Academic Hallucination

Paul Edwards

Lisa Siraganian’s article, ‘Out of the Air: Theorizing the Art Object in Gertrude Stein and Wyndham Lewis’, published in Modernism/Modernity in November 2003, should not pass without comment. It attempts to establish an unnoticed similarity between the two writers’ aesthetics; both distinguish between the condition of art and that of life, and both use images of airlessness in artworks to make their points. Siraganian claims that her reading ‘goes against the accepted view of … Lewis’. On the contrary, it is wholly conventional and is based on a standard interpretation of his anti-temporal aesthetic. There is nothing novel in noticing, as this essay does, that Lewis held a quasi-platonic view of the condition of visual art as removing its objects from the stream of time. That reading can be demonstrated straightforwardly enough in half a page of quotations from his 1922 ‘Essay on the Objective of Plastic Art in Our Time’. And the role of the spectator – ‘looking at Botticelli’s Birth of Venus’ with as little physical disturbance ‘as looking at a kettle or the Bank of England’, as Lewis puts it – needs only a few more quotations such as this from ‘The Credentials of the Painter’ to establish.

It is the ingenious enlistment of a scene from Lewis’s Childermass to elaborate what is basically a standard reading of his aesthetic, and the asserted kinship with Stein, that might offer something new. This kinship, however, turns out to exist along a very thin line indeed: the condition of art as being different from ‘breathing life’. All other differences between Stein and Lewis are dismissed by reduction to their alleged origin in Lewis’s misogyny, antisemitism and supposed anxiety about the reality of his ‘singularity and novelty’. Siraganian cites neither Lewis’s 1934 remark about ‘this brilliant Jewish lady’, nor Stein writing of Lewis in 1933 that ‘Gertrude Stein rather liked him’. Lewis knew precisely where and why he disagreed with Stein’s ‘bad philosophy’ (666), and his 1927 critique of the ideological implications of her work was cogent in relation to that disagreement, even if somewhat overheated in its expression. He could not, of course, have known in 1927 of the 1935 Stein lecture upon which Siraganian relies to establish their supposed kinship.

Modernism/Modernity is an academic journal supported by a major US university and with an editorial board of over 30 internationally recognised authorities on modernism. It has established itself as the leader in the field. So before commenting on the article’s interpretation of Childermass, I have to ask how so many minor errors of scholarship were allowed to reach publication stage. For example, the text of Lewis’s novel referred to in the article is not called ‘The Childermass’ (as stated in note 3), but The Human Age, Book One: Childermass. Either the 1928 edition (The Childermass: Section I) should have been used, or the correct title for the 1956 revision should have been given: a 1956 The Childermass simply doesn’t exist. Second, Lewis’s judgement that Stein is a ‘faux-naïf’ and a ‘sham’ because (as Siraganian would have it) ‘she produced fake art’ (666) is referenced to ‘Time and Western Man, ed. Paul Edwards (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1987), 26’. The correct publication date is 1993, not 1987, ‘faux-naïf’ and ‘sham’ do not appear on p. 26, but on p. 49, and they are used not personally but in connection with Stein’s employment of the manner she adopts in her art even when she is pretending to ‘explain’ the art (‘Composition as Explanation’). Other quotations attributed to Time and Western Man on p. 668 are obviously not from there but from Childermass. The whole of Siraganian’s note 42 deserves commentary. Its attribution to the character Pullman of complicity in Satter’s violence against ‘Thomas Paine’ is completely unsupported by the text of the novel, and its final statement is particularly baffling: ‘In an effort to avoid the destruction of representation, Lewis
produces his own version of an art without time: intricate, semi-abstract self-portraits of himself [sic] as a beetle on covers of his magazine, *The Enemy* (1926–27). The true dates of the run of *The Enemy* are 1927 to 1929, but it hardly matters because neither the covers nor the inside pages reproduce any self-portraits of Lewis as a beetle. Indeed, no beetles are to be found anywhere in his œuvre. The main argument of the note (about the links between representation in art and democratic representation in politics) stands or falls with the rest of the article's argument about the meaning of the portion of *Childermass* it discusses.

