Telling History the Time
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How Wyndham Lewis’s work deserves to be thought about is the question raised by this book, in a solicitous and very comprehensive manner. Not for the first time, but on a scale massive enough to demand attention at last, Lewis is given the sort of consideration which must be taken note of by all who aspire to a critical understanding of his work (as opposed, say, to the kind of understanding displayed by the star reviewer of the Sunday Times). Such is Edwards’s dedication to his subject that one gets quite a distinct sense of a life as well as a body of work. This sense is contributed to by the chronological arrangement of material, which gives priority to Lewis’s own development. Edwards has regarded it as vital to this that the two areas of Lewis’s work be discussed in a manner which preserves, as far as is possible, their actual relationship; and in the integration of the themes and concerns of the fiction, essays and criticism with the compositional elements of the paintings and drawings (which he performs with an air of second nature), he produces a superb and rather special brand of comparative criticism. My general impression was of many passages of sustained, patient and brilliant analysis of Lewis’s writing, and meticulous, and at times moving, discussions of the paintings.

The book’s thesis is that Lewis exemplifies the spiritual problems of modernity. In the development of this thesis, Edwards raises Lewis up from the ground of British Modernism, and into the air of existential and religious questioning. In doing so, he indicates in several aspects, explicit and latent, the relationship between Lewis and European thought.¹

Thus, Part I gathers much of the work done up to 1917 within a set of concerns about authenticity. Here, Lewis is treated as the most radical of the writers with whom he is usually associated, owing to the thoroughness and mobility of his capacity for scepticism about the power of language to intuit the real. Neither Romanticism, superseded by the mechanization of nature, nor any of the modes of epiphanic interiority, blind to the self’s practical involvement in the world, attracted Lewis (though Edwards does bring out the extent to which Tarr is written over an ethos which early on was of a Romantic character). So, spurred by Bergson and by Nietzsche to look back before the human fell into consciousness, Lewis considered primitive life in the form of Breton peasants for signs of authenticity. Hence, the Wild Body stories, and the essay ‘Inferior Religions’, which Edwards regards as of the first importance for understanding Lewis’s development as an artist. Here, however, Lewis would not be charmed from watchfulness about the ways in which ritual may pass for free nature, complicated patterns for transcendence. Such patterns, he referred to as ‘inferior religions’. Thus, Lewis’s writing and painting keep being repelled from what he was rather singularly able to see as the self’s illusion of its own possession, its tendency to behave like everyone rather than itself, its bad faith and sentimentality, its mistaking of clichés as first thoughts and new gestures, its obtuseness to the manifold occasions of rhetoric and to the operation and insinuation of interest and will in every level of discourse. Edwards demonstrates this ability in his reading of Tarr, which is the best I have come across. Here, he exhibits systematically how language is the untruth of character, with scant chance of the coming to light of undesigned feelings (though he does
suggest that there is not no such chance).

It may perhaps be complained that the concept authenticity is not theorized by Edwards. The discussions of the *Wild Body*, 'Inferior Religions' and *Tarr* are certainly adequate, however, to delimit the possible senses of the word, with respect to the concerns described in the preceding paragraph. Edwards demonstrates that Lewis had a strong sense of the near impossibility of saving experience from convention, or of transcending ritual. In this respect, the decision not to offer a positive definition of authenticity is surely correct. Lewis's watchfulness over the false rhythms of human behaviour has little positive to recommend apart from such watchfulness and the necessity of breaking the rhythms of both life and art: its value is negative.  

One line of thought which such negativity, in its reference to the individual within culture, foreshadows is Sartre's in *Being and Nothingness*, which, in its turn, deplored Heidegger's use of the word 'authentic' as 'dubious and insincere'; and defined freedom as *transcendence*, that negative sense of possibility which motivates the sincere man to give up, and keep giving up, his present self on the point of its becoming false nature. According to this position, there is no authenticity, but only transcendence. This places the severest demands upon the individual, whose self-consciousness, in Sartre's scheme, can find no objectification. Edwards, I think, believes that Lewis had the potential to face these demands, and had preserved a faculty of 'negative capability' from the Romanticism he ditched. For a good deal of Part I of this book, Edwards certainly persuaded me that this was so.

