enough in talk of nihilism on the part of theoretically-minded colleagues, speakers, and so forth. Its attitude is pseudo-scientific because it assumes that the latest ‘garb of ideas’ or state of discourse is the most accurate and elegant. This being so, a kind of shame befalls anyone who asks for clarification or explanation, since to ask is to return to the nursery. Impudence is required, therefore, to ask questions such as the following: Why does Weller select Heidegger’s interpretation of nihilism in Nietzsche? Why does he select nihilism alone from the ‘five major rubrics’ Heidegger identified in Nietzsche’s thought?<sup>19</sup> Why does he not discriminate the uses of the term which occur among Nietzsche’s expositors?<sup>20</sup> Does he in fact have an understanding of the concept that resembles any of those used by Nietzsche’s expositors, or is he using it as a cipher or code to stand for something else?

Of course, I’m making a case for impudence here. Such questions as those posed above reveal that beneath the garb of an idea, the body of Weller’s essay is polemical. Tracking one of his rare primary citations of Nietzsche (the description of nihilism as the ‘uncanniest guest’) leads us to David Farrell Krell’s analysis of Heidegger’s lectures.<sup>21</sup> Here we find discussion of Hannah Arendt’s commentary on Heidegger and Nietzsche, where the word *polemos* is used to describe Heidegger’s turn from Nietzsche in the course of the lectures, in objection to Nazism. This word appears as if from nowhere in Weller’s essay to designate the Lewis-Nietzsche relationship, which strongly suggests that Weller’s motivation is a comparison of the Heidegger-Nietzsche relationship and the Lewis-Nietzsche relationship in terms of the concept nihilism, with the intimation of political resemblances.<sup>22</sup> It is in keeping with the principle of streamlining that Weller is able to acknowledge that no sustained discussion of nihilism occurs in Lewis.<sup>23</sup>

Here I’d like to return to David Wragg’s essay, and its note of weariness with the state of pedagogic-critical activity, in relation to Lewis and more broadly. For this I am grateful, since what Wragg is

intimating is that Lewis might fruitfully be released from philosophy and returned to art. We hear this in Wragg's observation that Lewis's philosophical claims stand or fall, by his own admission, by his 'aesthetic criteria'. How often, wonders Wragg, is the import of this genuinely considered?<sup>24</sup> Certainly, philosophy, history, and politics are still demanding his attention; this is the essence of a critical conscience such as that of Wragg. Yet he can see around himself so as to indicate a way forward for others:

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. *How many commentators on Lewis can claim to understand his visual art from the 'inside', as practitioners?*<sup>25</sup>

I would now like to attempt, very tentatively, to see if Wragg's question can be responded to with any degree of satisfaction. My effort will be to match Weller's conceptual commentary on Lewis's literary art with the observations of a 'practitioner'. The results may be more suggestive than coherent.

### **Watching Shakespeare: Sovereignty and Mimesis**

Having asserted the debt to Nietzsche which has been overlooked by Lewis's other critics, Weller turns now to Lewis's own writing in order to 'trace Lewis's more general response to Nietzsche, which frames his take on nihilism.'<sup>26</sup> Weller's starting point is a passage from Lewis's autobiography, *Rude Assignment* (1950), in which Lewis describes Nietzsche as '[his] paramount influence, as was the case with so many people prior to world war 1':

But for me Nietzsche was, with Schopenhauer, a thinker more immediately accessible to a Western mind than the other Germans, whose barbarous jargon was a great barrier – Hegel, for instance, I could never read. A majority of people, I daresay,

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found in the author of "Zarathustra" a sort of titanic nourishment for the ego: treating in fact this great hysteric as a power-house. At present that is what I like least about Nietzsche: and I was reasonably immune then to Superman. [...] On the other hand, that side of his genius which expressed itself in "La Gaya Scienza", or those admirable maxims [...] which he wrote after the breakdown in his health, were among my favourite reading in those years. (RA 128)<sup>27</sup>

This little passage has been interpreted as a decisive acknowledgement of influence on Lewis's part, as it is by Weller. I would argue that its emphasis is primarily connoisseurial and reminiscent. We learn that Lewis preferred Nietzsche and Schopenhauer to the conceptual Hegel on grounds of style. The phrase 'as was the case with so many people' seems to be recalling a fashion and is congruent with the observation (omitted by Weller) that the Germans Lewis encountered in Paris as a young man thought Nietzsche 'a salon philosopher' (which is, tonally, how Nietzsche is taken up in *Tarr*). The immediate context in Lewis's autobiography may be more important.

