

More Matter, Less Art?: Occam's Razor, 'Philosophy', and Wyndham Lewis's Modernism

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Philosophy and 'Philosophy'

In Volume Two of *The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies* Michael Nath cites my contribution to Volume One in the context of his remarks on the current state of Lewis's recuperation, and academic criticism generally.¹ In fact, my book-length study of Lewis, published in 2005, already contains a response to Nath's argument, and indeed to Shane Weller's claims about the relationship of Lewis's output to Nietzsche's, which functions as a pivotal role in Nath's claims about the limitations of attempts to define Lewis's work as a species of modernism.²

Problems begin for me when Nath cites an extract from Weller's estimation of Nietzsche's importance for Lewis before telling us that this amounts to a category mistake:

What is being promised here is "philosophy", and in the most urgent and exaggerated terms. [For Weller] [n]o 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?" (Nath, *LN* 3)

For the sake of argument, I'm going to assume that Nath is correct about Weller's trajectory since this makes what I want to say a bit easier to focus. The central question seems to me to be a tremendously important one: to what extent are we justified in using philosophical criteria and argumentation to elucidate and critique Lewis's work? The intended title of my book was designed to keep four key terms in play. Thus: *Wyndham Lewis and the Problem of Enlightenment: Rationality, Aesthetics, Avant-garde*, where my sense of the word 'philosophy' was determined by Derrida's response to Nietzsche, who had introduced an aesthetic

dimension to the problem of philosophy's self-awareness. As I tried to show, this move reverberates down the corridors of academic critique, to include its impact on Frankfurt School critical theory, which I used as one of the framing devices for my sense of a self-critical Enlightenment in Lewis's work.

Nath calls for an application of Occam's Razor because my 'theoretico-philosophical investments' must necessarily be incomplete, since 'to write adequately about Lewis, one would also need to have prepared by writing a book about Nietzsche [and Schopenhauer, Goethe, *et al.*] first' (Nath, *LN* 4). I am worried about the word 'philosophy' here, and what it might mean for Lewis's sense of modernism, and indeed the kind of modernity from which that modernism arises. With the poststructuralist Barthes in mind (one of my theoretico-philosophical investments in *Wyndham Lewis and the Problem of Enlightenment*), the principle of *lex parsimoniae* is thoroughly problematic because the selection of the simplest explanation among competing hypotheses, done for the sake of hermeneutic economy, will be tested by the principles of intertextuality. This is the point at which a structuralist emphasis on key narrative criteria in a literary text is called into question (though not totally remaindered) by the more radical approach to interpretation we find in *S/Z* (1970). Given Nath's concerns about 'the development of a complex discourse of academic criticism in the last half century [which] has seemed (to some) to conceal more than it discovers' (Nath, *LN* 2), it might be best for present purposes to work with this gloss from Jonathan Culler's Fontana Modern Masters digest of what Barthes was up to when reading Balzac's *Sarrasine* (1830):

In identifying [structural] codes and commenting on their functioning in classic and modernist literature, Barthes seeks not to interpret *Sarrasine* but to analyse it as an intertextual construct, the product of various cultural discourses. "We now know", he writes in *Image Music Text*, "that the text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of an Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture".³

In practice, interpretation is always selective – Barthes’s decision on which codes to employ as a means of uncovering his ‘various cultural discourses’ being an example from the horse’s mouth, as it were. But the principle of intertextuality, as set out here by Culler, calls into question any firm boundaries around a straightforwardly revealed meaning that can supposedly be drawn from a text, literary or otherwise. Indeed – and here I approach my next point about philosophy *as such* – the delimitation of the category ‘literature’ will always involve some kind of decision about where to erect boundaries which do violence to the interconnectedness of material. The delimitation of texts always involves some sort of conscious or unconscious avoidance of the implications of intertextuality, at least as Barthes in more radical poststructuralist mode understands the term.⁴ So while in one sense Nath is correct about the need to get to grips with Nietzsche *et al.* before coming to Lewis, one is already doing just that as one reads texts by Lewis which contain material that ‘belongs’ elsewhere. The issue, then, is not one of being exasperated by the inevitable complications involved, much less flunking the challenge by appeal to an Occam’s Razor-type interpretative convenience, but of making clear where one has drawn the boundaries, and why. Unless by an act of reading which violates Lewis’s own texts in the search for a simplified hermeneutic method, we have no choice but to explore the various possible contexts of Lewis’s work in order to specify its formative characteristics, and its apparent declarations of purpose. As I have tried to show over the years, this will include those philosophical and quasi-philosophical ideas which were part of the ‘cultural centres’ informing his awareness, and which can be shown to inhabit his output. Opening out criticism in this way enriches our awareness of what Lewis’s texts have often been *constrained* to mean, and this is surely what the business of critical practice is all about.

By way of an example, I want to re-visit Lewis’s deployment of ocularcentrism as a ‘philosophical’ ‘method’. (My reason for scare-quoting both terms will become clearer, hopefully, as my argument progresses.) But before doing so, it may help to cite a more straightforward use of intertextuality in Lewis’s visual art. I am not the only writer on Lewis to point out that Vorticist paintings and graphic work are not bound by Lewis’s signature when they are admixtures of, and corrective comments upon, apparently aberrant referential elements in Futurism, Cubism, and German Expressionism. Indeed, this situation has been explored so often (though sometimes in insufficient depth)

that it has become a staple of Lewis's art-critical reception. So a work such as *The Crowd* (1914-15) constitutes Lewis's response in painting to texts by Boccioni and Picasso, to cite only its two obvious sources. By incorporating images and ideas 'authored' by these artists self-consciously into his painting, Lewis is re-drawing the boundaries around *their* works, even as he re-frames his previous attempts to signify and comment upon the modernism they are held to represent. We can therefore re-cast terms like 're-drawing' and 're-framing' as re/drawing and re/framing, where the forward slash denotes the im/possibility of specifying a particular text's value-specific identity. In such a situation I doubt whether Occam's Razor would be of much use. What, exactly, would be the most straightforward way of interpreting images which trade on their intertextual engagements? And how would one relate them to Lewis's utterances in the *BLAST* manifestos? Are not these texts 'multi-dimensional space[s] in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash'? Would Lewis's Vorticist paintings be considered as intertextual *paintings* alone, or would their meaning (or meanings? – can Occam's Razor cope with multiple interpretations?) be clarified with reference to Lewis's thoughts on the role of the artist in *Tarr* (1918), which was in progress during the Vorticist period? (And when does this period begin and end?) How is Lewis's own critical authority to be established in these circumstances?

