Death and the Monad
Philip Head

As in art, so in life we learn that only the total configuration reveals ultimate values.
Adrian Stokes, ‘Colour and Form’

In his posthumously published book A Game That Must Be Lost Adrian Stokes—an erstwhile tennis-partner of Ezra Pound at Rapallo, and a fellow-admirer with Pound of the versatile aesthetics of the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini—wrote that ‘All perfection is close to death’. In discussing the qualities of art, and the making of modern art in particular, he elaborated this idea. The work of art, he wrote, ‘because it is expressively self-subsistent, should invoke in us some such idea as the one of “entity”. It is as if the various emotions had been rounded like a stone’. In this process ‘Form bestows not only pattern but completeness, not only the sense of separate life, but the sense of fusion. In art, repose will in some manner encompass energy’. He then suggests that the ‘more constant entities’ are inanimate. ‘Agent for resurrection and for death, the artist furnishes enshrinement’.1

On modern art (‘modern’ in a mid-twentieth century perspective) Stokes said ‘Our art has no pattern books, no norms, no settled iconography whatsoever. But although he may appear to have complete liberty of conception I still believe it is impossible for the artist to formulate or to communicate in a contemporary manner entirely outside a framework of stylistic alternatives’ particular to the artist’s own environment. ‘For the artist all current feeling and thinking, his own and the thinking of those who influence him, occur in the view of those concrete surroundings which are taken to impinge on the circumstances, and even to point the path, of our culture’.2 These observations provide us with a mise en scène, a concept Stokes himself frequently employed, for exploring the particular Lewisian relationship between death and the monad.

In the year before his own death, introducing the catalogue of the 1956 exhibition at the Tate Gallery, Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism, Lewis wrote: ‘I had at all times the desire to project a race of visually logical beings’, which he believed he had attained in a number of his paintings completed in the 1930s. His ‘creatures of that kind’, he added, ‘served a visual purpose. They were not created as we create creatures in a book, but with some purely visual end in view. If I had given them a name it would probably have been monads’.3

Lewis derived the concept of the monad from the philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716), for whom monads were the fundamental substances of the universe. Ernst Cassirer describes the Leibnizian monad as ‘no arithmetical, no merely numerical, unit, but a dynamic one....Every monad is a living centre of energy, and it is the infinite abundance and diversity of monads that constitute the unity of the world’. The monad’s activity ‘consists in a continuous transition from one new state to another as it produces these states out of itself in unceasing succession....Thus every simple element of the monad contains its own past and is pregnant with its future....Every monad is a true entelechy; each strives to develop and improve its being’. Within Leibniz’s own philosophical system each monad was self-contained and ‘windowless’, but each had been programmed by the supreme monad, God, to form the perfect whole.4

Leibniz’s reputation, rather damaged by Voltaire’s satirising him as Dr Pangloss, enjoyed a substantial revival during the twentieth century. Bertrand Russell spoke of him as ‘one of the supreme intellects of all time’ and the monad as ‘still useful’ in ‘suggesting possible ways of viewing perception’.5 The much changed perceptions of the physical world which came about
early in the century, in effect reducing matter to energy, made a fresh exploration of ‘possible ways’ an imperative. Metaphysics, looking over its shoulder at physics, so to speak, could, as R.G. Collingwood noted, ‘well compare the electron of modern physics with the Leibnitian [sic] monad’. When Collingwood was writing, in the mid-century, the electron, which ‘simply is what it does’, was commonly taken as the physical unit from which everything else derived. That is no longer so, but the conceptualising of still smaller units, down to the possibility of an irreducible elementary particle, does not invalidate comparison of whatever may be the ultimate small unit with the concept of the monad. Recent developments have also prompted the suggestion that the concept of the monad represented a philosophic prefiguring of a proto-DNA molecule.

These parallels are not important to pursue further. More to the point in considering the relationship of Lewis with the monad is that the monad served Leibniz with an approximate mathematical model for ‘life’, and can be interpreted as an early formulation of a type of symbolic logic. Hence naming his ‘visually logical beings’ monads did not move Lewis so far away from the original Leibnizian purpose as the underlying, immaterial, non-visual metaphysics may seem to suggest.

