

The Vortex as Ontology in *The Apes of God*: Self-Reflexive Satire and Apophaticism

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In Wyndham Lewis's satirical novel *The Apes of God* (1930) the character Horace Zagreus (who is 'broadcasting' the words of his mentor, Pierpoint) ruminates on the possibility of a radical new form of 'non-moral' satire which would present a novelistic mode of observation in which all human beings are rendered as ridiculous objects. This is because, as Zagreus puts it, in 'the eye' of a satirist like Jonathan Swift, '[e]very individual without exception [...] is objectively unbearable' (*AG* 257). Here, Zagreus articulates a set of ideas about satire that mirrors Lewis's own explicit consideration of an approach to writing fiction that he termed the 'external method'; instead of representing human consciousness in action, Lewis argues for the literature of 'the Great Without' (*MWA* 105), which focuses on the external, material elements of humanity. While Lewis's approach to representation within *The Apes of God* is necessarily more complicated than his account of the external method allows, the fact remains that Lewis's new theory of satire requires seeing the human from an inherently *inhuman* perspective.¹ For this reason, the human being is depicted in Lewis's fiction (in a reversal of Henri Bergson's dictum that laughter is predicated on the notion of a person behaving like a thing) as 'a *thing* behaving like a person' (*CWB* 158).

Although the 'external method' would only receive its full articulation in the 1930s, its aesthetic corollary of 'deadness' was a key component of Lewis's thought in his early Vorticist writings.² Perhaps the most explicit articulation of the Vorticist notion of 'deadness' is offered by the character Tarr in Lewis's 1918 novel of the same name:

[D]eadness is the first condition of art. A hippopotamus' armoured hide, a turtle's shell, feathers or machinery on the one hand; *that* opposed to naked pulsing and moving of the soft inside of life, along with infinite elasticity and consciousness of movement, on

the other. – Deadness, then [...] in the limited sense in which we use that word, is the first condition of art. The second is absence of *soul*, in the sentimental human sense. The lines and masses of the statue are its soul. No restless, quick flame-like ego is imagined for the *inside* of it. It has no inside. This is another condition of art; *to have no inside*, nothing you cannot *see*. Instead, then, of being something impelled like an independent machine by a little egoistic fire inside, it lives soullessly and deadly by its frontal lines and masses. (*T1* 299-300)

While Tarr's definition is excessive in a manner that borders on self-parody, and cannot be read as a straightforward explication of Lewis's own aesthetics, this famous passage nonetheless articulates many of the key concerns of Lewis's Vorticism, particularly in its relationship to an aesthetics of inhumanism. Indeed, my argument is that Lewis's later work, specifically *The Apes of God*, continues to interact with the aesthetics of 'deadness' articulated during Lewis's Vorticist phase.

The Apes of God extends this notion of deadness in its opening section, entitled 'Death the Drummer', which makes deadness not only the condition of art, but also its subject. The novel offers a portrait of Lady Fredigonde Follett, who is depicted as if she is already a member of the walking dead: 'there was nothing left in her body. [...] Her arms were made of plaster [...]. [S]he still would exercise her headpiece sharply, upon the ruined clock-work of her trunk' (*AG* 10, original in italics).³ Here Lewis elides the notion of deadness with the 'external method' of satire, since his insistent description of Fredigonde as a machine ('clock-work') or a statue ('made of plaster') emphasizes that she is effectively dead already; even her internal monologue is lifeless, composed only of 'patterns of conversations, with odds and ends from dead disputes, and cat's-cradles of this thing and that' (*AG* 13, original in italics). Here, internal monologue does not glorify the free association of the consciousness in motion, as in so many other modernist works, but focuses, rather, on the way that consciousness consists of clichéd and received language. As the narrator of the novel notes: 'This was an all-puppet cast' (*AG* 81).

But before considering the connection between the Vorticist notion of deadness and Lewis's later satire, it is also worth emphasising that the turn toward an aesthetics of deadness is also one of the key

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features of modernism, which Giorgio Agamben has catalogued in detail:

What is new about modern poetry is that, confronted with a world that glorifies man so much the more it reduces him to an object, modern poetry unmasks the humanitarian ideology by making rigorously its own the *boutade* that Balzac puts in George Brummel's mouth: "Nothing less resembles man than man." Apollinaire perfectly formulated this proposition in *Les peintres cubistes*, where he writes that "above all, artists are men who wish to become inhuman." Baudelaire's antihumanism, Rimbaud's call "to make one's soul monstrous," the marionette of Kleist, Lautréamont's "it is a man or a stone or a tree," Mallarmé's "I am truly decomposed," the arabesque of Matisse that confuses human figures and tapestries, "my ardor is rather of the order of the dead and the unborn" from Klee, "the human doesn't come into it" of Gottfried Benn, to the "nacreous snail's trace" of Eugenio Montale and "the head of medusa and the Robot" of Paul Celan, all express the same need: there are still figures beyond the human.⁴

