‘Light into a Dark Place’: 
Literary Criticism in Men Without Art 
Dennis Brown

I

There is a book to be written about Wyndham Lewis the literary critic. The difficulty would lie in ‘bracketing off’ what constitutes criticism itself from the vast range of Lewis’s expressed opinions – already thoroughly addressed in Paul Edwards’s Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer.¹ One method might be to start with Lewis’s trenchant stylistic critiques of, say, Gertrude Stein, Anita Loos, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner² and build up a basic ‘Taxi-cab-Driver Test’³ to indicate what Lewis valued as ‘Art’ in writing, and what he felt were flaws in literary technique. My aim here is far less ambitious: it is simply to comment progressively on the chapters of Men Without Art (1934), Lewis’s most sustained attempt at criticism itself. I do this while bearing in mind that in academic circles (as opposed to the journalistic reviewing Lewis condemned in its Bennettian form)⁴ ‘LitCrit’ has metamorphosed into a theory-haunted entity called ‘Critical Practice’. Of course, Lewis’s own criticism tends to come shot through with what we now call cultural theory. However, in Men Without Art he also promises to shine a ‘critical hand-torch upon the inside of a book or two’ and in Rude Assignment he was to define criticism as ‘the introduction of the outside light into a dark place’.⁵ I am more interested in Lewis’s critical illuminations than in his socio-political views, yet, as will be seen, they come untidily together. One tension within the book arises, in fact, because the philosophical ‘rage for order’ combines with Lewis’s acute sense of differences in literary technique.

The ‘Introduction’ proposes an essentially inductive approach: ‘I have … proceeded from the particular to the general – from the concrete to the abstract – from the personal to the theoretic’. (11) This applies to the book as a whole rather than the treatment in each essay, but it is ‘Art’, in each case, that is of most concern. Lewis is interested in ‘forms … of a permanent order’; ‘the living model’; ‘standards of taste and good sense’. His 1930s concern shares a world with that of T.S. Eliot, I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis. And it is presumably such an attitude that David Kahne had in mind when he resolved to subsidise ‘serious writing’ along the Classical lines approved in Men Without Art in 1942.⁶ Lewis notifies us of the (rather obvious) opposition – the conventional chumps who enjoy ‘mystery’ or the ‘schoolboy epic of the young English proletariat’, but his ‘not so Plain a Reader’ is expected to rise to the consideration of ‘the serious work of art’ which is a product of the ‘artistic intelligence’. In short, Lewis’s own critical practice is concerned only with contenders for lasting literary reputation. It is, then, not surprising that a one-time student of Leavis, who met Lewis, should compare the two: ‘Both were immensely intelligent, sharing the same passionate devotion to literature’.⁷ In those days, one might add, the word ‘literature’ meant something positively valuable, not an ideological construct to be ‘demystified’.⁸

The first chapter (‘The “Dumb Ox”’ – on Ernest Hemingway) commences with a compliment (‘a very considerable artist’) and a brilliant aperçu: ‘his work possesses a penetrating quality, like an animal speaking’. It is worth pausing to emphasise the importance of this insight, since it not only hits on the essence of Hemingway’s genius but also identifies a major strand in American culture – from Fenimore Cooper and Mark Twain, through films like On the Waterfront, Rocky or GoodFellas, to the bumble-rhetoric of a Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush. In the case of ‘Hem’ (as Ezra Pound called him), Lewis further qualifies this:
He is interested in the sports of death, in the sad things that happen to those engaged in the sports of love … He is in the multitudinous ranks of those to whom things happen – terrible things of course, and of course stoically borne. (19-20)

Lewis praises Hemingway’s ability to deliver narrative action (‘impressive, as the events themselves would be’), but makes the valid point that such events tend to be what has happened to the author himself – a kind of disguised ‘Life Writing’, one might now say. After repeated, if not wholly satisfactory, demonstrations that Hem has appropriated the stylistic tics of Gertrude Stein, Lewis sums up the writing as ‘poster-art … a cinema in words’.

