

**‘A Box and Cox Melodrama’: Love,
Politics, and Truth in *The Revenge for Love***

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All the best brains are on the left.

Wyndham Lewis, *The Mysterious Mr Bull* (1938) (MMB 234)

The Revenge for Love (1937) is Lewis’s most sustained literary attempt to explore the politics of the 1930s. His explicitly political writings of the period remain a point of serious contention for many modernist critics, even if the works themselves remain largely unread. Although the intellectual value of some of these texts can certainly be challenged (and indeed were by Lewis himself in *Rude Assignment*), they are marked, like some of his best work, by what Hegel describes as *diremption*: the exploration of the parts of a whole, but on the condition that the relation of the parts to that whole should not drive the analysis. The purpose of this method is to avoid effacing the lacunae that persist between concepts and objects, and to produce a kind of analytic metonymy. This stratagem anatomizes the parts which in fact *defer* standing for the whole. But despite the *diremptive* and contradictory nature of many of these writings, they have, by and large, been distilled into a sticky bolus, bound together by one common thread – an endorsement of fascism. This assumption does, of course, continue to haunt Lewis’s reputation, despite his published repudiation of German fascism in the late 1930s. However, we know that in *Time and Western Man* (1927) Lewis expressed his suspicion of Italian fascism as a kind of nostalgia for the Roman Empire (*TWM* 34), and that much of his reactive engagements with the ongoing political crises of the decade are informed as much by his dread of another war, by his own tendency towards appeasement, and by his deep suspicion of Stalinism, as it is by any supposedly unflinching identification with Nazism. One way of approaching this problematic is to turn to a now well-known Lacanian formulation: fascism functioned for Lewis as an object of desire that persistently hectored to answer the question ‘What does fascism want?’

What does it want from me?' His relationship was perforce ambivalent, in the same way that Nietzsche felt ambivalent about truth. Nietzsche famously espoused the embracing of the lie, having become too 'profound' to enjoy the truth itself *qua* truth. Falsehood, then, becomes for him the object of desire and truth the object cause, which drives the desire itself.

If we return to Lewis, we could say that he was prepared, through his ambivalent identification with German fascism, to extract and remove the 'real kernel' of truth from its bundle. But what is this 'real kernel'? Uncannily, it turns out to be socialism. He believes that fascism is an event in modernity that prompts a re-imagining of the function of truth of socialist politics. In a sense, fascism, like sovietism, is a kind of bomb or explosion in capitalist democracy that demands attention. In the parlance of Alain Badiou, it would seem to be an event – an historical occurrence that cannot be explained or anticipated by the situation which precedes its arrival.¹ Lewis's writing, which is often misconstrued as a love letter to fascism, is in part an attempt to astonish his readers, and to articulate the event in process. His desire to represent the emergence of German fascism, of a politics which resists explanation and incorporation, is a reason why tracts like *Left Wings Over Europe* (1936) or *Count Your Dead: They Are Alive!* (1937) are so hysterical, so contradictory; they enunciate and parrot the speech of the 'event' even as it occurs. Texts like *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926), one of Lewis's earlier attempts to describe, by means dialectical and dualistic, the political and cultural implications of fascism and socialism in the 1920s, undercuts its subjective claims to authority (that I, Wyndham Lewis, am writing this) by invoking a fragment of Parmenides by way of *envoi*: 'I wish to communicate this view of the world to you exactly as it manifests itself: and so no human opinion will ever be able to get the better of you' (ABR 375). Why this disavowal? Who is the 'I' speaking here? I am tempted to suggest that Lewis is attracted to this particular translation of Parmenides because of its use of the word 'manifests'. If 'no human opinion' is meant to be privileged, then whose opinion has been made manifest? The answer lies in a specific genre of writing that is so much part of modernism's symptomatic relation to modernity – the manifesto. As Alenka Zupančič tells us, the manifesto is not simply the displaced megalomania of the modern artist, the writing of the artistic ego. Instead, it is art itself, art as event, which is speaking.² In other words, there is no distinction between the event in process and its declaration. This lack of distinction

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is precisely what makes such texts difficult to decipher – *BLAST* is, of course, an obvious example. Readers of manifestos are often lured into a cynical dismissal of the 'shock value' of the manifesto in order to paper over its revolutionary implications.