While Agamben notes the centrality of 'deadness' to modern aesthetics, the question remains as to *why* deadness is so inextricably linked with modernity. Perhaps a preliminary answer can be uncovered in José Ortega y Gasset's essay 'The Dehumanization of Art' (1925), which attempts to wrestle with an art so new that it cannot yet even be named 'modernism'.⁵ For Ortega, the new art is a response to a century of dominance by the doctrines of 'Romanticism', an art that has become human, all too human. Conflating the emotion evoked by an image and the image itself, the 'Romantic' viewer of art can no longer make a distinction between representation and reality. Modernism responds by emphasising art's unreality – that 'an object of art is artistic only insofar as it is not real'.⁶ For modernists like Lewis, it was only through reasserting art's unreality, its deadness, that art could regain its authenticity, its truth. As Ortega describes it, modernist artists were not concerned with traditional mimesis (of holding up the mirror to reality), for the reason that '[i]n foregoing to emulate reality the painting becomes what it authentically is: an image, an unreality'.⁷ Ironically, in a modernity whose legitimisation crisis deprives it of the epistemological

guarantees offered by tradition (whether religious or aesthetic), it is only by asserting the fictionality of fiction, and the distance between literature and life, that the artist can return to some possibility of aesthetic autonomy; only through its dehumanization can art return to a fundamental ontology, to a self-sustaining truth.

But there is a further paradox in this turn. While the dehumanization employed by modern art appears as an attack on romanticism (or, at least, a naïve form of romanticism), at the same time its basic gesture is paradigmatically romantic. The aesthetics of dehumanization, in purging art of a tainted humanity, seeks more than anything to preserve the sovereignty of art at all costs.⁸ Art can maintain both its autonomy and its sovereignty as a special domain precisely *because* it is separated from the world of the merely human. Modernist art seeks to exist as a double that runs parallel to reality without ever becoming reality. It is precisely this notion of art as a ‘double’ that Lewis means by ‘deadness’. As Horace Zagreus states in *The Apes*: ‘Well, first, I think, *the real* should not compete with creations of Fiction. There should be two worlds, not one’ (AG 258). It is precisely art’s ‘deadness’ – its separation from life – that guarantees its vitality.

Lewis’s Vorticist conception of ‘Deadness’ articulates precisely this parallel existence for the work of art.⁹ The statue imagined in Lewis’s passage on deadness from *Tarr* nonetheless lives ‘soullessly and deadly by its frontal lines and masses’ (T1 300). Its existence is immediate – all that is the work of art is already there presented directly, so that art’s ontology is identical with its sensuously realized form. Rather, it is the human being, which Tarr describes in disparaging terms as an ‘independent machine [impelled] by a little egoistic fire inside’, that seems really and truly dead. Art’s vitality exceeds that of the human but only because its very deadness, its ‘absence of *soul*’, enables it to exist in a perfect harmony with itself. Art simply *is*, and its existence provides no contradictions, unlike the human being, the absurdity of whose outward mechanical motions clashes so comically with the desires of the ‘egoistic fire inside’.¹⁰

It is also in this gesture that we can begin to see how Lewis’s notion of the self is intimately linked to the notion of deadness. Utterly removed from the contradictions of life, art’s existence – which unifies content and form – provides the possibility of an authenticity that surpasses the capabilities of the merely human. In this sense, Lewis elaborates his new theory of satire precisely within the context of these

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larger struggles about the form, content, and purpose of art. His employment of the 'external method' within *The Apes of God* is linked to a larger project that could perhaps be best termed an aestheticized anti-humanism (or an anti-humanistic aestheticism). In this sense, notions of aesthetic 'deadness' and the human self are inextricably linked in Lewis's thought, and art's transcendence appears only through a diminishment of the human. Art's sovereign position as the sole medium for 'truth' derives precisely from its distance from a flawed humanity, and art's power – and, indeed, the source of its 'truth' – can be located precisely in its inhumanity. In this gesture, deadness appears as both the natural condition and the subject of Lewis's art.

For Lewis, satire is the natural form for an inhuman art, but such satire, as a result, will bear little resemblance to the classical definition of satire as the critique of vice and folly for the purposes of moral instruction. Lewis proclaimed that 'the greatest satire is non-moral' (*MWA* 85), and *The Apes of God* presents satire as a totalising negativity in which everything is subjected to its blistering critique (including the novel's own satirical gestures) without any reference to a larger ethical framework. While the 'external method' appropriates the form of traditional satire, it is expressly redeployed for the purposes of representing aesthetic 'deadness' instead. Not only does this shift the terrain of satire from the ethical to the aesthetic, thereby signalling a major transformation of the genre, but also satire becomes the locus of a specifically avant-garde aesthetic. In this sense, Lewis's 'return' to satire is, in fact, a radical break with tradition. For this reason, the complicated satire of this novel can only be understood fully within the context of Lewis's earlier avant-garde project of Vorticism and its unusual conception of the modern self.