A stepping-stone between Leibniz’s philosophy and Lewis’s transmutation of the monad into ‘visually logical beings’ can be found in Lewis’s 1927 book *Time and Western Man*, where he shares Russell’s high regard for Leibniz by finding ‘no great European philosopher of the modern age more worthy of admiration’. He criticises Leibniz’s ‘dogmatic theology’ in treating God as the supreme monad, but finds the concept of the monad ‘a marvellous, though imperfectly conceived...intuition of genius’. Later he quotes the views of the nineteenth-century philosopher Hermann Lotze (1817-1881), who disputed whether Leibniz’s monads could properly be seen as ‘windowless’, as he believed they could—within the metaphysical system that contained them—equally well have ‘windows through which their inner states were communicated to each other’. Lewis, significantly for his own philosophy, expressed a preference for the concept of windowlessness as providing a better base for ensuring ‘a clearly-cut, individually-defined universe...at the other extreme to the impressionistic disorder of contemporary psychology’.

Against that superficially complex but basically simple background we can attempt to track the transfiguration by Lewis of the monad into the form of symbolic logic he sought to inject into his pictorial art and relate its psychic form to the condition of inactivity, of immovable existence, the kind of perfection ‘close to death’ that defined Lewis’s underlying valuation of the painter’s art.

In his 1922 essay on ‘The Credentials of the Painter’, Lewis reasoned that ‘the painter participates more in life itself in one way than any other artist; but in another sense he is the most removed from it’. He observes that Keats’ ‘Happy melodist unwearied, Forever piping songs forever new’ is ‘only so happy because his pipe is soundless and because he has sacrificed the whole of his existence for the frigid moment of a sort of immortality’ which is the painter’s immortality; ‘a sort of death and silence in the middle of life. This death-like rigidity of the painting or statue, when a living being is represented, this silence and repose, is one of the assets of the painter or sculptor’.

In his 1925 essay ‘The Dithyrambic Spectator’, Lewis carries the argument further, suggesting that ‘in dynastic Egypt’ art ‘comes nearer to being’ life ‘than at any other recorded period: and apparently for the reason that it was “death”...The “living death” that is represented by egyptian culture is the very atmosphere for the sculptor and painter to thrive in’. They thrived because the ‘conditions particularly favourable to artistic expression’ in Egypt lay ‘in the nature of the “truth” required. It had its chance of perfection because it was working for
“the other world”10 And the truth demanded by Egyptian iconography for the other world was put to a decisive test when the heart of the dead man was ceremonially weighed in the balance and recorded by the god Thoth, against the feather of justice and truth, with the Great Devourer, seated nearby, ready to consume those that failed the test.

Other cultures—ancient Greek and Mesoamerican for example—evidence an art closely linked to death, but the Egyptian provides instance enough. ‘The single unifying theme which is invariably found in Egyptian art’, Richard Wilkinson records, ‘is its symbolic message’, and much of this symbolic message ‘has to do with the theme of life after death’. In this context many of Lewis’s perspicacious writings of the 1920s, the ideas behind his treatment of ‘death and the monad’ among them, were to be rearticulated forty or fifty years later by distinguished successors. Thus Peter Gay in his Cooper Union lectures of 1974, later published as Art and Act:

One quality that differentiates art from nature, little commented on but still uncanny, is that art has always enjoyed a factitious immortality. Before the advent of modernism, symbols and signs were common cultural property; everyone knew the meaning of a crucifix, remembered the attributes of saints, took pleasure in a landscape and found humor in a tavern scene. Yet even in those days art constituted a moment of frozen history, insolently refusing to age while generations who had stood before the same painting had grown old and disappeared from the world. Chardin’s loaves, unlike the bread of every day, would never become stale;...Boucher’s Venuses, defying the laws of nature, would never develop wrinkles.