Eventually, however, one will notice that Lewis's attitudes towards spirit are susceptible to variation, in the way of an English sky disturbed by breezes from the East. This in itself may not necessarily impress one as to anything apart from the fact of their variety—though pointing this out may be a bit too hard-headed. On the other hand, one may care to see Lewis as a rather brilliant synthesist with a gift, at times uncanny, for extending and foreshadowing branches of thought, someone who, like Coleridge, both suffers and benefits from the lack of a formal training, and substitutes wide-ranging speculative ability for concentration on a particular problem. The second point of view is taken by Edwards (and I incline to it); but his attempt to provide a total reckoning is faced with turbulence.

Thus, we find that 'authentic', 'inauthentic', etc., are beginning to be accompanied by 'transcendence', 'transcendent' and 'transcendential'. At times, 'transcendent' operates in the same context as 'authentic', where it means something like the overcoming of ritual in an ecstatic experience of reality; but it may also indicate the impossibility of the authentic in purely worldly terms, which means that we are being asked to think of a Romantic overcoming of difference; or of an overcoming of a stated dualism; or of an overcoming of the gravity of material life; or of a return to an original condition; or of an alternative to nature as a source of values; or of the impossibility of the incorporation of truth within life; or of the divine; or of the supernatural in a somewhat occult Yeatsian sense.

The consequence of such a build-up of traffic is most obvious in the discussion of *Enemy of the Stars*. This really is overcrowded, and beset with talk of authenticity, inauthenticity, transcendence, self, will, truth and asceticism, at times in senses which Edwards admits are contradictory and confusing. As he points out, the play is not only explicitly philosophical, but also particularly open to interpretation in philosophical terms. (155) Such a combination is very apt to lead to an excess of interpretation, and to result in an exercise in philosophical quantification, the whole conducted in a spirit of competition which is not philosophically all that illuminating.

For if Lewis is not to be boxed in by Gnosticism, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Stirner, Nietzsche, Bergson, some reckless driving is required. And here (but not here only), one will note that Edwards has a rather quick way with Nietzsche, giving the impression of Lewis's having di-
gested and spat out the philosopher—in the same process. Thus, we find that *The Gay Science*, 110, ‘Origin of knowledge’, comes up once more (previously, it had been discussed in the context of the *Timon* portfolio, where Nietzsche’s hollow, ‘neo-Romantic’ optimism about the ‘Superman’ had been put in its place). Here, Nietzsche describes in a somewhat veiled form the history of scientific knowledge and its appropriation by the instincts which had once been content with faith; in which phase, knowledge, the search for truth, potentially becomes of as much service to life as error is. But Nietzsche ends by posing the question, ‘To what extent can truth endure incorporation? That is the question; that is the experiment.’ This may be a question about institutions (i.e., could there be a church for truth, as there was one for error?) And it may be a question about the historical significance of philosophy (i.e., is *Gay Science* 110 in itself an incorporation of truth, or is it just about the possibility of such an incorporation?) It may also be an existential question, about whether what the reader has just read is to remain theoretical, or to be lived. And finally, it may be a question about the being of truth: in asking whether truth can have a body, Nietzsche is asking whether it can survive its own unveiling, as in the passage in question (a theme mentioned in the Preface to *The Gay Science*).

Edwards, however, takes the passage thus: ‘*Enemy of the Stars* says that what is embodied, either in language or material, is not the truth but some simulacrum of it that is unsatisfactory in itself and becomes more so in the traffic of intellectual commerce. This is the Romantic dilemma that Nietzsche would simply transcend in his “experiment”, the Superman. [Lewis denies] such transcendence, and the possibility of the embodiment of the truth.’ (160) But *Gay Science*, 110, makes no reference to *Übermensch*, which had anyway not appeared as a theme by then in Nietzsche, and is far from being the most likely referent of ‘experiment’. So why does the ‘Superman’ appear in Edwards’s remarks? Is it because of Lewis’s testimony to Nietzsche’s influence (and to his own capacity to resist that influence where the Superman was concerned) in *Rude Assignment*? This seems to me to be giving too much priority to Lewis; for there is a difference between presenting an interpretation, and passing it off as a determination of meaning. Moreover, there is much in the book to suggest that Lewis’s and Nietzsche’s attitudes towards the embodiment of truth are not opposite, but fairly similar.

