Bad Co-ordination: A Mistaken Discussion of Lewis and Heidegger

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Introduction
The substitution of denunciation for criticism, and of reference and deference for reading, is a trend in academic publishing on Lewis which has been responded to with force, clarity and humour in recent editions of the Annual. An essay on Heidegger and The Revenge for Love by Brett Neilson, which appeared in a 1999 number of Comparative Literature, is evidence of the persistence of that trend. I shall here try to respond to it in the manner which it deserves, as an example of academically-sanctioned intellectual indiscipline masquerading as research. This will require the indication of errors without the promise of progress; for one is confronted here with thinking in chaos: circularity, provisionality, desultoriness and enthusiastic orthodoxy are among its many bad elements.

Doxa
Neilson’s preliminary attitude to his object is also a final judgement. Here is his first sentence: ‘Despite subsequent shifts in both his political and aesthetic beliefs, the literary reputation of Wyndham Lewis was irreparably damaged by a series of pro-Nazi pamphlets he wrote during the 1930s.’ This is a conclusion, not an opening. Does it leave the essay anywhere to go?

Neilson then remarks that although The Revenge for Love is ‘the most lauded of [Lewis’s] literary works’ and that its admirers have thought that it transcends politics, ‘careful reading of this text provides a means for reassessing fascism’s centrality to the aesthetic dimension of modernism’. His paper will, therefore, reconsider ‘the relations among narrative form, aesthetics, and ideology’. And specifically he will ‘compare Lewis’s narrative strategies to the early Heidegger’s temporalization of ontology to demonstrate that the political meaning of The Revenge for Love lies in the mythic dimension of its temporal structure’. (24) The ‘careful’ reader of the essay will be noticing already the tone of pretension (‘the early Heidegger’), and the circularity in Neilson’s thinking. That opening sentence passes as a piece of ‘literary history’, such as one might find in a guide of some sort; it is the mere citing of a verdict; it is rather journalistic; perhaps it is even about to be challenged. Yet the following remarks promise its confirmation—not, however, on the level of exoteric literary history (what ‘everyone knows’ about Lewis), but on the esoteric level of transdisciplinary academic discourse and ideological vigilance. Neilson, however, would have no object to study at all had he not heard the gossip of literary history; this gets him going, but is passed off as a mere aspect of the climate of the land in which serious work is undertaken. He has depended on opinion to start his essay, while promising to undertake a scientific study of his object.

What sort of thinking is likely to develop from such beginnings? The sort that is blown around by hearsay, without settling in knowledge.

Coincidence and co-ordination
The spurious hardness of much thinking in literary studies over the past twenty years or so is epitomised in the use of the frightening verb ‘interrogate’. That word having been absorbed into practice (at no evident cost to the historical conscience of junior lecturers and middle-aged professors), research now assumes an attitude of interrogation towards its object. In Neilson’s essay, this attitude manifests itself as follows. Let us say Neilson wants to bring in for interrogation a novel on suspicion of its incriminating relationship with a serious controversy.
How to establish such a relationship? He begins by writing ‘My decision to read Lewis’s novel in the context of the Heidegger controversy is not fortuitous. For a start, there are historical coincidences that link the careers of these thinkers [italics mine].’ (24) That which is not fortuitous is not coincidental either—as these words are usually understood. But the pursuit of knowledge is never fortuitous anyway (though that adjective may apply to discoveries), yet it would seldom admit as its basis mere ‘coincidences’. So why are coincidences mentioned at all?