How valid, then, is the article's interpretation of *Childermass* as support for its argument about Lewis's aesthetic? As I have mentioned, its general point is a familiar and accepted one, so it is unlikely to be completely contradicted in the novel (though with Lewis that would not be impossible), but there remain problems that should be noticed. First, the article singles out one episode — Pullman's and Satters's exploration of a 'time-hallucination' of eighteenth-century England — without giving any consideration to the novel as a whole. True, we are given quotations from a passage occurring 64 pages earlier in the narrative, but Siraganian wrongly claims that it belongs to the same scene (and by doing so makes points about it that are unsustainable: namely that the two characters here are inside an oil painting). (666–7)

Since this part of Lewis's trilogy breaks down quite naturally into episodes (despite having no chapter divisions), concentration on a single one of them might be acceptable if it were something other than an affinity with Gertrude Stein that was at issue. The problem is that one of the characters, the childish Satters, is at one level a satirical synthesis of what Lewis takes to be the deleterious ideological affinities of Stein's writing: he is all uncontrolled affect, held together only precariously by habit. Pullman, on the other hand, is a (more personal) embodiment of some of the characteristics Lewis attributed to James Joyce: he is fussily pedantic and precise, equipped with apparently encyclopaedic knowledge, but the self-satisfied dupe of any fashionable idea foisted on him by the Zeitgeist. The reactions of neither of these characters in the scene discussed (or others) can be taken unproblematically as normative. But these crucial, and well-known, satirical identifications are not mentioned in the article. Indeed, Pullman is described as 'Lewis's surrogate' (668), and his complacent reactions in the scene are interpreted as indicating Lewis's own aesthetic attitude. But he is not Lewis's surrogate, and the interpretation falls. It should also be noted that another scene of *Childermass* — ignored in the article but surely relevant — is directly concerned with a fictional painter and visual art.

There is not much reason to regard the selected scene of the time-hallucination explored by Pullman and Satters as a comment by Lewis on the ontological status of aesthetic objects in paintings, and it is fairly clear that the crucial reason Siraganian interprets it this way is because of the chill 'air' that pervades the scene. Air is important because it apparently connects the scene with Stein's 1934 idea in 'Pictures' that in oil paintings there is 'no air' (and by extension should be none in writing, either). A little adjustment to the argument (to the effect that Lewis and Stein only seem to be at odds over the presence of 'air' in art, since the time-hallucination in this scene is actually Lewis's idea of a bad painting) and the Lewis–Stein match is successfully made. Now this error-strewn reading is passed as sound by Johns Hopkins, the editors of *Modernism/Modernity* and their academic readers, and is ready to be cited as authoritative in future dissertations and academic articles. But one wonders whether this work has at any stage been checked, even by a copy-editor (how did 'Ford Maddox Ford' pass scrutiny, for example?), let alone by any academic competent to judge its case about Wyndham Lewis. Was it felt that the ingenuity of its approach and the unexpected connections it makes were sufficient to guarantee its validity and make it worth publishing?
Actually the satirical dimension of the scene of the time-hallucination is straightforward enough, and requires no great ingenuity to interpret. It concerns a conception of history as relative to the present, a conception that Lewis believed left the past dangerously malleable instead of fixed in an unchanging perspective. Lewis’s objection to historical relativity is similar to George Orwell’s in Nineteen Eighty-Four, though he is primarily concerned with historiography rather than actual falsification of archives. In Time and Western Man he attributes such historical relativism to Oswald Spengler. This is allegorised in Childermass when Pullman and Satters enter the anomalous intrusion of the past into the present, and find it fixed, apparently dead, and set in a receding perspective. Pullman, intoxicated by the ‘air’ of the past, declares, ‘I evidently was built for Time-travel’. (Childermass, p. 115) They come across some miniature figures clustered round the egg of the Great Mogul in an inn-yard, one of them apparently being Tom Paine. Satters interferes, the figure comes to life and protests, Satters mauls and stamps on him, and the hallucination dissipates abruptly. The following quotation from Time and Western Man speaks for itself:

The Past as myth – as history, that is, in the classical sense – a Past in which people and events stand in an imaginative perspective, a dead people we do not interfere with, but whose integrity we respect – that is a Past that any person who has a care for the principle of individual life will prefer to ‘history-as-evolution’ or ‘history-as-communism’. As to the extremest form this sort of ‘historical’ or ‘time’ doctrine has taken, we can say that to desecrate a grave is a mild offence compared to the possibilities involved in the theory to which I have already alluded, that men may one day be able to poke into the Past, as it were resuscitate it, and dragone the dead – in the way that Spengler would the ancient races of the East, if he could, making Buddha swallow his words, and Confucius learn to play the ukulele; rather, of course, much more than that – decree that such people should cease to darken existence at all, and abolish them.5

In the narrative of Childermass, with Tom Paine ‘abolished’ by Satters’s interference with the past, his historic protest in The Rights of Man at the feeble right of supposedly ‘free’ British subjects merely to ‘petition’ their rulers is analogously also lost. Now there is no access to Paine’s arguments to oppose the afterworld’s ruling power. This power, embodied in a figure called ‘the Bailiff’, later quotes Paine without acknowledgement, derisively turning Paine’s words to his own oppressive purpose. (Childermass, pp. 261–2) The rights of the ‘innocents’ before the Bailiff’s tribunal are also restricted to ‘petitioning’. Siraganian’s own interpretation (in her note 42) of the significance for ‘representation’ of the killing of Paine takes no account of the appearance of quotation from him elsewhere in the novel.