The chapter from which the Nietzsche reminiscence is extracted is titled 'Early Life and Shakespeare' (RA 123-29). The emphasis is surely obvious enough, and could only have been obscured by the thirst for philosophy from which academic discourse suffers. It is Shakespeare to whom Lewis is drawing the reader's attention with respect to his own formative period. The first sign of artistic ability of an unusual kind in Lewis was that he could reproduce Shakespearean sonnets like a ventriloquist or an oracle (RA 123-24). This seems to have been interpreted as something of a portent by the older artists with whom Lewis was associating at the Slade. It would be the kind of thing that artists notice, with their regard for unpractised technique. Lewis shared this tribal superstition. There is a passage in *Time and Western Man* (1927) that tells us as much about Lewis's self-consciousness as an artist as the entirety of that work's attempts at philosophizing:

Shakespeare, writing his *King Lear*, was evidently in some sort of a trance [...] If you say that creative art is a spell, a talisman, an incantation – that it is *magic*, in short, there, too, I believe you would be correctly describing it. That the artist uses and manipulates a supernatural power seems very likely. (TWM 187)

Indeed, while Lewis's remarks on Nietzsche are piecemeal, in 1927 he published a book-length study of Shakespeare (*The Lion and the Fox: The Role of the Hero in the Plays of Shakespeare*). We can use this work to begin thinking about Lewis's own practice as a novelist.

Lewis's absorption in tragic character here illuminates the artist's concern with technique. Part V, Chapter II of *The Lion and the Fox* is titled 'The Manufacture of a Shakespearian Colossus'; etymologically the work of the hand is evoked by 'manufacture', and Lewis writes of being 'in the *chantiers* almost' as he studies such work (LF 181). *Chantiers* being French for 'work site' (as of a sculptor), apprenticeship and practice are denoted along with connoisseurship. Thus, one artist watches another's working. Shakespeare's 'monsters of grandeur and simplicity, the gigantic figures of Othello, Lear, Antony, Macbeth, Timon [...] have a strong tribal likeness' (LF 181). 'Monster' and its derivatives are terms to which Lewis returns in his reflections on character representations that have affected him (the word is etymologically related to a 'wonder' or 'marvel'). The attribution of primitivism associates the colossi with Lewis's own figures in the 'Wild Body' stories, first published as a collection in 1927. The image of the 'workshop' appears here too.<sup>28</sup>

To the writer, the workshop is potentially everywhere, a fundamental condition of both technical attention and imaginative opportunity. Thus, on the first appearance of Bestre, with which readers will be familiar, Lewis's narrator feels that, although the spatial relationship is the inverse, the former has come knocking – to present himself, or sit, as a character. The continuity of inside and out in this image, along with the phenomenon of suddenly-reduced distance, shows us something about the attention of the literary artist, as it converts or absorbs encountered person into character. Has it been considered that the subject of Lewis's painting *Workshop* (M P19; 1915), which depicts organic-coloured planes in motion and settling, is such an act of attention to human appearance? Elsewhere in these stories, a superstitiously-regarded blind man enters a bar as if entering the narrator's reverie (the phenomenon is commutative), becoming the death-god of the locality, of whom the narrator has just been reading.<sup>29</sup> Imagination keeps the passage open. People arrive as characters. Characters depart for the world.

'Don Quixote or the Widow Wadman is as *real*, to put it no higher than that, as most people ostensibly alive and walking the earth today', writes Lewis (TWM 188). In statements such as this, the 'life-



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world' of the novelist is evident in permanent primitivism. Anyone who is troubled by Lewis's claim might turn to the work of Kendall Walton, who has proposed that fictional character is a prop in a game of pretence or make-believe that suspends ontological commitment to reality as well as epistemological commitment to veridicality. Since Walton also suggests that make-believe is both co-extensive with cognition and trans-historical, he demurs from the philosophical commonplace that historical enlightenment diminishes the capacity for make-believe, as from the prejudice that the fictional is somehow secondary to the non-fictional.<sup>30</sup> A theory of make-believe of this kind may help one see, as if by daylight, that Lewis's absorption in pretence necessarily excludes the commitments that philosophically- or historically-led interpretations presuppose.