Another way of coming at this disavowal is to ask why the event must be calmed down by detaching the enunciating event from the process of its occurrence. Is it not because the event speaks, in the Lacanian sense, as the real? That the dizzying vortex of conflict is itself the ground upon which the declaration is made? The confusing, contradictory nature of the manifesto is produced by the split that only manifests itself in the declaration of the event while it is 'eventing', to give the process a Heideggerian spin. One of the problems Lewis struggles with in articulating the politics of the 1930s is one of critical distance – what Paul Edwards describes as 'an uncertainty about the relationship between that "real" and our "illusion"', an uncertainty which makes it difficult to write a coherent, ideologically suasive version of the unfolding disaster.³ The confusion of the 1930s was that of the real – the shifting ground of enunciation and declaration of events appear to be identical. My belief is that for the first half of the 1930s, Lewis attempts to disentangle the provisional 'knots' which produce this confusion, even as he is working through what place German fascism might *legitimately* assume in the European political theatre. He abandons this project only when it becomes clear to him that it is anathema to truth, that Nazism and political legitimacy are mutually exclusive, and that his continued efforts to conjure that legitimacy are damaging to his career and reputation.

In *The Revenge for Love*, then, Lewis is not simply offering a far right-wing critique of the 'leftist' position, but is instead contending with the ideological conundrum of understanding the difference between being a slave to an ideology and being its interpreter, between revolution and reaction, between the particular and the universal. Love becomes a problematic in the text that drives the interrogation of a particular relation to leftist politics, and the novel itself, as Reed Way Dasenbrock and others have noted, is not a rejection of its tenets *tout court* (RL 389). And as D. G. Bridson contends, communism 'is accepted as a fact of life – and one that can even be treated dispassionately as the sincere faith of a professional revolutionary.'⁴ That said, Andrzej Gąsiorek rightly cautions us against imagining love as an 'untarnished reality able to withstand political corruption.'⁵ With this proviso in mind, I argue

that it is not simply that love fails, like revolutionary politics, to live up to its promise; rather, the novel explores the complex ways in which one's relation, real and illusory, to *both* love and politics is at stake. The tragedy of the novel comes not from their failure, but from their utter separation from one another. The problem the novel attempts to confront is the ways in which politics and love grapple with how fate (as the real) appears or manifests itself.

Although the novel was completed (and set) prior to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, the publication of *The Revenge for Love* in 1937 is caught up in a 'revolutionary moment' in Europe's history. Just as W. H. Auden's 'Spain 1937' warns us, past and future are suspended, as we await the outcome of 'to-day the struggle.'⁶ In one of the poem's most fascinating passages, Spain speaks to Europe as if it is an enigmatic object of desire, refusing the mantle of sole political responsibility for the conflict. Spain readily acknowledges the contradictory positions into which it has been placed, that it is finally 'your choice, your decision; yes, I am Spain'.⁷ Like the manifesto, the nation itself 'speaks' by naming the political problem, the event, which awaits its destiny. It is thus fitting that Lewis opens his novel with a discussion of the relation of the destiny of the law in this revolutionary time by referring to another revolutionary: Saint Paul.

Percy Hardcaster, a propagandist member of a communist cell, finds himself in a Spanish prison, understandably (though regrettably) engaged in a conversation with his jailer Don Alvaro about the relationship of law to freedom. Percy sardonically invokes Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians: '*All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient!*' (RL 14). This statement appears fairly early in the letter, and is crucial to the discussion of love that follows both in Paul's text and in Lewis's novel. Before turning to love, I would like to map out the implications of his remarks about the law. Paul offers a paradox: if all things are lawful for me (that is, that I am autonomous, a law unto myself), it perforce implies that my relationship to the law is not that of the average person. On the surface, it seems that Paul is saying that the average person identifies with the law, while he identifies himself *as* the law. (The important distinction to keep in mind is that Paul is bound to another law – the law of love). But, for all his autonomy, all things are not expedient or in his best interests. What emerges is an exception to the apparently complete autonomy. The exception is, in this case, expediency, that which is advantageous or politic rather than just, which

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trips up the fantasy that 'One is the law'. This exception thus reveals that I do not follow the law because it is 'true'; I follow it because it is *expedient* to do so. In this way, the law is figured here as one of the several 'false bottoms' that the novel reveals.