Although this is the most likely satirical purpose of the scene, might Lewis not also have meant it to apply to painting, as Siraganian contends? After all, his critique of ‘time-philosophy’ notoriously groups under that heading all sorts of disparate ideas and cultural phenomena, and Childermass is one of his most complex and difficult books (what is the egg of the Great Mogul doing in the scene, for example?) So, although there is no warrant for Siraganian’s statement that the hallucination is ‘a huge, nearly completed, landscape painting’ (660), and though it is sheer nonsense to assert that ‘Pullman and Satters are able to see the paint and the painting – and nothing else’ (667), let us suppose for a moment the scene could be used as this article wants, to reveal aspects of Lewis’s theory of visual art. The hallucination is an example of bad art in that it ‘needs its spectators’ experience [in order] to be whole’, according to Siraganian. (661) But actually there is no question of the panorama Pullman and Satters enter being incomplete or needing their experience to be whole; it is whole and complete as it is. If it has to be considered in these aesthetic terms at all, far from being bad art, it actually answers pretty closely to Lewis’s desiderated condition for visual art.
The ‘Happy melodist unwaried, Forever piping songs forever new’, of Keats, is only so happy because his pipe is soundless and because he has sacrificed the whole of existence for the frigid moment of a sort of immortality. There is not one immortality, evidently, but several types, and this one is the painter’s; 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. (‘The Credentials of the Painter,’ p. 69)

So there is nothing wrong with the Childermass hallucination as ‘art’. It precisely exemplifies Lewis’s preferred ‘sort of death and silence in the midst of life’. The problem comes from Satters interfering in it. The analogy with a retrospective interference in history is obvious. Indeed Lewis makes the connection clear in his Time and Western Man discussion (with, as it happens, prophetic irony): ‘Or consider what such a person as Michelangelo would be apt to reflect if he learnt that each half-century would see the frescoes he was labouring at improved and “evolved”. As an artist he would know, of course, that such things were not susceptible of such barbarous “improvement”’. (TWM, p. 223)

It all comes down finally to ‘air,’ and Lewis’s supposed disapproval of it in works of art. This is the (highly appropriate) substance of the bridge Siraganian builds from Stein to Lewis. But what does Lewis say about it? ‘The wind that blows through satire is as bitter as that that predominates in the pages of Timon or King Lear’. If anything, Lewis seems to have had a taste for chill air in works of art. Indeed, one of his aesthetic objections to Ulysses is that it is ‘suffocating’; and the experience of being ‘closed up inside someone’s head’ instead of ‘in the open air’ makes him wish to take his own mind ‘where there is nothing but air and rock, however inhospitable and featureless’. (TWM, p. 89)

These issues are only indirectly related to Siraganian’s compressed concluding extrapolations on postmodemism. Typically enough we find her supporting her argument as follows: ‘As Lewis puts it, time-art “no longer stands for itself” (TWM, 274)’. (669) But Lewis does not put it like that; anyone consulting the page in question will see that the phrase is actually part of a long quotation from Oswald Spengler! The problem is not that Siraganian is ‘wrong’ about Lewis and ‘time-art’, but that by the time we have reached her concluding pages, the grounds of argument have become as unreliable and fluid as the mercurial environment that so baffles Pullman and Satters in their afterworld. It has become virtually impossible to find solid ground in the article from which we could judge whether her argument is right or wrong.

One clear idea can be assessed, however. Siraganian may or may not be right that Stein should not be seen as anticipating postmodemism, but I think she is wrong in disallowing a similar claim for Lewis (not that one can imagine him being desirous of the honour). The ‘postmodernist’ effects of his writing are for her not indications of postmodemism but ‘side-effects of his comprehensive satirical goal’. And it is true that the reason critics have seen an incipient ‘postmodernism’ in Lewis is because his satire depicts a depthless world of conflicting and transmuting signifiers and representations, and does so in a medium which exactly enact the ontology it satirises. ‘Officially’, this postmodern vision is being satirically repudiated just as Siraganian claims, but Lewis’s imaginative commitment to it gives it a persuasiveness that exceeds the satiric purpose. In the light of this what needs to be realised is that Lewis’s own metaphysic is haunted by the possibility that such a ‘postmodern’ version of Berkeleyand idealism may be all that actually constitutes our reality: ‘The illusion must in short be our “real”’. (TWM, p. 378) Where Lewis remains something else, however (and it is not simply modernist) is in his belief that the ‘illusion’ of a fixed historical truth should not be wilfully interfered with and distorted to suit the transient desires of those who would treat historical evidence as infinitely elastic.
NOTES


6 Wyndham Lewis, Men Without Art, p. 93.