When he quotes Menaphon's description of Tamburlaine in which, 'by curious sovereignty of art', the figure of Tamburlaine is heroically transformed, Lewis is beholding, in the *chantiers* of Marlowe, a statue's coming to life, shaped from life (*LF* 181-82). As Tamburlaine is nature's artwork, so Marlowe's art gives rise to an image of heroic nature, 'Thirsting with sovereignty and love of arms' (*LF* 182). To Lewis, 'sovereignty' is, primarily, the goal of mimesis, its meaning implied by the phrase (quoted from the Sonnets) which he attributes to Shakespeare's colossi: 'I am that I am' (*LF* 194). Here, character has achieved its peculiar eternity. Lewis's discussion of the character Othello is a truly surprising performance that brings to mind a rhapsody of Swinburne, and concludes in awed repetition of lines from Othello's final speech (*LF* 191-92). *To have made one like this!* is the feeling here. No wonder that criticism has had so little to say of this book of Lewis's. Is it not a kind of art tourism, and sentimental at that? One may be reminded of Edgell Rickword's comment that Lewis teaches Sunday school when he writes of what he likes.<sup>31</sup> But the apt image is of a child, not a preacher. What Lewis was wondering at was the fact that a character about to die should be remembered over centuries; not just in the case of Othello, but typically of the Shakespearean colossi. Sovereignty in characterization, and the question of its delimitation to tragedy, is his absorbing practical problem.

"*Death* is the thing that differentiates art and life. Art is identical with the idea of permanence. Art is continuity and not an individual spasm: but life is the idea of the person", Tarr says to Anastasya Vasek (*T2* 264). Critical attention has tended to focus upon this exchange as a

lecture rather than a drunken conversation (or ‘drivel’ as Anastasya puts it), with the result that Tarr’s words ‘Deadness is the first condition for art’ and the talk of shells and feathers (both *T2* 265) are seen as proclamation of his ‘externalist’ method with some sort of backing in the aesthetics of Schopenhauer. But Tarr and Anastasya are discussing the death of Kreisler, and the issue for Lewis is whether this death has a chance of being memorable. Lewis’s concern with this is such as to cause his ‘showman’ to vapour about the issue, as if somehow we had already moved on from all that. But this theoretical callousness is the novelist’s way of getting off his chest a bad day at work (so often with the novelist, theory is the admission or fear of technical deficiency). Then Anastasya utters the topos, ‘all the world’s a stage’, and Tarr replies, ‘It was an actor that said that. I say it’s all an atelier – “all the world’s a workshop” I should say’ (*T2* 264). We begin to sense that the cluster of uses of the ‘*chantiers*’ / ‘atelier’ / ‘workshop’ image in these works of the late 1920s is offering us an alternative or complement to the general idea that this was Lewis’s ‘theoretical’ decade. This image suggests a practical worldview whose principal concern is making things to last in a certain way.

This is why Tarr’s example of the art that fulfils the ‘first condition’ is sculpture. A statue commemorates what has lived in the stillness of death: this is the eternity of its subject, where it continues to live. When Lewis spoke of the tragic heroes of Shakespeare as ‘colossi’, he explicitly had statuary in mind. Eternity is the issue. Not, primarily, externality – which is perhaps Lewis’s mistaken short-cut: you don’t confer sovereignty over time by making the statue before the person, yet Lewis seems to have pursued this as a technical option in characterization. It is evident in the over-descriptions in *The Wild Body* (1927), *The Childermass* (1928), *Tarr*, and *The Apes of God* (1930), which produce unforgettable characters, but only temporarily. We will recall here Lewis’s estimation of the Widow Wadman: was it Sterne’s feat of under-description in presenting this character that Lewis admired?<sup>32</sup> He seems to be hinting at the mistake, the gap between practice and goal, in the staggering image of a ‘basalt’ Kreisler, belonging among a ‘race of statues’ (*T2* 142) who create their memorials / pyramids from flesh. Yet a statue may be ever so close to life, as in the myth of Pygmalion, itself a monument to the attempt to create character; and Lewis’s showman alludes to that myth.

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The issue of Kreisler's sovereignty continued to bother Lewis, which is why, in *Rude Assignment*, he had to point out that the novel should have been titled *Kreisler*, rather than *Tarr*, 'who is a secondary figure', and had to 'explain' Kreisler:

Otto Kreisler represents the melodramatic nihilism of the generations succeeding to the great era of philosophical pessimism. Whether national socialism is the ultimate term of that malady it is impossible to say. Nietzsche was another and more immediate source of infection [...] the fatality – to go no farther – depicted in the case of my German is of an entirely different quality from that in the Dostoevskian universe. The "signifying *nothing!*" of Shakespeare is nearer to it than the nihilism of Shigalev. (RA 162-66)

We would do well here to recall Nietzsche's warning about the meaning of ascetic ideals to artists: nihilism means too many things, and Lewis's complex and *ad hoc* deployment of the concept is typical of an artist's attempt to explain an intuited failure, though the association of Kreisler and Macbeth is as interesting as it is wistful. Since this paragraph represents just about the most 'sustained' discussion of nihilism in Lewis, we might use it to refute Weller's hypostasizing observation upon the passage (from *Rude Assignment*) quoted at the beginning of this subsection of my essay:

As we shall see, the distinction that Lewis makes both in *Rude Assignment* and elsewhere between two strands in Nietzsche becomes a way of making sense of his own intellectual history. That the concept of nihilism will survive all these discriminations, however, is a fact that has tended to remain unremarked upon in commentaries on Lewis, be they attacks upon, or defences of, his oeuvre. And it is in the fate of the concept of nihilism in his work, not in the distinction he makes between the two strands in Nietzsche's thought, that both Lewis's debt to Nietzsche, and the limits of his reading of Nietzsche lie.<sup>33</sup>

For the most part, the 'fate' of the concept nihilism in Lewis's work is desuetude. The idea I hope to have introduced in this section, is that it is on *making* that Lewis's attention is fixed – and *making to last* at that, as an

activity implicit with *value*. Which is why it is as irrelevant for Weller to focus on Lewis's Nietzsche, as opposed to Lewis's Shakespeare, in autobiographical terms, as it is to exaggerate in the following manner: 'It would not be particularly difficult to demonstrate that Lewis's entire oeuvre is in fact nothing less than an unremitting critique of nihilism in one form or another. In this respect, one might argue that the influence of Nietzsche upon him remains absolute.'<sup>34</sup>

A generic explanation for Lewis's failure to complete the representation of Kreisler, in such a way that he might satisfy as a protagonist, is that Lewis's attitude to tragedy in the novel as a genre is ambivalent. Walter Benjamin observed, with wonderful simplicity, that the novel offers us the experience of death by proxy. But the 'figurative' death of character (coinciding with the end of the novel) may signify quite as much to the reader as the representation of 'actual' death, described by Benjamin, in a macabre spirit, as 'preferable'.<sup>35</sup> Tarr dissented from Anastasya Vasek's use of the world-stage topos, but Lewis himself liked it:

it might be said we are performing our several parts in an intricate play, of doubtful merit, upon a stage the lofty and cavernous wings of which lead immediately into the darkest night. We know if we move into them there awaits us a precipice we should not see, but suddenly there would be nothing solid there under our feet – a chasm limitless in depth, literally with *nothing* at the bottom of it. How do we know there is nothing – that it is a fall that can never end? That is one of the things we know. [...] Comedy perhaps is a better *genre* for such a situation than tragedy: and because we are tragic beings, whatever way you look at it, is it a consistency imposed on us to drench this stage with our blood and with our tears? (RA 43-44)

Art is where we may, by proxy, live forever; but does represented death need to be a condition of such sovereignty over time? Can sovereignty be obtained through comedy instead? This is an issue to which we shall return.

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### Monstrous Patterns

The tendentiousness of Weller's opening paragraphs is, predictably, angled at Lewis's writings of the decade 1929-39. Here he indicates a partial renunciation of Nietzsche as a precursor of Nazism in Lewis's *The Hitler Cult* (1939); the renunciation is partial insofar as it is the 'Overman' element of Nietzsche's writing that troubles Lewis, the 'Overman' being Nietzsche's antidote to nihilism.<sup>36</sup> Weller's inference seems to be that this renunciation leaves Lewis *with* nihilism on his hands – a piece of outright question-begging, since the essay has done nothing to argue that nihilism *is* a serious concern of Lewis's; it has merely stipulated this, with the overworked reference to Nietzsche from *Rude Assignment* (as the 'paramount influence') now being interpreted as self-revision mixed with apology. It is here that Weller's argument thrives in the shadow of Hannah Arendt's thesis about Heidegger's developing '*polemos*' with Nietzsche between 1936 and 1940.<sup>37</sup>

Weller turns next to Lewis's opposition to the periodical *transition*, in which Eugene Jolas was promoting the 'New Nihilism'. The thread of the argument here is that *transition* conceived the 'New Nihilism' as a radical politicization of art, an objectionable development to Lewis.<sup>38</sup> And it is here that Weller undertakes a critical excursus on the concept 'sovereignty':

Nihilism will be defined by Lewis as the negation of art's autonomy, the contamination of both art and the intellect by the political. [...] To speak of nihilism is always to speak of the political as well as the philosophical and the aesthetic, and in Lewis this imbrication occurs principally through his reliance upon the concept of sovereignty in his thinking of both art and politics in the 1930s.<sup>39</sup>

