Ian Patterson

'The public which rejected the modernists of literature and art accepts the modernists of war, because it has become fashionable to think in that way' wrote Proust in *Le temps retrouvé*. Lewis, who knew plenty about rejection and was always quick to perceive the movements of cultural fashion, was fascinated by that 'new subject-matter for art... modern war' and, as this collection of essays amply demonstrates, the imbrication of the impact of technologised conflict with subjective violence was to remain a central and revealing element in his work throughout his career. In this volume, deriving originally from a conference at the Imperial War Museum in 1994, David Peters Corbett has brought together nine substantial essays devoted to a more focused reassessment of the impact of war on Lewis than has hitherto been attempted, and the resultant readings both of his writing and of his paintings offer plenty of material to think about.

What all the contributors agree about is that Lewis found his experience of the first World War a traumatic one. In his essay on war and aggression in Lewis, Alan Munton sets out to present his subject as a contemplative painter, one in whom the energetic stasis of vorticism leads naturally to a philosophical detachment that finds its best expression in the painting *A Battery Shelled*. Here, Munton argues, the gun as apotheosis of modern aggressivity is encircled and enclosed 'by situating it within the ambience of the contemplative'. This claim takes its place within a larger elegiac argument that reads Lewis's post-war work as an engagement with the loss of the prospect of any artist-led social transformation. In his nuanced reading of Lewis's relationship with his own violence, Munton is perhaps too ready to accept the late works as restitutive of earlier mistakes, and as so often in Lewis criticism, an attributed authorial psychology takes the place of a fully contextualised historical reading, and vitiates the strengths of the investigation. Tom Normand, too, takes a close look at *A Battery Shelled* and reads it as restating the absurdity of visions of progressive meliorism: 'War was the comedy, the joke which revealed the base biological mechanism at the core of human action.' It was also tragic in its revelation of human fallibility. Normand's conclusion, however, that Lewis as an anti-war artist saw 'war as a terrible waste which revealed... the failure of human civilisation' adds little to our understanding of Lewis, either as painter or as intellect.

The quiet bitterness of the title's recursivity — *A Battery Shelled* — is not commented on, nor the curious resemblance of the figure with the moustache to Lewis himself although both these might lead to a productively complicating view of the autonomous subject. It is left to Geoff Gilbert, in the most achieved essay in the book, to find adequate terms to discuss the problem of historical agency in relation to the trauma of war, and to show how Lewis's inability to resolve the issues this gave rise to finds its issue in his antisemitism. Through his analysis of the problematic of shellshock, the under-discussed 'Imaginary Letters', and the events surrounding the publication of 'Cantleman's Spring Mate', Gilbert lays the basis for a more detached and critical approach to the movements of history and
the avant-garde, and offers the possibility of a more historically scrupulous approach. David Peters Corbett's invigorating reading of the Tyro paintings also draws our attention to a group of paintings which have received less commentary than they deserve. Corbett gives stimulating readings of the paintings in their immediate post-war context, especially *A Reading of Ovid*; he also dwells on Lewis's 'moment of complicity' in cultural vacuity in his alarming self-portrait as a Tyro, speculating on the ways in which, as he puts it, 'the analysis of the war and its effects... is too bound up with his own career for clear expression.' Arguing that the Tyros are 'Lewis's true war paintings' he claims that 'part of that truth derives from the absence of war, from its continuing denial'.

Two other essays make this book worth reading: Paul Edwards and Andrew Causey take on the difficult topic of Lewis's paintings in the 1930s. Both discuss, among others, two serious and difficult paintings, *The Armada and The Surrender of Barcelona*. In a fascinating account of Lewis's return to painting, Edwards argues that historical change and the movement towards war prompted his turn to what he calls 'the historical unconscious'. His central claim is that by his recourse to a historically conditioned, but no longer conscious, dream-world Lewis can achieve (from the exilic margins of the imagination) a purchase on contemporary events which is otherwise unobtainable. The persuasive argument is supported by readings of other paintings and of Lewis's own writings on this and related issues, and makes a number of very suggestive points, which will need to be taken up, extended and challenged in any new work on Lewis's history and mythological paintings. Causey's essay more traditionally reads the paintings as allegorical, and to some extent idealised, 'harmonized and seen in the mirror of a dream' as Lewis puts it in *The Lion and the Fox*. Seen in this perspective, there is a continuity between the 'aristocratic calm' of *A Battery Shelled and The Armada*. If I am less convinced by his approach than by Edwards, it is partly because Causey too downplays Lewis's less pleasant attitudes.

Of his approach to the Spanish Civil War, he says 'Briefly, he had right-wing views, but supported non-involvement', an evasion of the facts which allows him to overstate the virtues of 'calm' and 'order'. It is perfectly clear from *Count Your Dead* that Lewis's views were both right-wing and anti-Semitic. It is also the case that non-intervention (or non-involvement as Causey misleadingly calls it) was itself a right-wing strategy that allowed the British government tacitly to support Franco. His evocation of Jerrold and Bryant (both of whom were involved in fascist organisations at that time) as well as his too-benign reference to the 'Chesterbelloc tradition' is perfunctory in this respect.

Implicit in this is a weakness shared by almost all the essays in this volume. Lewis continues to be treated as if he existed almost in isolation. There is little sustained comparative analysis, and too much reliance placed on Lewis's own
pronouncements, both on his own works and career and on cultural and historical movements. Edwards puts forward a plausible case for the historical paintings as a form of critique: but the ghost of Lewis looms too large in essay after essay for there to be room for any substantial independent sense of what is being critiqued in painting or prose. Until some broader perspective emerges, Lewis criticism will continue to be in danger of reiterating second-hand resentment. At its best, this volume indicates a way forward from that impasse.