Thus to the ocularcentric potentials of Lewis's work. In *Wyndham Lewis and the Philosophy of Art* I argued that the observational protocols of the Wild Body stories, the pre-eminence given to the capitalized Artist in *BLAST 1* (1914), a theory of (specular) 'deadness' for objects and people in *Tarr*, a deployment of satire as a visual trope (to include the externalizing depictions of degraded cultural phenomena) in *The Apes of God* (1930), an insistence on a priority for the eye in *Time and Western Man* (1927), and remarks scattered through *Men Without Art* (1934) – for example: 'I am an artist first, and a critic afterwards' (*MWA* 107) – are all functions of a mind which comments on modernity's cultural manifestations by paradoxically detaching itself from them. This is not philosophy *as such* but a curious kind of hybrid 'philosophy' motivated by truth-claims about modernity and the errors of its representations in rival modernisms. The paradox occurs when Lewis attempts to construct a master discourse governed by a perception which is itself a product of the things it seeks to surmount for the sake of critical value. Since one of those things is Nietzsche's ontogeneticism the eye becomes

partial in a doubled sense: it does duty for both rational *and* aesthetic criteria. And this is important for Nath's suggestion that an analysis of Lewis's work based on conceptual and philosophical extrapolations is somehow clouding our sight of what Lewis was about, not least because the idea of nihilism becomes especially troubling in this context.

An important critical review of the limits of ocularcentrism, to include its habitation in philosophy, can be found in David Michael Levin's *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation* (1988), which perhaps surprisingly does not appear on Nath's bibliography. For Levin, modernity, as understood by Nietzsche and Heidegger, has fallen prey to a nihilism bound up with 'the rationality of a mechanical vision', whose objectivism is found in the 'metaphysical eye' of Cartesian philosophy, the isolation of the *logos*, the calculative instruments of science and technology, and 'the detachment of vision from the body of feeling'.⁵ The poststructuralist resonances of these claims, especially when derived from Nietzsche, should be obvious enough, and there are connections with much else besides, to include the Adorno of negative dialectics (predicated on the ruinous effects of identity thinking, as presaged by Max Weber's view of the future as an 'iron cage' of bureaucratic rationalism in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* of 1904), through to more recent developments in eco-psychology, where the writings of Carl Jung are often used to promote various ways of putting us back in touch with ourselves as we face a perfect storm of resource depletion, financial crisis, and climate change, to name but three components of an increasingly apocalyptic scenario. It is therefore important to contextualize nihilism as a problematic of modernity, and to look for countervailing tendencies if we regard Enlightenment as a *pharmakon* – as both poison and cure.

My version of Lewis's work sees ocularcentrism as a crucial component in his 'philosophy' of modernity. The Wild Body narratives remain under-theorized in this respect when the observer of Brittany's strange customs and practices is so clearly fascinated by the body of a primitive domain which can only be written about as a *lack* in the discourse of primitivism itself. Here, we are on the edge of a rather different version of the eye, such as we find in Foucault's gloss on Bataille. As Martin Jay sets it out in *Downcast Eyes* (1994), a 'Cartesian philosophy of reflection or a science of observation' which seeks 'pure transparency and truth' is countered in Foucault-Bataille by a monstrous dispersal and negation of sight; a reversal

More Matter, Less Art?

crossing the globular limit of the eye, [which] constitutes the eye in its instantaneous being; sight carries it away in this luminous stream (an outpouring foundation, streaming tears and, shortly, blood), hurls the eye outside of itself, conducts it to the limit where it bursts out in the immediately extinguished flame of its being. Only a small white ball, veined with blood, is left behind, only an exorbitated [*sic*] eye to which all sight is now denied.⁶

This is heady stuff, and there is no lack of irony when Jay tells us that for Foucault this unseeing eye also ‘marks the limit of language’s ability to signify, “the moment when language, arriving at its confines, overleaps itself, explodes and radically challenges itself in laughter, tears, the overturned eyes of ecstasy, the mute and exorbitated horror of sacrifice”.’⁷ Nath would probably say that we are approaching (perhaps have already arrived at) the point at which critical language runs into the buffers, but if so this is directly relevant to the connection between Lewis and Nietzsche, and bears on a sense of ‘nihilism’ we might locate in both. My sense of Lewis’s ‘wild’ body is that it signifies something that resists its primitivist incorporation; a body only knowable through a corporeal presence which is also an absence and a challenge to the observer’s phenomenological, entomological, typological, and lexical power to represent. The answer to this conundrum, in a foretaste of the extreme externalist method in *The Apes of God*, is to register the otherness of the body while accommodating it to a critique of an ossified modernity. For a sense of alienation to be converted into an act of astonished discovery the wild body must be tamed as mechanism, yet must remain wild in order to embody (literally, metonymically, metaphorically) a primary energy which cannot be properly appropriated by the narrator-observer. So in ‘Inferior Religions’ (1917): ‘I would present these puppets, then, as carefully selected specimens of religious fanaticism. [...] They are only shadows of energy, not living beings. Their mechanism is a logical structure and they are nothing but that’ (*CWB* 150). Here, nihilism is recorded as the oppressive condition of the observer’s limitation; in Nath’s terms (see Nath, *LN* 11), a version of philosophical pessimism ascribed by Lewis in *Tarr* to Otto Kreisler, via the version of Nietzsche discussed in *Rude Assignment* (1950) (though doubtless one needs to write a book on Schopenhauer to get things into proper perspective).