The image of 'imbrication' (as of overlapping roofing tiles) is a conspicuous favourite in humanities research; it is used to refer to instances of false consciousness which attempt to keep separate what is inseparable. Thus Lewis's attachment to aesthetic sovereignty (note that Weller desists from offering citation of the noun used in this sense) must readmit the political. Accordingly, 'sovereignty' becomes a dangerously equivocal term, once Lewis finds he cannot resist writing about politics, as in *Left Wings Over Europe* (1936):

[Lewis] argues Hitler's principal aim is simply the re-establishment of Germany as a "sovereign state, within its own frontiers, subject to its own law." It is just such a sovereignty that, for Lewis, is the defining principle of the intellect or creative intelligence and the art in which it finds not only its expression but also its being as a transhistorical event.<sup>40</sup>

In other words, Lewis's resistance to nihilism unavoidably gives rise to a bad conception of sovereignty. We see here the polemical value of the image of 'imbrication': it makes possible the identification of the historical / political and the aesthetic by means of the phrase, 'it is just such'. But what we have here is no more than a supererogatory and unscholarly deconstructive finesse. Lewis is, in fact, fully prepared to concede that the 'detachment' (a word he employs far more frequently than 'sovereignty') of the literary artist is difficult and even undesirable to maintain in a world of competing ideologies.<sup>41</sup>

It is necessary to go into Weller's argument at some length here, because his devotion to revealing the contamination of concepts is such a distraction from what Lewis was about artistically, and because I have been considering sovereignty practically as an issue for characterization. Yet Weller does, once again, provide a citation that leads us into Lewis's principal area of interest, namely, Lewis's identification of the 'New Nihilism' with what he had already encountered in Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* (1872).<sup>42</sup>

Dostoevsky is, with Shakespeare, the artist who belies the supposed priority of Nietzsche's influence over Lewis. From Dostoevsky Lewis may have picked up a notion of nihilism as the spirit of a dynamic and vacuous avant-garde, Marinettian in advance. What is critical here is that Lewis also gained 'something that revolutionized [his] technique of approach to experience' (RA 156).<sup>43</sup> For the encounter with Russian fiction, Lewis employs the word 'crisis'. It is worth pausing briefly upon this technical revolution.

Lewis writes that his early experience of reading Dostoevsky was not of a fictional world of ideas nor of metaphysics (he compares himself, in an image of protracted naivety, to a child reading 'Through the Looking Glass'), but of 'monstrous character patterns, often of miraculous insight' (RA 158). The adjectives chosen confer value in a manner that is distinctive for Lewis. First, there is the rejection of conceptual thought. Then the coupling, 'monstrous character', the

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adjective recalling Lewis's response to Shakespeare's colossi and here associated with the 'miraculous'. And finally, the term 'pattern'. This suggests three things. First, that which is to be copied; here, wonder is an experience of technical absorption. Second, that character itself may appear as an elaboration of the decorative impulse that eventually discovers nature, pattern acquiring personality and an affective capacity.<sup>44</sup> A pattern may become a person. Third, as that which is indefinitely repeatable, pattern may achieve sovereignty over time itself. This is related to a question about character in its comic dimension that preoccupied Lewis. We might also note Tarr's use of 'pattern' in the conversation with Anastasya Vasek. Here the word designates completeness in the sense of a 'type' or 'original', and its opposites are 'individual' and 'eccentric' (T2 267).

### **Eternal Laughter?**

In the final section of his essay, Weller declares, contradictorily, that over the decades 'the concept of nihilism that [Lewis] inherits from Nietzsche, and redefines to suit his own purposes, remains intact.'<sup>45</sup> His topic here is Lewis's critique of existentialism in *The Writer and The Absolute* (1952). 'Nihilism' now becomes identified with Heidegger and then with Sartre's conception of 'the nothing' (*Das Nichts, le néant*) as the (non-) ground or essence of subjectivity and self-consciousness. This 'appears to enable Lewis to offer a definition of nihilism that is no longer limited to the negation of art through its politicization'.<sup>46</sup> The belt and braces quality of Weller's argument is palpable here, as are the stock deconstructive moves. Thus we hear that Lewis praises Albert Camus as a novelist while disliking the latter's affirmation of 'the absurd', that term marking Camus, like the other existentialists, as a nihilist; and that, ironically, Lewis's criticism of Camus is both compulsive and self-destructive, since Lewis himself depends crucially on the concept of 'the absurd'. There follows a discussion of Lewis's essay, 'The Meaning of the Wild Body' (1927). It is here, Weller supposes, that Lewis 'establishes the fundamental principles for his own comic art'.<sup>47</sup>