Linking *The Apes of God* with Vorticism, however, may initially seem an odd gesture. As a movement, Vorticism was founded in 1914, was interrupted by the First World War, and was effectively dead as a movement by 1920. Lewis chose to work alone thereafter.¹¹ However, Vorticism's aesthetic program explicitly remains the guiding principle of his writing well into the 1930s.¹² Indeed, the very persona that Lewis adopts in the 1920s, that of the 'Enemy', which also gave the name to his third and final literary journal, *The Enemy* (1927-29), is clearly derived from *Enemy of the Stars* (1914), the play written and published by Lewis in the first volume of *BLAST*. Lewis saw his later work as an extension, and to some extent a revision, of Vorticism, as emphasized by his

decision in the late 1920s to rewrite much of his early prose.¹³ While many critics read the more conservative stylistics of these revisions as a repudiation of his earlier avant-gardism, such an argument ignores the more important point that, for Lewis, Vorticism was still a work-in-progress. The ‘external method’ of Lewis’s later satire, then, should be viewed as a further development of Vorticism’s programme of aesthetic ‘deadness’, and, as I will argue, the text of *The Apes of God* clearly indicates its links with Vorticism. Along with redeployed Vorticist aesthetics, Lewis’s satirical writings announce a conception of the self that is explicitly Vorticist, a fact that has significant consequences for his understanding of satire. However, understanding why this is so first requires coming to terms with Vorticism’s conception of the self.

Although the point is rarely noted, Vorticism did develop a conception of the self in oblique terms, and, indeed, this conception is already implicit in its central metaphor, the vortex. The vortex has traditionally been represented along the line of interpretation offered by Hugh Kenner: ‘a Vortex is a circulation with a still centre: a system of energies drawing in whatever comes near’.¹⁴ In this interpretation, Vorticism represents an attempt to find a compromise between the Futurist emphasis on the speed of modernity and the Cubist sense of distanced observation.¹⁵ The whirling outer edge of the vortex represents the intensified pace of modern life, overwhelming the subject with an incomprehensible stream of data. The centre of the vortex represents the observer – that still point of artistic consciousness, which alone is able to convert that whirring into the still, ‘dead’ unity of art – and it is at this moment that the notion of the modern self becomes entwined with the modern concept of art. But while the self and modern aesthetics are essentially conjoined in Lewis’s thought, there remains one significant problem with this traditional explication, which misses an essential element of the metaphor: the still point at the centre of the vortex is not a subject. Indeed, it is not anything at all.¹⁶

The centre of the vortex is a void, a nothing, an absence. Following the logic of its central metaphor, it remains unclear if, in Vorticism, there is even any subject at all, and whatever remains of individual identity is something radically different, compounded, and complex. As the manifesto/essay ‘Wyndham Lewis Vortex No. 1. Art Vortex. Be Thyself’ (1915) makes clear, Vorticism hardly supported the classical notion of the self as unchanging essence:

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You must talk with two tongues, if you do not wish to cause confusion.

[...]

You must give the impression of two persuaders, standing each on a different hip – left hip, right hip – with four eyes vacillating concentrically at different angles upon the object chosen for subjugation.

There is nothing so impressive as the number TWO.

You must be a duet in everything.

For, the Individual, the single object, and the isolated, is, you will admit, an absurdity.

Why try and give the impression of a consistent and indivisible personality? (B2 91)

Rather than offering us a stable identity, Lewis presents a multiplicity of selves, which in any traditional, essentialist view of identity is no self at all. And, indeed, the dual selves imagined in this manifesto are even inherently opposed ('each on a different hip' with 'eyes vacillating [...] at different angles'), suggesting a notion of the self as a reciprocal *agon* of negation, which seems much closer to a romantic conception of identity as an inherently self-reflexive process. For Lewis, the challenge of modern art was inextricably linked to the complexity of the new modern subject, which, unlike the classical self, lacked any essence or 'soul'.¹⁷

Lewis further articulates this late Vorticist conception of identity in his difficult and hermetic essay, 'Physics of the Not-Self' (1925).¹⁸ In 1932 Lewis republished this essay in book form as a commentary on his revision of his early Vorticist play, 'Enemy of the Stars' (1914), which was published in the first volume of *BLAST*. Scholarly discourse around 'Physics of the Not-Self' has usually portrayed it as a difficult and pseudo-mystical work. I will argue that it provides a central key to Lewis's philosophy of the self, but only by following the logic of Lewis's own connection in his 1932 republication – by linking it directly to the Vorticist project. I submit, following 'Physics', that Lewis is not a Cartesian dualist, as he is usually understood to be, or, at least, not in a typical way. Much of the confusion surrounding his dualism stems from the opening of Lewis's 'The Meaning of the Wild Body' (1927), in which he states that 'to assume the dichotomy of mind and body is necessary

here' (*CWB* 157). Yes, Lewis creates a division between mind and body, but the sub-category of mind is divided again. Lewis lived in a post-Freudian world, and, however suspicious he may have been of psychoanalysis, he never rejected the division of mind outright. In the earlier deadness quotation from *Tarr*, its eponymous character's reductive description of the body describes it as a machine impelled 'by a little egoistic fire inside'. This ego which impels is part of the mind, not part of the body, and it, like the body, is also problematic and ridiculous. In 'Physics of the Not-Self', Lewis discusses 'those who prefer the will's truth to that of the intellect' (*CPP* 196). Here the will is equivalent to the 'little egoistic fire'; it is a self-invested aspect of the mind, specifically that aspect of the mind that ties us to our body, to our own situatedness, to our own self-interest.

