Trying to read Lewis's early poetry

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Two questions may be asked about Lewis's early poetry: can it be understood, and if it can, does it anticipate his later work? This poetry is so obscurely written that we must be cautious in interpreting it; but it probably does anticipate some later themes. These notes try to explain some of Lewis's monstrous obscurities.

Wyndham Lewis dated his earliest productions in verse from his sixteenth year, which was 1898 to 1899. He left Rugby School at the end of 1898, and attended the Slade School for the first time on 9 January 1899. The poem that may be his first is entitled 'To Doubt', and in October 1942 Lewis wrote on the back of a manuscript copy: 'This is about my earliest literary product. Written about 16th year. (cf handwriting over page)'. The handwriting is of a rounded kind not otherwise seen in Lewis's manuscripts, and antedates his chaotic and almost illegible hand of 1905-1910. Eight lines from this poem are quoted in Rude Assignment (1950), but incompletely. Lewis wrote: 'About the time I went to the Slade I began to write Petrarchan sonnets, but soon changed to Shakespearean. They were easier to do'. In 'To Doubt' only lines 5-8 (abab) and 9-12 (c.d.c.d) rhyme, suggesting that Lewis had yet to master either form.

Two names are involved with Lewis's early poems, those of William Stirling and William Rothenstein. Stirling was the author of The Canon (1897), a book on the Kabbala and the arts. He introduced Lewis to Rothenstein, who remained a lifelong friend, and whose copies of the poems deposited in Tate Archive form the basis of the poems published below. Stirling, an unsuccessful architect, was aged forty when he killed himself on 7 April 1902. Rothenstein, his executor, found a sheaf of poems of 44 leaves among Stirling's papers and assumed they were the dead man's; he later discovered they were Lewis's.

In a note to the set in the Cornell archive, Lewis wrote (again in 1942) that 'These poems were mainly written in about 18th year, all before 20th certainly [i.e., 1902, the year of Stirling's death]. Of no value, but better kept. It is certainly not my desire to have these not very interesting early efforts published. I should be very sorry to think that after my death they might be dragged out and published by some literary promoter, for mercenary reasons'. It was out of respect for Lewis's opinion that I did not include any of these poems in my edition of The Collected Poems and Plays published by Carcanet in 1979, and reissued in 2003. However, in his introduction to that collection C. H. Sisson transcribed the sonnet beginning 'A wealth of soul', remarking (not quite consistently) that these early texts were 'mercifully unprinted'. It is because publication in the Wyndham Lewis Annual is not likely to be considered a mercenary activity that some of these early efforts are printed here. And perhaps they do have some interest after all.

'To Doubt' wants to say that Doubt is everywhere, that it is preferable to Certainty, and that God invented it as early as the Garden of Eden. The two final lines express an unexpected thought: God brought Doubt into existence because he was afraid of Anarchy, or chaos. 'Doubt' is an insecure way of keeping order that allows scepticism to remain in play. Lewis's scepticism would eventually dominate his thinking, notably under the name of satire. 'How strange that first infection' (a double sonnet) is largely about 'Fate', a favourite idea in almost all these poems. 'Fate' is all that happens, the source of circumstances that have to be dealt with: lazing about in 'mute reverie' is not enough. Yet as late as the autobiography Rude Assignment, written in the years following the Second World War, Lewis structures his life around what he calls 'Three Fatalities', where the three things that happened to him were his being an intellectual, his liking for satire, and his (fateful) interest in politics. This sets up a continuity between the impossible
poetry and the coherent later Lewis. Another thread is the perception that we get to know ourselves from what others think about us, as in the second line: ‘When first through other minds our hearts we know’. These other minds bring Fate to bear, so that reality imposes itself in a complex Self-Other relationship that became characteristic of Lewis’s mature writing.

The text of ‘Some in the van of Enterprise’ is written on a receipt dated 1915, but it cannot have been composed then; though the copy may attest to a continuing interest by others in the productions of ‘the poet’, as Lewis was known to Augustus John and others during the first years of the last century. What does this poem mean? Doubt and Fate feature again, but nothing holds together the three stanzas except perhaps the idea that ordinary people present to the world not their strongest or best selves, but their doubts, uncertainties, and ‘Fancy’. Only ‘the careless front of Power’ offends the world with its self-confidence, and here Lewis first signals his distrust of power, though here the oppression seems more psychological than political. Similarly, ‘Woke from the inward reveries’ is about the way the Real impinges on the dreaming self.

‘To Lust’ is dated October 1905, contradicting Lewis’s belief that his early poems were all written before 1902. In his biography, Paul O’Keeffe suggests that this poem (‘exquisitely structured but barely comprehensible’) concerns Lewis’s feelings about Ida Vandler, since it seems to be about a conflict between Love and Lust. Shortly after writing it, Lewis set off to meet her in Germany, and with her travelled on to Paris, where they decided to marry. If that had happened, the Love-Lust problem might have been better resolved than it is in the poem.

‘And many maladies’ is again about the mind waking to reality, and finding other minds already in occupation of the world. This triple (1) sonnet seems to find the soul again vulnerable to Power and Fate, but with the option of getting sustenance from helpful ‘minds maternal’. As soon as this is decided upon, that sustenance is removed. It is a disappointing ending after a long struggle with the words. ‘A wealth of soul’ is less about the maternal than about women whose strengths are somehow taken from them, or wasted by the women themselves. The final couplet is obscure, but makes more sense rewritten as ‘And man she doth off some dark despoiler deem’, so that the woman gives away her powers when she buys into the dream of a man. This is interesting, given Lewis’s supposed misogyny.

‘I think’ is unbearably resistant. In free verse Lewis is more obscure than when he rhymes. A night landscape is infested by lawless brigands in the first section. They noisily enjoy themselves with their pistols, and represent the past. In the present (second paragraph), a silent and sinister force wastes the individual’s ‘healthful treasury’ (compare the previous poem, ‘A wealth of soul’), and Time is implicated in this. The force is ‘This Present’, taking the individual out of the dance or leaving him there to collapse. The third part seems to say that ‘today’ charges in with its armour on and visor down and that this apparent energy conceals an attack on the imagination, made to seem an aspect of fear. Here, Lewis hits upon the time-theme that will dominate his work of the 1920s. But in 1903 he simply does not know what he wants to say, or how to say it. These notes are the best I can do to explain the poetical obscurities of a struggling intelligence that will not for several years be able to explain itself to itself.