Between Value and Cynical Reason: ‘Wild’ Bodies, Modernity and the Environmental Other
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1. BESTRE’S DASEIN

If the Enlightenment ushered in the age of modernity, it also sowed the seeds of a particular kind of ‘post’-modernity: the age of environmental catastrophe. Where attention used to focus on the role of science and technology in the creation of a world judged by the Jewish Holocaust, coupled to a ‘rational’ (or MAD) justification for nuclear weapons, our dystopic conscience must now include the insidious and accelerating destruction of our planetary habitat. Discounting the things we cannot control – the vast magma pool under Yellowstone Park whose eruption will likely lead to a nuclear winter, the possibility of asteroid impact (ditto), or a reversal of the earth’s magnetic poles – there remains the problem of modernity’s contribution to environmental degradation, increasingly focused by the issue of global warming. What to do, indeed what to think, about modernity and the fate of Enlightenment with the prospect of one’s bread basket becoming an arid desert (USA), one’s Atlantic Conveyor turning itself off (Great Britain), or one’s country (Bangladesh) becoming inundated by rising sea levels. The problem of doing is then ‘finally’ revealed as the problem of knowing, which is to say, the problem of thinking about Nature as Other to modernity’s seemingly unquenchable ambition for growth and progress. What we have already thought about our world and how to act towards it then amounts to the present tense of a dystopian consciousness. So, in a kind of parody of Lyotardian postmodernity, our global future is progressively revealed in our past misappropriations of Nature, or what we took ‘Nature’ to be.

Locating an environmental context for Lewis is not as difficult as it might first appear. There is a suggestion of relevance in his modernist crusades against a kind of Weberian rationalization, initiated by his ‘avant-garde’ phase in Vorticism. For the moment, though, I want to focus on the way his idea of the ‘wild’ body engages with the processes of identifying, framing and conceptualizing the problem of modernity’s Others. If we let Otherness stand for Nature ‘itself’ (I’ll explain the scarequotes in a moment), a connection between Lewis and environmental postmodernity becomes possible, with some fairly obvious ramifications for our understanding of his negative modernist outlook. In brief, I want to argue that Lewis’s Wild Body stories embark on the impossible, yet essential, task of interrogating their own environmental assumptions. I will also suggest that these early narratives predict a typically postmodern situation in which modernist claims about value, or the valuing of ‘Nature’ for what it can teach us about the depredations of modernity, encounters what Peter Sloterdijk has called the ‘cynical realism’ of postmodernism. Here, a rational recuperation of modernity’s errors, including the damage done to the world by scientific and technological rationalization, accepts environmental degradation as an inevitable consequence of intellectual advancement. Influenced by Kant and a number of ‘post’-Kantians, Lewis’s valuing of the ‘wild’ body as ‘Nature’ enacts a paradox, within which we find the representation of the body as both antidote to and proof of the inevitability of modernity as an environmental catastrophe which has already occurred as the very basis of Enlightenment.