On the other side, however, is the intellect. The intellect is, in fact, dangerous to the will, to the ego, to the part of ourselves that ties us to the world, and so much so for Lewis that 'if anyone refers to the existence of that unfortunate by-product of the human state [i.e. the intellect], they convict themselves on the spot of being *no gentleman*, or, at the best, an enemy' (*CPP* 196). To declare oneself associated with the intellect is to become an Enemy, a word whose significance should now be clear. The Enemy's stance is that which values the intellect above all else. But why is the intellect so dangerous? Precisely because there is a '*not-self*' established at the centre of the intellect [that] betrays at every moment its transient human associate' (*CPP* 196). This '*not-self*' enables the possibility of outside thought, of the realization of our own situatedness in a world that extends beyond our own selves and self-interest, and for this reason the intellect must be opposed to the ego. In this sense, human beings, in Lewis's view, are bound to be inconsistent and 'dual', because the ego will always clash dramatically with the not-self at the centre of the intellect.

The not-self also recreates the metaphor of the vortex on the level of ontology. The not-self is the absent still point 'established at the centre of the intellect', which directly corresponds to the absent still point at the centre of the vortex. It is absent because it is not a self. It is a point, yes, but one that is able to transcend the pure egoism of self-interest. In this sense, the not-self is nothing more than the negation of self; it negates the ego without the creation of another entity, identity, or self. The reason that the concept of the not-self has been so mystifying to previous scholars of Lewis lies in the fact that they have failed to link

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it to the central metaphor of the vortex, which itself has been consistently misunderstood. To extract this view further, for Lewis the intellect directly corresponds to the position of the satirist. Indeed, the not-self is inherently a laughing self, or, as Lewis describes it, '[t]he essential us, that is the laugher' (*CWB* 157). Laughter enables us to realise the absurd situatedness of our own being: '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' (*CWB* 157-58). Laughter takes us outside of ourselves, bridging a gap that logic alone cannot overmaster. But where does it take us? Not back to the self, but somewhere outside. In this sense, laughter is purely a negation of self, of that self that is found both in the body and in the ego (one half of the mind). It is for this reason that Lewis goes on (in an oft-quoted passage) to state that '[t]he root of the Comic is to be sought in the sensations resulting from the observations of a *thing* behaving like a person' (*CWB* 158). All human beings are material bodies, and, in this sense, they are things, even though the egoistic will inside us, which posits our individual consciousness as the centre of the universe, makes us forget as much. Laughter steps outside the ego-body interaction to reveal the inherently absurd and comedic element of human existence. Laughter leaves us, momentarily, in the void at the centre of the vortex.

But this realization must be carried out to its logical extreme, and it is for this reason that Lewis's satire, such as *The Apes of God*, must become self-reflexive. Once we have realized the fundamental absurdity of human existence, it effectively becomes applicable to all subjects. As Horace Zagreus states: 'Were we mercilessly transposed into Fiction, by the eye of a Swift, for instance, the picture would be intolerable, both for Fiction and for us. [...] *Every* individual without exception is in that sense objectively unbearable' (*AG* 271). Lewis's very view of the self requires a significant transformation in the deployment of satire from its classical description as the castigation of vice and folly from a detached and objective viewpoint, and this is the case for two reasons. First of all, the laughing observer of the highest order does not merely see the absurdity in the position of others, but in his position, as well:

Again, it is comparatively easy to see that another man, as an animal, is absurd; but it is far more difficult to observe oneself in that hard and exquisite light. But no man has ever continued to

live who has observed himself in that manner for longer than a flash. Such consciousness must be of the nature of a thunderbolt (CWB 158).

Seeing the absurdity of human existence necessarily includes the realization of our own absurdity. The laughing observer, the comic experience of the not-self at the centre of the intellect, is an inherently self-reflexive one. When we mock and attack others for their absurdity, we implicitly include ourselves as one among the victims of our attack. For Lewis, then, satire is and must be inherently self-reflexive in its pursuits. Secondly, and following from this first point, there is no possibility of 'objectivity' in satire. Yes, the laughing observer has moments of self-reflection, but they are instantaneous thunderbolts that cannot be maintained. As embodied egoistic subjects, we are inherently incapable of objective judgement in satire or elsewhere, since 'fundamental self-observation [...] can never on the whole be absolute. We are not constructed to be *absolute observers*' (CWB 158). While the satiric gesture is structured to remind us, via comedy, of the absurdity of the world and of ourselves, it can never reach a level of objectivity or absolute observation. Indeed, the absolute observer, God, is for Lewis never reachable for a subject, and in this sense everyone, even the most enlightened satirist, is still an ape of God, because absolute observation remains elusive.

Thus, for Lewis, the conception of the self is tied directly to his conception of the comic and to his conception of satire. For Lewis, the strange requirements of our unique humanity, which entails our grotesque mechanistic body, the deluded self-importance of our ego, and our strange intellectual ability to realize the absurdity of this very situatedness, means that we can never reach a state of ultimate enlightenment, even if the highest human goal is to glimpse, however briefly, the basic absurdity of (our own) humanity. Here we see, for the first time, the complexity of Lewis's conception of the self, which is a dualism down to the very core. In a sense, we could perhaps better say that Lewis's is a Cartesian dualism without a soul. There is a dualism between mind and body, but then another dualism within the mind, between the ego and the not-self of the intellect. Whatever is worth preserving in humans, for Lewis, is this intellect, but, unlike the classical soul which is our essence (and, as we know, 'absence of *soul*' is the second condition of art), the intellect is essentially not us, it is not a self. Here the human

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being presents the semblance of self, but it is, in reality, a series of *agons* that whirl around each other with an absence, or not-self, at their centre. That is to say, every human being is a vortex.