Finally, I should say that the reading of *Enemy of the Stars* is lacking in a sense of contemporary and later connections and foreshadowings. For if the play were fully ‘open to philosophical interpretation’, the present analysis of it could readily be unblocked by examining the problem of authenticity in Argol as a precursor to the theme of authenticity in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, starting, say, with Argol’s decision to leave university for the craft of a wheelwright. Argol’s confusion then turns into a question of whether human existence falls from authenticity, on the one hand, and seeks (in vain) to recover it; or whether falling itself, on the other hand, is a fundamental structure of human existence, and prior to the possibility of becoming authentic. And this, in its turn, would have done something to clarify Lewis’s existential dilemma, in which the foreshadowing of ‘transcendence’ as negative freedom in the Sartrean sense, and of ‘authenticity’ as Heidegger means it, are elements not easy to reconcile. Nonetheless, Edwards succeeds here in revealing the intellectual and critical intensity of Lewis’s imagination.

It was a faculty which was damaged by the war. This Edwards describes as critical to the understanding of Lewis, to the extent that virtually all his work after 1918 may be interpreted as a response to it. Edwards’s account of Lewis’s experience of the death of his men, and of shelling, and of the paintings which came out of it, in the eighty-odd pages of Chapter 7 is superb. The reading of ‘A Battery Shelled’ convinced me that this was indeed ‘the most profound painting to emerge from World War’. (217) But the experience seems to have undermined Lewis’s integrity as an artist, and for a long time displaced and set against each other his powers of concentration. It hypertrophied the scale of his imagination; and in mostly
detrimental ways twisted history into his thinking. One might say that his attitude towards spirit underwent a mutation from its absolute to its objective expression.

This becomes evident in his thinking about the state in terms of architecture and civic life. And it is evident in his conversion to reverence for the machine as a moral extension of human capabilities. (One sees here the sense of Hegel’s remark, which at first sight seems just immoral, that the invention of the gun—in Lewis’s case, a six-inch howitzer—has raised courage to a higher, because more abstract, level.) Then, having painted the alarming and lascivious Tyros, he explained that their grins were modelled on the fatalism of the British infantry, and in addition portrayed himself as just such a Tyro, subordinating his individuality to the ethos of the mechanized state. He denied the autonomy of art; and then he denied the aesthetic altogether: ‘Art is a coin [...] that has no aesthetic value, only an historic one’. (260-61) This is partly a justification for incursions into history, politics and sociology; and partly an arrogation of the necessity of filling the vacuum of the aesthetic with his own principles—as opposed to practice. For by 1923, he had ceased painting (inexplicably failing to accept an invitation to exhibit in Paris) and ‘turned philosopher’. This long and thoroughly absorbing chapter ends on a note of quiet concern.

Chapter Eight covers a great deal of work (the whole of the non-fictional side of the ‘Man of the World’ project) in a comparatively short space. I suppose one may entertain a comparison here between the methodological solipsism of Descartes and the compulsion of Lewis to effect a total clearing of the ground, so as to establish the first principles of an aesthetic revolution. This required an expenditure of energy that may seem to be out of proportion to what Lewis actually required in the name of the ‘Philosophy of the Eye’—namely, ‘a philosophy of common sense’. (312) Yet he felt that he had to overcome nothing less than the ‘hegemony of the scientific attitude’; (228) and what must have made this more difficult still was that he had partly internalized it (in the passing stance of reverence for the machine). And a similarity of concern about that attitude should be indicated between Time and Western Man and Heidegger’s Being and Time (both 1927). For in disputing the primacy of the theoretical and the scientific over the practical and the everyday, the image of the world derived from science over the image that is manifest, Heidegger was in part motivated by concern that science should not usurp the place of the truth of art—though this concern was not to be explicitly stated until a later essay. If one senses with some force that the answer to the problem was far readier to hand for Lewis than for the philosopher, this itself needs to be qualified with a sense of the forces which had undermined Lewis as an artist. That is why a criticism made by Edgell Rickword at the time is, on reflection, superficial: ‘One genuinely creative work would dispel these miasmas of doubt and self-distrust that resist all the efforts of ratiocination’.

