The Enemy as Deconstructionist?

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For a niche in the deconstructionist pantheon imaginaire Wyndham Lewis has been named as one forerunner of deconstruction; placed among those who — irrespective of time or place — track the illusions and ‘mark the traps’.1

Deconstruction, today often vulgarised from the seminal ideas of Jacques Derrida, may perhaps best be perceived as an endeavour to thwart the reduction of the signifying process to a totalised system of absolute knowledge.2 In its professional formation, deconstructive criticism, it ‘examines the instances of decision: it investigates deciding authority. As soon as it does so, it becomes subversive’.3

Lewis need not be labelled, anachronistically, a deconstructionist to demonstrate his capacity, over several decades, to subvert the conventional aesthetic and political correctness of his day. He examined the social and artistic phenomena around him, investigated their authority and challenged their worth. But his opposition to such ‘correctness’ in itself makes him somewhat apart from today’s deconstructionists who have themselves acquired an aesthetic and even a political correctness.

The hostility of the guardians of the contemporarily correct has taken a diversity of historical forms: auto da fé by the Holy Office, de Tocqueville’s majority drawing a ‘mighty circle round all thought’, George Steevens’ ‘being sent naked to the Snare omnipotent’, Zdhanov’s strictures to the Congress of Soviet Writers, Hitler’s inaugural speech to the Great Exhibition of German Art, ‘Lacanian terrorism’; these are examples from over the years. For Lewis the chief manifestations of the hostility he met in opposing ‘correctness’ in his day were the ‘Bloomsbury sniff’ in the 1920s and the comprehensive ostracism of the Popular Front in the 1930s.

Recreating today the particular environment of Lewis’s writings of the 1920s and 1930s requires some effort of historical imagination. Landmarks have vanished and values have been transvalued. Lewis himself confronted a similar, if lesser, problem in 1950 when, in Rude Assignment, he set out to ‘defend ideas of twenty years ago with a changed outlook’. He then concluded that — for the most part — the books he wrote in the 1920s ‘contain nothing which disagrees radically with my present view of things’.4

Since 1950 the scene has changed more remarkably. One view of that change is that liberal humanism has been progressively discredited as the ‘ratifying ideology of cultural studies’, in the wake particularly of the (mainly) French antecedents preceding the events of 1968.5 Certainly Anglo-Saxon philosophy, psychology and literary theory have increasingly converged in a new more-or-less hermetic discourse, nicely described by Elizabeth Wright as ‘unthinkable, unwritable and, perhaps more to the point, unreadable without a proper understanding of psychoanalytic rhetoric’.6 A decade ago Edward Said discerned a closed community of about 3000 (mainly American?) scholars who wrote specialised, advanced literary criticism and faithfully read one another’s books, thereby commercially justifying their publication. That community of interest would not seem greatly altered today.7

This scene is far removed from the intellectual environment of Lewis’s own day. Much of his best critical writing preceded the Leavis revaluation in literary criticism, and the Hampstead revaluations in art criticism, of the 1930s, let alone those of their
successors. At its apogee, which can best be dated to the currency of *The Enemy* magazine, which he published and edited between 1927 and 1929, Lewis identified a ‘peculiar, debilitated, unanimity, typical of the present period . . . an uncritical hypnotic sleep of all within it’.8

In that unpromising context Lewis claimed, with some reason, ‘to act and to think non-politically in everything, in complete detachment from all the intolerant watchwords and formulas by which we are beset’, and to ‘attempt to exorcise politics from art’.9 But that proved impossible.

By calling into question the prevailing canons of aesthetic and political correctness, not only those of the ‘old gang’ but also those of the ‘new gang’, and doing so pugnaciously, Lewis acquired among his adversaries the label of ‘fascist’, a word which, as George Orwell was to point out, came to mean nothing more exact than ‘not desirable’. By dismissing Lewis’s ideas, and even the man himself, as ‘not desirable’, his adversaries could put his arguments beyond the pale and effectively ignore them. It was made easier for them because his ideas had — in Walter Allen’s phrase — a ‘profoundly unEnglish quality’. In the context of the 1990s that may not ring as a disqualification, but in the 1920s and 1930s the resonances were different. Allen discerned that Lewis had brought to bear ‘the power of a whole body of thought unEnglish in the sense that it had influenced the English very little, though it had dominated the continent’.10