The Apes of God explicitly reproduces this Vorticist conception of the self within its text. Reed Way Dasenbrock has already argued that *The Apes of God* possesses a literally circular structure reminiscent of the vortex, beginning and ending in the same location with virtually the same characters, along with the thematic association of the approaching drums of death.¹⁹ What has not been noted, however, is that, in keeping with the metaphor of the vortex, *The Apes of God* also possesses an absence, a void in its centre, around which the entire plot revolves. Pierpoint, as has often been noted, is the central figure of *The Apes*, yet he is a figure who remains conspicuously absent. It is Pierpoint who writes ‘The Encyclical’ – the engine of the book’s plot – that Zagreus gives to Dan, commanding him to observe and categorize the various species of Apes. And it’s worth noting that the title of his ‘Encyclical’ (which contains the root word ‘cycle’) itself suggests a cyclone or a vortex. But Pierpoint seems to act as the absent puppeteer of the novel in other ways, as well. It appears that, by some financial arrangement, Pierpoint supplies ideas to Zagreus at a price, including not only a variety of speeches (which Zagreus calls ‘broadcasts’), but also the idea for the final prank in the novel’s ‘Lord Osmund’s Lenten Party’ section. Elsewhere, for example, as in the chapter ‘Chez Lionel Kein, Esq.’, Zagreus explicitly echoes Pierpoint’s prior statements on other matters: ‘My dear Zagreus, excuse me! But what you have just said is word for word what Pierpoint said the last time you were both here together – and about Proust – It was about Proust [...]’ (*AG* 258). The absence of Pierpoint, while given a great deal of consideration in scholarship on *The Apes of God*, nonetheless remains problematic for the novel, since he hangs over it like a phantasmic, dead presence. And it is precisely in this state of deadness, of course, that Lewis intends Pierpoint to remain, for Pierpoint, ultimately, is the Vorticist self embodied, or, more accurately, disembodied. The vortex revolves around an absent centre (the Vorticist self) and Pierpoint, too, is the conspicuous absence at the centre of *The Apes* around which everything revolves. Indeed, it is not simply that the prose style of *The Apes of God* is ‘Vorticist’ – the very structure of the novel *is* the structure of a vortex, with a group of hapless characters (‘things behaving as if they were people’, or an ‘all-puppet cast’) whirling around their absent puppeteer, Pierpoint.

Pierpoint's central importance to the novel, and also the degree to which he is misunderstood in most of its accompanying scholarship, can be further seen in the fact that his name – which is rife with possible interpretations – has rarely been given close attention.²⁰ Indeed, most critics, following Hugh Kenner, have noted that Pierpoint was named after Pierrepoint, a famous English executioner who presided over beheadings.²¹ While I do not deny the plausibility of this reading, I think the name is intentionally multivalent. For example, we could read 'Pierpoint' as meaning literally to point at one's peers – that is, to satirize those around you by castigating them as apes. Secondly, 'Pierpoint' could mean the point of a pier; like the end of a pier, Pierpoint is distant, far removed from the shore, and possibly sitting in another realm (i.e. beyond the sea). The third, and perhaps most significant, reading revolves around the emphasis on 'point' in his name; Pierpoint is the still 'point' at the centre of the vortex. He is the distanced observer who 'peers' out at the vast and confused world around him from this point. Lastly, given Lewis's career as a painter, Pierpoint could represent the 'vanishing point' in a work of art, which determines its perspective (and therefore its composition), even though the vanishing point itself may exist outside the field of composition itself. *The Apes of God* is a Vorticist work – Vorticist in its style, its structure, and its deployment of a Vorticist conception of human ontology. It is the dead, phantasmic Pierpoint who represents the Vorticist self, which in Lewis's conception is not a classical self at all, but rather the negation of self, or, in his own terminology, the 'not-self'.

The anti-humanism enacted through Lewis's satire can actually be recuperated as a strange form of humanism – albeit one in a particularly romantic mode. But identifying Lewis's aesthetic programme as romantic is not unproblematic, for satire is traditionally seen as the pre-eminent literary form of classicism, one that is inherently in opposition to romanticism; although more recent scholarship has acknowledged the influence of romanticism on Lewis's work, he has traditionally been identified as a classicist, a categorization further strengthened by the standard portrayal of modernism as a form of neo-classicism.²² Modernism's 'classical' aesthetics are typically located in the work of English writers who sought to return to a hard notion of truth and to move away from 'romantic' modes that privileged emotion and personal experience, such as Ezra Pound's Imagist credo to engage in '[d]irect treatment of the "thing", whether subjective or objective', or T. S.