Although Percy sees the revolutionary potential of Paul's statement, that the law is merely a set of particulars, he blindly annoys his warden by admitting that he places the authority of expediency above the law. If we turn to Alain Badiou's atheistic, but sympathetic, reading of Paul, we see a revolutionary consistency in Percy's believing that 'everything is permitted' – that is, the law cannot stand as a universal precisely because it is bound to the political and economic differences which continue to lure, ensnare, and imprison humanity.⁸ As Slavoj Žižek has reminded us, Paul's epistle comes at a crucial moment in Christianity's history; he is spreading the Gospel after Christ's death and resurrection. According to Žižek, Paul claims that he lived in a revolutionary time, when our relation to things like the law and love must be re-evaluated.⁹ This is the *beginning* of Christianity, after all, when it is staging a religious and political revolution against Rome. The politics of the text are clear: Paul is not advising revolution as a permanent state, but as a necessary stage in the revolution called Christianity. This state of revolution – or, as Auden might put it, 'But today the struggle' – is the political problem faced by Spain during its civil war (1936-39), and offers a suggestive way into why Lewis is referring to Paul, the revolutionary. However, Percy does not yet fully understand the implications of his invocation. One way of reading the trajectory of Percy's plot is that he struggles with the very diremption that defers his ability to grasp fully his politics; in this respect, he cannot be counted among Lewis's 'revolutionary simpletons' (*TWM* 27-29). Although Percy does almost immediately recognize the trouble he has made by arousing Don Alvaro's suspicion, he persists in defending the very differences that communism, like Paul's Christianity, hopes to overturn. He proceeds to argue for the relative virtue of the English system of law over that of Spain, but, more important, he has yet to consider another crucial dimension of Pauline doctrine: the relationship between love and universalism.

But before I explore this dimension of the novel, I will address how the relationship of the law to the exception raises another problem: How do we come to accept and naturalize the law's authority as truth? As the novel contends, we adopt this attitude through an identification

with the law that is politic or expedient. In other words, we discover that the law is not the stable basis of authority; it has, as I have said, a 'false bottom', which reveals our paradoxical relationship to the law. On the one hand, the law sets up a limit to desire; one is prohibited from doing this or that. But on the other hand the law *causes* desire. In other words, how would one know what one wants, what one desires, what one's pleasure might be, unless the law specifies it? The law then inculcates a particular relation to enjoyment; we are meant to follow our desire, but there is a limit to that desire, which we call the law. Yet, as Freud famously insists, our desire to go beyond the law, or the pleasure principle, produces the fantasy of more freedom than the law itself inhibits.¹⁰ But we have already seen the absurdity of this assumption. It would not be expedient or politic to 'go beyond' because what opens up beneath the false bottom of the law is the abyss of freedom (in this case, the freedom to die), or expediency at its purest, as if, paradoxically, expediency *itself* were the law. That is, in Lacanian terms, if expediency is the law, then one attempts to escape mere pleasure, and one's ethical obligation to the other, to live in a constant state of enjoyment, the painful pleasure that defies comprehension or meaning. Since the option of constant enjoyment is an impossible one, then there must be a dimension of the law which exceeds interdiction, punishment, and expediency. In Badiou's reading of Paul, that excess is not anarchy or self-interest, but love itself.

If we turn back to the novel, we see that the false bottom of the basket intended for Percy makes the same promise: What lies beneath? A letter with instructions to expedite his escape from prison. But Don Alvaro discovers the false bottom in part because of his earlier conversation with Hardcaster about the nature of law and freedom. He is put on the alert precisely because of Percy's insistence that the letter of the law is subject to exception, that what we call the law is a necessary site of contestation, a site that changes over time. By exposing the contingent nature of the law, he reveals that the law has a false bottom, leaving himself open to danger. His bid for freedom results in his absurd amputation; Don Alvaro discovers the plan of escape, and Percy loses much of his leg. His body is viciously marked by someone who has hidden his own penchant for expediency by masquerading as the 'letter of the law'. In a Lewisian irony, Percy realizes too late that he should have followed Paul to the letter. Don Alvaro was fully prepared to let him 'go beyond' the law, for a bribe.