Edwards thinks of The Childermass as fulfilling many of the conditions of such a work. His demonstration of the limitations of Jameson’s definition of Lewis’s style reveals the demands that Lewis’s vocabulary makes upon the reader’s imagination, and the novel’s power of original synthesis. And his analyses of grammar, syntax and subjectivity call to mind Nietzsche’s observations on grammar and metaphysics. This is impressive and rewarding criticism, and really illuminates a difficult work. Yet it seems to me that The Childermass in a rather obvious sense excuses itself from having to deal with what Lewis had earlier found missing in Picasso and Kandinsky, namely, life in the form of a familiar world; and that here Lewis is preoccupied with establishing the optimum conditions for posing questions. What is unsatisfying about it has something in common with what is unsatisfying about Donne’s ‘Holy Sonnets’, the running towards death in the hope of clearing the air. One is drawn to the hypothesis, to which Edwards gives some substance, of how it might have turned out as a war novel. The Apes of God seems to me a great novel, unlike The Childermass. Edwards feels the
other way about the two works; though I wonder if this has something to do with the fact that he rates *The Art of Being Ruled* so highly, as a ‘totalising critique of the culture of liberal capitalism’ that has not been surpassed on the left. (300) (This judgement is likely to provoke those readers with a high estimation of Adorno and Horkheimer). For such an attitude towards *The Art of Being Ruled* may get in the way of one’s ability to discern what, as satire, *The Apes* has to add. I should point to its brilliant and magnifying mimetic power which again and again produces the real out of the shadows cast by the satirist’s enmity, preserving and holding up what would otherwise fall away and disappear. I also have a feeling that Lewis’s reading in Shakespeare is more evident here than in any other novel: ‘The reported violence is not directly Dionysian,’ Edwards writes of the novel’s representation of the General Strike. (356) Indeed it is not. Surely there, Lewis was thinking of Rumour, in the second part of *Henry IV*.

But evaluation of *The Apes of God* must also have been affected by the publication the following year of *Hitler*. For it looks as if the absence of a political vision in *The Apes* had now simply been deferred. The truth, I think, is that the absence of positive prescriptions in *The Apes* is exactly its value. In this sense, its negativity is a form of critical transcendence (again, in the sense in which Sartre uses that word). It might also be seen in terms of the negative utopian vision which Adorno thought was all that modern art could offer society.12 Conversely, the fault of *Hitler* is that Lewis’s positive vision of what National Socialism may have to offer cannot avoid complicity and corruption. Regarding *Hitler*, Edwards writes that Lewis’s complex of paranoia and fantasy ‘virtually is Nazism (and vice versa) at this stage of the movement’s history, before it came to power.’ (387) This is a very effective way of making notoriety disappear; but some readers (and they’ll get to Chapter 11 fast) will no doubt suspect admission as a form of concealment, or simplification: it will be both more and less than they want to hear. I myself find Edwards’s way here honourable and open.

As the key to Lewis’s attitudes towards race, Edwards analyses the article ‘The Strange Actor’, and describes the oscillations of value in the self-other relationship there presented. I wondered here whether *The Gay Science*, 361, ‘On the problem of the actor’, may have had some bearing. For Nietzsche begins that section by indicating the figure of the actor (a type of adaptability) as the only means by which it may be possible to ‘get at the dangerous concept of the “artist”’. 13 Then he lists under the actor a number of types of the other (‘Jews’, ‘Women’), but fails to return to the artist, leaving the concept somewhat destabilized. Is there the outline of a model for Lewis’s career here?