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Eliot's attack, in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), on the Wordsworthian romantic conception of poetry as 'emotion recollected in tranquility', leading Eliot to define poetry as 'an escape from emotion' and as 'an escape from personality.'²³ T. E. Hulme, perhaps British modernism's most significant aesthetic theorist, explicitly called for a 'classical revival' in his essay 'Romanticism and Classicism', written sometime between 1909 and 1914:

There is a general tendency to think that verse means little else than the expression of unsatisfied emotion. People say: "But how can you have verse without sentiment?" You see what it is: the prospect alarms them. A classical revival to them would mean the prospect of an arid desert and the death of poetry as they understand it, and could only come to fill the gap caused by that death.²⁴

But in point of fact, a desire for the return of classicism is a key characteristic of romantic desire, and Lewis, perhaps more than any of his contemporaries, noted that modernism was shot through with a romanticism from which it could not hope to escape.²⁵ Indeed, Lewis's conception of satire starts from a seemingly contradictory position, in which modern satire is always both classical *and* romantic.

Although Lewis sympathized with the modernist recuperation of classical aesthetics, he felt that a return to classicism in any real sense was impossible:

It would be mere effrontery, or buffoonery, in an artist of any power, among us, to lay claim to them – to say, "as an artist I am a classicist." With all of us – and to this there is no exception – there are merely *degrees* of the opposite tendency, at present labelled "romantic." (*MWA* 157)

For Lewis – *contra* Hulme – both his own project and modernism more generally were more romantic than classical.²⁶ Lewis's re-conception of satire, then, is not so much a revival of classical satire as it is a transformation of the satirical genre itself. Indeed, Lewis notes that 'classical literature is above all didactic, is *moral*' (*MWA* 154); thus, in his very assertion of a non-moral conception of satire, Lewis severs any connection between his own project and classicism *per se*. Following Lewis's

arguments, any truly modern satire would, of necessity, be a hybrid form, a romantic classicism that contains all the contradictions which such a term might suggest. Indeed, this over-determined gesture represents precisely the paradoxical manner in which Lewis's apparent emphasis on the human being as a 'thing' can be recuperated as an unusual form of humanism.

Indeed, the process of objectifying the human being is part of the larger project of romantic self-consciousness, which Manfred Frank has described as 'the epistemic relation of a subject term to itself as an object term.'²⁷ Lewis's anti-humanism participates in this project since it reduces the human to an object, but this reduction occurs precisely for the purpose of gaining greater insight into the human. In 'Physics of the Not-Self', Lewis makes this connection explicit:

If "truth" is the word we give to that disintegrated *not-self* principle which every man necessarily must harbour [...], then every altruism can be traced to the activities of this same principle. [...]

The man who has formed the habit of consulting and adhering to the principle of the *not-self* participates, it is true, in the life of others outside himself far more than does the contrary type of man, he who *refrains* from making any use at all of this speculative organ. [...] For this ultra-human activity is really inhuman [...].

(*CPP* 197-98)

For Lewis, it is only through an adherence to the notion of the inhuman (which requires the transcendence of the subject) that we can actually hope to become 'ultra-human'. The true goal of humanism, then, cannot be achieved through normal means, but rather only by recourse to the negation of the human. While it is essential to note that Lewis's 'inhumanism' informed his authoritarian politics, an inhuman aesthetics need not necessarily be authoritarian.²⁸ Such left-leaning theorists as Giorgio Agamben and Jean-François Lyotard have argued in favour of inhumanism, as did the Marxist critic Theodor Adorno, who noted that Art 'is loyal to humanity only through inhumanity toward it.'²⁹ Regardless, for Lewis, aesthetic anti-humanism is actually a complicated form of a self-reflexive, romantic humanism.

Satire became the only literary genre in which Lewis's concepts of the not-self, his aesthetic anti-humanism and his self-reflexive theory of

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laughter, could all be simultaneously enacted. Satire became the one form adequate to the task of representing all of these theoretical concepts, and as such it was the modern genre *par excellence*. But this also necessitated a satire that differed radically from its classical forms. In essence, instead of being an instrumental and ethical form, satire, for Lewis, was the privileged aesthetic form for modern literature, and the only form up to the task of representing the absolute, a concept that – in the tradition of apophaticism – is named only in negative terms (as a ‘no place’ or a ‘not-self’).³⁰ But it is precisely satire’s own inherent apophaticism that makes it such a special form. It is only through satire’s negations – which reveal the human as an object – that the subject can be adequately transcended in such a way as to provide access to the absolute. For Lewis, satire functions like a negative theology, revealing the absolute by negating everything that the absolute is not. In this radical reformation of the genre, satire appears as an ‘absolute infinite negativity’, to borrow the term that Kierkegaard (following Hegel) used to describe romantic irony.³¹

And in keeping with the tradition of apophaticism, even the satiric persona is paradoxically defined by an absence, since, as a figure of infinite negation, the satirist can only be an absence, a negation, and never a presence. In this sense, the role of the satirist must always be a performative one. As Paul Edwards has argued, ‘the satirist is a human being masquerading as a god and arrogating the god’s powers of judgment.’³² Pierpoint, who is the disembodied embodiment of the satiric persona within the text, lives precisely in this realm, which is both divine and a mere aping of the divine, as the very title of Pierpoint’s ‘Encyclical’ suggests; typically a papal dictate (the encyclical represents a ‘personal letter from His Holiness to Horace’ [AG 115]), the term suggests that Pierpoint has a direct line of communication with God.³³ But at the same time, the text suggests that Pierpoint’s judgement is in some sense counterfeit or ‘aped’, which is emphasized by the fact that the ‘Encyclical’ that Dan receives is ‘a letter in duplicate’ (AG 116). It could be further noted that the Encyclical itself is described as merely an ‘extract’ (AG 118), leaving it a romantic fragment *par excellence*. Pierpoint is both God and ape, counterfeit and original, dwelling in an absent no-place that exceeds any discrete definition.