Although Lewis strikes a personal nerve, which later helped fuel Hemingway’s vicious portrait of him in A Moveable Feast – and ‘his master has been a mistress’ did nothing to shore up Hem’s macho-pose – Lewis’s chief aim is to make the style symptomatic of a larger cultural shift (what Lewis calls ‘politics’). His points of comparison, from Prosper Mérimée’s Carmen (1845) to F. Lamb’s Forty Years in the Old Bailey, are used to contextualise Hemingway’s steining – suggesting a significant move in prose English from literacy to quasi-orality, from formal grammar to parataxis, from British particularity to American-style globalisation and from high to low culture. As so often, Lewis’s clarity of vision has to be isolated from some of the excrecent innuendo. In his conclusion, he acclaims the ‘penetrating beauty’ of the writer’s ‘bovine genius’. But he adds, in support of his larger cultural contention: ‘if we take this to be the typical art of a civilisation … then we are by the same token saying something very definite about that civilisation’. (36) Since Lewis has already identified Hem as a satirist, this is its own form of praise. What Lewis identifies as the literary ‘Hollywood’ of A Farewell to Arms has become true, also, of much ‘northern’ and ‘estuary’ British fiction.

According to Paul O’Keeffe, Hemingway first encountered Lewis’s critique in Sylvia Beach’s bookshop. His ‘face swelled and became purple’ and he demolished a vase of red tulips – leaving a copy of Mrs Dalloway wallowing in a puddle.9 Very dumb ox! Basically, Lewis understood Hem well, although he surely overemphasises his stylistic indebtedness (as he did Joyce’s ‘Alfred Jingle’ mode). Hemingway perfected a kind of action-prose, similar to that described by Robert Alter in The Art of Biblical Narrative,10 and uses it to express an instinctive will-to-survival. In this, it is appropriate to much masculine experience in the savage twentieth century. Despite his partial disclaimer in the ‘Introduction’, it is this particular trick of the ‘performer’s trade’ which Lewis calls attention to. Lewis was very much aware that writing creates a ‘sign world’11 and that – as Marshall McLuhan would later say – ‘unitone’ style constitutes a form of hypnosis. In ‘The Dumb Ox’ Lewis is an intuitive debunker of Hem’s brand of hypnotism because it denies the motivating factor of human intelligence – ‘purposeless violence, for the sake of the “kick” is pursued and recorded; ‘the rhythm is the anonymous folk-rhythm of the urban proletariat’; ‘few words and fewer ideas’. However Lewis inflected and Hem reacted to it, this identifies Hemingway as a highly relevant satirist. It also, I think, places Lewis with Lawrence and Orwell as an incisive and eloquent modern critic.

Lewis’s treatment of William Faulkner, ‘The Moralist with the Corn-Cob’, omits any complimentary opening. And his overall judgment of the writer would scarcely make a publisher’s back cover:

He is a bold and bustling romantic writer, of the ‘psychological’ school. That is the main thing to grasp about him. It is, in short … as if Joyce had never jingled: except for one little shame-faced flourish, it is as if Miss Stein had never stuttered. (48-9)

Against the grain of his earlier strictures about Joyce and Stein, Lewis is, in fact, accusing Faulkner of being behind the times. Put another way, he is seeing Faulkner in terms of a longer and wider tradition than the modern – certainly more substantial than an ‘equal measure of
Sherwood Anderson and of Powys’. The critique is apt as to Faulkner’s obsession with heredity (what Philip Roth has recently termed the ‘human stain’). Lewis also identifies the use of random chance and ‘mechanical’ plotting (as in Hardy’s novels) and, especially, the repetition-obsession with words such as ‘sourceless’ and ‘myriads’. However, the fact that he addresses Faulkner’s work (along with Hemingway’s – as opposed to, say, the Nobel Prize-winning Pearl S. Buck’s or John Steinbeck’s) shows Lewis’s sense of his centrality in contemporary American fiction. He grants Sanctuary, in particular, the status of ‘extremely good’. But his main charge is that Faulkner’s writing constitutes ‘melodramatic moralism’, and that the era of Bunyan and Balzac is over. This reads rather like a version of that ‘time-philosophy’ which Lewis tried hard to debunk in book after book.