But for all Lewis’s attempts either side of *The Apes* to tell history the time, there is in my view nothing to match the scene in which Zagreus indicates to Ratner the figure of a fylfot woven into a rug. I am grateful to Edwards for pointing out this scene, which I had never taken in. (391-92) Its vast and indeterminate ominousness compensates for the temporizing vulgarity of Lewis’s political journalism.

The distinction between art and power, and their respective capacities for truth, was eventually acknowledged in the essay ‘Power-Feeling and Machine-Age Art’: ‘the most gigantic power-station is controlling a power against which the power that is resident in art cannot be measured, for they have nothing in common.’ (396) This is written about 1935, some twenty years before Heidegger’s ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, which concludes: ‘The more questioningly we ponder the essence of technology, the more mysterious the essence of art becomes’.14 I feel that there may be depths to this connection which Lewis scholarship ought to take up, risky as that is likely to sound (on the principle of out of the frying pan—and straight into ‘conservative culture critique’). Lewis’s statement might be taken as approaching the recognition of an error deriving from an attitude towards objective spirit, with the promise of concentrating the self again on art.

In the final section of Part II, and in Part III, Edwards discusses the paintings of the
mid-1930s, culminating in ‘The Surrender of Barcelona’, the portraits and the sublime ‘Creation Myths’, six novels, and Men Without Art. I myself have had little taste for the fiction after The Apes; but Edwards does some outstanding work in explaining Lewis’s declining style—in Self-Condemed, The Revenge for Love and Monstre Gai particularly—and in indicating its considerable merits, as the growth of pity in Lewis’s writing brings with it an ‘ethical supplement’ to compensate for the loss of force.\textsuperscript{15} The analysis of Snooty Baronet and the glissading relationship between reader and ‘offensive’ narrator (who, incidentally, might be taken as a radical example of neo-Gnostic antinomianism) is brilliant; and perhaps that novel is more subtle about moral complicity than Monstre Gai and Malign Fiesta, if less important.

The two last-named fictions really amplify the dissatisfaction I feel with The Chidermass; but Edwards thinks Malign Fiesta ‘the crowning masterpiece of Lewis’s career.’ (547) This is because it is the culmination of Lewis’s self-overcoming towards nature; and because it can find it in itself to represent the ‘transcendent Absolute’ in a sensible, and not merely intellectual mode (when, according to the Kantian formulae of Time and Western Man, it could only have been disembodied reason—i.e., nothing).

There may be a lot to learn from that judgement, precisely because Edwards has occupied himself with the spiritual development of his subject, which development has been erratic and dialectically compacted to a degree consistent with Lewis’s existential tendency to break rhythm, but consistent also with his subjection to historical forces beyond his control. And if by the end of the book, even as far as the last sentence, we have heard so much of ‘transcendence’ that it’s in danger of becoming the known side of the horizon, this turns out to have been justified by the doubting intensity with which Lewis sought it. For it is this double attitude, Edwards believes, which makes him Modernism’s most comprehensive self-critic. (549)

My recent opinion has been that in ‘Inferior Religions’ (which I interpret more positively than Edwards, the section on laughter and tragedy especially) and in the Conclusion of Men Without Art, Lewis had already got further than he was at the end, in the development of a vision of immanent affirmation in which the aesthetic is the ground of the ethical, and the concept human is not degraded but open. But I am beginning to be persuaded that Lewis’s final stance was more interesting than either a fall or a rise into metaphysics.

\textbf{NOTES}

1. The importance of this relationship was first pointed out, I think, by Alan Munton in a review of Fredric Jameson’s Fables of Aggression in Blast 3, edited by Seamus Cooney (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1984), p. 351.
9. See Being and Time, Section 69b. See also Herman Philipse, Heidegger's Philosophy of Being: A Critical Interpretation (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 132-33, for an introduction to the problem of the manifest and scientific image. The later essay is Heidegger's 'The Question Concerning Technology', which I discuss below.