But Pierpoint reminds us that the ‘supreme judge [i.e. God] is constantly absent’ (AG 118), and it is precisely Pierpoint’s absence from the text that actually makes him godlike (and in this sense he is also an

ape of God). As a marginal note to Lewis's incomplete novel *Joint* would make even clearer, 'GOD is NOT an individual. He is the IMPERSONAL impersonified. All definition is negation.'³⁴ Effectively the satiric persona, as represented through Pierpoint, is again a suspension of the self, a no-place, or, as Pierpoint describes it, a 'bombastic rôle' (*AG* 125) that is distinct from his true self. Indeed, the power of 'The Encyclical' derives from the fact that it is not, as Pierpoint says, him speaking, but rather '[his] opposite' (*AG* 125), a phrasing that clearly alludes to Lewis's concepts of the 'not-self' and the 'enemy'. And Lewis suggests these are in fact two names for the same principle, noting that the not-self 'is, in the last analysis, the enemy of all the constellations and universes' (*CPP* 198). For Lewis, Pierpoint is both the satirist *par excellence* and the 'true' Vorticist self – a being that can only be actualized through its own negation. For Lewis, the validity of art does not and cannot lie in the expression of the artist's self, but rather in the negation of that self. It is this negation that enables the creation of a 'dead' art.

Notes

¹ The existence of a disjuncture between Lewis's practice and his own explication of his practice is unsurprising, given that Lewis's expository writings often contain layers of irony and provocation befitting the personality of the 'Enemy'. For a detailed consideration of the complicated deployment of mimesis (as a mode of representation that actually reveals the *limits* of mimesis) within *The Apes of God*, see Peter Nicholls, 'Apes and Familiars: Modernism, Mimesis, and the Work of Wyndham Lewis', *Textual Practice* 6. 3 (1992): 421-38.

² See also Rebecca Beasley, 'Wyndham Lewis and Modernist Satire', in Morag Shiach (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 126-36.

³ Indeed, her name, Lady *Fredigonde*, suggests the phrase 'dead and gone', recalling a line of Ophelia's song ('he is dead and gone, lady') in *Hamlet* (IV, iv, 31).

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 50.

⁵ Lewis himself put the same point more succinctly: 'Dehumanization is the chief diagnostic of the Modern World' (*B1* 141).

⁶ José Ortega y Gasset, 'The Dehumanization of Art' (1925), in *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature*, trans. Helene Weyl (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968): 3-56, 10-11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁸ Thus Jos De Mul: 'It is characteristic of the Romantic attitude that reality is in its entirety understood from within an aesthetic perspective.' See Jos De Mul, *Romantic Desire in (Post)modern Art and Philosophy* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999), 7.

⁹ The title of Lewis's *Count Your Dead: They Are Alive! Or, A New War in the Making* (1937) suggests that 'deadness' is for Lewis a philosophico-aesthetic concept, rather than a simple ontological state. At the same time, Lewis also links the birth of sculpture directly to Egyptian funeral rites: 'The great imaginative interest of this book of Dr. Elliot Smith cannot be denied. It shows the statue evolving out of the corpse' (DPDS 174).

¹⁰ It is likely that Lewis's formulation of this concept is indebted to a speech by Timon in Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* (I, I, 161-62): 'The painting is almost the natural man; / For since dishonour traffics with man's nature, / He is but outside; these pencilled figures are / Even such as they give out.' Lewis exhibited a series of paintings in 1912 titled *Timon of Athens*, and the satirical figure of Apemantus suggests a connection with *The Apes of God*. Lewis would also write extensively about *Timon of Athens* in his book-length work on Shakespeare, *The Lion and the Fox* (1927).

¹¹ In *Time and Western Man* (1927) Lewis presents an argument against avant-garde movements which is clearly indebted to Nietzsche's conception of the 'revolt of the slaves in morals'. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887), trans. H. B. Samuel (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1913), 19. In Lewis's conception, groups of artists similarly band together for personal benefit (see *TWM* 24-25).

¹² Tyrus Miller does see a continuing avant-gardism in Lewis, but doesn't posit a direct link to Vorticism as in my account. See Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 92-93. Paul Edwards challenges the idea that the "Enemy" is a repudiation of modernism and an exercise in reactionary politics. See *WLPW* 305. I follow Edwards's procedure, examining Lewis's thought internally, but Edwards does not make the direct link with Vorticism that I posit. Reed Way Dasenbrock perceptively notes that Lewis's later novels, including *The Apes of God* and *The Revenge for Love* (1937), are all structured like Vortices. Dasenbrock, however, still reads the Vortex as promoting a notion of the subject identical to that proposed by Descartes. See Reed Way Dasenbrock, *The Literary Vorticism of Ezra Pound*

and *Wyndham Lewis: Towards the Condition of Painting* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 168.