The scarequotes, first of all. In Recodings, Hal Foster has a chapter called ‘The Expressive Fallacy’. In it, he points out that artistic claims for unmediated expression are founded on a
linguistic imperative: quoting de Man quoting Nietzsche, Foster reminds us that the ‘inner necessity’ of the German Expressionists (among others) ‘is based on a linguistic reversal: “The whole notion of an ‘inner experience’ enters our consciousness only after it has found a language that the individual understands – i.e., a translation of a situation into a familiar situation”’. In other words, a form of representation is the problematic medium through which the otherwise unrepresentable Other is registered. This is a crucial insight into the legacy of Enlightenment modernity, particularly as read by deconstruction and ‘negative’ theorists such as Adorno. Put briefly, we can say that anyone attempting to think the ‘other’ of Enlightenment can only do so from within its boundaries, but that we can choose how to value this dilemma. Either we can use our enlightened knowledge to think our way past the limitations of that knowledge – and this is obviously inherently problematic and Utopian – or we can fall back into a kind of blank cynicism, or what Nietzsche called ‘passive nihilism’; a condition in which, shades of Weber, we see modernity as a ‘cage’ with no windows on to the outside. Postmodernism often tends to confl ate these two conditions in an inadequately theorized post-Enlightenment, whereas a more profitable outcome for modernity lies in finding a way to re-imagine the legacy of Enlightenment which keeps open a door to the value of Otherness. Without simply remaining Adorno, it is here, I would argue, that deconstruction is genuinely useful. When Derrida finds metaphysical thinking (in Adorno the very basis of identity thinking and the consequences that follow therefrom) to be a necessary limit on awareness, a door is, by dint of a self-critical logic, kept ajar to the ‘outside’ of Enlightenment; to the possibility that Otherness may be understood as something which cannot be fully understood – though it can still be valued when a failure to comprehend is seen as an advantage, rather than a hindrance to modernity’s full disclosure; the failure of Enlightenment.

In a striking example of ethical modernism – by which I mean the possibility of an ethical consciousness, rather than an ethical attitude per se – Lewis’s early Wild Body narratives appear to encode this situation. Anticipating Foster, Lewis makes it clear in ‘The “Pole”’ (one of the very first narratives to be published, in 1909) that Parisian artistic culture, and market exchange culture at that, has already inscribed itself into the lives of the Breton peasants. In the person of Ambroise Vollard (Picasso’s dealer for a while) an avant-garde culture arrives in Brittany on the lookout for any sketches that Gauguin left behind. But the peasants are already wise to the game, being willing to pass off any convenient examples of ‘expressionist’ work as authentic. Thus, at the moment that Vollard seeks an ‘authentic’ representation of Otherness he is stymied by the damage already done to it by representation, and doubly so when Gauguin’s flight from the shackles of the Paris stock-exchange as the index of capitalist modernity in the place that has already been corrod ed by that same modernity – the discourse of the Other’s antithetical other, so to speak. And yet ‘authenticity’ – the scarequotes now mandatory – also stands in the narrative as a sign of the Other itself. This Otherness is vested in Bestre’s physically ‘authentic’ confrontations with the narrator/Ker-Orr, which, despite Lewis’s insistence on their literary identities, exist as the sign of a pre-Enlightenment state of Nature (now without scarequotes), the factor which just might provide an antidote to the ills of modernity.

Wild bodies are undoubtedly ‘natures’ – they provide the Other to the observer’s narrative gaze, later formalized in the figure of Ker-Orr who ‘hang[s] somewhere in the midst’ of his own body, ‘operating it with detachment’. This is more than a mind/body dichotomy, a Cartesian conundrum. The concatenation of states that a ‘soldier of humour’ represents stages an encounter between Self and Other which underwrites Lewis’s attitude to modernity. The ‘wild’ body houses the observing intelligence but it is also the mark of a (Nietzschean) ‘uncivilized’ laughter, a ‘barbarian’ consciousness which is sufficiently aware of its own estrangement to recognize that something is lacking when it ‘cannot help converting everything into burlesque patterns ...
forget[ting] people are real ... [rather than] subjective patterns belonging specifically to me’.  