One thing which is revealed by this is Neilson’s superstitiousness. Like an atheist who mutters prayers just to be on the safe side, he has trouble keeping his thinking above the level of fatal significance. Another is his assumption that regardless of the quality of the evidence produced, his case is at any given point already made, because he and a great many of his readers are ideologically attuned: this is the condition of their community. Thus, he has merely to mention what they expect to hear in order to sustain a mood of suspicious hostility. There is an analogue for this manner of arraignment which Neilson, given his topic, is sure to be aware of. It rests in the Nazi refinement of natural justice called gesundes Volksempfinden (‘sound national feeling’), which is attuned to the feelings of the community (no matter how subjectively defined) over the rights of the arraigned individual—to the extent that those rights virtually disappear. I feel entitled to indicate this only, but wholly, because Neilson himself is scrupulous about ‘replicating at the level of literary analysis’ that which is ‘constitutive of fascist ideology’. (37) Not scrupulous enough.

Some vague talk of political coincidences in the respective careers of an independent artist and an institutional academic ensues, until Neilson becomes aware of a lack of point and retracts what he previously advanced as significant. Such retraction is a characteristic of the essay. Its effect is confusing, and bathetic: ‘There is, of course, no evidence that Lewis had read the works of Heidegger or that these thinkers [italics mine] were even aware of each other. [...] I suggest neither a relation of direct influence nor a coincidental convergence of ideas.’ (25)

As one attempts to recover from this, one should not overlook its implicit contempt for evidence from a primary source. Consider the following: ‘When in the late ’twenties and ’thirties I attacked the type of thinking of which Heidegger is, as I have observed, so fine a specimen, it was because I was momentarily dismayed at the prospect of the imminent collapse of the culture of the West.’ That is Lewis’s own statement about the relationship between Heidegger’s thinking and his own, and Neilson had a scholarly duty to cite it. Either ignorance, or sophistication and prejudice prevented him from doing so. If he has not read The
"Writer and the Absolute," he ought to have: it contains thirteen references to Heidegger, whom Lewis seems to have been reading about in *Les Temps Modernes* in the late 1940s. If, however, Neilson has read *The Writer and the Absolute,* he is evidently a) so prejudiced as to discount anything Lewis says which runs counter to his suspicions, and b) so sophisticated as to think that a ‘theorized’ relationship is more important than one actually attested to. How he goes about theorizing a relationship between Lewis and Heidegger, I shall now try to demonstrate.

His opening deserves to stand alone: ‘The relation between *The Revenge for Love* and *Being and Time* is best understood in the more general context of Nazi intellectual speculation.’ (26)

And thus, we begin to see a reason for Neilson’s peculiar designation of Lewis as a ‘thinker’. It has been to assist him in the co-ordination of Lewis with Heidegger ‘in the more general context of Nazi intellectual speculation’—as opposed to a ‘less’ general or merely ‘general’ context in which there would be no ideological comparison to make. *The Revenge for Love* is going to be taken as Lewis’s *thinking.* To allow it to be primarily a novel would release it from the context of investigation. Now and then, Neilson remembers that it is a novel and sends himself a memo about ‘different discursive fields’ (e.g. 26); then he forgets again. So, since Neilson is scrupulous about ‘replicating at the level of literary analysis’ that which is ‘constitutive of fascist ideology’, let us call what he is doing here an act of interpretative *Gleichschaltung* (forcible ‘co-ordination’ or ‘streamlining’).5

Neilson’s authority in the method of comparison is Pierre Bourdieu, and the method itself is that of ‘common schemata’, which Bourdieu has used to compare Heidegger with other writers from different genres, such as Oswald Spengler and Ernst Jünger, who nevertheless fall into the ‘revolutionary conservative’ category. The method of identification by ‘common schemata’ acknowledges both similarity and difference between works of different kinds, within the general context of a shared political vision. Since, however, one may still be thinking that a shared political vision is precisely the matter in question where Lewis and Heidegger are concerned, one may here object to the circularity in Neilson’s argument—and object strongly to the impudence with which he justifies it. For he admits (if that is the word) that he could ‘doubtless’ have compared Lewis with ‘other thinkers beside Heidegger who mobilize these schemata’; but that he chose to specify Heidegger because of recent debates about Heidegger’s Nazism. (26)

Here is the accusation which the co-ordination of Lewis with Heidegger enables Neilson to make: 1) destiny and historicality are common schemata of Nazi thought; 2) they appear as concepts in Heidegger; 3) they appear in *The Revenge for Love*—‘under a different guise’. (26) One could think of many other books in which they appear too, and under many a ‘different guise’. But perhaps Neilson plans to burn many other books, in many more essays.