I don't mean my comment in parenthesis as in any way a jibe at Nath's expense. One certainly does need to know about Schopenhauer to appreciate Lewis's thoughts about Nietzsche's pessimism at all adequately. But here we are back with the basic problem raised by Nath: does philosophy provide a productive way into the complexities of Lewis's work? To adapt a question from Nietzsche: *how much philosophical truth does a critic require?*

What Nath misses, I think, is that strand of poststructuralist thought, exemplified by Derrida's ruminations on deconstruction, which takes Nietzsche's 'philosophy' seriously as philosophy. What I mean by this may for present purposes be summed up by Derrida's assertion that philosophy remains within the horizon of metaphysics, even when Nietzsche has moved to an ontogenetic overcoming of same in the aphoristic style of his later work. Philosophy is not simply remaindered by Nietzsche's ontogeneticism; rather, it is *situated* as a discursive framework for a deconstruction that cannot accept that truth is independent of its signification, that language is transparent to meaning, that thought is fully present to itself (the Freud-Lacan axis in Derrida is relevant here), that binary oppositions are in any way stable, and that pure visibility is possible when it insists on an undifferentiated moment of revealed truth – for example, in the self-identity of the *Augenblick*, which Derrida refers to in *Speech and Phenomena* (1973) as part of his critique of Husserl's phenomenology and its denigration of temporality in favour of perceptual immediacy.⁸ Metaphors of immediacy are abundant in Lewis's work: in the theory of Vorticism ('The Vorticist is at his maximum point of energy when stillest' [B1 148]); in the freezing of Futurist modernity in a work such as *Composition* (M 125, Plate 23; 1913); in attempts to contain the play of language in 'synthetic' Cubism (what is the completion of that un/framed word in *The Crowd?*); in the definition of wild bodies as things for observational dissection; in Frederick Tarr's theory of dead art as a counter to Kreisler's existential blundering, sexual aggression, and aesthetic incompetence; in a wholesale refutation of a veritable *Zeitgeist* of ideas hostile to the supremacy of the analytical eye in *Time and Western Man* ... the list is extensive.

Yet such immediacy undermines itself, for reasons already given. Lewis's is a 'philosophy' of modernity because in Kantian terms it is contaminated by *aesthetic* criteria, though I will come to the limits of that contamination in due course. And for 'aesthetic' read Nietzsche, as the

one who undermines metaphysics by implicating philosophy in its own dispersal; a prefiguration of Derrida's reading of the history of western metaphysics, one of whose crucial staging posts was Kant's granting of a non-rational knowledge to the aesthetic which, because accorded an epistemological status, is not simply irrational in any absolute sense. It is here that the idea of concepts – and indeed of complex theoretical apparatuses – being somehow inadequate for a knowledge of Lewis's work breaks down. And it does so not because of any special critical pleading, but because the rational (ocularcentric, metaphysical, conceptually critical) and the aesthetic (Lewis's other sense of the eye, his avowal of the visual Artist's importance to modernity, his insistence on the tropological and intertextual structures of modernist exegesis) are locked together in a symptomatic demonstration of how fraught the epistemology of modernity has become. *This* is why, in my previous piece for *The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies*, I expressed exasperation (not weariness, as Nath sees it) with all those readings which foreclose on historiographical complexity, and in so doing reduce the scope of Lewis's work by assigning it to unproblematized categories, or which employ simplified critical agendas as a way of reaching politically convenient conclusions.⁹

Nath is correct, then, when he argues that art deserves art to explain it. This is what Nietzsche does for philosophy: by prioritizing aesthetics as *the* branch of knowledge for modernity he not only leaves philosophy where it has always been in terms of its metaphysical ambitions, but also completely undermines it in the wake of Kant. It is this dual move that underpins deconstruction: metaphysics has been well and truly problematized, but we cannot escape its gravitational pull, any more than we can escape the lure of history in historiography, the science in Freud's scientism, the text in intertextuality, or the meaning of words beyond their tropological structures. It is not a question of either/or, but of a *problematic both*, where terms such as irony, ambiguity, or paradox will not quite suffice. This is to say – and this is not a tautology – that an undeconstructed sense of philosophy is no longer viable after deconstruction. One of Derrida's classic ways of describing such a situation can be found with the idea of signification 'under erasure' (*sous rature*). When words are crossed through in a text they are held to be essential to the meaning being conveyed, even though that meaning is tied to the instability of the terms employed. For Derrida, even Heidegger's proto-deconstructive moves are compromised when

Heidegger elevates the term 'Being' as both an ontological and epistemological absolute. In this sense, Heidegger and the ocularcentric Lewis have something in common when they both appear to privilege a state of being/seeing that transcends contingency, and which looks for an awareness capable of rising above the negative effects of modernity. Heidegger's search for a security beyond the endless questions posed by hermeneutics is somewhat akin to Lewis's attempts to freeze the Futurist sense of 'Life' castigated in *BLAST 1*; the 'universal dynamism', as Marinetti describes it, of an enveloping experience from which the one at the centre of the vortex must detach himself in order to define modernity's misrepresented essence. As Lewis puts it in 'Relativism and Picasso's Latest Work': 'The Artists [*sic*] OBJECTIVE is Reality, as the Philosopher's is Truth' (B1 139).

