

## Book Reviews

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David A. Wragg, *Wyndham Lewis and the Philosophy of Art in Early Modernist Britain: Creating a Political Aesthetic* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 2005), 358 pp. (+ 31 pp. b&w illustrations) pp. £99.95 (hb).

In his brief preface to this book David Peters Corbett remarks upon the fact that Lewis was until recently a neglected figure in modernist studies, whereas in recent years he has become ‘increasingly central to new readings of modernism and its complexities’ and is now being seen as ‘a major figure whose career and work occupied a place at the centre of our understanding of the art and literature of the early twentieth century’ (ix). He goes on to commend David Wragg’s monograph as a ‘substantial and scrupulously argued study of Lewis in relation to “Enlightenment” and the concepts of rationality and the avant-garde’ (x). This reader, for one, can only concur with this assessment. *Wyndham Lewis and the Philosophy of Art in Early Modernist Britain* is a fine book in every respect: scholars of Lewis, and of modernism more generally, will, I think, be reading it for a long time to come. Peters Corbett’s emphases on ‘newness’ and ‘complexity’ are also relevant here, because Wragg’s reading of a key phase in Lewis’s career develops original ideas about how that phase might be understood, and as he goes about this task he rightly insists on the difficulty of Lewis’s work and the need to be attentive to its many complexities.

This emphasis on complexity brings us to another point, which needs to be noted from the off. *Wyndham Lewis and the Philosophy of Art in Early Modernist Britain* is a difficult book, which is not easy to read. It’s important to be clear about this. The book is difficult not because of a rebarbative style (as is all too often the case with theoretically informed work) but because the ideas it is trying to tease out are complex. Wragg’s style is lucid, his arguments are clearly laid out, and he regularly signposts the direction in which he is taking them. But there is no escaping the difficulty of this material, and readers who are not *au fait* with a

range of philosophical positions are going to have to work hard to get the most out of this book. They should certainly make the effort, as the rewards are great. In what follows, then, I shall try to give an exposition of some of the key arguments laid out here; given the relatively short space offered by a review this exposition will necessarily be selective. I should also say that I have few disagreements with Wragg's broad thesis. It is more a question of where one places certain emphases and what aspects of Lewis's *oeuvre* one chooses to highlight. When I raise questions about certain arguments, they should be understood as just that: questions addressed in the spirit of dialogue to an intelligent book with which one ought to wrestle.

About half way through this monograph, Wragg offers this remark *à propos* Fredric Jameson's reading of Lewis: 'Jameson's desire to recover "History itself" from its various misrepresentations in the cause of verifying a "correct" version of Enlightenment, is politically understandable, but it virtually overwhelms anything Lewis might have to say on the subject of art' (163). A few pages on, he comments with great restraint on John Carey's preposterously reductive account of Lewis (and other modernists) by noting that Carey 'seems unwilling to recognize that the *political* meanings of modernism are multiple rather than single' (166). Both observations are spot on. The *difference* (and in a book strongly influenced by Derrida's writing this is significant) between Wragg's account of Lewis's work and the respective approaches of Jameson and Carey is that the former is attentive to what Lewis painted and wrote, whereas the latter two are not. Of course, one needs to distinguish Jameson's subtle late Marxism from Carey's blunderbuss 'empiricism', but the general point stands. Both writers in their own particular ways have a prior thesis about the cultural work performed by modernism, and about Lewis's role in that performance, and both glide over everything in Lewis's writing that might complicate or challenge the accounts they offer.

Not so here. The keynote of this book is complexity. Wragg is concerned to demonstrate how ramified Lewis's thought is, how intertwined it is with the ideas of various interlocutors, and also – crucially – how internally unstable it often is. Thus although the argument of *Wyndham Lewis and the Philosophy of Art in Early Modernist Britain* relies on a clear theoretical paradigm, it doesn't try obsessively to fit Lewis to that paradigm, at the cost of eliding the contradictions, inconsistencies, and tensions exhibited by his work. The general argu-

ment is laid out in the opening chapter ('Art and the Problem of Enlightenment – Introductory Signposts'), and this is a good decision on Wragg's part because it makes the subsequent analyses easier to follow. The book is preoccupied with the question of how we should read Lewis's response to modernity; in short, how we should interpret his particular brand of modernism. *In nuce*, Wragg holds that this response 'is built on an Enlightenment substructure composed of the discordance between rationality [...] and aesthetic perception, and that this discordance is crucial for the attempts to establish a case for Art's social relevance' (209). The capitalized 'A' is used here to refer specifically to Lewis's (evolving) avant-garde aesthetic, as opposed to 'art' in general, and Wragg argues that this aesthetic, which he sees 'as a pre-eminent, though dirempted, and thus autocritical, category' (2), is inseparable from Lewis's reflexive reading of Enlightenment modernity. Lewis's avant-garde period is then seen to come to an end with his turn to fascism in 1931, and the book ends at this point in his career, leaving a consideration of the consequences of this turn to others.