Nevertheless, Lewis manages yet again to pack incisive insights about Faulkner’s work into less than twenty pages. He gets to the core of the novelist’s expressive sign-system, and hence his distinctive vision:

There is a lot of poetry in Faulkner .... And it has [a] ... rather comic way of occurring at a point where, apparently, he considers the atmosphere has run out ... requiring renewal, like the water in a zoological-garden tank for specimens of fish. (39)

This is clairvoyant and witty commentary. As are many other passages:

His characters demand ... an opaque atmosphere of whip-poor-wills, cicadas, lilac, "seeping" moonlight, water-oaks and jasmine. (39)

All [the figures] are demented: his novels as, strictly speaking, clinics. (42)

The Sartoris family is literally rotten with fatality. (43)

A flash, a glare – that is what Faulkner’s books are intended to be. (44)

This characterises Faulkner’s world – as it also identifies a quality in ‘Southern’ writing (Toni Morrison might be a contemporary exemplum). If scarcely balanced, such remarks illuminate an œuvre as by flashes of fork-lightning (in Faulkner’s own vein). Overall, Lewis suggests, the writer is a satirist (‘full ... of sound and fury’) and ‘a very considerable moralist’. In this, his work might be compared to that of Herman Melville: and it exemplifies a strain in Americanism where ‘Evil Empires’ may conjoin to form an ‘Axis of Evil’. Lewis sees Faulkner’s fiction in terms of both Civil War and the Great War – he also regards it as a contemporary portent:

What you are intended to see in these scenes [from Sanctuary] is undoubtedly the proliferation of a spolt, a purposeless, a common, and irresponsible bourgeois, society, awaiting, surely, if ever a society did, its coup de grâce. (52)

Lewis’s third foundational chapter is entitled ‘T. S. Eliot: The Pseudo-Believer’. In the ‘Introduction’ he had made plain that he would be criticising the critic – not the poet. Nevertheless, this does make Chapter III somewhat ‘arbitrarily’ associated with the chapters on the art of Hem and Faulkner, and an opportunity is surely lost here. For a major aspect of Eliot’s earlier poetry would have benefited from the close reading and intuitive illumination which Lewis has manifested in the first two chapters. The starting-point could have been his own assertion:

Mr.T.S. Eliot, as a poet, is no exception to the rule that all art is in fact satire today. Sweeney, the enigmatical Mrs Porter, Prufrock, Klipstein and Burbank, are authentic figures of Satire and nothing else. (15)

An exacting exposition of this contention (in 1934) might have helped save us from a whole generation of critical source-hunting, mythologizing, misreading (‘currants’ must mean ‘currents’), religiosity and accusations of ‘defeatism’ with respect to The Waste Land. In particular, it would have undermined, from the start, the PhD political correctness of Anthony
Julius’s vastly overrated book on Eliot. Julius, whose main address to the poetry focuses on early work, bluntly asserts that what Hugh Kenner called the ‘Oxford satires’ (the ‘Sweeney’ quatrains etc) are not satire at all. It remains a wonder that Julius’s external examiner (let alone publisher’s reader) allowed him to get away with this idiosyncratic pontification. For it renders Julius’s quasi-legal indictment of de facto anti-semitism a nonsense by common critical consent. On this plane of argument, we should doubtless prepare for ‘generic bias’ accusations from Boston Irishmen, princesses, vamps, Greeks, Poles and assorted self-made millionaires.