My response to Nath's contention that an interpretation of Lewis's work may be overburdened by 'theoretico-philosophical investments' should now be a little clearer. While I hold to the view that being a practitioner of art can confer special insights into the interpretation of other art in the same domain (e.g. narrative fiction – one of Nath's provinces), the point I wanted to make is that working in the same medium as the thing commented upon brackets off awkward questions about the relationship of criticism to its object-text that we find in other meta-discourses, simply because in the latter case a different set of non/correspondences comes into play. A piece of visual art which is produced to comment on another example of the medium, as in Lewis's Vorticist responses to Futurism or Cubism, corresponds to that example only problematically, simply because it is a meta-discourse whose non/identity is its *raison d'être* within the shared language of the medium. But this is not the same as the non/identity produced when the medium of the commentary or criticism changes. The difficulty faced by those of us who find philosophical components *per se* in Lewis's work becomes acute when Lewis himself enters the field in *Time and Western Man*, and does so by claiming a priority for an eye which is both ocularcentric *and* aesthetic. Effectively, Lewis asserts *both* senses of non/identity: as *philosophy*, an ocularcentric priority is used to match the medium of concepts in which philosophy is expressed; as *art*, the material in *Time and Western Man* either drives a wedge between itself as art, and philosophy; or it *reduces* philosophy to art by insisting on an aesthetic recuperation of philosophy in order to critique it. This, I would

argue, is Lewis's closest approach to deconstruction, though I doubt that it was intended in the way I describe it here.

Thus, in a rather special, and admittedly rarified, sense Lewis's work has anticipated the ground on which Michael Nath and I seek to comment on what an interpretation of that work might look like once the use of a certain kind of critical operation becomes problematic. It has never made much sense to me that some kinds of criticism ignore as too troubling or inconvenient the insights brought to bear by deconstruction, and other aspects of poststructuralist writing, to include the later Barthes, when these complicate assumptions about what criticism can represent. This is to say that Nath's point of departure from my suggestion that "one of the best ways of responding to Lewis might be another work of art" (Nath, *LN* 6) can only be read as paradoxically correct, when Lewis himself has placed before his critics the duality of conceptual (rational) and aesthetic (non-rational) criteria for understanding his work. This is also to say that a symptomatology of that work's modernity must inevitably become entangled with the *problem* of philosophy in the light of its development from Kant, via Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, to Heidegger and Derrida, if I may so draw a rather basic line of inheritance. This is less a matter of tracing what Barthes calls the *punctum* of Lewis's reaction to Nietzsche in *BLAST 1, Rude Assignment*, or wherever, than of teasing out the implications of a *problematic for the issue of Enlightenment*, as far as this can be located across Lewis's modernism. The critic, then, is duty bound to invoke a constellation of contexts in order to map the terrain. I hope I have not, as Nath seems to imply, closed down the wider horizons of Lewis's critical reception by invoking figures such as Derrida, Adorno, Habermas, Rorty, and others who have been centrally concerned with the fates of philosophy and aesthetics in the wake of Enlightenment.

In a nutshell, then, I am not arguing that Lewis's work 'might fruitfully be released from philosophy and returned to art' (Nath, *LN* 6), since it already straddles a fault line between the two domains. Philosophy in Derrida cannot be annexed from art, or vice versa – *they inhabit the same terrain marked by difference*. This is again where Nietzsche is a crucial figure for modernity and the issue of what Enlightenment can be taken to involve. Nietzsche's ontogenetic overcoming of modernity, and the philosophical limitations taken to inform it, are for the ocular-centric Lewis-Artist a one-sided kind of critique. And here reflections

on Lewis's response to Nietzsche inevitably lead us into other arguments, as I tried to show in *Wyndham Lewis and the Philosophy of Art*.

One of these has been policed over the years by Christopher Norris.¹⁰ In *Deconstruction and the 'Unfinished Project of Modernity'* (2000) Norris takes issue with those readers of Nietzsche who, like Richard Rorty, regard Derrida's deconstructed sense of philosophy and its correlatives (rationality, conceptuality, representational transparency, and so on) as a wholesale undermining of a metaphysical project which has forgotten its origins in metaphor. In 'White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy' (1982) Derrida shows how philosophical abstractions forgot about their origins in figurative language, and in the process promoted themselves to the status of an epistemological master discourse, superior to the effects of *mere* representation. In Rorty's anti-foundational argument, philosophy then becomes just another competing account of how things are; just another collection of tropes for representing reality and what we might know about it. 'This is Rorty's postmodernist summation of Derrida', says Norris, 'and it is one that has understandably gone down well in departments of English or Comparative Literature', where we find the influence of slogans such as "truth is a fiction", "reason is a kind of rhetorical imposture", "all concepts are forgotten or sublimated metaphors", [and] "philosophy is just another "kind of writing".¹¹ Derrida's texts suggest as much, for example in the second paragraph of the discussion of 'Exergue' in 'White Mythology':

Metaphor *in* the text of philosophy. Certain that we understand each world of this phrase, rushing to understand – to inscribe – a figure in the volume capable of philosophy, we might prepare to treat a particular question: is there metaphor in the text of philosophy? in what form? to what extent? is it essential? accidental? etc. Our certainty soon vanishes: metaphor seems to involve the usage of philosophical language in its entirety, nothing less than the usage of so-called natural language *in* philosophical discourse, that is, the usage of natural language *as* philosophical discourse.¹²