For Wragg, the decisive point about Lewis's avant-garde phase – from the 'wild' body period through to the early 1930s – is that it attempts to engage with, and to resist, the power of instrumental rationality unleashed by modernity (here the Weber-Frankfurt School-Habermas intellectual tradition plays a key part in Wragg's account) and to overcome the *aporiai* produced by modernity's autonomization of the spheres of aesthetics, reason/science, and ethics/law (here Kant is the seminal voice, followed by his 'deconstructive' critics – Nietzsche, Heidegger, Adorno, Derrida). The argument is that Kant's Third Critique theorizes the aesthetic as a way of mediating between pure reason and practical reason but cannot break the deadlock between them. Drawing on J. M. Bernstein's useful concept of the 'after image', Wragg suggests that already in Kant we can see that the disjunction between 'art' and 'truth' gives rise to a utopian memory trace of what might have been: a political realm free from the excessive control of rationality. Lewis's avant-garde work, he suggests, needs to be interpreted in relation to this post-Kantian context.

For Wragg, then, Lewis's work up to the late 1920s is productive precisely because it refuses to foreclose the difficult questions with which it grapples, but remains open to the unresolved (unresolvable?) problems caused by modernity's creation of disparate, and clearly demarcated, categories. Adapting Peter Bürger's influential account of

the avant-gardes, Wragg now redefines Lewis's avant-gardism as '*the problematic and unfulfilled relationship between art and "life praxis"*' (8, original emphasis). Because it is both problematic and unfulfilled – and, in an obscure sense, knows itself to be so – it is internally aporetic. Its very contradictions keep this avant-gardism alive, ensuring that it is aesthetically self-reflexive and politically indeterminate. It frustrates the desire of those who would pin Lewis down to fixed positions by exploring artistic and political options that are internally unstable and always open to revision. Wragg thus agrees with 'those readings which find Lewis's work to be at odds with itself' (7), and approvingly cites Antonio Feijó's rather Keatsian view that "A capacity to entertain antinomies without striving to arrest them in any apparent synthesis makes [all] these texts peculiarly valuable" (7).

What isn't of value is the attempt to close off such antinomies. In an odd conjunction, both Lewis and some of his critics are equally at fault here. That is to say, the Lewis of 1931 and beyond is no longer able to hold on to the productive tensions generated by his earlier work (and therefore shuts them down), while some of his more reductive critics have never seemed able to acknowledge these tensions in the first place and thus foist rigid views onto Lewis. Wragg argues that if 'Lewis's work enacts the dilemma of a disjunction between rational and aesthetic criteria, his attempt to heal this aporia through an espousal of fascist politics in the 1930s is really a mistaken attempt to close down the self-referential paradoxes in his work' (15). This false move occurs because 'the critical value of Art's social autonomy becomes fraught in the 1920s' (8) when the failure of art to alter a damaged and corrupted lifeworld in any decisive way becomes apparent to Lewis. Turning to an almost obsessive critique of the 'societification of art' (Lewis's phrase), Lewis embarks on a whole-scale critique of what Adorno and Horkheimer later describe as the 'culture industry'. For Wragg, this turn to agonistic critique is one consequence of Lewis's inability to find a 'way of concretizing his vision of a reconstructed world' (214).

As for the critics who suggest that Lewis's work was always already in some sense inclining towards fascism (Jameson, Foster, Ayers), Wragg points out that they typically read *back* from the positions Lewis took up in the 1930s to suggest that the earlier work anticipates this move and can only be understood properly in relation to it. Lewis's turn to satire and the persona of the 'Enemy' is then read as the *inevitable* outcome of earlier tendencies, which lead him finally to reveal his true

phallogocentric and fascist colours. Wragg's response to this is a twofold one: firstly, he shows that this kind of reading routinely misconstrues the earlier work (the 'wild' body period, *BLAST* (1914-15), Vorticism, the critiques of the 1920s) because it is insufficiently attentive to the detail of Lewis's work; secondly, he argues that even in the satirical writing of the late 1920s Lewis's thought is still internally fissured, which means that readings which focus on any *one* aspect of it occlude its complicating features: 'Lewis's conception of Art is sufficiently reflexive about its identity to problematize ascriptions of a reactionary politics, at least until we get to *Paleface* [1929] and *Hitler* [1931]' (3). This is absolutely right, in my view. For while there have been scholars who have worked painstakingly to understand the complexities of Lewis's knotty thought, there has also been a good deal of sloppy reading which moves to quick and easy conclusions that then produce simplistic (but comforting?) conclusions about modernism and Lewis's place within it.