However, the main reason why Lewis could have given a powerful account of Eliot’s early satiric method is that it is close to his own. Sweeney, for instance, is a kind of Lewisian ‘Tyro’, as is the ‘young man carbuncular’, and Eliot’s grotesque quatrain figures are all ‘kodacked [sic] by the imagination’. Erik Svarny attributes Eliot’s satire to ‘generic and historical, rather than ... specific individual influence’. This seems to me over-cautious, granted Eliot’s laudatory review of Lewis’s essay on satire, ‘Inferior Religions’, in the period of writing his most savage poems. I retain my earlier view:

In such verses Eliot masters two of the most effective techniques deployed by Lewis. The first is the use of Expressionistic shock-imagery: ‘Daffodil bulbs instead of balls/Stared from the sockets of the eyes!’; the second, bizarre contextualisation of ironic abstractions: ‘Polyphiloprogenitive/The sapient sutlers of the Lord’. Within the taut constraints of the quatrain form, Eliot proved brilliant at being Lewis in verse (something Lewis, himself, never quite managed).

It is true that Eliot was also influenced by Ben Jonson’s comedies, as Lewis was by the caricatures of Hogarth and Rowlandson. However, it was his friend Lewis who had the eye and the satanic daemon to help Eliot’s mode of modernism to metamorphose from the interior self-consciousness of Prufrock’s ‘Love Song’ into the exterior grotesquerie of ‘Sweeney Erect’, just as it was Pound’s enthusiasm for Théophile Gautier which provided the four-line vehicle. And it is, here, Lewis’s critical intelligence which identifies satire as the major genre of early Eliot.

However, the spectacle of Mr Richards and Mr Eliot conducting their arcane wrangle about poetry and belief in public arouses Lewis’s love of argumentation in this essay. And, in this regard, he could have used some help from the lowly procedures of ‘thesis-writing in American universities’. His argument is all over the place. It is grounded, according to Seamus Cooney, in a pseudo-quotation from I. A. Richards – one not to be found in Richards’s main works. Presumably, then, this is Lewis’s paraphrase of what he takes Richards to be saying – but that makes it an inhuman foundation for resolute contention. Lewis proceeds to construct an unholy alliance between Richards and Eliot (scarcely the ‘Possum’s’ view), conflate Eliot’s earlier and later critical positions, conjoin Eliot’s and Pound’s notion of literary canonicity as a species of ‘history’ (cast as ‘exoticism’), concentrate on individual ‘sincerity’ (where Eliot was stressing shared ‘tradition’) and construe Eliot’s commitment to the ‘entelechy’ of the literary text – what it actually says – to mere ‘art-pour-l’art’.

In short, Lewis gets the bit of ‘belief’ between his teeth and simply runs off with it. One might imagine that Eliot’s own response to Lewis’s discursive ramble would be a combination of: ‘It is impossible to say just what I mean!’ and ‘That is not what I meant at all’. Certainly in The Use of Criticism and the Use of Poetry (which Lewis alludes to in his ‘Appendix’), Eliot had switched attention away from authorial intention toward the dialogism of the ‘scene of reading’. The problem of what a poem “means” is a good deal more difficult then it appears, since the poem’s existence is somewhere between the writer and the reader’. This move into ‘reader-reception’ ideas is not something that Lewis, with his ‘pseudo-belief’, gets anywhere near. In Keats’s terms, Lewis wants Eliot to conform to the ‘Egotistical Sublime’ whereas Eliot is more concerned with poetry as an arena of interactive ‘negative capability’.

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That said, Lewis is wonderfully entertaining about Eliot’s pretensions to a ‘theory’ about poetry (in his ‘Note contra a Richards footnote’) when, as Lewis helps to show, he is engaged in a somewhat ad hoc tactic to match up his post-conversion convictions with earlier essays and Richards’s very ‘Cambridge’ response to what Pound edited into *The Waste Land*. He is also very funny about Eliot’s critical manner – puzzling over what that fellow Tom of the early post-war years might have been meaning, consigning Richards to the ‘purgytory’ of Arnold-land or viewing Herbert Read as an insubordinate crew-member aboard the good ship *Criterion*. Seen from the post-poststructuralist double-millennium, one cannot help feeling that Richards, Eliot and Lewis too are trying to balance angels on the head of a needle, with all their word-chopping about ‘sincerity’, ‘belief’ or ‘system’ where it comes to the poetic. Lewis’s virtue here lies simply in his ironic edge – his enactment of the inherent comedy of this kind of hermeneutic tangle.