This body of thought (complex in its origins) allowed Lewis to come to terms with, rather than put aside as irrelevant or authoritarian, social ideas which found expression in such continental movements as Action Française, to perceive in those ideas a different conception of a revolutionary philosophy and to understand the force of arguments that progress and equality were incompatible. Whether this unEnglish quality can be described, as Allen suggested, as basically Cartesian is more doubtful. It was from the methodology of Georges Sorel, whom he saw as ‘the key to all contemporary political thought’ in the 1920s, that Lewis particularly, though not uncritically, drew. For Sorel, ‘Everything connected with Cartesianism presents the same quality . . . it is literature that leads to nothing useful and nothing certain’, and in this controversy, at least, Lewis declared himself on the side of Sorel.11

Sorel’s main contribution to contemporary thought was in fact largely one of method, and it is his method, rather than the content of his argument, which Lewis adapted to his own purposes. Sorel sought to desystematise holistic philosophies such as Marxism by a technique he described as *diremption*: examining ‘certain parts without taking into account all their connections with the whole; to determine, in some way, the nature of their activity by isolating them’.12

Against that succinct description, it is possible to demonstrate a familiar resemblance by placing an equally succinct recent explanation of deconstruction’s basic assumptions: ‘that the text has been put together like a building or a piece of machinery, and that it is in need of being taken apart again, not so much in order to repair it as to demonstrate its underlying inadequacies’.13

Social theory was, for Sorel, an area in which ‘everything blends with everything else; formulas are true and false, real and symbolical . . . everything depends on the use one makes of them’.14 This is explicit enough a forerunner of Derrida’s ‘complicity of contrary values’, the view that ‘two interpretations of interpretation’ share the field of the social sciences. Lewis offered his own characteristic variant on the theme: ‘I
shall act as a conventional ‘radical’ at six this evening . . . and at ten a.m. tomorrow I shall display royalist tendencies if I am provoked by too much stupidity or righteous pomf from some other quarter. 15

In The Art of Being Ruled, Lewis applied the Sorelian technique of diremption to Sorel’s own syndicalism. He did so in consonance with Sorel’s prescription that ‘every pragmatic critic will observe that it is absurd to try to profit from diremption in order to obtain clarity and forget what diremption is when one makes use of what it has produced’. 16 Lewis could thus admire the Sorel who sought ‘to escape from the constraint of past formulas, invented for the general use’, while chiding the ‘romantic’ Sorel who played the part of ‘a sort of spleenetic Ariel flying above an ocean and exhorting it to do something spectacular and napoleonic’. 17

Sorel and Lewis both put a high value on William James’s philosophical pragmatism but, postulating that James ‘did not believe it necessary to complete his thought because he shared the illusions of democratic optimism with his American readers’, Sorel sought to apply that thought — pragmatically — to a more specifically French cultural context. 18 His search for social meaning thus led him towards Anglo-American empiricism and pragmatism, and away from Cartesian rationalism, but Sorel’s works nevertheless remained largely inaccessible to an Anglo-Saxon audience for a further half-century, lacking any English translations other than of Reflections on Violence. As late as 1950 Edmund Shils identified The Art of Being Ruled as still ‘the fullest discussion of Sorel in English’, and Lewis, in effect, had adapted Sorel’s ‘unique critical stance from which to demolish intellectual humbug’ to an English speaking audience. 19

In the same year, 1950, in Rude Assignment, Lewis re-examined his interest in the French intellectual debate which had underpinned his writings in the 1920s: the controversies in which Sorel, Berth, Benda, Maurras and others had expounded their polemical views. The Lewis of 1950 effectively sought to straddle the gulf between Sorel and Benda. ‘Were it simply the old cartesian quarrel that was in question, I should go over to the side of the Sorelians . . . But . . . the use Sorel and his satellites made of their anti-cartesian technique I regard as dangerous and childishly irresponsible; whereas Benda used his rationalism to humane, sensible, and social ends’. 20

Lewis owed some precedence to T. E. Hulme, who translated Reflections on Violence, in exposing to an English public the debates of French neo-classicism current before 1914. Sir Jacob Epstein recalled that, like Socrates, Hulme ‘drew the intellectual youth of his time around him’. 21 Had he survived the war, Lewis saw him as a potentially distinguished theorist in the criticism of the fine arts, and believed he would himself have ‘played Turner to his Ruskin’. 22 Hulme’s death in action in 1917 left Lewis as his most eligible successor in Britain as an exponent of genuinely modernist aesthetics, a field in which Hulme had become the leading British advocate of the phenomenological ideas of Husserl. 23

Lewis did not follow Hulme in that role but, if little of Husserl can be traced directly in Lewis’s own writings on aesthetics or general philosophy, the ‘bracketing of the empirical individual’ (in Husserl’s terms) can be found behind Lewis’s thinking. And if a Cartesianism of some kind is traceable in Lewis, Husserl believed himself to represent ‘a new, a twentieth-century, Cartesianism’. 24 The line from Husserl to Derrida is unquestionable, and one of Derrida’s key postulates: ‘To think of presence
as the universal form of transcendental life is to open myself to the knowledge that in my absence, beyond my empirical existence, before my birth and after my death, the present is', has presignification in some of Lewis's earlier writings, including Time and Western Man.  