On the basis of the phenomenological and existential preamble to this section, Weller would have the reader assent to the possibility that twenty-five years before *The Writer and the Absolute*, Lewis was engaged in

something akin to Heidegger's enquiry into ontology via the 'existential analytic' announced in *Being and Time* (1927).<sup>48</sup> *Prima facie*, Lewis's vocabulary may suggest that ontology is at issue, though the brevity of the essay ought to lower expectations that the establishing of 'fundamental principles' of any sort is likely to be possible, or indeed what was aimed at, in spite of Lewis's axiomatic opening: 'First, to assume the dichotomy of mind and body is necessary here, without arguing it; for it is upon that essential separation that the theory of laughter here proposed is based' (CWB 157). Yet whatever Lewis is up to here, it is not a matter of shedding light on the 'Wild Body' stories either, for no such separation operates in them.

Many critics, Weller included, have interpreted the second section of the essay as an inversion of the thesis of Bergson's essay 'Laughter' (1899).<sup>49</sup> This leads Weller to the drastic conclusion, 'being as such is fundamentally absurd, given that there can be no logical explanation for its emergence out of non-being'.<sup>50</sup> Weller follows this with his first quotation from 'The Meaning of the Wild Body':

To begin to understand the totality of *the absurd*, at all, you have to assume much more than belongs to a social differentiation. There is nothing that is animal (and we as bodies are animals) that is not absurd. This sense of the absurdity, or, if you like, the madness of our life, is at the root of every true philosophy. ... It is the chasm lying between being and non-being, over which it is impossible for logic to throw any bridge, that, in certain forms of laughter, we leap. We land plumb in the centre of Nothing.<sup>51</sup>

Overlooking the careful, but here unspecified, phrase 'in certain forms of laughter', Weller infers from this a number of coercive dichotomies about being, non-being, body, mind, and absurdity. His conclusion, which depends, as far as I can see, on Krell's discussion of the enduring issue of ground and nullity in Heidegger's philosophy, is that Lewis's comic art is necessarily nihilistic because it views the absurdity of all being from a 'non-position, an absolute outside'; or to put it another way, nothingness is necessarily the ground of laughter.<sup>52</sup> But all this is beside the point: Lewis's preoccupation is not with being, nor with value, as a problem, but with *laughter* itself.

As often with Lewis's attempts at theorizing, the idea at the head of the essay is dispersed in a tail of particulars, instances, concessions,



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illustrations, and doubts, like a comet in reverse. But in the present instance, this may be in keeping with the phenomenon in question, primitive, indivisible, and beyond conceptualization. For in the words of another 'showman', Ker-Orr: '[W]hat I would insist upon is that at the bottom of the chemistry of my sense of humour is some philosopher's stone. A primitive unity is there, to which, with my laughter, I am appealing. Freud explains everything by *sex*: I explain everything by *laughter*' (*CWB* 18). But there is also an intimation of wonder in this essay. Weller, occupied with conceptual Lewis, suppresses this in his omission of the passage Lewis quotes from William James:

One need only shut oneself in a closet and begin to think of the fact of one's being there, of one's queer bodily shape in the darkness (a thing to make children scream at, as Stevenson says), of one's fantastic character and all, to have the wonder steal over the detail as much as over the general fact of being, and to see that it is only familiarity that blunts it. Not only that *anything* should be, but that *this* very thing should be, is mysterious. Philosophy stares, but brings no reasoned solution, for from nothing to being there is no logical bridge.<sup>53</sup>

Such wonder is, temperamentally, the reverse of nihilism. And a child's screaming at its own concealment in a dark cupboard is apt to be a matter of hilarity – perhaps of the kind hinted at in Lewis's phrase, 'in certain forms of laughter'. The child does not *suffer from* nihilism, in any acceptance of that word; it glories in the fact that in the dark, no one knows it is there and imagines from this that it *is not*. We may also note that the emphasis is upon 'the detail', rather than 'the general fact of being'. This is an emphasis to appeal to an artist, not a philosopher / thinker.<sup>54</sup> One might point out in passing that it is not Nietzsche but the spiritualist James whom Lewis considers a favourite among philosophers: 'With a great deal that [James] says, and with the spirit of a great deal of his writings, I am much in sympathy. Underneath, one knows what is there: but philosophically, he is the best of company' (*TWM* 242). Far from being a document of nihilism, 'The Meaning of the Wild Body' associates an artist's sense of wonder and the 'miraculous' with laughter (*CWB* 158-59). One might go as far as to suggest that James's reserve in discussion of religious laughter (in

response to some ideas of Havelock Ellis) is the source of Lewis's uncertainty about the sovereignty of comic characterization.<sup>55</sup>