The first four essays of Lewis’s ‘Part Two’ combine to argue for the art of satire in general, and for *his* contribution to it (notably *The Apes of God*) in particular. Along the way, the theory and practice of Henry James are praised, but distanced as an example of what Lewis rejects – the ‘inside’ or ‘psychological’ method. Lewis’s type of satire will, as it were, rejoice in ironising from the ‘outside’ the very hollowness of modern hollow men. Perhaps oddly (in view of his previous strictures about Eliot as ‘pseudo-believer’), he declares that: ‘The greatest Satire is non-Moral’ – suggesting a suspension of authorial belief. He proceeds to set up a series of telling binary oppositions: Jonson versus the sentimentalists’ Shakespeare, Dryden as opposed to Hazlitt, Flaubert not Maritain, neo-classicism against romanticism and comedy in place of moral earnestness. At times he makes his argument sound in favour of satire-for-satire’s-sake (‘in a sense everyone should be laughed at’), but a rationale is also provided: ‘Laughter is ... an antitoxin of the first order’. His stance, one might say, favours the ‘cold’ eye of the painter over the empathetic ear of the littérateur – in contemporary terms, perhaps, the savage *Guardian* cartoons of Steve Bell (where politicians, in particular, are drawn as grotesque puppets) against the bleeding-heart moralism of many of the adjacent articles. However, Lewis seeks to ground his theory in the gravest of genres:

satire is as it were tragic laughter. It is not a genial guffaw nor the titillations provoked by a harmless entertainer. It is tragic, if a thing can be ‘tragic’ without pity and terror, and it seems to me it can. (92)

Overall, in these terms, he commends to us the ‘naked world of the *Satyricon*, of *Volpone*, of the *Médecin malgré-lui*’.

II

The particular essays I shall give attention to in this section are ‘Mr Lewis: “Personal-Appearance” Artist’ and ‘Virginia Woolf: “Mind” and “Matter” on the Plane of a Literary Controversy’. They are, of course, contrastive (defence versus attack), and they address work produced specifically in the contemporary period. The clear aim of the first is to justify the method and manner of Lewis’s own magnum opus – a ‘reply’, I believe, to Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Lewis writes:

This book has derived in the first instance, from the notes written in defence of my satire, *The Apes of God*. That book was a fiction-satire ... of considerable proportions ... and because of its satiric content it provoked, not an outburst of recrimination – nothing half so frank as that, but what was intended to be a pulverizing hush. (97)

That ‘hush’ has largely continued up until the present time of writing. Lewis is anxious to assert the principles on which *The Apes* is founded – aptly summed up in his last point: ‘Dogmatically,
then, I am for the Great Without, for the method of external approach – for the wisdom of the eye, rather than that of the ear’. At the same time, he admits that he has himself made use of the internal method at the beginning of his book, but for strategic contrast. At the core of Lewis’s thought seems to be a dual emphasis: all significant contemporary art is, in fact, satire; however, the ‘external approach’ is more truly (even ‘scientifically’) satiric than its alternative. There also seems to be an implication that the ‘Bloomsbury game of ping-pong’ favours the ‘internal method’ and that had resulted in the ‘pulverizing hush’. There is, no doubt, truth in this, but offence taken at recognisable caricatures was far more to the point. Lewis here makes a trenchant case for what Pat Rogers has called the ‘Augustan vision’, but he glosses over the real reasons for the failure of The Apes of God. Its wonderfully elaborate rhetorical play was never likely to make it popular, and its scarcely disguised attacks on the literati prevented it from receiving the awe in which Ulysses came to be held. Arguably, Evelyn Waugh is as ‘cold’ and ‘external’ as Lewis, but his early books are couched in more populist terms and avoided obvious ‘personalities’.