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After Percy is wounded, we see the problematic of love emerge for the first time. While convalescing, he is mocked in the same way that he himself teased Don Alvaro in the opening of the novel. While Percy grouses at being tended to by a diligent, but rather unsavoury nun, his roommate Virgilio reminds him of the Christian motto to ‘*Ama al prójimo como a tí mismo!*’ (Love thy neighbour as thyself!) (RL 51). What is his response? Love my neighbour? I would prefer not! His doctrinaire leftism prompts a suspicion not only of Christian values, but also of a liberal reading of those values. But again, this is a moment when Percy fails to see the full implications of Paul’s revolutionary doctrine. In the course of their discussion, Percy figures the doctrine of ‘Love thy neighbour’ as a form of sadism. And as Lacan puts it in his seminar *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, ‘I retreat from loving my neighbor as myself because there is something on the horizon there that is engaged in some form of intolerable cruelty. In that sense, to love one’s neighbor may be the cruelest of choices.’¹¹ Another way of putting it is to say that loving thy neighbour as thyself is problematic because, in this logic, one does not consider the other’s desire, and merely substitutes one’s desire – how one wants to be treated – for the other’s desire. For Percy, this version of loving one’s neighbour as oneself is really just about avoiding the neighbour’s desire. In his view, the nun’s love for him is ‘criminal’ (RL 51), since its real goal is to sustain a particular fantasy of sacrifice.

For him, the obscene enjoyment lurking in her love is that it swerves constantly from what he really wants. If she really loved him, she would sacrifice – her sacrifice. If she wanted to sacrifice something for love – does it not mean sacrificing that which is most dear to you? The problem for Percy is that she isn’t sacrificing anything; she’s merely reproducing the conditions of her own enjoyment. But there is a danger in his privileging of painful endurance; as Virgilio smilingly warns him, Percy may very well be competing with the nun for the title of martyr (RL 52). In Virgilio’s eyes, Percy’s relationship to communism is sullied by a fascistic strain. This strain is identified as an absence; he has ‘no feelings’ as Virgilio puts it, and is unable to identify with the people that he is fighting to free (RL 57). There is thus a limit to Percy’s understanding of love. On the one hand, he views the nun’s ministrations as false love, but, on the other, he is not prepared to give up that which is most precious to him – his contempt – in order to free the oppressed. When the two men begin to argue in earnest, they run into an ideological *cul-de-sac* – each tries to trump the other with a more abject,

more 'authentic' descriptions of their origins. Virgilio claims that he was born without a name, and had to steal an identity 'to go about the world with', while Percy has changed his name to Hardcaster from Hardcastle in order to 'protect' his mother's good *petit bourgeois* slum name (RL 58). Here the irony of repairing to authenticity reveals itself; his mother, the origin of his world, is more concerned with appearances than with producing the material conditions that would permit her to get out of the slum. So the two men, whose names are themselves false bottoms, taunt each other about their creeping nationalisms, and find themselves caged 'in their Lock Hospitals' (RL 59).

But the problem is not merely that Percy clings so fiercely to his contempt, it is also that he does view himself as a martyr to communism. Although his hatred of the nuns and the Jesuits is part of the 'bluff' of 'revolutionary expressionism' (RL 53), his self-pity and humiliation at being maimed and caught fuels his tetchy insistence to Virgilio that he is the true martyr, when compared to the 'tenderly compassionate women – vowed to such insidious tasks' as caring for him 'as if he had been made of some precious substance' (RL 54). As Badiou's reading of Paul shows us, suffering, martyrdom, even the death of the apostles and Christ himself – are irrelevant to salvation and redemption – in other words, to the revolutionary work of Christianity, and by extension, to the formation of the political subject. Why? The reason is that sacrifices of this sort are tied not to the event (for Paul, the resurrection; for Badiou, the revolution), but finally to the law, which governs death and desire: 'For Paul, death cannot be the operation of salvation, for it is on the side of flesh and the law. It is, as we have seen, the configuration of the real through the subjective path of the flesh. Not only has it no sacred function, no spiritual assignation; it cannot have one.'¹² In effect, Percy's continued, though ambivalent, fidelity to the law makes it impossible for him to identify fully with the truth of communism as event.