I take Nietzsche, as a key influence on the early (and not so early) Lewis, to figure for an aesthetic overcoming of modernity, vested in Lewis’s representation of the ‘wild’ body. Nietzsche’s influence mediates the situation we find in the philosophical inception of modernity, where Kant’s three Critiques create an aporia formed out of a disjunction between rational and aesthetic forms of knowledge, where the latter amounts to the Other of rationality. Arguably, Lewis’s use of laughter is then aporetic when it belongs to both the ‘wild’ body and to Ker-Orr, the controlling intelligence which figures for the rational pole in Lewis’s critical economy. In terms of a ‘post-Kantian’ dialogue between rationality and aesthetic perception which works its way through the development of philosophical modernity my claim here is buttressed by Nietzsche’s own ruminations on the often aporetic relationship between the figures of Apollo and Dionysus. When Ker-Orr tells us that the ‘philosopher’s stone’ which lies ‘at the bottom of the chemistry of my sense of humour’ represents an impossible ‘primitive unity’ we find one of many indications in Lewis of a desire to overcome the disjunction between rational and aesthetic categories operating within modernity. Such a desire to make the world whole is in Kantian terms philosophically impossible, and we thus arrive a theoretically productive symptomatology. Put simply, Ker-Orr represents the rational intelligence in its always ambivalent and paradoxical relationship with the Other of the ‘wild’ body, where ‘wildness’ cannot, yet must, be ‘authentically’ wild in order to sustain the repetitive dialogues between Self and Other on which the very idea of the Wild Body is constructed. One crucial aspect of this situation is that the aesthetic figure of Bestre exposes the limitations of Ker-Orr’s controlling influence, even as the latter attempts to operate Lewis’s version of modernity’s levers from ‘within’ the very body on which it depends.

Lewis’s work thus tackles modernity, and therefore his own modernism, as a limitation to be overcome in the cause of releasing the ‘wild’ body from the shackles of the observing intelligence. Though by dint of the Kantian aporia itself there can be no authentically wild body (that is, a wild body without the scarequotes, or Nature itself), an aesthetic critique of rationality opens the possibility of a new discourse on the critical potential of ‘nature’ under what rational, or in Adorno rationalized, modernity has become. Many of Lewis’s critics have overlooked this possibility, ascribing to his work a right-wing, sometimes misogynist, but always elitist politics, obsessed with a negative Othering, well before Lewis’s outright flirtation with fascism in the 1930s. A more theoretically sensitive approach to the deeper currents of modernity in forming his work should acknowledge the complexities and contradictions of Lewis’s modernism, based on the problem of the Other’s registration. It is this problem which bears on my sense of an environmental postmodernity, and the possibility of staving off the self-regarding logic of cynical realism. Only by resisting the lure of cynical reason can we really hope to value Nature as ‘Nature’, and in the process confront the damage done by modernity to environmental consciousness. Though we cannot give up on rationality, we must know its limitations if we are to foster a genuinely symbiotic relationship with the world we inhabit.

To flesh out the picture a little, we can remind ourselves of Ian Duncan’s insight into the development of the Wild Body collection. The early narrator, says Duncan, is ‘low-key, rarely participating more directly in the text than the speculations that arise from his observation’, even if his interventions in the narrative anticipate ‘the more militant aggressiveness of Ker-Orr’, where a ‘tentative hypothesis [about the nature of the Other] is replaced by the ringing decisiveness of the catechism’. In the narrator’s aggressive mode, wild bodies are “odious” simply because they are other than the narrator [whose] language invades and controls them [so that] they become mere objects of its terminologies’. Duncan’s identification of two attitudes within the Wild Body points us towards an extensive philosophical context for Lewis’s
development, to include the two sides of a Kantian Nietzsche noted above, as well as a debate between Adorno on identity thinking (the dominative assumption that concepts are adequate to the things they describe) and what we might call a tradition of critical thinking, exemplified by writers such as Heidegger and Ernst Bloch, in which the Other is framed by a self-deconstructive mode of representation deriving from Kant. Duncan’s comment that there exists a ‘tension between detached [and relatively non-invasive] diagnostic observation and the more hostile, destructive involvement in a direct human (if only antagonistic) relationship with the [Wild Body] character’ (84) calls to mind the whole problem of modernity’s corrosive instrumentalism; its exploitative attitude to Otherness in the very act of trying to understand it.