**Neilson’s invasion of Foshay’s reading of Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche**

Since ‘historicality’ and ‘destiny’ do not show up as ‘concepts’ in *The Revenge for Love,* they have to be imputed to the narrative ‘system’. This elevation of system over theme shows how Neilson is dogged by Fredric Jameson, whom he is trying to outdo in this essay (27-28), and whose first name he misspells (perhaps as a way of destroying Jameson’s influence). In Neilson’s hands, the narrative ‘system’ of *The Revenge for Love* is an *ad hoc* provision for the containment of two of the lightest elements in the ideological table. It is a bag of gas.

Of the narrative system of Lewis’s novel, Neilson offers two observations: ‘[It] both disrupts the sequential unfolding of time and raises questions of an existential-ontological nature’. (27)

The first observation is exaggerated, and dishonest; and Neilson knows it, for a page before, he has written: ‘*The Revenge for Love* conforms loosely to the kind of narrative
patterning that Joseph Frank calls "spatial form". So 'loosely', indeed, that it just doesn't conform to Frank's description. But the point of this dishonest claim is to make Lewis's novel sound as if its structure is anti-progressive. This enables Neilson to talk about a reactionary attitude towards time, and a narrative 'scheme' which 'buys into the "Nazi myth" of the German people as a racial-spiritual whole'. (30) I shall have more to say about this in my final section.

The second observation (about existential questions) relates to the 'false-bottoms' motif in the novel. Interpreting this in terms of the narrative system enables Neilson to talk about nihilism and ontology in terms of the 'schemata', historicity and destiny. In doing so, he hopes to confute those of Lewis's critics who think that only those characters who turn their backs on politics 'achieve genuine self-recognition'. (27) Nihilism is not beyond politics. Nothing is beyond politics.

Neilson's conduct of the ensuing argument is so desultory, ignorant, provisional and manipulative that following it is like watching a magician who tries to hide his lack of skill by the fanatical energy of his conjurations. To give some impression of his method, I shall attempt to explain how he abuses Nietzsche's concept ressentiment (which he insists on calling a 'trope', and which he wrongly thinks means 'revenge').

With the incantation, 'My starting point here', Neilson begins to cite Toby Foshay's book, Wyndham Lewis and the Avant-Garde. Foshay, he tells us, analyses the 'ontological implications' of the 'narrative system of "false-bottoms"', in terms of 'Heidegger's understanding of ressentiment as the central category of Nietzsche's philosophy'. Foshay 'follows Heidegger in the lectures on Nietzsche' by interpreting ressentiment in metaphysical (as opposed to ethical or moral) terms, as an attitude related to Being. Foshay 'recalls a line' in Zarathustra 'in which Nietzsche characterizes ressentiment as an antipathy towards time'. And Foshay 'invokes' an argument of Heidegger's from Being and Time about time's transitoriness upsetting the 'ontological status of Being as present to itself'. 'This means he [Foshay] can read The Revenge for Love as an exploration of ressentiment'. 'It is worth working through Foshay's argument methodically,' Neilson tells us, 'since it encompasses some difficult philosophical material'. (30)

Once one has oneself worked through Foshay's argument methodically, one realizes that what Neilson means by 'method' is in fact violent but not purposeless confusion. In Foshay's book, there is indeed a substantial discussion of ressentiment. (94-107) This has its merits; but it uncritically depends on Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche, instead of going to the primary source, which is Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality. Neilson does not read the primary source either; nor has he put himself to the trouble of reading Heidegger's published lectures on Nietzsche—he merely refers to them with an air of familiarity (which is another of his tricks). All he wants, he gets from Foshay's book, which satisfies, more or less, his crude desire for a metaphysical bridge between Lewis and Heidegger, over which he can conduct the forces of his political enthusiasm. The price of his satisfaction, however, is the deception of his reader.