I now want to turn back to the fraught relationship between the law and love that informs the novel's title. What does the title mean? As Margot Stamp tells us, it was her love for Victor which marked him – he who, as an obscure art-forgery, cannot make his own mark – that fate or destiny would exact its revenge on him because of their love. In an important sense, Margot is Percy's obverse number: just as Percy is faithful to the event of communism, so too is Margot faithful in her love for Victor; just as Percy sees the law as a radical set of particulars, in

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which everything is permitted (whether they are expedient or edifying is another matter), Margot sees her love not as a ‘second dispensation’, but as punitive demand in which nothing is permitted, one that she, ‘a frail contraption’, is helpless against (RL 69). Margot struggles with the event of her love in the same way Percy struggles with the event of communist revolution. They are faithful to their respective ‘events’, yet each of them is, in different ways, blinded by martyrdom. While Percy sees himself as a martyr to communism, Margot sees herself as martyring Victor in the very act of loving him (RL 70). For Margot, fate is figured as an unrelenting stalker, who has been put on the scent of their relationship precisely because the event of love marks them as distinct, in discursive competition with the unboundedness of the law (RL 70). In this respect, fate or destiny is merely fulfilling its role as a punitive agent of the law; in this way, destiny is simply the superego masquerading as law. Of course, Freud’s use of the term superego is linked to repression, which he occasionally uses interchangeably with the term ego-ideal.¹³ But Lacan offers a more precise formulation of the superego, which has a more concrete connection to the law. In *Seminar I*, he discusses the paradoxical dimension of the superego-as-law, which inflects my earlier discussion of the subject’s relation to the law. For him, the superego is characterized by a ‘senseless, blind’ determination, marked by ‘pure imperativeness and simple tyranny.’¹⁴ As one would surmise, such a manifestation of the law is simultaneously, paradoxically, its instantiation and its destruction. An encounter with this destiny is, for Margot, an encounter with the unlucky knotting of love and the law that haunts the relationship: ‘She had been saying to herself that love was in vain, that love could do nothing, that the gods had a hatred for love; that love, in short, was unlucky! What could love do against such events?’ (RL 69). What is implied in this passage is an unhappy collision of two inflections of the real; the law or destiny is an example of what Lacan calls *dustuchia* or an unhappy encounter with the real and its opposite number, *eutuchia*, or a happy encounter with the real could be compared to Margot and Victor’s love.¹⁵

Margot’s misery is compounded by the double-bind that this collision has produced; love, as Badiou puts it, is an event in the sense that it fundamentally alters the situation in which the couple find themselves. In other words, their lives are constitutively altered by the event of their encounter. Love is sustained by what he calls ‘a fidelity to the event’, but the event of love has no ontological consistency outside of

the couple's relation to it.¹⁶ Love is a 'situated void' in the usual state of things that the couple choose to nurture and protect (or not). But the fidelity to this event is marred by the encounter with the vengeful spectre of the law. Margot and Victor are made 'unlucky' not only because of their poverty and obscurity, but also, by Margot's reckoning, because they are not legally married. This sense of guilt shapes Margot's thinking about the conundrum of this double-event. She contemplates suicide as a form of sacrifice; if she sacrifices herself for Victor, will he then be free of the absurd revenge enacted upon him by the law? Or, is it always already too late? Margot reasons that the event of love has opened up a space, an eruption of the real in the symbolic order, one that will persist even if she should kill herself:

Once to have been loved as she did Victor was enough – it was compromising to the *n*th degree. He was a marked man! Even if he did not return it, fate would never forget. Victor would always be, whatever happened to her, *the man who had been loved*, in the way she had done it (it was *the way* that she had loved was at the bottom of the matter). (RL 70)