Heidegger is exemplary here, insofar as he was preoccupied with the paradox involved in attempts to free the object of thought from the impositions of thought itself. The authentic potential of Dasein (being in the world) is constrained by the kind of calculative thinking Adorno condemns as ruinous for modernity. The apparently insurmountable difficulty of freeing the mind, as a product of modernity, from the damage done by instrumental knowledge can only really be countered in Heidegger and Adorno by the awareness of instrumentality – this at least retains the possibility that one’s situation within modernity might be re-oriented towards a more sympathetic understanding of Otherness. What Heidegger calls Sorge (‘care’, but the word also translates as ‘anxiety’, ‘alarm’ and ‘grief’) is a keystone for authenticity, a necessary step on the road to freeing Dasein from its self-constraints. Heidegger claims that Ek-sistenz can be achieved if we refuse the lure of Zuuhandenugen, roughly speaking the equivalent to Adorno’s sense of instrumental rationality. In environmental terms Heidegger helps us to recognize the dominating tendencies of modern science and technology as these have become predicated on the control of natural forces without sufficient regard for the ensuing consequences. In effect, an environmentalist Heidegger would have us reconsider the relation to Self to Other, where the second term is to be thought of as things-that-are, rather than things that exist for our purpose alone. This situation obviously includes intersubjective relations – the most immediate expression of Self/Other relations in modern societies, accentuated when the Other is perceived as extrinsic to one’s social and cultural self-definings.

The connection with the Kantian aporia, and hence with the deep currents of philosophical modernity, is glossed by Terry Eagleton in The Ideology of the Aesthetic when he remarks: ‘As a general Being-in-the-world, Dasein has about it something of the original, phenomenological connotation of the aesthetic: even if it is hardly a sensuous phenomenon, it inhabits the realms of the affective and somatic, is marked by its biological finitude and runs up against a density in things irreducible to some abstract reason’. The resistance of the (aesthetic) Other to a determining rationality brings us back to Lewis’s sense of the ‘wild’ body as Ker-Orr’s ‘primitive’ interlocutor. Bestre’s ability to intimidate by his sheer physical presence initially puts Ker-Orr at a disadvantage which is only partially countered by the narrator’s use of the ‘stalking-horse’ metaphor and the aggressive quasi-military sense of laughter in ‘A Soldier of Humour’. In his identity as Other, Bestre enacts a curious role reversal, where the narrator’s descriptive flourishies frame his own ignorance of the object ‘itself’. It is

as though he [Bestre] would cause the new-comer’s mind to whirl round and dart frantically to left and right, without, however, managing to seize any of these mocking thoughts that beset him. Bestre gazes at a new acquaintance as though the latter, all unconscious, were entering a world full of astonishing things, of which he had not yet become aware."

Lewis’s trademark insistence on a spatial recuperation of modernity inscribes a controlling influence (dialogised in Vorticism when Futurism and Cubism are colonized in order to surmount
their ‘incorrect’ registrations of modernity) in the discursive domain of (counter-) modernism that the Wild Body stories have already made problematic. Succinctly: encounters with Otherness involve a series of critical moves against the disastrous effects of modernity which interrogate their own limitations. In Vorticist art it is the sometimes scandalous deployment of colour, in Time and Western Man it becomes the Kantian contradiction of a philosophic rationality expressed as an aesthetic imperative, while in The Apes of God the very proliferation of satiric literary tropes generates Lewis’s sociology. These texts represent Blast 1’s governing Art/Life opposition only to deconstruct it, which is to say that in leaving each term dependent on the other for its identity Lewis keeps harking back to the early Wild Body’s non/invasive representation of Otherness. As far as I can see, most, if not all, of Lewis’s efforts to establish a spatial rule for modernity are tested by an autocritical trajectory because they are built on a paradox, stemming from Kant’s establishment of a dialogue between rational and aesthetic forms of knowledge, which is then carried forward by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche before being reconfigured by Heidegger. As in these philosophers, Lewis’s Wild Body stories ultimately leave the reader with a series of questions, arising from the central problem of Otherness: how can it be adequately represented? How might an ethics of Otherness be defined in the wake of Enlightenment, and, in the context of my opening paragraph, how might this question now be translated into an environmental consciousness?