Here, however, is where I have one of my few disagreements with Wragg. It seems to me that by positing a 'caesura' in 1931 he both underplays the complexity of Lewis's thought in the 1930s (yes, there are some deeply misguided and objectionable arguments here, *but not only*) and overplays the significance of the art/praxis conundrum. Wragg suggests that the critique of democracy as 'false enlightenment' is 'where Lewis's political analysis is *really* a displacement of Art's fundamental avant-garde dilemma' (267, my emphasis), and this leads Wragg to suggest that the 'stability Lewis would confer on politics is *really* a cry for Art's coherence and social belonging, beyond all the obscurities of mediation and modernist self-reference' (268, my emphasis). I wonder. In a book as subtle as this one is, those two claims about what is 'really' going on puzzle me, because they shut down other interpretative possibilities. I don't entirely disagree with the claim being made here. Certainly, it offers *one* way to think about what happens around 1931, but it isn't the *only* way. I would want to suggest that Lewis's turn to fascism in the 1930s is as much about politics as it is about art. I mean by this that from at least *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926) Lewis was preoccupied with what he saw as the ineradicable structural weaknesses of liberal democracy, and was sympathetic to political solutions that imposed centralized order on society. This was partly because he wanted to create or preserve a space for art in society and partly because he thought that political control might mitigate what he saw as the excesses of modernity at a primarily *social* level. What happens in the 1930s is not

separable from Lewis's thinking about the place of art in society, but nor is it to be interpreted solely in these terms.

A related point concerns Wragg's account of the link between Lewis's attempt in the late 1920s to connect artistic radicalism with social critique. He writes: 'Again, if Lewis's politically non-aligned individualism can be condemned as elitist or socially nugatory from the perspective of the politically committed avant-gardes, it also serves to remind us of the dangers of Art's exploitation by politics. This is the trap Lewis falls into when his desire for Art's social relevance leads him to a fascist corruption of Nietzsche's post-Enlightenment' (184). As Wragg is aware, this raises the problem that Lewis addressed (and that bedevilled him) throughout his career. Certainly, from any leftist perspective Lewis's insistence that art *must* be politically non-aligned will always be seen as retrograde (though Jameson acknowledged the power of Lewis's particular form of diremptive ideology critique), but Lewis is important (and still significant today) precisely because he questioned this linkage and sought to make art socially pertinent in a *different* way. It isn't obvious to me that Lewis's 'desire for Art's social relevance' is what led him to the 'fascist corruption', since Lewis's stress on the autonomy of the aesthetic (which is not Bloomsbury formalism) depended on its freedom from the political realm.

A crucial aspect of *Wyndham Lewis and the Philosophy of Art in Early Modernist Britain* is its concern with the continued importance of the 'wild' body to work that Lewis produced much later in his career. Here, the influence of Bernard Lafourcade's edition of *The Complete Wild Body* (1982) is very much in evidence, especially his 'archaeology' of the wild body and his claim that beyond its various mutations, the wild body 'remained with Lewis to the very end, as was explicitly stated in *Rude Assignment?* (CWB 190). Wragg explores the implications of this claim in detail, but he does so in a way that always holds the wider theoretical possibilities broached by the 'wild' body in mind. It is impossible to do much more than to gesture at the richness of his developing argument in a review. Wragg suggests that Lewis's pained awareness of the depredations of modernity informed his defence of aesthetic detachment (the philosophy of the eye, the spatializing inclinations, the assault on Bergsonian vitalism, the turn to critique and satire, etc.), which in turn drove him in the direction of a certain kind of rationalism. But as Wragg points out, the 'blindspots of rationality can also figure for something else, so far underplayed in the reception of Lewis's work',

and this is 'an aesthetic Utopianism which struggles to articulate itself from within the closures it helps to sustain' (26). In a series of subtle readings of the early stories; of *BLAST* and Vorticism, especially *Enemy of the Stars* (1914); the key books of the 1920s, especially *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926) and *Time and Western Man* (1927); and then *The Apes of God* (1930), Wragg shows that when Lewis's interest in 'primitivism' combines 'both rational and aesthetic interests' the result is 'a critique of the idea of the "primitive" as this appears in the discourse of primitivist modernism' and 'an investment in the potential of the body as socially regenerative, amounting to a critique of reification' (40).