But this won't quite do, says Norris. Rather than simply cashing in on Nietzsche's sense of philosophy as a mobile army of metaphors, Derrida in the second part of 'White Mythology' argues that Nietzsche's

claim itself can only be couched using philosophical argumentation in order to make sense – put simply, it must set out a philosophical ground on which claims about metaphor can be evaluated, or as Norris puts it: ‘there is no point in saying that “all concepts are metaphors” unless it is also kept in mind that the *concept of metaphor* is one with a lengthy and complex philosophical history’.¹³ In other words, while metaphor may constitute philosophy, it also provides philosophy with the means to interrogate its own operations; to provide the kind of argumentative rigour that powers Derrida’s argument, and Norris’s gloss thereon. That philosophy is bound to be impure cannot be allowed to obscure this fact, which is necessary to any meaningful distinction between philosophy and metaphor in the first place. Thus ‘understanding *cannot do without* the critical resources that philosophy has developed, not least through its refinement of the metaphor/concept distinction’.¹⁴ This is a crucial point for a deconstructive awareness: what we are left with is a theory of metaphor’s contamination of philosophical protocols that can only be expressed in claims about reason, truth, and logic belonging to the very idea of philosophy which metaphor seeks to undermine.

I am not concerned here with whether Norris has simplified a more complex argument in Derrida, or loaded the dice in favour of a rationalist (or ‘properly’ philosophical) version of Derrida’s Nietzsche, *contra* Rorty. Rather, the point is that such an argument springs from what a scrupulous reading will admit is a paradox of (‘)philosophical(?) awareness, generated for present purposes by Nietzsche’s project of modernity’s overcoming, which is predicated on an extrapolation of Kant’s distinction between the epistemologies of rationality and aesthetics in the *Critiques*. If this paradox has become something of a sounding board for competing theories of post/modernism (where the slash indicates the inseparability of the operative terms), then Lewis’s work seems to belong to the kind of thinking it involves.

Derrida himself outlined the basic issue in an interview with Richard Kearney. Responding to Kearney’s point that he is a philosopher because deconstruction ‘is directed primarily to philosophical ideas and texts’, Derrida makes two important points:

I have attempted more and more systematically to find a non-site, or a non-philosophical site, from which to question philosophy. But the search for a non-philosophical site does not bespeak a non-philosophical attitude. My central question is: from what site

or non-site (*non-lieu*) can philosophy *as such* [my italics] appear to itself as other than itself, so that it can interrogate and reflect upon itself in an original manner. Such a non-site or alterity would be radically irreducible to philosophy. But the problem is that such a non-site cannot be defined or situated by means of philosophical language.

[And] one must remember that even though these sites are non-philosophical they still belong to our Western culture and so are never totally free from the marks of philosophical language. In literature, for example, philosophical language is still present in some sense; but it produces and presents itself as alienated from itself, at a remove, at a distance. This distance provides the necessary free space from which to interrogate philosophy anew; and it was my preoccupation with literary texts which enabled me to discern the problematic of *writing* as one of the key factors in the deconstruction of metaphysics.¹⁵

That Sense of Deferral

Nath's discussion of Weller's 'Nietzsche among the Modernists: The Case of Wyndham Lewis', which appears in *Modernism/modernity*, is in the present context especially revealing. Discussing Lewis's concept of laughter in 'The Meaning of the Wild Body' (c. 1927), Nath says that

[Weller's] conclusion, which depends, as far as I can see, on [David Farrell] 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. *But all this is beside the point* [italics added]: Lewis's preoccupation is not with being, nor with value, as a problem, but with *laughter* itself. (Nath, LN 16)

Read deconstructively, this passage makes a number of interesting moves. The piling up of contexts on the 'wrong' side of the boundary between correct and incorrect criteria depends on the quote from Weller

(‘non-position, an absolute outside’), in order to reinforce the division between irrelevant interpretative moves and Nath’s own reading, which depends on laughter *itself* as the pre-eminent category in the argument about a correct designation for nihilism in Lewis’s work. This in turn contributes to a certain repetition in Nath’s text when it quotes Lewis’s primary statement about the meaning of the wild body: ‘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). Nath correctly points out that ‘[a]s often with Lewis’s attempts at theorizing, the idea at the head of the essay is dispersed in a tail of particulars, instances, concessions, illustrations, and doubts’ (Nath, *LN* 16-17), before trying to hold this problem in check by claiming that ‘in the present instance, this may be in keeping with the phenomenon in question, primitive, indivisible, and beyond conceptualization’ (Nath, *LN* 17). This concatenation of opposites in the cause of critical completion not only mirrors Lewis’s tendency to think in dichotomies or dualisms for the sake of a conclusive critical identity; it also doubles Kerr-Orr’s statement in ‘A Soldier of Humour’, quoted by Nath: ‘[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). Sex *and/ but* laughter: where the latter term, which is called upon to explain ‘everything’, cements the narrator in the literary necessity of an impossible division between the self and the primitivism of an ‘other’ whose identity provides the antidote to sterile observation.

It would take more space than I have at my disposal here to tease out the overdeterminations, transferences, cancellations, substitutions, recuperations, accommodations, and denials in this passage, linked as it is to the contexts Nath has invoked – a good many books would be needed to get an adequate grip on this series of intertexts, not least given Nath’s criticisms of Weller’s failings where Nietzsche is concerned. But some idea of what is at stake can be gained if we concentrate on the metaphor of the philosopher’s stone as it inhabits Nath’s text via Lewis’s characterizations of the ‘wild’ body. As I explained in *Wyndham Lewis and the Philosophy of Art*, the ‘wild’ body serves two purposes in Lewis’s formative response to modernity. On the one hand it bears the signs of reification (‘creaking men-machines’ and so on) as identified in a second act of objectification by the observer-narrator, Ker-Orr. But it

is also marked in some necessarily ineffable way as ‘genuinely’ wild – a ‘primitive’ body which functions as an antidote to its reified self. I use scare-quotes around ‘genuinely’ because Lewis is only able to figure the situation through a discourse of primitivism that, because it is imported into Brittany by an outsider to the cultures described, expresses wildness as a metaphor for something unavailable in the ontological sense it is supposed to possess. Nath reconstructs Lewis’s sense of the ‘wild’ body as an opposition between nihilism and ‘wonder’ (Nath, *LN* 17), where the latter term resides in a kind of radical alterity, as a counterpart to Weller’s emphasis on ‘the conceptual Lewis’. As I read it, in Lewis’s texts ‘wonder’ rails against both the reified world of modernity *and* the impositions of the narrator’s observing eye, while in Nath’s disagreements with Weller it assumes a weighty importance as the sign of an anti-conceptual polemic, drawn from my own suggestion that works of art can respond to each other in ways denied to conventional academic criticism.