The change in intellectual climate in Britain since Lewis conducted in 1950 his own review of his early works must colour any appraisal of the standing of his ideas today. In the mid-1980s Malcolm Bradbury commented on the emergence in the previous twenty years of 'a body of literary theory, pure and applied, quite inconceivable in the moral urgency and philosophical pragmatism of the 1950s'. One consequence was 'an increased detachment between the critical and the creative'. Denis Donoghue identified the underlying fracture thus: 'Only when there is a real belligerence between official and unofficial values is a worthwhile art possible'. Today 'societies have learnt that they can deal with dissent by incorporating it. Orthodoxy can be expanded to accommodate heresy'.

'Fashionable revolt' is not something peculiar to the post-1968 generation. It was a phenomenon condemned by Lewis in the 1920s but, for Lewis, 'a real belligerence' was necessary, and required the persona of the Enemy who could express himself not only in 'worthwhile art' but also in 'a hostile criticism, which it guarantees, to maintain vigilantly directed towards those antagonists assigned to it by circumstances'.

Today's stand-off deconstructionist manoeuvres, noisily but prudentially conducted, like the ritual warfare of tribes who have renounced cannibalism but enjoy the invigorating and convivial odour of the stewpot, would doubtless seem to Lewis 'a parody of the real article' such as he condemned in the 1920s.

Lewis did not abandon his critical role in his later years, and he perceived the developing malaise of twentieth century art and its appreciation in his last main non-fiction work, The Demon of Progress in the Arts, in 1954. Greeted by the successor to the 'Bloomsbury sniff', the 'Hampstead snort', his arguments were taken up and rearticulated, in Britain and America, in the following decades, with or without acknowledgement. In Suzi Gablik's litany of disenchantment, Has Modernism Failed?, published thirty years after The Demon of Progress, the copious bibliography admits nothing by Lewis and, unlike Lewis's work, was commended on publication as 'a comprehensive explanation of certain poisons in the art system'.

Lewis foreshadowed deconstruction's concern with language as a means of self-realisation in the absorption in his own writings of Nietzsche's central formulation wherein man 'sees and evaluates himself, deceives himself about himself, and proceeds to mould himself'. As with Sorel, Lewis distinguished between the 'romantic' and excessive Nietzsche of the conceptual Superman and the innovatory and exploratory Nietzsche most fully realised in the book which Lewis identified as his own favourite by its secondary title, La Gaya Scienza. Alistair Davies sees in Tarr, the hero of Lewis's eponymous novel, someone fulfilling the role outlined in La Gaya Scienza of a 'sign-making animal, fashioning, as an artist, those signs necessary for communication and deciphering the essential signs by which others express themselves. He thus achieves joyful wisdom'.

Nietzsche wished to see laughter united with understanding. Laughter was central to Lewis's own examination of humanity and 'the tragic handicaps that our human condition involves'. That differentiates him from most of the deconstructionist

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rhetoric of recent years, where Lewis's 'healthy clatter' of laughter does not figure importantly. Although the pun is central to deconstructionist discourse, it makes little of satirical humour, 'a comedy full of dangerous electrical action', as Lewis described it. And the pun notoriously provokes not the grin but the groan.

It has been said that Lewis's vision of the 'tragic handicaps' of the human condition meant that he was 'perpetually at war with the spirit of satire', but he embraced the topicality which characterises satire. Even so, much that he wrote in the 1920s requires only a minor updating to be applicable to the present day. As an example, one may take the section in The Art of Being Ruled in which Lewis analyses how 'The Contemporary Man "Expresses his Personality"', which foreshadows the deconstructive approach to figural language. It might now require to be orientated somewhat more precisely towards the Contemporary Woman 'expressing her personality', but little other alteration is needed. The 'cinema, wireless and press' of 1926 have expanded into kindred media of like influence, and formal education, reenacting a plurality of cultural landscapes, may not be quite so effective a matrix of personality as then. That said, the current belief that 'the teaching of reading and writing is in both method and content the establishment of the channelling of desire' may redress that balance.