The tragic irony lurking in this meditation on the relation of love and fate (as superego) is that love itself becomes the unhappy encounter with the real. But what produces this confusion? I would suggest that it is Margot's lack of certainty about Victor's love for her, coupled with the 'way' she has loved him. This irony is doubled by the fact that Victor himself has been contemplating suicide for the same reasons (a problem to which I will return). The event of love, which is a positive void, is here subject to a misprision; the nothingness that threatens to divide them is not love, but the law divorced from love. In Margot's case, we discover a parody of Paul's dictum about the relationship of law to love. Instead of subsuming the old law under the law of love (that is, that one can still fulfil particular laws simply by following the universal law of love), she is unable to reconcile her love for Victor with the law because she cannot view herself as a subject or agent – she is nothing but a mirror for 'his own misery' (RL 70). One of the fascinating dimensions of Margot's love of Victor is not only is she, as Dasenbrock argues, a virtually unique character in Lewis's fiction (RL 392-93), but she is also psychologically astute about the complexity of one's relationship to the beloved. In conversation with Victor, Margot contends that she would

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love him even more if he were as much an abject failure as he describes himself. She realizes that love is not simply an identification with the positive attributes of a lover, but is instead a cathexis to an elusive *je ne sais quoi* that exists over and above the other's accomplishments (or lack of them). If she believes that Victor's love is in some way compromised, she is reassured by his failure. His failure, because of the pain and vulnerability it represents, cannot deceive or subvert the force of love, but serve only to intensify it.

In other words, it is the fact that Victor occupies what one could call an impossible space between Victor as a 'sublime object' in that he is in some way fascinating or enigmatic to Margot, while at the same time he appears as the hopeless failure she sees before her, that makes it possible for her to resist suicide, even as she cannot see herself as an agent of their love. For Margot, fate is superegoic law, suicide is a bid for expediency that might appease the superego (though she doubts it), and love is unlawful. If one thinks only in terms of the law and expediency, but neglects love, one misses the point. As Paul famously insists in first letter to the Corinthians:

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. [...] For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

(I Cor. 13, New International Version)

Let us consider Paul's contention in light of love's relation to knowledge and prophecy. Love, it seems, will exist only for those who are 'partial', 'incomplete'. They who possess partial knowledge may be able to prophesy, but cannot see all. Is this not what constitutes Margot's relation to prophecy (that is, to fate) and to love in the novel? In spite of the fact that her love for Victor makes her recognize that her knowledge is incomplete, blinded as she is by the superego, she is at the same time strangely prophetic. She sustains Victor with faith and hope, even as she forecasts his dreadful fate. She sees the implications of Victor's name being forged; she sees the implications of his having been 'designated'

the leader of a cell of arms smugglers: he has become a symbol, 'a hunted symbol' (RL 318). But she is utterly without a politics; even her response to Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) is framed by her identification with Woolf as stately friend more than it is the feminist implications of the text (RL 214).

But if Victor is a symbol, so too is Percy. When he returns to England as a maimed hero of the cause, he becomes rather an emblem of glory among the faithful, one that especially intrigues Gillian Phipps. Yet Percy's new status mirrors his ambivalent relationship to this particular element of party politics. In 'Gillian Communist', Lewis draws our attention to the nature of one's identification with a political position. The hypocrisy of the armchair socialists resides not in having failed to be sufficiently proletarian, but in failing to think through the consequences of a particular ideological stance. As Gillian's affair with Percy unravels, we discover that she is not committed to material change, but is instead fascinated with communist ideology itself – she is much more invested in the revolution's perpetually remaining just round the corner, than she is in seeing it take material shape. When Percy decides to disabuse her of her absurd notions about politics – recall that, when kissing Percy, she thinks she is kissing an *idea*, and not a person – we see that she perversely misses the point. She is not interested in Percy, but in what he represents – something she is, in fact, prepared to destroy in order to possess. One's identification with a certain ideological position is predicated upon a particular relation to community; there are those who identify with privilege, and those who identify with the underprivileged – to put it in rather reductive terms. Gillian is disillusioned when she is told flatly that politics is also a struggle over representation – that in conflict, different sides try to produce competing, persuasive versions of historical events – this knowledge does not produce wisdom, only cynicism. Percy is spoiling her political fantasy – which is, for her, merely eroticized intellectualism.

