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PETER L. CARACCILO

SHELLEY'S *HELLAS* AND JOSEPH JACOB'S 'THE WANDERING JEW' IN *SELF CONDEMNED* AND *THE HUMAN AGE*

I

In the paper I delivered to a session at the 2012 Conference in Senate House, London University, 'The Enemy's "Sum of All Destructions": Picasso-sque Re-fashioning of George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell in *Self Condemned*', I endeavoured to map the many parallels between the way Picasso's paintings and Lewis's novel expressively reshape the art of their great predecessors. So many are these parallels, in fact, one ought to register when the two artists go their separate ways. If adequately explored, one or two examples may suffice to substantiate my point.

II

The reference to Picasso's blind Minotaur prints of the Thirties that seems to be made (via that chilling allusion to 'Gnossoss') at the climax of *Self Condemned* (Carcanet, 367) would have had an especially poignant resonance, since by the time of the novel's completion, Lewis had lost much of his sight.

There are, of course, profounder differences here. Picasso was fascinated by the Labyrinth's modern

equivalent in the Spanish bullring which the Catalan traced back to the cult of Mithras. Whereas (though he also was well acquainted with Mithraism) for Lewis the transcendent portal is Byzantium. 'Constantinople [is] Our Star' Lewis proclaims in *Blast II* (p. 11).

This particular insight I owe to Paul Edwards. Lewis's interest in Byzantium, however, goes back to at least the beginning of the century. For the supporting evidence that follows, I am indebted to Graham Lane, who told me about one of two drawings at Bloomsbury Auctions that he had purchased for the Trust on 23 June 2011. The artwork in question is 'Hellas', 1900; pen, ink and wash (Michel 8, pl. 1), signed and dated, Slade 1900. On the verso of the contemporary support there are inscribed the first four lines of the introductory 'Chorus of Greek Captive Women' from Shelley's *Hellas*. These lines are:

We strew these opiate flowers,
On thy restless pillow,
They were stripped from orient bowers,
By the Indian billow.

Lewis of course studied at the Slade from 1898 to 1901 and Lane believes this subject was a student exercise set by his Slade teachers. If so, it was a stroke of pedagogic genius.

Shelley apologizes for his 'newspaper erudition'; yet obviously he knows something about the seminal Byzantine traditions concerning The City's role in the End Time. Even so Shelley takes as his primary model *The Persians* that classic epoch-marking drama by Aeschylus. Accordingly *Hellas* is written from the point of view of the Ottoman Sultan. However, its setting is not named Istanbul (as historically it should be) but Constantinople, speedily to be liberated – or so Shelley hopes.

Mahmud (at whose command the Turks are attacking Greece) is restless, his sleep disturbed by a recurring nightmare. He seeks help in interpreting a dream that prophesizes ultimate victory for the cause of Greek freedom. The troubled dialogue between the Sultan and the sage he consults alternates with the sung commentary of a chorus of enslaved Greek women. The last chorus from the drama contains the celebrated stanzas:

The world's great age begins anew,
The golden years return,
The earth doth like a snake renew
Her winter weeds outworn:
Heaven smiles, and faiths and empires
gleam,
Like wrecks of a dissolving dream.

Significantly this exhilarating evocation of 'a new heaven, a new earth' (Revelations of John 21:1) reappears in *Self Condemned* (Carcanet, 92). But another and closer link exists between this crypto-apocalyptic novel, that sublime chorus from Hellas, Lewis's visual homage to Shelley's epic-drama, and the eschatological mock-epic which is 'The Human Age': the connection seems to lie in the identity of the Sultan's counsellor. This important personage, a hermit healer, is none other than the Wandering Jew.

Looking back at Lewis's 'student exercise' with greatly increased attention, it is easy to identify in the drawing the various groups: on the left, there in a slanting line, are the captive (and so half naked) women of the Greek Chorus, facing inward to 'the restless pillow' on which uneasily lies the Sultan; behind him two attendants, and about to form the third side of a dynamic triangle enters the impressive figure of the Wandering Jew. For, by contrast with the way the other figures in this sepia and white sketch are shaded, Ahasuerus's garments

are rendered luminous (by the brilliant application of that wash ... ?)

Conventional as this early drawing is, it is of the greatest interest as giving a sense of Lewis's intense response to one of master-pieces of Romanticism. As George K Andersen (pre-eminent among the authorities on the subject) comments: 'It is almost possible to say that Shelley has laid down the basic framework within which move all of the later nineteenth century aspects of the Wandering Jew ... It is possible to say with or without apologies to Goethe ... that Shelley is the first successful creator of a worthy art form in which Ahasuerus is to appear'.