Via a discussion of a passage from William James that Weller omits from his essay, Nath remarks that ‘The Meaning of the Wild Body’ ‘associates an artist’s sense of wonder and the “miraculous” with laughter’, so that Lewis’s text contains an appeal ‘to an artist, not a philosopher/thinker’ (Nath, *LN* 17). In fact, this does not sound too different from my more extensive theorization of *The Wild Body* in *Wyndham Lewis and the Philosophy of Art*, except that where Nath prefers James to Nietzsche I have concentrated on the potential of the latter’s aesthetic critiques of philosophy to construct a position for Lewis as outlined above. So I am in cordial agreement with Nath when he says that Lewis’s desire for critical *detachment* ‘is difficult and even undesirable to maintain in a world of competing ideologies’ (Nath, *LN* 14), though my sense of the italicized term is founded on the complications caused to ocularcentrism by Lewis’s ‘attachment to aesthetic sovereignty’ (Nath, *LN* 13). This issue bears directly on questions about Lewis’s political utterances, and I would like to say a few more words on this issue via some comments about the use of deconstruction in my readings of Lewis’s work.

I am not sure if Nath thinks that deconstruction is part of an unsuitable ‘theoretico-philosophical’ critical apparatus; at any rate he finds it inadequate in Weller’s essay and refers to its deployment as part of a ‘belt and braces’ type of argument involving ‘stock deconstructive moves’ (Nath, *LN* 15).¹⁶ Weller’s use of deconstruction may be wanting

More Matter, Less Art?

in nuance, but I wonder if Nath's comments are occasioned by his search for a non-conceptual simplification, which would be alien to Derrida's writings (and to those of Paul de Man), bound up as they are with the problems of apparently logical habits of critical practice which trade on contradictions, paradoxes, antinomies, aporias, and sometimes irresolvable issues of textuality. Norris's extensive publications on the subject of deconstruction and contemporary theory have tried to show (sometimes to the point of unnecessary repetition) that if we reject those accounts of Derrida which skew his arguments in favour of a *laissez-aller* approach to ideas of textuality, we are actually on more secure philosophical ground. The relationship between the *real* and the *represented* is undoubtedly no less complicated now we have an extensive body of 'theory' to work with, but this does not mean that a connection between the two terms has been severed by deconstruction. If, as Nath implies, deconstruction has in some hands solidified into an easily applied critical discourse, this misrepresents what should surely continue to be a challenge to contemporary hermeneutics.¹⁷ As I've tried to indicate in the present essay, deconstruction can play an important role in an analysis of Lewis's work, especially when Derrida's writings can help to sift its critical reception for values which are inevitably over-determined by the philosophical contexts they invoke.

Lewis and the Problem of Modernist Politics

And so to a few remarks on the perennially thorny issue of Lewis's politics. In an essay that appears alongside Michael Nath's in Volume 2 of *The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies*, Ivan Phillips offers an unusually well-balanced reading of the evidence.¹⁸ I tend to agree with Phillips that Lewis's texts, to include those which contain outright endorsements of fascism, or which espouse other questionable opinions, are often more complex than some critics are prepared to admit. A good example of ambiguity can be found in a deconstruction of those remarks in *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926) about the possibility of fascism as a corrective to what Lewis regarded as the ideological subterfuges and manipulative strategies of contemporary democracy. Having discussed the presence of metaphor in the texts of philosophy, and having indicated how this might be relevant to Nietzsche, we might note the title of Lewis's book, which is indeed indicative of its content. *The Art of Being Ruled*

introduces the idea of aesthetics into a sociological text; as with *Time and Western Man*, the eye of the detached observer serves a double purpose. But the word 'art' is doubled in another way: on the one hand it denotes an analysis of the act of deception (art = ideology), while on the other it stakes a claim for the superior intellect that can recognize the ideological game and transcend it for the sake of something more enlightened. That something had already been tested in *Tarr's* bifurcation of supposedly 'good art' (the theory of deadness as art's 'first' condition) and Kreisler's failure to achieve aesthetic selfhood, except that the novel ends not in *Tarr's* artistic or existential triumph but in successive acts of deferral.¹⁹ The word 'art' is therefore the key, over-determined metaphor in both texts, when according to *Tarr* the primary aesthetic value is not art but 'deadness', which then operates as another metaphor in a 'philosophy' of critical values (detachment / satire / avant-gardism / contemplation / spatiality, and so on) whose economy aspires to expose democracy's socio-political insufficiencies.