There are numerous implications here. For example, whereas some critics see Lewis's satire as purely destructive, Wragg suggests that it discloses 'a kind of mourning for something beyond modernity's philosophical diremption' and that Lewis's 'critiques of a reified lifeworld *do*, in fact, seek for something to counteract the damage done by reification' (44). Drawing on Lewis's often ignored 'Our Wild Body' essay of 1910, he argues that it exhibits 'a hankering after the body as an antidote to rationalized modernity' (45) and raises the question of 'what it means to represent a Utopian *subject* under modernity', suggesting that 'detachment cannot do this' but that 'the body's "eager" versions might paradoxically be reclaimed from its currently reified condition' (47). Mobilizing Nietzsche in support of this position (especially his account of the Dionysian), Wragg sees a kind of doubling at work in the avant-garde Lewis whereby 'two kinds of "detachment"' are operative: "To the measure of "truth-only cognition" in the rational critiques of modernity must be added the Apollonian control, or perhaps better *mediation*, of Dionysian impulses which carry within them the aesthetic overcoming of rationalized modernity. This form of "detachment" opens up the possibility of an *antiocularcentric* discourse in Lewis's work, contra to the sense of a spatialist value for Art' (58). There is a utopian potential at work in Lewis's 'wild' body, but it needs to be seen by way of a Nietzschean mediation. Wragg thus suggests that across a number of different works (and in different ways, of course) the 'wild' body acts as a disrupting and complicating presence that secretes within itself the possibility of retarding an over-rationalized philosophy and an aesthetic of detachment. Lewis, he contends, was preoccupied with '*how to locate the idea of the body's critical value* when it was in danger of being romanticized or sentimentalized on the one hand, and rationalized out of existence on the other' (105-6). To take just one example, in his

*Book Reviews*

account of the difficulties of reading *Enemy of the Stars*, Wragg suggests that the 'wild' body is not just a thematic presence but is transmuted into style. The corrupted self in *Enemy* 'is faced with the threat posed by the violent energy of the "wild" body, whose "beauty" is then displaced into the sheer creativity of the text's modernism' (139). Furthermore, Lewis's 'mediations of the "wild" body in *Enemy* can be made to offer a critique, *avant la lettre*, of his political "solution" to Art's avant-garde dilemma in the 1930s' (143). Because the 'wild' body is in 'dialogue with detachment's visual supremacy' (143) it can offer 'a way of protecting against the closures of reality, particularly in its totalizing mode' (144).

In his discussion of *Tarr* (1918), Wragg argues that Tarr's failure to act on his philosophical principles 'is bound up with the text's modernism and its resistance to closure' (147), while Anastasya is a 'successful character' (148) who must be set against the figure of Bertha (and Tarr's sexual politics) in any consideration of claims that the novel as a whole is a misogynist text. In fact, Wragg suggests, *Tarr* 'maps out the consequences of detachment's existential failure' (163), a claim that continues the earlier analysis of the link between detachment and ocularcentrism. The figure of Kreisler can then be read as 'a mediation of Lewis's interest in the aesthetic potential of the "wild" body' and, moreover, as one whose role in the text suggests 'a correspondence between that mediation and Heidegger's thoughts on the critical value of Being under modernity's ocularcentric regime' (147). Kreisler emerges here as 'the real inheritor of that Nietzschean strand in Lewis's thinking which I have identified as the Dionysian potential of the "wild" body' (148). This strikes me as far-fetched. Wragg admits that the philosophical links he's striving to make are 'extrapolations from highly mediated ideas' (155), but I'm not convinced that these particular extrapolations hold. While Tarr's strictures on Kreisler should certainly not be taken as authoritative, I can find little in the wider textual presentation of Kreisler to suggest that his 'otherness' hints at a bodily positivity. *Tarr* does, I think, stage the *aporiai* thrown up by a strict adherence to the rigid Art/Life dichotomy its eponymous protagonist defends, but I'm not convinced that much (any?) redemptive potential can be located in the particular 'wild' body represented by Kreisler in this admittedly complex text.