We can complete our present consideration of Lewis's concerns as a novelist by examining the essay 'Inferior Religions', revised to accompany publication of *The Complete Wild Body* in 1927. Here, we find that the issue of sovereignty and character is given the most concentrated attention. The possibility of making something to last is considered now under the aspect of laughter, not death. The essay begins with some observations on freedom and primitive ritual, suggesting that complex forms of social behaviour are no freer than primitive ones, merely concealing their inertia in greater variety (*CWB* 149-50). Then the essay turns from primitive to elaborate characterization, with attention to the issue of individuality and comic character. Lewis's concern here is that even the richest comic character (Falstaff, Don Quixote, Boswell's Johnson) may through repetition of appealing traits become self-stereotyping: 'A comic type is a failure of a considerable energy, an imitation and standardizing of self, suggesting the existence of a uniform humanity, – creating, that is, a little host as like as nine-pins; instead of one synthetic and various ego' (*CWB* 150-51). This is troubling. Must comic characterization settle for repetition rather than eternity, 'I am that I am' falling from pathos into formula, or standardization (*LF* 194)?

It is fascinating that Lewis, in the effort to raise laughter to the level of death as a source of sovereignty, feminizes the former: 'Laughter is the female of tragedy' (*CWB* 151), this essay tells us. Lewis speaks as Anastasya Vasek here.<sup>56</sup> There is no 'binary' distinction in this aphorism; it knows that death has a male bias. Can laughter hold it at bay? Lewis's profoundest concern is carved here with something of the force of a renaissance emblem:

So the King of Play is not a phantom corresponding to the sovereign force beneath the surface. The latter must always be reckoned on: it is the Skeleton at the Feast, potentially, with us. That soul or dominant corruption is so real that he cannot rise up and take part in man's festival as a Falstaff of unwieldy spume. If he comes at all it must be as he is [...]. (*CWB* 153)

I have tried here, taking a hint from David Wragg, to suggest some of the ways in which matters of character and genre might have

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appeared to Lewis as a literary artist, associating these matters under the heading of sovereignty within the horizon of the 'life-world'. A complementary discussion of sovereignty and laughter occurs in the work of Georges Bataille, with a valuable note on the idiom of Hitlerian ambition.<sup>57</sup> It is clear enough, by the way, from Weller's closing paragraph on Nietzsche, Lewis, and Heidegger what the term 'nihilism' has been functioning as a cipher for in his polemic, syllabically and phonetically.<sup>58</sup> But it isn't relevant.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Shane Weller, 'Nietzsche among the Modernists: The Case of Wyndham Lewis', *Modernism/modernity* 14. 4 (2007): 625-43.

<sup>2</sup> The problem has been persuasively discussed by Alan Munton in "Imputing Noxiousness": Aggression and Mutilation in Recent Lewis Criticism', *Wyndham Lewis Annual* IV (1997): 5-20, and by Dennis Brown in 'Review Article' (a survey of the *Modernism/modernity* 'Wyndham Lewis Number'), *Wyndham Lewis Annual* IV (1997): 38-48. See also Paul Edwards, 'Academic Hallucination', *Wyndham Lewis Annual* XI (2004): 92-96.

<sup>3</sup> See Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 51.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-53.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 111-14 and 121-25.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Kermode, 'Fiction and E. M. Forster', *London Review of Books* (10 May 2007), 16.

<sup>8</sup> David Wragg, 'Stating the Obvious? Lewis's Critical Reception: Pedagogy, Criticism and Hermeneutics', *Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies* 1. 1 (2010): 109-27.

<sup>9</sup> Weller, 'Nietzsche among the Modernists', 625.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> On the early influence of Nietzsche in England, see David S. Thatcher, *Nietzsche in England 1890-1914: The Growth of a Reputation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970). It is notable that Lewis plays a minor part in Thatcher's study, compared with such figures as Davidson, Orage, Herbert Read, George Bernard Shaw and Yeats.

<sup>12</sup> Weller, 'Nietzsche among the Modernists', 625-28.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 628.

<sup>14</sup> Wragg, 'Stating the Obvious?', 123.

<sup>15</sup> Most recently in "We Are Unknown to Ourselves, We Knowers": More Thoughts on Lewis's "Paramount Influence", in Carmelo Cunchillos Jaime (ed.), *Wyndham Lewis the Radical: Essays on Literature and Modernity* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007): 69-90.

<sup>16</sup> Wragg, 'Stating the Obvious?', 112-13.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>18</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is* (1908), trans. Richard Hollingdale (1979) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 64.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche – Vol. IV: Nihilism* (1961 / 1982), trans. Joan Stambaugh *et al* and ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 9-10.