2. GREENER THINKING?

I do not mean it as a back-handed compliment when I say that perhaps Lewis’s greatest virtue lies in his showing us how difficult it is to escape the pull of modernism’s all-seeing, all-knowing, eye. From an environmentalist perspective Adorno was quite correct in drawing attention to modernity as first and foremost a form of conceptual domination. Instrumental rationality of the kind that Lewis flirts with in his use of satire and the other controlling tropes of ‘detachment’ imposes representation on the objects of its attention, and this is what happens when a narrative attitude supervenes upon a ‘mere’ description of the ‘wild’ body. Yet even here, in the final representation of ‘Bestre’ (mostly the 1922 version, according to Lafourcade), the narrator is aware that such an attitude is problematic:

Now, what seemed to happen was that, as I bent over my work, an odiously grinning face peered in at my window. The impression of an intrusion was so strong, that I did not even realize at first that it was I who was the intruder. That the window was not my window, and that the face was not peering in but out, that, in fact, it was I myself who was guilty of peering into somebody else’s window: this was hidden from me in the first moment of consciousness about the odious brown person of Bestre.¹³

If we translate this into environmental terms we arrive at a core ‘philosophical’ problem for our understanding of Otherness. In Green Political Thought, Andrew Dobson considers the ‘philosophical foundations’ of ‘green’ awareness. Quoting Tim Hayward, his definition of ‘anthropocentrism’ has an Adornoan tinge: anthropocentrism is ‘the mistake of giving exclusive or arbitrarily preferential consideration to human interests as opposed to the interests of other beings’. Dobson’s discussion of ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ meanings for anthropocentrism is revealing in the context of Adorno and Horkheimer’s sense of Enlightenment. He specifies a ‘weak’ meaning of anthropocentrism as ‘human-centred,’ claiming this to be more neutral than the ‘strong’ meaning, which he paraphrases from Warwick Fox as ‘human-instrumental’. Dobson is on firm ground in suggesting that both definitions see anthropocentrism as ‘unavoidable feature[s] of the human condition,’¹⁴ but the ‘weak’ sense of the term – and this is the one that applies more to the early Wild Body – guards against those forms of eco-criticism which take
radicalism to be essentially anti-humanist in orientation. Pushing out this boat a little further we can discern here a familiar ‘cultural studies’ debate about the relationship between ‘structure’ and ‘agency,’ where the first term is often taken to be decisive in shaping human consciousness. Adorno and the structuralists point to modern consciousness as an ideological production of instrumental thinking; in Adorno’s case only an art which can, as it were, unconsciously mirror the ‘cage’ of instrumentalized modernity can offer some sort of ‘negative’ resistance to it.\textsuperscript{15}

I take it that Dobson’s ‘weak’ sense of anthropocentrism wants to retain the shaping power of a human consciousness which can act in the knowledge, albeit necessarily incomplete, of its situation as a product, rather than the all-seeing author, of modernity. Such partial knowledge paradoxically turns out to be a critical strength rather than a limitation. precisely because it is merely partial. Essentially, Dobson sees Enlightenment as a pharmakon. (This is a Greek word which interests Derrida for its double meaning in Plato’s Phaedrus. Derrida finds the word to mean both ‘poison’ and ‘cure’ in Plato’s text, with consequences for claims about the relationship between speech and writing, where the latter turns out to be both corrupter and saviour in the dissemination of philosophical truth.)\textsuperscript{16} Borrowing the idea for our present context, Enlightenment as poison continues to underwrite the elevation of ‘mechanistic science and its technological consequences’\textsuperscript{17} above environmental sustainability and a respect for environmental Otherness, while as cure, it permits us to think our way out of this Man-made corner using the tools of a self-critical rationality. This is where critical thinking scores (or should score) its double hit. In becoming aware of itself as critique, critical thinking preserves its desire for a fully rational understanding of modernity while recognizing that rationality as presently constituted is part of the problem to be overcome. Lewis’s Kantian stand-off between rationality-as-detachment and the essentially non-rational character of aesthetic perception (and what can ever be truly rational about art?) saves his work from fairly useless derogatory labels, such as ‘classicism’ and ‘reactionary modernism’. In their ‘weak’ anthropocentrism, the early Wild Body stories reveal a narrator caught up in the mystique of the Other, rather than a narrator who simply keeps his distance by objectifying the Other’s identity. This is an absolutely crucial consideration for any sense of the relation of theory to environmental history, to modernity as part of that history, and not least to the impact of the real on theory itself.