Another point of disagreement arises in respect of Wragg's reading of *The Caliph's Design* (1919) in relation to *BLAST*. He suggests that the former is a 'thoroughly paradoxical document' because its



‘momentary *volte face* from the position announced in *Blast 1*, where we are told that “Art merges in Life again everywhere,” is predicated on existing diremptions within modernity which have still to be repaired’ (316). But is this such a *volte face*? Given the multivalent nature of *BLAST*, can the desire for a merging of art and life attributed to *The Caliph’s Design* be excluded so clearly from *BLAST*? In the 1915 *BLAST*, for example, four years before *The Caliph’s Design*, Lewis argues during his critique of Kandinsky’s spiritual values that the art of painting ‘is for a living man, and the art most attached to life’ (B2 44). He goes on to argue that his principles should be applied to ‘Tube Posters, Magazine Covers, Advertisements and Commercial Art generally’ (B2 45), and this move in *BLAST* can surely be aligned with the desire to transform the form-content of our common life expressed in *The Caliph’s Design*.

Wragg points out in his concluding remarks that ‘Lewis’s work cannot be understood without recognizing that Art remains a special category, leading to the agonized sense of avant-gardism I have employed in this book’ (316). This not only captures a crucial aspect of Lewis’s thought but also goes to the heart of modernist avant-gardism more generally. The question of what kind of category art is, and how it might intervene in an alienated lifeworld, is central here. In much of Lewis’s writing of the 1920s, the seemingly unresolvable tension between aesthetic autonomy and social praxis tended to manifest itself as a tension between art and critique. But at the same time, his work of the period typically brings art and critique together in productive ways. Wragg is well attuned to this, indicating that these aspects of Lewis’s creativity in the 1920s cannot easily be disentangled. Thus *à propos* *The Art of Being Ruled* he suggests that ‘although Lewis’s sociology in 1926 seeks to transcend the Dionysian energies referred to in Harrison’s notion of ritual, these become transferred to the modernist *style* of Lewis’s text, so that the oppositions it sets up between Apollonian and Dionysian, individual and crowd, critical intellect and “democratic” body politic, remain to be deconstructed’ (241). This is well put, and Wragg goes on to show that the tension between demystifying critique and modernist form in *The Art of Being Ruled* leads to a kind of ‘contradiction’ whereby ‘the *aesthetic* reality specified at the level of *form* remains held in check, *though not remaindered*, by a rationalist impulse found in the *content* of the text’s socio-political analysis’ (261).

What this also means is that texts like *The Art of Being Ruled*, *Time and Western Man* (in parts of its analysis), and also *Paleface* (not discussed

here) are concerned not just with the question of how or whether *avant-gardism* can be political but also with the issue of whether *the subject* can be political. These two preoccupations are intimately linked, of course, but they are not reducible to each other, and Lewis gave a good deal of thought to both. Wragg sees *The Art of Being Ruled* as a text that ‘stages the problem of *being* political in the modern world’ (263), and he suggests that this reading ‘preserves critique as a function of artistic marginality’ (264). This is the right emphasis, I think. And it is a short step from a belief in artistic marginality as the *source* of critique (the outsider status conferring independence of mind) to a sense of it as the *consequence* of social or political powerlessness. It is scarcely surprising, then, that by the third volume of *The Enemy* (1929) Lewis is insisting that ‘the *person* is a thing of the past, in public life’ (E3 78), that ‘no single individual can, as things are, effectively *be* anything, politically, at all, except quite simply a “capitalist” or a “communist” (E3 79), and that ‘there is no margin in which the individual can exist, *effectively*, outside these gigantic organisations’ (E3 79-80). What Lewis now saw as the shutting down of political options will result in a closing down of certain critical-aesthetic possibilities. The path to 1931 is becoming visible.

David Wragg argues that it is ‘a strength of Lewis’s work that the aporia formed out of the categories of rationality and aesthetics’, which Wragg anchors ‘in Kant’s formative sense of modernity, remains relevant to ongoing debates about how to theorize this situation’ (311). This book amply demonstrates his case. It offers nuanced readings of Lewis’s writings and paintings from the years 1909 to 1931; teases out their aesthetic, social, and political implications; and shows that these aspects of Lewis’s work can’t be understood unless they are seen in relation to philosophical theorizations of modernity. Towards the end of his book, Wragg worries that his use of deconstruction might be functioning as a reifying ‘metanarrative theory [...] a kind of analytical system’ (320), but he needn’t be concerned. This is a supple book that establishes new connections between Lewis’s work and his intellectual precursors, while at the same time showing its relevance to contemporary theoretical debates.

Andrzej Gašiorek  
University of Birmingham, UK