As proof of this, let us consider again the phrase 'Heidegger's understanding of ressentiment as the central category of Nietzsche's philosophy'.

Foshay's book in fact makes no such claim about Heidegger's understanding of ressentiment. This is because Heidegger does not understand ressentiment thus. He regards 'Eternal Recurrence' and 'Will to Power' as the two forms of Nietzsche's fundamental thought. What Foshay does write is that ressentiment 'is a central concern of Nietzsche's philosophy'. (96) This is unexceptionable. Foshay also cites a statement of Fredric Jameson, that ressentiment 'is the fundamental conceptual category of all late-nineteenth and early twentieth century counterrevolutionary literature'. (97-98) Neilson appears to have conflated these statements, and
in the process attributed to Heidegger remarks made by Foshay and Jameson. The effect is an authoritative enunciation of an untruth.

It should hardly be necessary to state that this matters; yet to the referees of Neilson’s article, or to the editor of Comparative Literature, it just did not matter, nor was it checked. So, let us merely state here that Neilson does invasive, collateral harm to Nietzsche, and to Heidegger, and to Foshay, in his vengeful pursuit of Lewis. This is not because he ‘misreads’ in any ‘strong’ or interesting sense; it is because he does not read: he merely negotiates his way among authorities according to expediency. His attitude to authority, to its application, its borrowing and its betrayal, is the essence of his work; and it is a certificate of his orthodoxy. It is quite chilling to hear Foshay, his usefulness exhausted, eventually denounced for failing ‘to register the novel’s anti-Semitism or complicity with official Nazi positions’. (31) Is Neilson an academic—or a party member?

But his attitude to authority is also a current sign of scientism in arts research: one merely keeps abreast with the latest work, in sophisticated ignorance of what some American academics now talk of with disdain as the ‘archives’.

If Victor Stamp is Germany

Yet Neilson’s eventual attempt to offer a reading of Lewis’s novel itself is anything but scientific. It is based in superstition, not experimentation, in the drastic narrowing of contextual possibilities and significance.

For example, he quotes a joke uttered by Victor Stamp’s pal, Tristram, after Victor has wrecked the Van Gogh self-portrait on which he was working in the forgers’ den run by Freddie Salmon, and walked out:

‘Victor, I think, suffers from an inferiority-complex.’

‘I must say I haven’t noticed it!’ burst out Freddie.

‘Oh, yes. Victor is very like Germany!’ Tristy smiled at himself at his simile. To Neilson, this joke is a great opportunity, because it mentions the word ‘Germany’. But in order for him to capitalize on it, a retraction of his essay’s own past will be necessary; for the joke has been given no place in the narrative system. Accordingly, Neilson resorts to paraleipsis: he declares that the joke is ‘insufficient’ for him to start talking about ‘national allegory’—and thereby introduces that term. (33) Quite suddenly, with revolutionary dynamism one might say, allegory has superseded the narrative system: ‘The political meaning of The Revenge for Love thus lies less in the formal qualities of its narrative system than in the allegorical cues it provides to the mythical significance of its spatio-temporal operations.’ (39)

I shall now try to explain Neilson’s interpretation of the joke.

If Victor Stamp is Germany (pause), then we can no longer interpret the novel as a confrontation between the authentic individual and hollow political discourses; rather, ‘Tristram encourages us to interpret the Stamp’s escape attempt as a reflection on Germany’s historical fate’, and as an allegory of Germany’s ‘collective destiny’. (33) Encouraged by Tristram, Neilson continues: ‘Moreover, I believe that this nationalist overcoding of Victor’s flight can best be explained as a version of the Heideggerian idea of “destiny”. And in order to “believe” this, he has also to believe that Lewis, like Heidegger, conceives authentic existence in terms of “being-towards-death”.