In this connection, Dobson’s critiques of ecophilosophical abstractions are apposite, in that they demonstrate how theory can ill afford to become detached from its contexts: drawing on Marx’s Eight Theses on Feuerbach he remarks:

The idea is that there are things in the world that are hard to understand (‘mysteries’), and that their resolution can take on an inadequate theoretical form (‘mysticism’). In our present context, I would argue that the environmental crisis is the ‘mystery’ and that ecophilosophy – in all its various forms – is the ‘mysticism’. Marx’s thesis goes on to point out that adequate understanding lies in the comprehension of the social life and its practices that give rise to the problem, or ‘mystery’. Further, that the tendency towards ‘mystical’ solutions is a function of those very forms of social life (i.e. the present ones), and thus that both the avoidance of ‘mysticism’ and the final resolution of the ‘mystery’ will depend upon changes in social practice. If this is correct, and if I am justified in interpreting ecophilosophy in this light, then ecophilosophy’s failure to address the issue of social practice will disqualify it from ever formulating a satisfactory solution to the problems that have given rise to it.\textsuperscript{18}

I am not concerned here with whether Dobson is actually right or wrong about ‘ecophilosophy’. But his point about theoretical abstractions and their relationship to social life is clearly important for the connection I am making between Lewis and environmentalism. As far
as the development of the Wild Body is concerned, we can trace a more ‘theoretical’ attitude to the Other in the behaviour of Ker-Orr, as noted above: the fact that the narrator becomes the other to the Others he represents signifies the social gulf that opens up in a world which retains its ‘primitive’ allure. But beyond that, we can read Lewis’s avant-garde phase in Vorticism, and the books of social criticism in the 1920s as (failed) attempts to reconnect art (that is, Lewis’s version of a spatial, or ‘philosophical,’ aesthetics) and social practice. The Caliph’s Design of 1919 is an exemplary text in this respect when Lewis insists that art must find a life outside the studio. In Dobson’s reading of Marx, these texts represent a modernist ‘mysticism’ which is symptomatic of a critical practice in increasingly aggressive retreat from the instrumentalism of social life, itself a symptom of Enlightenment’s miscarried notions of genuinely enlightened social progress. (It is, after all, an entirely logical step from Weber’s The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism of 1904–5 to Adorno and Horkheimer’s Dialectic of Enlightenment, completed in the wake of the Jewish Holocaust and the atom bomb.) The annexation of art’s social function by instrumental rationality (art’s identity as merely another item of exchange-value) is something of a pharmakon itself: art’s ‘detachment’ from social relevance grants it a critical leverage that represents the very problem of its social marginality. Lewis’s turn to fascism in the 1930s may even be seen as a desperate and misguided attempt to secure for art the social meaning that it so obviously lacked (a lack which Bloomsbury’s hegemonic aesthetic autonomy could hardly satisfy, particularly for the coterie of its advocates); a kind of false restoration of art’s social value called for in The Caliph’s Design.