Equally notably, Sir Ernst Gombrich’s much praised and much republished Art and Illusion, first issued in 1960, quotes the same passage as Lewis from Keats’ ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ in contrasting ‘the changeless realm of art and the irretrievable evanescence of human life’. He continues: ‘For the Egyptian, the newly discovered eternity of art may well have held out a promise that its power to arrest and to preserve in lucid images might be used to conquer this evanescence...for the “watcher” who could here see both his past and his eternal future removed from the flux of time’.11

Although the paintings specifically mentioned by Lewis in 1956 as representative of his ‘monads’ date from the 1930s, that reflects the fact that, preoccupied by his writing activities, he had produced very few large-scale paintings during the preceding decade. His Tyro paintings, dating from the early 1920s, he described at the time as ‘philosophic generalizations’ and, to that extent may be taken to represent an earlier attempt to present something akin to a ‘race of visually logical beings’. Of his portraiture of that time, he said ‘A sort of immortality descends upon these objects. It is an immortality, which in the case of painting, they have to pay for with death, or at least with its coldness and immobility’.12

This philosophic groundwork to Lewis’s visual art goes back to his early career. Some of it he learned from T.E. Hulme before the First World War, when Hulme commended the art of ancient Egypt (along with Babylonian and other geometrically-influenced art) as a starting point for a new twentieth-century aesthetic. The ‘stiff and lifeless’ art of Egypt he saw as an example of the need for a geometrical art to ‘attempt to purify’ natural objects of their ‘characteristically living qualities in order to make them necessary and immovable’, with ‘rigid lines and dead crystalline forms’.13

From the same immediate pre-war period came Ezra Pound’s adaptation of the idea of the vortex to describe Lewis’s (and the other Vorticists’) art of that time, and it is not too difficult to trace some part of Lewis’s later interest in monads back to the ideas behind Pound’s use of the vortex, which appears to have had several antecedents. One came from Descartes, but Pound’s vortices—‘radiant nodes or clusters’—are not functionally Cartesian. Another, more significant for Pound’s purposes, originated in the work of the nineteenth-century German scientist Hermann von Helmholtz (1821-1894). That there was a conscious link was demonstrated by Pound’s
contributions to the *Egoist* magazine in 1914 under the pseudonym Bastien von Helmholtz.¹⁴

The authentic Helmholtz had presented vortices as ‘incompressible frictionless fluid rotatory movements...always composed of the same particles....They may jostle against each other and undergo changes of form, but...have the indestructability which is believed to belong to the ultimate constituents of matter’.¹⁵ The resemblance of such a vortex to a Leibnizian monad hardly needs spelling out, and it may well be that Pound’s espousal of the concept of the vortex in 1914 (to some degree as a label of convenience) had less significance for Lewis’s art of that time than it did towards the later development of his ideas.

That those ideas contained an element of symbolic logic also becomes apparent. Several books on symbolic logic appeared in various languages towards the end of the nineteenth century, the best known in English by the author of Alice’s adventures, Lewis Carroll. Ernst Cassirer cited Heinrich Hertz’s *Der Prinzipien der Mechanik* of 1894 as having ‘brilliantly formulated’ the ‘new ideal of knowledge’, that is its symbolic character. Hertz (1857-1894), who had been a pupil of Helmholtz, argued that pure mechanics consisted of ‘images’ (or systems of equations) that accorded with the facts only to the extent that they enabled the necessary predictions to be made and, provided they achieved that end, one ‘image’ was as good as another (though one might be preferable as being simpler or more precise).¹⁶

By the first decade of the twentieth century a substantial literature about ‘symbolic logic’ existed and was to exercise a major influence on mainstream European philosophy for the next thirty or forty years, as a kind of symbolic cognition which, as Cassirer put it, ‘like algebra and arithmetic, governs almost all the rest of knowledge’.¹⁷ But problems arose from the variable uses of the word ‘symbolic’, and these usages tended to congregate in two camps, one adhering to the ‘logical symbol’ of mathematics and a formalised linguistics, and the other to the ‘aesthetic symbol’ of the arts, of liturgy and (where the constraints of dogma allowed) theology. Both had snags. ‘Logical symbols’ needed a pre-existing ‘natural’ language to say what their constructed signs signified. ‘Aesthetic symbols’ could degenerate. The poet Saint-Pol-Roux spoke of the ‘common device of a symbol comprehensible to mediocre minds’. In those circumstances the kind of ‘ideographic symbolism’ of Lewis’s monads can be seen to have a substantial merit by providing simultaneously high levels of both a propositional logic embedded in the intentional art-object and the aesthetic message also embedded there.