In the next two pages, Neilson cites a number of key words and phrases from Being and Time and a couple of page references. The citations outnumber the page references. This is meant to signify that we are ascending from the level of what ‘everyone knows’ about Heidegger (thus, no need to specify pages), to the level of ideological vigilance, by way of Neilson’s latest
authorities (Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Peter Osborne). It also implies (without, perhaps, meaning to) that Neilson’s own reading of Heidegger has been pretty unreflective, and mainly a matter of reading about and following up references. And what Neilson has been reading about Being and Time is that it is in the development of the concept ‘destiny’ alongside that of ‘heritage’ and ‘repetition’ that ontology becomes politicized in Heidegger, his thought consequently ‘susceptible to Nazism’. (34)

At this point, the reader who is of a mind to scrutinize the argument, rather than accept it, is obliged to begin by consulting Being and Time, Sections 72-74.11 Here, Heidegger is concerned with Dasein as connectedness in time as opposed to Dasein in its moment of resolute choice in anticipation of death (the theme of earlier sections), and asks if consideration of the former might lead to a ‘more primordial’ understanding of Dasein. (424) Since connectedness in time is the element of Dasein which Heidegger calls its historizing, this leads to a discussion of ‘anticipatory resoluteness’ and authenticity under that aspect of history called ‘heritage’. (435) Heidegger talks of heritage as the source of possibilities of Dasein’s resoluteness; he but he also states quite emphatically that Dasein does not regard its choice of its ‘ownmost distinctive possibility’ as that which has merely come down to it (from a national museum of heroism, so to speak; 435): Dasein chooses itself from what it has been given (I find it helpful to think here of Nietzsche’s phrase ‘How one becomes what one is’12). Heidegger also uses in an idiosyncratic sense a word which has been translated as ‘repeat’ (wiederholen) to explain how Dasein comes upon these possibilities. (437-39) Furthermore, a distinction appears to be made between Dasein as it alone resolutely answers to itself for its fate (Schicksal), and Dasein as it ‘exists essentially in Being-with-Others’, sharing in a collective ‘destiny’ (Geschick). (436) The inconclusiveness of the discussion is itself raised in the last paragraphs of Section 74, in which Heidegger admits that he has failed to establish so far a relationship between Dasein as connectedness in time and Dasein in its moment of authentic resoluteness. In the following section (75), Heidegger returns to the problem of how the moment of resoluteness might link Dasein’s past and future; this, not the concept of destiny and the collective, is evidently absorbing his attention; and in Section 76, ‘destiny’ is mentioned just once, and in passing.

Thus, Neilson’s assertion that ‘[Destiny] connects authentic selfhood...to the actualization of a historically given collectivity’ (33-34), represents here a rushing towards a judgement which the essay has not earned through open reflection on its primary material. Where the assertion arises from is a project which is ethically important (though perhaps philosophically intractable) insofar as it has been pursued by others (Neilson’s authorities among them): this is the task of establishing the philosophical continuity of Being and Time with Heidegger’s disgusting professional and institutional conduct of 1933-34. But Neilson merely arrogates the arguments for continuity in pursuit of a simile uttered in a dialogic situation by a character in a novel who happens to be a communist, ‘whose face confessed to his childish pleasure at having the formula for Victor Stamp’. (Revenge, 273) It is pleasant to think that Lewis laid this joke up to provoke the childish pleasure of a certain type of academic over half a century later. It is not pleasant to see that it leads Neilson to nothing less than the violent co-ordination of Lewis’s novel with Heidegger’s notorious address as Führer-Rektor of Freiburg in May 1933, from which he quotes some phrases about the ‘unyielding spiritual mission’ which ‘forces “the fate of the German people to bear the stamp of its history”’. He finds justification here in ‘a link between Stamp’s last name and his resemblance to Nazi Germany’ [sic], which ‘coincidence’, Lacoue-Labarthe suggests to him, ‘is more than accidental’—because there is an instance of Ernst Jünger using the noun ‘stamp’. (34) Enough.