This is the picture drawn by Lewis in 1926:

> When people are encouraged, as happens in a democratic society, to believe that they wish 'to express their personality', the question at once arises as to what their personality is . . . If a hundred of them were observed 'expressing their personality' all together and at the same time, it would be found that they all 'expressed' this inalienable, mysterious 'personality' in the same way. In short, it would be patent at once that they had only one personality between them to 'express' — some 'expressing' it with a little more virtuosity, some with a little less. It would be a group personality that they were 'expressing' — a pattern imposed on them by means of education and the hypnotism of cinema, wireless and press.

The presignification of deconstruction in Lewis's work carried within it a rider; an anticipation of the deconstruction of deconstruction itself, epitomised in his critique of Joyce. Lewis 'marked the traps' into which deconstruction itself proved prone to fall. As its critics have observed, simple boredom is one hazard. Under its methodology, the essential aporetic nature of the text is . . . tirelessly demonstrated in timeless uniform and predictable deconstructive readings. Such readings already seem tedious and provoking even to some deconstructionists.

In examining the conditions where readers are 'disillusioned with analytic aesthetics and dismayed by deconstruction', Richard Shusterman has suggested that the assumption that, to gain a post-modernist perspective (or to complete a modernist perspective), 'we can only choose between the uselessly superannuated language of the past and a radically new language for the future' is erroneous. There is, he points out, still available a lucid language 'which is neither antiquated Greek nor antic Derridean'.

In a similar vein Lewis put forward in 1914, in the context of visual art, the case for a 'presentist' aesthetic standing up against 'the sentimental Future or the sacrificial Past'. Here is the central aesthetic of Lewis's subsequent career. A presentist aesthetic
acknowledges a *processus in infinitum*. It identifies mutually antagonistic concepts and ideas, and their modes of expression, and shows where influential society has at some point put its thumb in the scale, saying 'this is truth', or at least its best approximation. Lewis demonstrates the privileged, or sacred, or merely sentimentally conceived, for what they are: fashion. Fashion is not falsity or mere expedience, but it lays claim to a sovereignty which is inherently bogus, the more so when it seems most assured.

If Lewis shared deconstruction's propensity to subversion, his role was, I suggest, substantially distinguishable. If one draws parallels with two of the most famous forces of military subversion of this century, which have given the dictionary new words: the deconstructionist is a fifth columnist within the city walls and Lewis a maquisard of the resistance. And there, to end on a nice deconstructionist word, is the difference.

Notes and References
Abbreviations:
BJA  *British Journal of Aesthetics*

Works by Lewis are identified as follows:

| ABR | The Art of Being Ruled, New York 1972 |
| EES | Enemy Sailors (ed C. J. Fox), London 1975 |
| WLA | Wyndham Lewis on Art (ed W. Michel and C.J. Fox), London 1969 |

9. Lewis, WLA(P), p. 300; ES; p. 30. Lewis’s attempts to 'exorcise politics from art' were accompanied by an analysis of political systems which owed much to his reading of Machiavelli. His study of 'fascism' as a power system in ABR is a case in point. Made at a time when Mussolini had still to reach a 'stable entente' with other power structures in Italy (v. A. Lyttleton, *The Seizure of Power*, London 1987, p. 286) it reflects the conditions of the mid-20s. Next to Sorel and Nietzsche, Machiavelli was the most important of the 'unEnglish' influences on Lewis, as evidenced particularly in *The Lion and the Fox* (1927). At the time Machiavelli (whom we might now be inclined to identify as the arch-prophet of deconstruction of political rhetoric) enjoyed little of the esteem as a political analyst which he has today in this country.
15. Lewis, WLA, p. 301.
17. Lewis, ABR, p. 327.
18. G. Sorel 'The Utility of Pragmatism', *op cit* p. 278.
20. Lewis, RA, p. 43.
22. Lewis, BB, p. 100.
25. J. Derrida (cited) in W. V. Dunning, ‘Post-modernism and the Construct of the Divisible Self’ in BJA,

21 M. Bradbury, 'The Impact of the Literary Theory' in Appagnesi op cit p. 12.


32 Lewis, ES, p. 48.


34 E. Wright op cit 137.

35 Lewis, ABR, p. 164.


37 Shusterman, op cit p. 323.

38 Lewis, WLA, p. 25.