Northrop Frye has argued that ‘no structure of imagery can be restricted to one allegorical interpretation’ and, in a somewhat discursive exposition, that analogically ‘the symbol is a monad, all symbols being united in a single infinite and eternal symbol which is...total creative act’. Susanne Langer elaborates a similar point:

> In discourse, meaning is synthetically construed by a succession of intuitions; but in art the complex whole is seen or anticipated first. This creates a real epistemological impasse: artistic import, unlike verbal meaning, can only be exhibited, not demonstrated to any one to whom the art symbol is not lucid.¹⁸

For Roman Ingarden the work of art is empirically ‘always manifested to an observer in some concretion’ but ‘the joint product of artist and observer’ depends on the competence of the observer as also upon the empirical nature of his observation and the particular conditions in which it takes place’. In art ‘the presented objects, in which a metaphysical quality is concretized and through which it is revealed, come into prominence exactly because we intuit the metaphysical quality through them’.¹⁹

The most self-consciously ‘metaphysical’ of major modern artists, Giorgio de Chirico, put forward the aesthetic case for the *pittura metafisica* he and a few others (notably Carlo Carrà) produced at that time, in an article published in the April-July 1919 number of the journal *Valori Plastici*. Into the ‘absolute consciousness of the space that an object in a painting must occupy,
and the awareness of the space that divides objects', he found a kind of 'metaphysical geometry' often embodying symbols 'of a superior reality'. Later the art historian Werner Haftmann identified the characteristics of pittura metafisica as a treatment of perspective where motionless things cannot tolerate the presence of living beings with their disorderly movements. Living creatures belong to another world, a world of motion and changing interpretations, not to the silent, lofty world of immovable existence...populated by beings of a different kind—articulated puppets, statues, figurative trophies...'.

Other artists, contemporaries of Lewis and of de Chirico, who populated their pictorial world with 'beings of a different kind' included Oskar Schlemmer (1888-1943) and Amédée Ozenfant (1886-1966). Regarding Schlemmer, Wieland Schmid spoke of a 'typology of forms which can be occupied, vacated and then reoccupied, an allegory of earthly immortality'. Ozenfant, Haftmann relates, 'developed his precise, cool constructions from the pure objective forms of his standardised things', which did not exclude figurative elements.

These parallels among continental contemporaries of Lewis—none of them exact or having a comparable 'monology' behind them, but with important similarities—heighten the isolation of Lewis's art in Britain in the 1930s, when the only comparable work may be found in that of a younger contemporary, Merlyn Evans, of whose imagery Bryan Robertson said that it was hard to write directly 'because what he creates is the image behind or beyond words...hardly representational but it is often figurative, in different ways, and frequently symbolic', with 'often a philosophical measure behind the abstraction...as much as an aesthetic compulsion'. Here, too, one can see an artist seeking to occupy the terra incognita between the 'logical symbol' and the 'aesthetic symbol'.

To explore that terra it would be pleasant to visit an exhibition that assembled on its walls half a dozen suitably representative works each of Lewis, de Chirico, Schlemmer, Ozenfant—supplemented perhaps by Léger—and Evans, accompanied by some ancient Egyptian and Mesoamerican art to provide a broader historical context. Until then we must content ourselves with a musée imaginaire.