III

After 'The Great War to End All Wars' as well as the totalitarian revolutions that ensued, the ability to read the signs of the End Times would have seemed both more imperative and (even to the serious student of eschatology) vastly more problematic than in the utopian enthusiasm motivating Shelley's Hellas. The phantasmagoric opening of *The Childermass* (1928) is set in the vicinity of the Magnetic City. Evidently Lewis was inspired by further researches into the Byzantine apocalyptic tradition. These searches took him to the various London libraries but also, it seems, to Saint Sophia Cathedral. Practically on his doorstep at 33 Ossington St, Bayswater; literally just round the corner on Moscow Road there is what became in 1922 the most important [Greek Orthodox](#) church in the British Isles and Malta – that other famous site of Turkish siege. Six years later Lewis models the supernaturally besieged metropolis in *The Childermass* on the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*'s description of Constantinople, its fortifications, the great basilica of Haghia Sophia with its Eucharistic rituals.

Belatedly the persistent reader (and you do need a certain amount of perseverance to make sense out of the enigmatic *Childermass*), belatedly one recognizes that the manner of Pullman's devotion to the Holy Ghost – that is, his appeal for Holy Wisdom's help on his faith journey (C : Chatto and Windus, 116 comes from the [Eucharist](#) service of the [Byzantine](#) tradition. In the Western Christian liturgy the whole congregation at Mass (and that includes its departed souls) are envisaged as going on a journey, a voyage even, to the Heavenly Kingdom; whereas the aim of the eastern Orthodox rite is to create an ecstatic revelation of Heaven on Earth. (1) But is it really so here in Lewis's bleak view of the Next World?

It is rather like the difference between Yeats's 'Sailing to Byzantium' (1926-7) and his 'Byzantium' (1932-3). In the case of both writers there are problems with these visions of Constantinople as an extraordinary way station to the Other World. Yeats's portal gives onto a troubling pagan Afterlife. The opening of *The Childermass* presents similar ambiguities. True, the Sanctus bell from the Anglo-Catholic church on the metropolitan shore summons Pullman, trapped in the Bailiff's Camp on the other side of the river Styx, to participate, albeit at a distance, in the rite of Holy Communion (C 8, 116-7).

Dismayingly the Bailiff's Camp is 'a pretty dud Heaven' (C , 64). But even on the metropolitan shore the Magnetic City is said to have suffered 'a tragic exodus' (C, 8). And when in *Monstre Gai* (1955) Pullman and Satters do penetrate the Third City, there are doubts as to whether this is the Third Jerusalem, i.e. the New Jerusalem where resistance to the [Antichrist](#) is prophesized by the Byzantine [Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius](#) (a work that had shaped the [eschatological](#) imagination of [Christendom](#) in the Middle Ages). (2) Or is it

merely the degenerate version of a theocratic state (under so to speak an 'Angelic Pope'), a city similar to that which Constantine intended in establishing this New Rome?

To the signs of the Apocalypse found in Mathew (XXIV: 7-8), The Book of Revelations (V-VIII) and such European folk beliefs about the End of the World, the legend of the Wandering Jew adds a further portent. The signs of Doomsday are believed to be: wars and deadly plagues – and false Messiahs who will try to mislead the faithful about the Second Coming and attempt to pervert the Last Judgment. Ultimately the Anti-Christ will emerge to fight with Christ in the final battle between good and evil. Eventually the full range of these apocalyptic portents will be found tantalizingly encoded in 'The Human Age' – if not immediately deciphered by the intellectual Pullman. In *The Childermass*, Satters's intuitive suspicions are more quickly aroused, as this odd couple of anti-heroes reconnoitre first the satanically delusive lands confronting the Magnetic City. There they witness the epiphany of the woefully misunderstood Phoenix and the misrule of the Bailiff's Court (manifestations of, respectively, the Saviour and Anti-Christ). Then, in the succeeding volumes of this terrifying burlesque of the After Life, Pulley and Satters discover the Third City's streets and public spaces are hardly Purgatory; before, in *Malign Fiesta* they encounter what may be an Infernal fate in a Hollywood make-over of a Nazi-fied Dis.

But warning hints (if at times ambiguous ones) were there in the opening paragraphs of *The Childermass*:

southward from the highroad, is a mist that seems to thunder. A heavy murmur resembling the rolling of ritualistic drums shakes the atmosphere. It is the outposts or

investing belt of Beelzebub, threatening Heaven from that direction, but at a distance of a hundred leagues, composed of his resonant subjects. Occasionally upon a long-winded blast the frittered corpse of a mosquito may be borne. As it strikes the heavenly soil a small sanguine flame bursts up, and is consumed or rescued. A dark ganglion of the bodies of anopheles, mayflies, locusts, ephemerids, will sometimes be hurled down upon the road ; a whiff of plague and splenic fever, the diabolic flame, and the nodal obscenity (C, 1).