Virginia Woolf’s work is attacked as (after Henry James’s) the prime instance of the ‘interior method’. However, Lewis’s chief aim is to lampoon her as a ‘party-lighthouse’ and representation of a polarising feminism – champion of the ‘defenceless old lady’ at the hands of ‘the big bully’, Arnold Bennett, in ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’. She is, writes Lewis, a ‘sex-nationalist’ – a charge given added resonance over the last thirty years or so, whether Woolf is criticised for insufficient female vigour by Elaine Showalter or praised for stylistic jouissance by Toril Moi.

Having myself supervised some dozen or so Woolf dissertations over the last few years, it seems clear that Lewis was at least unerring about her potential status as lasting icon of ‘very real significance’. Arguably, Woolf should not have wilted (as she did) at the mere awareness of his coming chapter, for in its way, Lewis’s entertaining piece (which has its forbidden frisson for those male academic critics who must now abandon any residual ‘phallocentrism’ at the conference door), gives her due worth as cultural phenomenon – on a par with Joyce, Eliot and Hemingway. Lewis sees her essay as rather a ‘boy and girl quarrel’, and he makes no bones about playing bad boy to her affronted Alice-in-Wonderland: ‘I have taken the cow by the horns’. Along the way, he notes Woolf’s affinity with both Walter Pater and Joyce (now critical commonplace – although Lewis’s precedent alertness is rarely acknowledged). However, it is Woolf the gender polemicist he mainly addresses, and as with the Eliot essay, this is surely our loss. For Lewis can be an expert analyst of the ‘behind’ of writing as manifest in the writer’s ‘tricks’. Here Woolf’s novels are largely alluded to in terms of generalisation.

Lewis has some fun, it is true, with Mrs Dalloway – Clarissa ‘peeping at the omnibuses in Piccadilly’ (a critique which might be directed at the ‘androgy nous’ Peter Walsh too). This represents that ‘psychological’ treatment which Men Without Art defines itself against. However, he does not recognise the degree to which Woolf is herself a satirist – and one capable of the ‘exterior’ method. For in a major sense Mrs Dalloway is a Manichean novel; ‘good’ characters (Clarissa, Peter or Septimus Warren Smith) are granted the favour of interiority, while ‘bad’ ones (Miss Kilman, Drs Holmes and Bradshaw or Lady Bruton – as ‘grenadier’ as Lewis could wish) are cast into the outer darkness of exteriority:

Proportion, divine proportion, Sir William [Bradshaw]’s goddess, was acquired by Sir William while walking hospitals, catching salmon, begetting one son in Harley Street by Lady Bradshaw, who caught salmon herself and took photographs scarcely to be distinguished from the work of professionals.

It is even possible that writing like this (and Clarissa’s party is full of it where minor characters are concerned) had been influenced by earlier Lewis: for instance, such throw-away lines in Tarr (1918) as the one about the artist (Lowndes) who had ‘just enough money to be a
Cubist’. Whether so or not, Lewis might at least have noted this strange dichotomy in Woolf’s ‘interior’ novel. Just as Lewis could admit to using interiority for the opening of The Apes, so Woolf was more than capable of employing in her novels a quite ruthless exteriority (as she does in her diaries). Woolf, like Clarissa Dalloway, has feline fluidity (‘If you put her in a room with one, up went her back like a cat’s; or she purred’, Mrs Dalloway, p. 10). The purring comes out as stream-of-consciousness writing, the back-arching as external satire. Lewis’s ‘hand-torch’ here illuminates, brilliantly, the aspect of Woolf’s work which illustrates his thesis. Considered as fair criticism, it flickers across too briefly, and leaves out too much.