NOTES
2. Ibid pp. 146-7. Stokes’ stylistic analysis (as late as the 1930s) of Agostino’s relief sculptures in the Malatesta Tempio as vortices, so that even ‘where no vortex appears in the middle of a relief, the idea of it yet lingers’, tells of Pound’s critical influence at that time. See Stokes, The Image in Form (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 181.
7. Wyndham Lewis, Time and Western Man, ed. Paul Edwards (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1993) pp. 290, 305. The main imperfection Lewis found in Leibniz’s system appears to be that identified by Ruth Saw in her study of the German philosopher: ‘Leibniz never put together his view of the simple substances mirroring one another, and his view of their
possession of properties. If he had, he would have seen that the notion of simple properties, all of them mutually compatible, will not do when we think of them belonging to unique individuals who together form a series. He has, however, made a positive contribution to our thinking about individuality; if we try to define the concept, we shall have to take account of the difficulties disclosed by a study of Leibniz's Monads.' See Ruth Saw, *Leibniz* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954), p. 232. Lewis's near-contemporary, the poet Wallace Stevens, discussing Leibniz's monads, spoke of them as 'the disappointing production of a poet *manqué*': 'Leibniz had a poet's manner of thinking but there was something a little too methodical about it...Leibniz, to sum it up, was a man who thought like a poet but did not write like one', so that his monadology 'instead of standing as one of the world's revelations looks like a curious machine, several centuries old'. See Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, rpt. in Herbert R. Kohl, *The Age of Complexity* (1965; New York: Greenwood Press, 1977), pp. 254-55. George Steiner, from a different position, comes to a not dissimilar conclusion: that Leibniz was 'profoundly interested in the possibilities of a universal semantic system...grounded in the very architecture of human reason', even though 'we think and feel as our particular language impels and allows us to do' with its own 'particular sight-lines and habits of cognition'. Thus 'almost infinite particulars' provide 'both the syntactic and lexical corpus of different languages', and constitute a need to 'think like a poet' to offset a 'falsely reductionist' universal logic of language. See George Steiner, *After Babel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 74-76. Lewis, it is abundantly clear, could 'think like a poet', though his 'poetry' more usually took the form of a visual representation. Pound contended that Fenollosa's *Essay on the Chinese Written Character* told 'how and why a language written in this way', i.e. as an ideogram, 'had to stay poetic' (*ABC of Reading*, London: Faber, 1973), p. 22.


10. *Wyndham Lewis on Art*, p. 239.


16. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 75. This argument extends also to the choice of one kind of scientific (or for that matter, aesthetic) theory over another. It is not a question of one being (verifiably) true and the other false, but of one being the 'best fit' in relation to the circumstances to which the theory relates, and if it ceases to be the 'best fit', it will be replaced by another. The parameters of a 'good fit' may also change.
17. Cassirer, p. 131. In addition to symbolic logic, ‘Freudian symbolism’ became a lively issue early in the twentieth century, less for its possibly therapeutic uses than its more popular interest, including its widespread application (or misapplication) to linguistics and to the arts, a development from which Lewis stood well aloof. Among the more extensive claims advanced in the 1920s, the psychoanalyst Otto Rank suggested that ‘the real world itself, created by man, has proved to be a chain of symbol formations, uninterruptedly renewed, which must represent not merely a substitute for the lost primal reality which they copy as faithfully as possible, but at the same time must remind us as little as possible of the primal trauma connected with it’. See Otto Rank, The Trauma of Birth (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 100. In his later study of the relationship between psychoanalysis and art, the art-historian Arnold Hauser concluded that by ‘postulating a ubiquity of symbolic forms, psychoanalysis restricts its attention to a few primitive examples and neglects the fact that new symbols are incessantly being created’. See Arnold Hauser, The Philosophy of Art History (London: Routledge, 1959), pp. 105-6. For Jack Spector in the 1970s the ‘persistent trend within psychoanalysis (not only among mystical Jungians) to deny the private and personal role of symbols seems to point towards a rapprochement with the universal symbols of some writers and critics. But...this attempt to discover constant and universal symbols has so far failed and perhaps never will succeed’. See Jack J. Spector, The Aesthetics of Freud (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1972), p. 96.

18. Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 120-22. Suzanne K. Langer, Feeling and Form (1953; London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 379. All art is symbolic in the sense that it presents the viewer with a visible ‘something’ to interpret but, as Edwyn Bevan points out, religious (and aesthetic) symbols fall into two distinct, but not wholly separable, classes: those ‘behind which we can see’ and those ‘behind which we cannot see’. In the former class we can see how the symbol is ‘only’ a symbol, and in the other ‘we cannot have any discernment of the reality better and truer than the symbolical idea’. See Edwyn Bevan, Symbolism and Belief (London: Fontana, 1963), pp. 227-28. In a different context C.J. Ducasse has observed: ‘The symbolizing of aesthetic feelings by aesthetic objects is not ultimately arbitrary and conventional, as is the symbolizing of meanings by words....[The] aesthetic object is the natural, immediate and unique symbol of the feeling’. See C.J. Ducasse, The Philosophy of Art (New York: Dover, 1966), pp. 178-80.