What is meant by that ‘small sanguine flame’ being ‘rescued’ on contact with ‘the heavenly soil’ – or is the reference backwards to ‘the frittered corpse of a mosquito’? There are even greater mysteries about that further sign of the Second Coming, the arrival of the Wandering Jew:

With the gait of Cartophilus some homing solitary shadow is continually arriving in the restless dust of the turnpike, challenged at the tollgate thrown across it at the first milestone from the water-front. (C, 2)

Here, the Wanderer’s presence seems to be almost too strongly indicated. Puzzlingly, this solitary wanderer is described as if there was a steady trickle of them – ‘continually arriving’. And is he Jewish? Or is he just camouflaged under another unfamiliar and possibly less provocative name? If so, by whom and to what purpose? On the level of the narrative, as a puppet of the Father of Lies (a. k. a. Beelzebub, the Lord of the Flies – all three names for the Devil) that ‘Punch-like person’, the Bailiff is the prime suspect. But as the creator of what is among the most complex of Modernist masterpieces, Lewis himself clearly wants to break with stereotypes – and perhaps not merely aesthetic stereotypes.

IV

The original legend concerns a [Jew](#) who is said to have taunted [Jesus](#) on the way to the [Crucifixion](#) and was thereupon doomed to walk the earth until Christ’s [Second Coming](#). Understandably the legend has given great offence to many in the Jewish community who see it as distorted – as, for example, Joanna L. Bricchetto, who, in her thought-provoking essay on the response of artists, ‘The Wandering Image: converting the Wandering Jew’, says it is: ‘an anti-Semitic iconic projection’ drawing on sources that range from prejudiced ‘medieval manuscripts to neo-Nazi blogs’. Nevertheless not a few in the community worldwide have reacted with admirably resilient scholarship and creativity in putting the legend into a historical context and / or appropriating it for their own purposes (e.g. in reflecting Diaspora, Shoah and the Advent of Zionism).

Thus (to cite what is certainly one of Lewis’s sources) in his 1911 entry on ‘Jew, The Wandering’ in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (11th ed. XV. 362 -3 a), the brilliant Jewish folklorist Joseph Jacobs notes a medieval Armenian archbishop who, on a visit to England, spoke about several analogous legends and reported that one offender ‘Cartaphilus’ had since converted to Christianity and spent his days [proselytizing](#) and leading a [hermit](#)’s life’. Reviewing the evidence Jacobs considers: ‘these legends and the utterance of Math. XVI. 28 became "contaminated " by the legend of St Joseph of Arimathea and the Holy Grail’, thence took the form given in the thirteenth century versions of Roger of Wendover and Matthew Paris. Consequently, Jacobs concludes Cartaphilus ‘is not a Jew, nor does he [wander](#)’ (emphasis added).

More recently in her coolly ironic article, ‘The Wandering Jew –A Jewish Perspective’

(Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem 1986, Vol. II pp. 189-196), Galit Hasan-Rokem remarks that ‘the name of one of the pre-Reformation precursors of the Wandering Jew figure, Cartophilus [sic], has been ‘interpreted’ in the light of Augustine's phrase about the Jews being the ‘preservers of books’ for Christianity (194). As this perceptive Israeli scholar suggests, etymologically considered, the term ‘cartaphyl’ implies a love of books.

This illuminating reading, however, needs to be slightly amended in the case of a signal instance of what is among the attributes that Wyndham Lewis does share with Pablo Picasso – a love of punning. Paul Edwards (who has tracked Cartophilus from a draft of the Revolutionary Simpleton through *Time and Western Man* to *The Childermass*) and I agree that Lewis’s deliberate misspelling of the repentant sinner’s actual name wittily registers what seems to be an entirely appropriate preoccupation in any unremitting wanderer. Doomed to pass through cycle after historical cycle, visiting every part of the globe, Cartophilus needs must cultivate an appreciation of cartography.

V

As with the collage technique generally, the tonal effect of such play on words, allusions, images and ideas can be intellectually and emotionally electrifying. So Picasso’s unnerving 1930 ‘Crucifixion’ (or is it a ‘Deposition’?) grotesquely defamiliarizes certain events on Golgotha during the governorship of Pontius Pilate. Likewise in ‘The Human Age’, Lewis’s fusion of details from Shelley’s and Jacobs’s discordant views of the End Times helps render disturbingly strange what from eschatology we thought we had learnt about the Four Last Things. These bizarre reconfigurations of

Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell in ‘The Human Age’ become the unsettling mock-epic panorama within which Lewis ironically surveys the appalling role played by *la trahison des clercs* in the Satanic usurpation of the Twentieth Century. Similarly if Professor Rene Harding, the ironically viewed protagonist of *Self Condemned*, had been able to pursue with sufficient understanding of the ‘metaphysics’ involved in the ‘possibility’ of writing his Secret History of World War II, ‘a violent burlesque ... the criminals in question, ... treated as ghastly clowns’ (S C 87. 351), would it have looked something akin to not only ‘The Human Age’, but even, to take a recent example, (a powerful study supporting the great Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski’s interpretation of an evil epoch), would Harding’s project have resembled Vladimir Tismaneanu’s *The Devil in History : Communism, Fascism, and Some Lessons of the Twentieth Century?*

(1) This paragraph corrects an egregious error in my ‘What Rough Beast?’ *JWLS* I . 85, 1st sentence, 1st paragraph.

(2) See e.g. Paul I Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition* (University of California, 1985).

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