Deconstructing *Tarr* in this way is not a trivial exercise in literary semantics. The establishment of a political identity surely depends on context, and the way that ideas are represented on behalf of Art. It is, in fact, a matter of *textuality*, and the analysis of Lewis's political credentials is better handled by the rigours of deconstruction than by ascriptions of value which fail to tease out contradictions, and which fail to identify where Lewis's exegesis doesn't add up to a coherent statement of political intent. This is not to sanction politically objectionable remarks, nor to ignore them as unfortunate lapses, but to *situate* them as part of the versions of modernism we can find in those forms of critical reception which are bound to the same problematic as Lewis when it comes to the question of enlightenment. So it seems to me that we must *identify the presence of modernism in the text of politics, as well as the presence of politics in the text of modernism*. This neither remainder Lewis's political opinions as any less problematic (or critically nugatory), nor elevates them to a final signified of his writings' value. Rather, it enables us to interrogate those opinions as a response to a modernity on which they depend, but which they can never surmount, and to consider how our critical efforts might be bound to a similar set of formative conditions.

Is this too difficult a requirement? I don't think so. Perhaps Lewis's problem – the one that tends to set traps for both adherents and detractors – is that his work raises questions about what it means to be both political and 'philosophical'. Too many of those who find a target

More Matter, Less Art?

in Lewis's politics have overlooked in his texts a complex series of checks and balances in order to mount one-eyed arguments about (proto-) fascism (Jameson in *Fables*), regressive social attitudes (John Carey in *The Intellectuals and the Masses*), Nietzschean heroics (Alistair Davies on *Tarr*), or worst of all, the jibe about Lewis's embalmed brain in James Fox's *British Masters* TV programme. In some ways, Fox's is the logical outcome of an approach to the understanding of modernism in the age of the sound bite – the contemporary outcome of the kind of thing satirized in *The Apes of God*, which has already been read in the context of the 'culture industry'.²⁰ I am pleased to see that Philips agrees with me (*Wyndham Lewis and the Philosophy of Art*, again) that there are correspondences between Lewis and the analysis of alienated, reified, and commodified modernity that we find in Adorno and Horkheimer (and, I might add, other examples of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, such as Marcuse).²¹

I am arguing, then, that reading Lewis implicates us in the problems he tried with varying degrees of success to identify and control, and that once we are caught in the labyrinth there is no single, easily followed thread to lead us out again. One cannot, in these circumstances, avoid a fairly complex theoretico-philosophical apparatus, precisely because we need an analytical approach that does justice to the complexities of Lewis's work. For example, we might take the figure of woman in *Tarr* to set up a sequence of neat oppositional pairings when Kreisler-Bertha occupies one side of an initial equation whose other half becomes Tarr-Anastasya, thus to provide a structure for the text's gender politics. We might then argue that Tarr-Anastasya functions as the antidote to what Lewis in *BLAST 1* characterizes as the 'life' principle, or those attributes that the successful artist has to overcome for a sense of authentic self, Nietzschean or otherwise. But if this is the case what does this mean for Lewis's supposed priority for a *masculine* sense of self, that target of critics who view Lewis through the lens of gendered binary oppositions? Is Anastasya to be re-defined as the masculinist woman in the novel's narrative logic? Or does her independence place her in a separate category from Tarr because she is woman and not man? And if she really does figure as the sign of masculinity in opposition to Bertha, is this then a kind of hybridity that undermines any of the available pairings? How could we then decide on Tarr-Anastasya, rather than Anastasya-Tarr? And what does this question mean for the values we might ascribe to Bertha as the feminine principle

in the text, when notions of femininity prove to be unstable in the text's apparent progression of values? Is the figure of Anastasya best read as the undecidable 'nature' of Tarr's modernist woman, and the violation of the very principle that Bertha might be held to embody in order to found the text's modernism in the first place? Can these propositions be resolved into *any* coherent sequence of values, thus to establish the novel's politics *vis-à-vis* gender?

If *Tarr* is to be regarded as one of Lewis's founding statements about a modernism he was to re-visit, develop, and revise in future work, do we not find ourselves in a position analogous to the one Robert B. Pippin maps out in *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* (1991) with respect to Derrida's notion of deconstruction? In line – sort of – with Norris's call for a more scrupulous reading of Derrida's work, the conditions of modernist awareness arise not from a denial of sense or rational critique, but from an acknowledgement that 'sense' or 'critique' are incapable of hauling themselves out of their own formative ambiguities. It is this awareness, so the implication goes, which we take with us when we read as carefully as possible, in order not to distort by premature assessment the difficulties involved in understanding the conditions within which interpretation might take place. Pippin's argument in Chapter 6, 'Unending Modernity', is virtually impossible to gloss in the space of the present essay, but perhaps the following extract might help to provide a feel for what is at stake. Having pointed out that a dismantling of metaphysics in the cause of textuality or 'writing' undoes itself by means of an appeal to a philosophical truth deemed by reason of argument to be unavailable, Pippin continues:

unless Derrida, like Heidegger, wants to invoke some notion of an autonomous *arche* like an ontological happening or appropriation (a dogmatic appeal which, he clearly realizes, raises its own problems) he, like Heidegger, thus lands us right back in Hegel's critique of [the] Kantian original formalization, the original move or strategy in the critique by reason of itself. As in that archetypal debate about the philosophical implications of modernity, we would soon encounter the suspicion that Derrida cannot be engaged in some ultimate disclosure about the possibility of meaning, but a current historical self-construal in the history of that sense-making practice known as philosophy (or "metaphysics"). Precisely to the extent that "the activity of

More Matter, Less Art?

deconstruction is strictly inconceivable outside the tradition of enlightened rational critique whose classic formulations are still found in Kant”, to that extent that we are returned to the Kantian *aporiai* exposed first by Fichte and made so much of in Hegel’s endless paradoxical play on being “outside” limits in order to set them.²²