One consequence of art’s social marginality is that it becomes the unrecognised Other of modernity. Like the Breton peasants, it has a ‘social’ life that stubbornly resists commodification by dint of its existence as art ‘itself,’ despite the commodified world in which it now has to exist. Art is in this sense like ‘Nature,’ both of which can only be seen through the distorting lens of instrumental rationality. (‘Free’ market economics, as someone once said, knows the price of everything but the value of nothing.) It is surely significant here that Lewis sees Bestre as a kind of proto-artist, and therefore as the aesthetic Other to the narrator’s later description of him as ‘odious’. In Some Innkeepers and Bestre, the first version of the story published in 1909, the narrator asks: ‘Has Bestre discovered the only type of action compatible with artistic creation, assuring security and calm to him that holds the key of the situation, in a certain degree compelling others to accept your rules?’ (231) The uncertainties of this question (who is holding the ‘key’ – Bestre or the narrator?) are indicative of the tension that exists between Self and Other which then becomes such a feature of the Blast publications, however wrapped around with modernist arcana, notably in Enemy of the Stars. The narrator has already told us that ‘a well-known painter and his family were angrily responsive to this something in Bestre that seemed to make the human animal uneasy, as though in his composition were elements derived from the fauna of another planet’.

The invasion of Brittany by the estranged artist – Lewis himself in his tourist-bohemian phase after leaving the Slade School of Art in 1901 – now amounts to a particularly poignant reflection on the impossible search for an Other to put over against the damage done to the world by modernity. Yet the significance of the early Wild Body lies not in the search for a ‘primitivist’ critique of modernity, though it obviously contains this, but in Lewis’s largely inchoate realization that such a critique is framed by the much bigger problem of how difference has already been overwritten by a modernist identity. Hence perhaps those remarks in the little essay ‘Our Wild Body,’ where an ‘original and eager’ body has been made ‘artificial’.

The idea of ‘Nature’ comes under scrutiny here, even as such scrutiny is shown to be inimical to ‘originality’. A body ruled by the ‘calisthenic quack’ is a technological body: no wonder that Lewis would later tells his readers in ‘The Meaning of the Wild Body’ that ‘the root of the comic’ lies in ‘a thing
[or a body] behaving like a person. When the taxi stands for its driver’s body we have a concise image of man become machine, the obverse of his ‘natural’ self. Lewis wants us to recognize a man in the same way that we recognize a cabbage; both are creations of Nature, but the man denies it in order to negotiate the modern world. Hence the person running for his train who has to make his body as obedient as possible to his mind. Yet bodies have limits, as the running man acknowledges: ‘When you run a line of potatoes like ME, you get the knack of them: but they take a bit of moving’. Calisthenics or no calisthenics, the body remains the mind’s ontological vehicle; a vehicle which is vulnerable to the mind’s misuse.

At such moments, Lewis’s work becomes a diagnosis of its own modernist impasse, and hence of the modernity which underpins its situation. In Modernism as a Philosophical Problem, Robert B. Pippin reminds us that Kant is the exemplary philosopher of modernity because the three Critiques are reflexive investigations into what it is possible to know about modernity, which is to say that they construct the philosophical modernity on which they also seek to comment. Lewis’s desire to ‘detach’ himself from modernity, in the form of Futurism, mass culture, the time cult, democracy, or whatever else he considered wrong about it, faces the same problem as the narrator in the early Wild Body. But for Pippin, modernity’s ambitions must be seen as a kind of doubt, or at least a growing certainly that doubts about the role of reason, self-determination and representation amount to a kind of cyclic epistemology:

Read this way, modernity is thus not a hubristic, autochthonous ‘will’ to autonomy and self-sufficiency, as Heidegger and others read it, but is itself irresistibly provoked by the growing, ever more plausible possibility that what had been taken to be absolute and transcendent was contingent and finite, since always ‘self-determined’, a contingent product of human positing. Or, the modern ethos is always as self-deflating as self-inflating, and is always both at the same time. Again as presented by Kant, this means that the central sensibility that results from such a reading of the modern revolution is not so much a need for some new positive realization of who or what we ‘truly’ are, as it is a great, pervasive, eternal uneasiness with anyone pretending to speak in the name of such a truth.