Yet it is Percy who tells her about the *realpolitik* of the struggle; he could have continued to let her believe him a hero, that he was mistreated by the nuns, but he does not. Crucially, instead of re-thinking her relationship to 'kissing an idea' (RL 194), she decides to infer that Percy is 'all sham', but Percy is quick to point out that there is a material effect – he *has* lost his leg. Her identification with communism is predicated upon disavowing its material implications – even as she is confronted with Percy's mutilated body. However absurdly, Percy has

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lost his leg in the name of political struggle, but she still insists on the mask – the false bottom – of intellectualized sentiment about the communist cause. When this fantasy is snatched from her, she reverts to her original ideological position – that of an Englishwoman of a privileged class, resentful and horrified at the vulgarity of the working classes. Just as he has with Don Alvaro, Percy exposes yet another false bottom – this time of communism itself – again, not that communism is necessarily a sham, but that, like fascism and capitalism, it struggles over the representation of history as much as it does over territories and economics. In making her, in Day Lewis's phrase, 'feel small' (RL 196), Percy reveals an authenticity – a materiality – lurking under the false bottom of ideology and its competing modes of representation. She is shamed and angered when confronted with what lies behind the 'capitalist dope' of heroism – the question of how particular forms of representation work to benefit the greatest number of people – and how to produce the greatest, most material, forms of emancipation. As a result, Gillian sics Jack Cruze on him, and the working class is set against itself in a game of divide and conquer. Percy yet again becomes a 'martyred pedagogue' when Jack kicks his new stump viciously and repeatedly. It is consistent, then, that Percy's howls of pain, like his politics, are ironically dismissed as 'only shamming' (RL 199). In the jargon of Badiou, we are thus confronted with two radically different relationships to the event. The first obscures the truth of the event; the second is faithful to it.¹⁷ Gillian evinces an obscurantist attitude to communism, simultaneously materializing it into a heroic idea to be kissed, even as she disavows the material consequences of a fidelity to communism as event. On the other hand, Percy demonstrates a fidelity to the event by refusing to enable Gillian's obscurantism. In yet another irony, she comes to view herself as a 'very angry martyr', hating the class she is destined to save (RL 203), even as Percy, a willing participant in this grotesque parody of love, finally rejects the role of martyr as liberal capitalist posturing.

The problem is that, after his health has been wrecked by Jack Cruze, Percy seems willing to reject what insight his leftist politics has brought him by agreeing to be an agent in Sean O'Hara's gun-running scheme. Though the narrative informs us of his deep suspicion, even contempt, for O'Hara and Abershaw, Percy goes along with the plan once he is told that there is no political organization behind it (RL 256). There is a perversity in Percy's acquiescence; he is perfectly aware that

O'Hara is untrustworthy, and that he and Abershaw are happy to profit from either side of the political spectrum, but he does it anyway. Why the rejection or disavowal of the truth of the event? If political truth, for Badiou, is articulated around a 'void' in which the event appears, how might we understand Percy's decision? It is an attempt to paper over or articulate that dimension of the void (or, in Lacanian terms, the real) which resists explanation or definition. The void is no longer the event to which Percy remains faithful; rather, he sets his politics aside, and covers the void with the promise of blood money. For Badiou, an act of this sort is an example of evil; it has a false bottom, and functions as 'the brutal antithesis of a truth.'¹⁸ In effect, Percy's betraying his faith in the truth of communism is also a betrayal of the universal singularity of communism as event.

At the novel's climax, the void appears, and finally comes tragically into focus for Percy, Victor, and Margot. By becoming ensnared in Percy's cynical machinations, they effectively take on the fate he should have suffered. Percy is arrested, and the Stamps, tricked into being decoys for a genuine arms smuggling operation that O'Hara is directing elsewhere, recklessly knock down and kill a Civil Guard in a truck they discover is filled with bricks, not guns (an irony which points back to the russet dice of fate lurking in the 'cubist' painting that Victor had been working on much earlier in the novel), and are themselves killed when they walk into a void, and fall over a cliff during a storm. When they discover that they have been betrayed, Margot laughs the Lewisian laughter of tragedy, as she confronts the real around which their lives have been structured. Although her love makes it possible to *warn* Victor, it is not enough to save him. But what she and he are not able to sacrifice is the sacrifice they were making to each other; they lie to each other about their desire, their mutual desire, to commit suicide. Her laughter is the tragic recognition of seeing the terrifying real of her desire – their deaths – appear.