It is pretty obvious that Neilson’s interpretation of Victor Stamp as a national type has all the time been hankering after an earlier failed painter, namely, the German Otto Kreisler (of the
novel *Tarr*). In Kreisler, Lewis was indeed concerned with the destructive merging of individual character with a Germanic conception of fate—one recalls the novel’s explicit references to *Schicksal*. That word, as Lewis uses it in connection with Kreisler, tends, I think, towards synonymy with the term from which Heidegger differentiates it, namely, *Geschick*: what Lewis means by *Schicksal* in *Tarr* is what Heidegger means by *Geschick* in *Being and Time*. The difference between them is that Lewis cannot be taken as the proponent of any collective conception of fate; whereas Heidegger’s own distinction between *Schicksal* and *Geschick* may be a fruitful distinction between the lonely type to which Lewis belongs and himself: the institutional type of the professor of philosophy with its habits of terrible complicity. One might recall here the lonely game which Victor Stamp plays with fate, on the day he manages his only good painting. (88-90) Stamp, unlike Kreisler, is not also a failed *personality*.

**Conclusion**

Neilson’s interpretation flouts violently the heterogeneity of Victor Stamp. Stamp is a pleasantly caricatured Australian with a face somewhere between that of Clark Gable and a camel, a resemblance to Germany and an aversion to the ‘hysterical North’ and its ‘beastly blond’. (250) It is only in the context of a dream of denunciation, and in emulation of Fredric Jameson, that Neilson can specify his Germanness as the mythical essence of his character.

Eventually, Nielson wakes from his dream so embarrassed that he *denounces his own interpretation*:

If, as I suggested earlier, the ‘analogy’ between Victor Stamp and Nazi Germany is more than fortuitous, then the ‘fatality’ of his death can be compared with the ‘destiny’ that Heidegger finds to ‘stamp’ the history of the German ‘people’. There is of course no absolute coincidence between the two writers’ views on ‘destiny’ and ‘historicality.’ Lewis does not understand Victor’s death as an authentic moment of decision, nor does he emphasize the ‘being-with-others’ that for Heidegger manifests itself as national belonging. *The Revenge for Love* likewise positions itself in a discursive field different from that of *Being and Time*, thus avoiding the purely philosophical articulation of Heidegger’s work. Nonetheless, both texts mobilize a set of common schemata, which—despite assuming different functions in each—produce similar ideological meanings. Most crucial among these schemata is the belief that death is the horizon of life [and] seals the individual’s fate into a collective national destiny. (36)

Superb. Lewis had nothing to do with Heidegger after all: that is what Neilson’s ironic quotation of his own key words, the devout taking leave of ‘coincidence’, the retraction of philosophical affinities, the bureaucratic reminder that *The Revenge for Love* is a novel, and in the disappointment about the schemata and their banality—that is what they all acknowledge. There were no grounds for the comparison. Yet out of it, Neilson has produced something: a political slander. Which is to say, he has produced no more than was there already.

**NOTES**


2. Brett Neilson, ‘History’s Stamp: Wyndham Lewis’s *The Revenge for Love* and the Heidegger Controversy’, *Comparative Literature* 51, 1 (Winter 1999), 24-41. Further references are given in parentheses in the text.

4. See Wyndham Lewis, *The Writer and the Absolute* (London: Methuen, 1952), p. 133. See also Philip Head, ‘Hurry up please, it’s time’, *Wyndham Lewis Annual 1999*, 29-34, for an interesting comparison of *Time and Western Man* and *Being and Time*.


12. The subtitle of *Ecce Homo*.

13. He can’t have him, however, because Fredric Jameson got there first. See *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 89-94.