In fact, by the middle part of Men Without Art it becomes apparent that we are given, in the book, a collocation of fitfully penetrative sketches of contemporary authors, held together by a discursive and highly argumentative voice. There are a few authorial convictions in search of characters to exemplify them. And this is signalled by Lewis’s attempts to enforce a firm agenda. At the beginning of Part II, Chapter VI, for instance, there is an over- insistence on Lewis’s own sense of direction:

In the five foregoing chapters I have been road-making – a Roman occupation! And I have been driving my causeway across what is in fact an inconvenient and insanitary bog. More and more Roman! (141)

Hemingway’s ‘dumb ox’ persona, Faulkner’s phrasal repetitions, Eliot’s decisions and revisions about ‘Intentionality’, the nature of satire, The Apes of God and Ulysses, the ‘interior’ preciousness of Henry James, Woolf’s ‘feminine … standpoint’ – never has a Roman road wandered about so interestingly and so without firm direction! And beyond this halfway point the indications seem to me even more wayward; at the same time, there are no longer the focused examinations of authorial styles or themes which light up the first half of the book. Some insightful literary criticism is followed by a more generalised discussion of the decay of art and the ‘bad-lands’ of modern society. In the words of Eliot, which Lewis quotes (166), he is ‘criticising not so much the man but the age’, and there is far less to be said here. Chapter VI is of interest regarding the Mario Praz view of Romanticism (and Lewis makes the thought-provoking remark that ‘Mr Eliot’s is … a “romantic agony”, after all’), and this leads into Chapter VII, ‘The Terms “Classical” and “Romantic”’. Lewis summons a great cloud of witnesses to shore up the hackneyed polarity but, for all the dance of ideas, the key phrase is surely ‘the terms are strictly unusable’ – what we might now call a ‘deconstructive’ conclusion. Chapter VIII, ‘The Materialism of the Artist’, seems the most discursive of all, ending with a sort of Carlylean admonition: ‘In any case, act, I say to the artist … and let truth take care of itself’. It has taken a great deal of truth-seeking verbiage to get to this point.

III

The last part of Men Without Art is very different from the first. For where the first is recognisably literary criticism, the last constitutes the gripes of a grumpy old man at the state of contemporary society and politics, with the consequent marginalisation of the artist. The ‘Foreword’ features a short dialogue between ‘Citizen X’ and ‘the Deputy of the Party of Genius’, to the effect that: ‘There must exist among us some un-partisan principle’. Hence there should be respect for ‘the values that all the arts may use, to their advantage as arts’. Chapter I then proceeds to what is, in effect, a rather ‘partisan’ commentary about war, politics, the ‘three parties’, unemployment and poverty, the uses of ‘coarseness’, women’s lack of scruple, IRA outrages and popular fiction such as ‘the crime-yarn’. Chapter II, ‘Fénélon and his Valet’, poses afresh William Godwin’s question as to whether, in emergency, a far-seeing intellectual should be saved rather than his servant. Lewis asserts that contemporary opinion would favour the valet, and that this leads to ‘the
assaults that are made upon “the intellectuals”. Chapter III purports to be about Flaubert and his ‘ivory tower’, but is mainly concerned to indicate why Edmund Wilson’s attempt to make the prose-stylist’s work safe for Communism is doomed and why, or to what extent, François Mauriac’s accusation that Flaubert is a literary religionist succeeds. As so often in this insightful but errant book, Lewis’s attempt to assert the importance of ‘value’ in the arts is overtaken by his zest for polemic and opinionation.

It is left to the final two chapters, then, to attempt the last stretch to some kind of cultural garrison. Chapter IV, ‘Anti-Artist’, provides a provisional slogan: ‘Art is by definition a mere expressive projection of something that is there’. Lewis then makes for home-base by citing a variety of obstacles (‘Marxist or semi-Marxist scribblers’) before shoring up his lines of defence in the conclusion:

Art is as transparent and straightforward a proceeding as is animal life itself. Singing, dancing, acting and building are all indulged in by animals of one kind or another. (231)

At the same time, there is our ‘paradoxical “reason”’:

by means of our “word-habits” [we] know that we are animals and … compelled … – to go on being animals and behaving as such, and yet perfectly realizing what we are. (231-2)

Hence modern art is forced into satire to depict ‘the terrestrial monsters of the evolutionist circus by which we are surrounded’. The drift is toward an existentialist vision:

“Satire”, as I have suggested that word should be used … refers to an “expressionist” universe which is reeling a little, a little drunken with an overdose of the “ridiculous” – where everything is not only tipped but steeped in a philosophic solution of the material, not of mirth, but of the intense and even painful sense of the absurd. (232)