This needs unpacking. But I would like to suggest that it contains an unavoidable context for a proper appropriation of Lewis’s modernism, where the act of criticism is faced with the impossible task of fully contextualizing its own enlightened operations while at the same time being obliged to carry on as if that impossibility could somehow be overcome. This kind of ambiguity is, I think, in the end rather different from Norris’s own sense of Occam’s Razor, where a thoroughly sensible, thoroughly rational understanding of Derrida is in the end founded on a sense of reality – modernity ‘itself’ so to speak – which remains elusive. This is not, of course, to say that ‘the real’ is banished from critical discourse – quite the reverse when the whole edifice of deconstruction is bounded by a horizon of thought in which actuality is a component part of perception. And this is the (‘)philosophical(?) dilemma. As Pippin puts it *apropos* Hegel, in what seems to be a conclusive nod in the direction of that ‘philosophical’ axis which leads from Kant, through Nietzsche and Heidegger (the two obvious figures in the present context), to Derrida:

I have been trying to suggest that Hegel was not trying to “transform the world into a concept,” and so to offer a final substantive account [of reason]. His attempt was to do justice to that process whereby the world must be conceived to be intelligible, but must also always be re-conceived, given the perpetual absence of any measure for such conceiving, either in nature, the transcendental ego, the ideal speech situation, or a sort of a practical wisdom (itself unintelligible except when conceived).²³

If Lewis’s work is ‘political’ through and through (that is, political in the unresolved sense I use above) the argumentative *aporiai* in *The Art of Being Ruled* become more intelligible as expressions of a deep-seated critical conundrum. As I have tried to show in various publications, this

is rather more than a matter of the disaffected and socially marginalized artist-intellectual's plea for critical relevance during the 1920s, when experimentations and avant-garde aspirations have been tested by the experience of war's experiential reality. If Lewis's sociological tracts remain bound to the protocols of an aesthetic sensibility, they inherit the legacy of Kant, and stand as testaments to the problem of political *theorizing* as the ground of socially validated political action.

Thus, when Nath asks if concepts are the principle issue with interpreting Lewis the answer is both yes and no. The ambiguity depends on the absolute necessity of the conceptual in Lewis's work, which demands an answer on its own terms lest we fail to recognize the importance of rationality to his sense of modernism. On the other hand, Lewis's insistence on the value of Art for modernity is central to his claims for critical relevance, to his grasp of socio-political reality, and to his sense of difference with respect to rival avant-garde movements and competing representational systems. Such ambiguity cannot but help to refer us back to modernism as a 'philosophical' dilemma for the critical recuperation of the works. In such a context, wielding Occam's Razor is a valuable activity only if it slices open its own attempts to achieve enlightenment.

Notes

¹ Michael Nath, "'By curious sovereignty of art': Wyndham Lewis and Nihilism", *The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies* 2 (2011): 1-22. Hereafter cited parenthetically as Nath, LN.

² David A. Wragg, *Wyndham Lewis and the Philosophy of Art in Early Modernist Britain: Creating a Political Aesthetic* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2005). The title of this work was determined by the publisher against my wishes. For Weller's article, see 'Nietzsche among the Modernists: The Case of Wyndham Lewis', *Modernism/modernity* 14. 4 (2007): 625-43.

³ Jonathan Culler, *Barthes* (London: Fontana, 1983), 85.

⁴ With more words to play with, I would have been tempted here to say something about the implications of Derrida's *Glas* (1974, first published in English by the University of Nebraska press in 1986) for my argument. But this text is sufficiently complex to risk over-complicating the basic purpose of the present essay, even if it goes over well-worn ground.

⁵ David Michael Levin, *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation* (London: Routledge, 1988), 3, 267, and 117.

⁶ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 401.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 498. Derrida's text was originally published as *La Voix et le Phénomène* in 1967.

⁹ See David A. Wragg, 'Stating the Obvious? Lewis's Critical Reception: Pedagogy, Criticism, and Hermeneutics', *The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies* 1. 1 (2010): 109-27.

¹⁰ Norris's is essentially a rationalist recuperation of Derrida. As such it does not, in my opinion, sufficiently account for the more radical implications of deconstruction. Again, this issue lies beyond the scope of the present essay – see note 4 above.

¹¹ Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction and the 'Unfinished Project of Modernity'* (London: Athlone Press, 2000), 76.

¹² Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), 209.

¹³ Norris, *Deconstruction and the 'Unfinished Project of Modernity'*, 84 (original emphasis).

¹⁴ Ibid., 85 (original emphasis).

¹⁵ Richard Kearney *et al.*, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 108 and 109.

¹⁶ In Derrida there are, of course, no 'stock' deconstructive moves: deconstruction is not a methodology which can be imposed upon a text, but a condition of textuality itself.

¹⁷ See Norris, *Deconstruction and the 'Unfinished Project of Modernity'*, Chapter 1 (6-24).

¹⁸ See Ivan Phillips, 'In His Bad Books: Wyndham Lewis and Fascism', *The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies* 2 (2011): 105-34.

¹⁹ Tarr does not pair off with Anastasya when another female Bertha, the 'stodgy' Rose Fawcett, appears on the scene, only to be superseded by what might be a clone of Anastasya, Prism Dirkes. Thus the novel's literal conclusion marks an existential hiatus for Tarr, and a narrative repetition of Lewis's unresolved Art/Life opposition. The fact that Lewis himself reduces the various pairings to a formula now looks like a pre-emptive strike against a mechanical use of structuralist protocols where interpretations of this work are concerned.

²⁰ See Mark Perrino, *The Poetics of Mockery: Wyndham Lewis's 'The Apes of God' and the Popularization of Modernism* (London: W. S. Maney and Son, for the Modern Humanities Research Association, 1995), alongside my own

reading of *The Apes* in *Wyndham Lewis and the Philosophy of Modern Art*, 285-304.

²¹ Phillips, 'In His Bad Books', 117.

²² Robert B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 161-62.

²³ *Ibid.*, 166.