**Philip Head, Some Enemy Fight-Talk**

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**Robin Holt**

Wyndham Lewis: virtu bonded; breath a staccato issuance of 'aggressive voltage', a bold type facing the time-hag Fortuna. Agitated by trap-door conation there was no time for syllogistic depth – there was no conclusion to identity save for the recognition of distinctions, angular postures set in lines of flight toward possible, peripheral worlds. Cast as the Caliph's design, the internalized panopticon of self on self conceived before the structuralists had negotiated even the bars on their cot, such positions as were possible in Lewis's world were abrasive, set in an acid mélange. So where does he line up? At the back, to one side, with his head turned to the front of elsewhere. Despite this resistance to classification, his re-bored, electric nobility is so startling a configuration that it agitates the reader and viewer into response of the type: 'This is Lewis; that is not.'

Philip Head's *Some Enemy Fight-Talk* embodies one such response; or more accurately, a series of responses written 'over many years' that echo and reflect Lewis's Zyedian range. There is no obvious pitch to this collection of essays, no publisher's blurb extolling a 'timely' or 'exact' analysis of a 'forgotten genius'; though this might not be out of place. What we have, according to the sub-title, are 'Aspects of Lewis on Art [covered by the second half of the collection] and Society [covered by the first half]'. Aspect-seeing is description from a point of view; which is all description can ever be. We only see aspects, and the generalization to the whole, the universal, is the pretense of the Idea that so concerned the aspect seeing Lewis. The universal occupies the space to create; we create by working against things, not with them. So a collection of essays is not an inappropriate vehicle for exploring Lewis; they might acknowledge the distinctions that a monograph may find troublesome. To the extent the essays configure central themes to, or characterizations of, Lewis, they configure a gestalt figure: now we see Burkean aesthete; now an anarcho-syndicalist; now an atemporal 'enemy'. The urge in any response, or commentary, is to organize and so constitute (to quote what Head quotes mid-way through the volume) an 'aid to sensation'. But Head only ever does this with reluctance, qualification and with the rider that as contradiction is in and of itself not a flaw in the creator, nor should it be in the commentator. We arrive at a roughed out definition of the mature Lewis as an anti-romantic (though this must be the Jacobin romanticism of early Coleridge), a modern Machiavelli, a sanguine realist keeping his exotic wardrobe for the privacy of peripatetic imaginings of personal insight. Rorty's 'ironic poet' able to accept public power and still tell iconoclastic, stuttering, minor stories. This point of
arrival at definition in the essays is as much one of departure. The speed of the restless prose is hastened by the brevity of the introduction and the use of selected postscripts that act as ‘aids to sensation’ only insofar as they confound any finality in the reader’s mind. It is a credit to Head’s comprehensiveness that he resists any such ‘aping’ of Lewis. Final definitions result only in the nihilistic, Californian grin of the tyro. We have only aspects.

The sweep of the essays is impressive. In his own limnery, Head’s palette is extensive. But ‘aspect-seeing’ need not limit commentary to contextualization; and at times the essays appear cautionary, unwilling to associate, reflect and refract ideas for prolonged periods and instead linger upon who or what may have influenced Lewis at various junctures in the passage of his thought. For an insider’s commentary upon a ‘surface dweller’ this contextualization is important, but the Introduction hints at a desire to rehabilitate Lewis’s ‘working system of thought’, for which a more sustained, contemplative ‘aspect-seeing’ would have been appropriate. It is testimony to what is presented, that the reader is left with a feeling of missed potential. The dominating main gallery of ideas-men and texts are lined up to configure Lewis as an original, modernist thinker: De Man, Marinetti, Proudhon, Nietzsche, Machiavelli, Kandinsky. The essays deal with the usual suspects, and do so well, but so obvious are some of the links, that even Head himself slips at times into uncritical patter: so we have the ‘eminent’ jurist Carl Schmitt; the ‘elevated’ social scientists St Simon and Comte; ‘the distinguished’ expressionist

Emile Nolde; the ‘magisterial’ text Space, Time and Deity; the ‘formidable herdswoman’ Camille Paglia. Whilst the technique can be indulged as journalistic slack when considering the more ‘obvious’ and ‘understood’ links between Lewis and his contemporaries, it is a severe constraint when used to muse on connectivities between Lewis and the less ‘obvious’. So we have: the ‘English “Machiavellian” William Thomas’; the ‘seriously entertaining’ Slavoj Zizek; the Pythagorean French architect Amédée Ozenfant; a ‘ley-line’ from Cusanaus to Lewis; and a ‘precursor’ in Coleridge (for example, links between the intense and singular clericism of The Friend and Lewis’s journalism abound). And little more.

Head’s Lewis is traced far from its prete rosso origins of contrapuntal, cadenzic, vortistic energy – as brilliantly artificial as Fregean logic. The war revealed finally for Lewis that the human was no longer in relief to its condition, no longer set taut in the thrall of Homeric virtue. To convey the human as a full identity was not possible, only its parody in the gun-metal idiom of ‘force-illustration’; a vectored restless motion unrelieved by emotional humour. After such a realization any ‘fight-talk’ was the quantification and belittlement of strength. Politics became an art of survival, (the Art of Being Ruled serving as a supplement to The Prince for would-be subjects) and art the way of edging beyond the universalist sympathies of time and the metaphor of the machine. Head’s pieces continue to echo this Manichean Guffaw, and do so with quiet aplomb.