What matters, then, is simply whether the ‘game’ is ‘well-played or badly-played’. However, the burden of the book overall is that even the better players (Hemingway, Faulkner, Eliot, James and Woolf, in particular) could play better. At the same time the socio-political realities of contemporary life conspire to ignore ‘the valuing of our arts … bound up with the valuing of our life’. Hence Lewis’s final declaration:

hoping that … I may have directed your attention to a question of great moment – namely, whether the society of the immediate future should be composed for the first time in civilized history, of Men without art. (234)

In Seamus Cooney’s ‘Afterword’ to the Black Sparrow edition, he notes of the book’s original reception:

reviewers tended to agree – as will most readers – that overall coherence is not the strong point of Men Without Art, swamped as it often is under a positively Swiftian exuberance of digression. (309)

I have to concur with this. Paradoxical as it may seem – in terms of conventional gender-divisions and his own aggressive masculinism – Lewis has always seemed to me a brilliantly intuitive and fitful intellectual rather than a ‘linear’ philosopher-king. He probably sensed this himself – hence his defensive insistence on his Roman road-building in the book. However, the genuine rewards here are to be found in reading against this grain. It is Lewis’s critical ‘hand-torch’ which makes Men Without Art worth reading. His illuminative insights into Hemingway’s animalised men (with or without women), Faulkner’s race-obsessed melodramatics, Eliot’s tortuous (and inconsistent) critical pontificating or the Little Miss Moffet side of Woolf’s divided discourse are, in particular, what makes the book remarkable – and that has been the main focus of this essay. In addition, the insistent theme that modern art is essentially a mode of absurdist satire is perceptive and, indeed, prophetic: it will find its fulfilment in such as Sartre, Camus,
Beckett, Bellow, Murdoch, Rushdie and Winterson. And his sense of the sign-making ('semiotic') nature of style is a further proleptic aspect of his critical awareness, on the plane of 'grammatology' itself. The most incisive and revelatory passages of *Men Without Art* are precisely 'deconstructive' because they demonstrate artistic intelligence within the 'tricks' of fallible stylicities. In this, the book is forward-looking for the foundational decade of practical criticism. It is also (as ever) idiosyncratically *sui generis*.

**NOTES**


2. In *The Art of Being Ruled, Time and Western Man* and *Men Without Art*.

3. See the 'Appendix' to Wyndham Lewis, *Men Without Art*, originally published in 1934. All references will be to Seamus Cooney's edition (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1987).

4. 'It was [Arnold Bennett] who set the fashion for employing all the resources of the critical vocabulary to "puff" every week, for years together, a batch of goodish, baddish, and exceedingly indifferent works – and remaining silent about most that were of any moment, it might be added'. *Men Without Art*, p. 239.


8. This more recent phenomenon is well summed up in Peter Widdowson, *Literature* (London: Routledge, 2000). Having spent many pages debunking the idea of 'literature', Widdowson replaces the term with 'the literary' – presumably not wholly dissimilar from that which pertains to 'literature'.


13. Lewis's phrase, of course, from 'Inferior Religions', 1917.


18 In the sense of poet-text-reader relations. See Mary Jacobus, Psychoanalysis and the Scene of Reading (Oxford University Press, 1999). Cf. Paul Ricoeur’s view that it is ‘the reader who is the ultimate mediator between configuration and refiguration’. Hence there are three key factors for examination: ‘(1) the strategy as concocted by the author and directed toward the reader; (2) the inscrption of this strategy within a literary configuration; and (3) the response of the reader considered either as a reading subject or as the receiving public’, Time and Narrative, Vol III, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellamer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 159-60.


22 Among these is, again, Edmund Wilson. Martin Amis has some devastating observations on Wilson’s naive USSR-infatuation in Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million (London: Vintage, 2003).

Fig. 2. Wyndham Lewis, Centaress No. 2
(M42, 1912) Private Collection