<sup>20</sup> For Heidegger's distinction, 'classical nihilism', see Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 3-5. For Jaspers's distinctions between 'radical nihilism' and 'creative nihilism', on the one hand, and 'destructive nihilism', on the other, see Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity* (1936), trans. Charles Wallraff and Fredrick Schmitz (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967), 120ff, 243ff, 434ff. For Deleuze's distinctions of use (namely, 'negative nihilism', 'reactive nihilism', 'passive nihilism') see Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1962), trans. Hugh Tomlinson (London: Athlone Press, 1983), 147-51.

<sup>21</sup> See Krell, 'Analysis', in Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 287.

<sup>22</sup> Weller, 'Nietzsche among the Modernists', 631.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 629.

<sup>24</sup> Wragg, 'Stating the Obvious?', 119.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, emphases added.

<sup>26</sup> Weller, 'Nietzsche among the Modernists', 629.

<sup>27</sup> As quoted in *ibid.*, 629-30.

<sup>28</sup> For Lewis's remarkable image of the 'workshop', see 'Bestre' (*CWB* 77).

<sup>29</sup> See 'The Death of the Ankou' (*CWB* 109-10).

<sup>30</sup> Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 73-81, 95-98, 385-430.

<sup>31</sup> See Edgell Rickword, *Essays and Opinions 1921-1931* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1974), 292-94.

<sup>32</sup> See Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767), ed. Graham Petrie (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 450-51. On the value of leaving things out, or rough, see E. H. Gombrich's comparison of the Singing Galleries of Luca della Robbia and Donatello, in *Art and Illusion: A*

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*Study of the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1960), 162-63.

<sup>33</sup> Weller, 'Nietzsche among the Modernists', 630.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 634.

<sup>35</sup> See Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Fontana, 1970): 83-109, 99-100.

<sup>36</sup> Weller, 'Nietzsche among the Modernists', 633.

<sup>37</sup> Krell, 'Analysis', 272ff.

<sup>38</sup> Weller, 'Nietzsche among the Modernists', 634-38.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 636.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 637.

<sup>41</sup> Lewis, "'Detachment" and the Fictionist' (1934; *CHC* 214-30).

<sup>42</sup> Weller, 'Nietzsche among the Modernists', 635.

<sup>43</sup> For Lewis's own reflection on his reading of Dostoevsky, see *RA* 156-60.

<sup>44</sup> See Paul Valéry: 'In art there is a word which applies to all styles and all fancies, and at one stroke dismisses all the pretended difficulties with regard to the opposition or the relationship between art and that "nature" which, for good reasons, is never defined: the word is *ornament*.' 'Fragments from "Introduction to the Method of Leonardo da Vinci"', in *Selected Writings of Paul Valéry* (New York: New Directions, 1950), 103.

<sup>45</sup> Weller, 'Nietzsche among the Modernists', 638.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 638-639.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 639. Weller is not alone in attributing fundamental importance to 'The Meaning of the Wild Body'. See also Bernard Lafourcade's remarks on the essay (*CWB* 156).

<sup>48</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1927), trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 32-34.

<sup>49</sup> See Michael Nath, 'Wyndham Lewis and Laughter', in Paul Edwards (ed.), *The Great London Vortex: Modernist Literature and Art* (Bath: Sulis Press, 2003), 103-7. Here I tried to show that the relationship with Bergson goes well beyond mere inversion, focusing in Lewis on the self-consciousness of the laughter.

<sup>50</sup> Weller, 'Nietzsche among the Modernists', 639.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 640 (ellipsis in Lewis quotation added by Weller). See *CWB* 157-58 for Lewis's original.

<sup>52</sup> See Krell, 'Analysis', 284ff.

<sup>53</sup> See *CWB* 157. The quoted passage is from William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy* (1911), reprinted in *Writings 1902-1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York: Library of America, 1987), 1002-1003. This source is identified by

Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000), 559, n. 60.

<sup>54</sup> In selecting this passage, Lewis may have been reminded of Peter Verkhovensky's hunt for Kirilov in a darkened room. See Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Devils* (1872), trans. David Magarshack (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 618-20.

<sup>55</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902) (London: Routledge, 2008), 38-39, 57-58.

<sup>56</sup> Not less than Joyce as Molly Bloom.

<sup>57</sup> See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, Volumes II & III (New York: Zone Books, 1993), 197-211 and 457, n. 55.

<sup>58</sup> Weller, 'Nietzsche among the Modernists', 641.