¹³ These revisions of earlier works include the stories and essays collected in *The Wild Body* (1927), the revised *Tarr* (1928), and the emended *Enemy of the Stars* (1932).

¹⁴ Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 239.

¹⁵ See David A. Wragg, 'Wyndham Lewis's Vorticism and the Aesthetics of Closure', in Steve Giles (ed.), *Theorizing Modernism: Essays in Critical Theory* (New York; London: Routledge, 1993): 87-137, 96-99.

¹⁶ Critics who notice the absent self in Vorticism suggest that it is little more than an inconsistency in Lewis's thought. Toby Avarad Foshay, for instance, argues that the 'vortex cannot represent the central dichotomy in Lewis's work: mind/body dualism. See Toby Avarad Foshay, *Wyndham Lewis and the Avant-Garde: The Politics of the Intellect* (Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 39. My proposition is that we take Lewis quite literally in his explanation of the vortex. It is only by reading the vortex literally, and by seeing the self as primarily an absence (a view that appears again and again in Lewis's thought), that we can understand his unusual conception of subjectivity.

¹⁷ Thus Paul Edwards: 'Vorticism's refusal of all unitary, fixed definitions of the self has been traced in this essay to what is virtually a metaphysical critique of a Romantic urge to transcendent authenticity. But that critique is only an expression of the new sense of the self that modern material conditions were themselves making possible.' See Paul Edwards, "'You Must Speak with Two Tongues": Wyndham Lewis's Vorticist Aesthetics and Literature', in Paul Edwards (ed.), *Blast: Vorticism 1914-1918* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000): 113-34, 118.

¹⁸ 'Physics of the Not-Self' remains a contentious essay within the body of Lewis criticism. My argument remains that the concept of the 'not-self' can only be understood by reading the metaphor of the vortex literally, in which the observer at the centre is an absence. SueEllen Campbell offers a brief overview of the different positions taken by scholars on this Lewisian essay. See SueEllen Campbell, *The Enemy Opposite: The Outlaw Criticism of Wyndham Lewis* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1988), 210. See also Joel Nickels, 'Anti-egoism and Collective Life: Allegories of Agency in Wyndham Lewis's *Enemy of the Stars*', *Criticism* 48. 3 (2008): 347-73.

¹⁹ Dasenbrock, *The Literary Vorticism of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis*, 168.

²⁰ An exception to this claim is provided by Robert C. Elliott, who suggests that the 'literal signification of the name ("peer", "point") [...] would clearly

be attractive to Lewis.' See Robert C. Elliott, *The Power of Satire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), 234.

²¹ In 'The Artist as Crowd' (1932) Lewis states that 'Molière could kill with laughter as effectively as the headsman with his axe' (*CHC* 173), and in 'The Satirist and the Physical World' (1934) he notes that hearing 'two satirists comparing notes would be [...] like being privy to the unguarded chat of a couple of headsmen' (*CHC* 207), two quotations which suggest that the link between executioner and satirist was certainly on his mind in the 1930s.

²² For the influence of romanticism on Lewis's work see Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis*. For the link between modernism and neo-classicism see Geoffrey Wagner, *Wyndham Lewis: A Portrait of the Artist as the Enemy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), 12-13.

²³ Ezra Pound, quoted in Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 178; T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), in Lawrence Rainey (ed.), *Modernism: An Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005): 152-56, 156.

²⁴ T. E. Hulme, *The Collected Writings of T. E. Hulme*, ed. Karen Csengeri (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994): 59-74, 66.

²⁵ Thus Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy: "romantics" will not give themselves this name.' See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988), 6. See also Morton Gurewitsch, *The Comedy of Romantic Irony* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 2002), 6.

²⁶ Lewis remained sceptical about modernism's claims to be 'classical', and even remained doubtful about its alleged novelty, noting that it bore the traces of a variety of previous movements (see *MWA* 109).

²⁷ Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism* (Albany, NY: SUNY University Press, 2004), 63.

²⁸ Following Nietzsche, Lewis believed in the importance of distinguishing the strong individual from the crowd. For Lewis, strong and wise individuals were marked out by their ability to employ the not-self – a principle that, among the crowd, 'awaken[s] suspicion instead of trust' and acts as 'a radio-active something in the midst of more conservative aggregations' (*CPP* 198). A good political leader – employing the not-self – would also 'be a philosopher – in order that he may dispose of what he rules over, as though he were an indifferent god' (*CPP* 202). For Lewis, the not-self was fundamentally incompatible with democratic governance, which was a form that attempted to placate the human desires of the crowd.

²⁹ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), trans. Robert Hullor-Kentor (London: The Athlone Press Ltd., 1997), 197.

³⁰ For more on Lewis's relationship with the romantic absolute, see Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis*, 310-11.

³¹ Robert L. Perkins, *The Concept of Irony: International Kierkegaard Commentary* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001), vol. 2, 392.

³² Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis*, 348.

³³ The term 'encyclical' also suggests a continual recurrence of events, and given the influence of Nietzsche's thought upon Lewis's writing, the fact that an eternal return of sorts appears in his own thought is no surprise at all. For more on Nietzsche's influence on Lewis, see Shane Weller, 'Nietzsche among the Modernists: The Case of Wyndham Lewis', *Modernism/modernity* 14. 4 (2007): 625-43.

³⁴ Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis*, 320.