The comic dimension of their tragedy arises from the difference revealed in the repetition of the red dice; the difference is not between real and illusion, not between the void and its appearance, but between two appearances. Lewis's novel cleverly shows us that the basis of the tragic is not the banal notion that appearances are deceiving; rather it is that appearance itself *never* deceives. In this regard, we can read the 'false bottoms' that appear in Lewis's novel *The Revenge for Love* not as the 'reality' or truth behind the appearance. Instead, it is that with the re-

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appearance of the bricks in the truck's false bottom, Margot and Victor confront the repetition of an appearance. This is not the 'real' lurking beneath the appearance, after all, but the bottomless abyss of appearance itself. In other words, the traumatic appearance of fate – or its truth – at the end of their lives was already there, standing in front of them all along, in Victor's painting. So what is their blind spot? It is not that they do not love each other; the problem is that they cannot politicize their love – that is, give it a kind of agency, a kind of universal truth, which together would permit them to think *outside* the discourse of fate which constrains them.

If Margot and Victor fail to politicize love, Percy faces the consequences of betraying the truth of his politics, of betraying the void of the event. Even as he blindly disavows his communist sympathies, he fails to incorporate love into his vision of the political – and experiences what could be called the revenge for politics. It is only in the novel's conclusion that he, who is partly responsible for Victor and Margot's deaths, is able to bear witness to this tragedy. His shame is that he is not able to relinquish the fantasy that he is beyond love, to acknowledge that expediency is not enough in the fight against the law. He has abjured the universal for the particularity of individual gain; but as Lewis tells us in *The Writer and the Absolute* (1952), the abstract notion of the individual does not exist, made up as it is of 'a great number of people, alive and dead' (*WA* 195). The absolutism surrounding the concept of the individual is as dangerous a prospect for Lewis, as religious or political absolutism; rather, it is one's relation to truth, the freedom of its pursuit, and that 'a meticulous fidelity to [its] life is of its essence' (*WA* 15). For Lewis, then, the only absolute, the only universal, is the austere discovery and articulation of truth – something that Percy has tragically abandoned. Interred once again in a Spanish prison, without the dignity of his political principles to comfort him, he experiences too late the love that Virgilio had insisted was so ignobly absent in him. Through his mask there appears 'a sudden tear, which fell upon the dirty floor of the prison' (*RL* 336). Perhaps it is not, as Fredric Jameson has said, 'the realest tear in all literature', but is, at least, an appearance that does not deceive.¹⁹

Notes

- ¹ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), 181.
- ² Alenka Zupančič, *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 11.
- ³ Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 443.
- ⁴ D. G. Bridson, *The Filibuster: A Study of the Political Ideas of Wyndham Lewis* (London: Cassell, 1972), 167.
- ⁵ Andrzej Gašiorek, *Wyndham Lewis and Modernism* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2004), 92.
- ⁶ W. H. Auden, *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage, 1979), 52.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.
- ⁸ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 101.
- ⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 112-13.
- ¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud – Volume XVIII (1920-1922)*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1962): 1-64, 11.
- ¹¹ Jacques Lacan, 'The *jouissance* of transgression' (1960), in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997): 191-204, 194.
- ¹² Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 68.
- ¹³ Sigmund Freud, 'Ego and the Id' (1923), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud – Volume XIX (1923-1925)*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961): 1-66, 24.
- ¹⁴ Jacques Lacan, 'The wolf! The wolf!' (1954), in *Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-1954: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I*, trans. Roy Forrester (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988): 89-106, 102.
- ¹⁵ Jacques Lacan, 'Tuché and Automaton' (1964), in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978): 53-64, 53-60.
- ¹⁶ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), 67.
- ¹⁷ Alain Badiou, 'Book I: The Formal Theory of the Subject', in *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event, 2*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London and New York: Continuum, 2009): 43-78, 62.

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¹⁸ Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 263.

¹⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1979), 177.