This is readily transposed into Adorno’s profound doubts about the capacity of reason to lift itself up by its own bootstraps in the hope of escaping its own worst effects, or Derrida’s view that metaphysical thinking remains the horizon of its deconstruction at the hands of rationality’s ‘irrational’ aspects. I am arguing, then, that the ‘ethos’ of Lewis’s Wild Body must be seen as part of this kind of self-critical, and thoroughly paradoxical, discourse if we are to assess its environmental ethics. The doubts we now have about the sustainability of Enlightenment practices, propped up by the consumerist dream of the good life, do not simply cancel Enlightenment’s aspirations; rather, they allow us to re-think these aspirations along environmental lines; to respect the Other even if ‘Nature’ – the ‘wild’ body – comes in scarequotes, and even if our belief in the capacity of reason to dig itself out of the pit must be hedged around with doubt in order for any notion of progress to become viable again. Ergo, those who think that modernity is over had better think again.

Lewis’s encounters with the ‘wild’ body shows how progression is also a kind of regression; as the stories develop they seem to founder, in a positive sense, on the problem of how the Other should be represented, thereby complicating the metaphysical pretensions of critical objectivity and ‘detachment’. The morphological development of the ‘wild’ body into the unthinking Subject of modernity, for example the indistinguishable figures inhabiting the cityspace of The Crowd, the automata of the ‘creasing men machines’ in ‘Inferior Religions’, the dupes of democracy in The Art of Being Ruled, and so on, does a necessary violence to Enlightenment, so long as we
preserve an element of autocritique in Lewis’s work. It is this autocritical dimension which in the end rescues Lewis’s constructions and reconstructions of Otherness from being merely invasive. His encounters with ‘Nature’ constitute a complex set of representations which include the possibility that the business of representation traces a faultline through modernity, and an interpretation of this faultline is central to any symptomatic reading of his modernism.

Lewis’s deployment of satire is instructive here. In The Apes of God, that locus classicus of the satiric method, the dispassionate ‘murder’ of the ‘wild’ body produces an excess in the language used to do the killing, as though the reification of the satiric object is at one and the same time a cause for its aesthetic survival. The proliferation of tropes – the weapons of murder as it were – has a reflexive aspect that sits uneasily with satire’s objectivist pretensions, with the result that the world of Apery, centred on the idea of art’s proto-Adornoan ‘societification’, becomes the subject of a modernist sociology, where these conjoined terms mean different things. The idea of ‘Life’ that Lewis reacts against in Blast 1 in 1914 is Art’s antithesis only insofar as it remains a critical term for modernism’s injunctions to keep the real at bay. While it is true, as Peter Nicholls reminds us, that Lewis’s work is ‘animated by a scepticism about metaphysical truths’, it is also powered by a belief in the possibility of metaphysics, or at least a kind of problematic critical objectivity: take this away and texts like The Art of Being Ruled and Time and Western Man simply collapse in on themselves. In this sense, Lewis’s kermesse (carnival) paintings are exemplary: frozen in the aspex of detachment, the figures combine Apollonian and Dionysian features as they represent a dance which is both the object and the unfathomable destination of Art. Lewis’s view of democracy as a kind of misrepresentation in The Art of Being Ruled is part of this paradox. On the one hand, democracy is ideological (or ‘political’) like everything else and detachment, or the ‘intellect’, stands outside of such phenomena; on the other, the book cannot detach itself from its own political trajectory, which exists on this side of the Utopia that Lewis looks for “beyond action and reaction”.

Such a paradoxical economy of representation is thoroughly Kantian, in as much as the identity of the Other shuttles back and forth between an epistemology of modernity and a modernity of epistemology. It is just this ambivalence, or ambiguity, that makes Lewis a poor postmodernist, at least in the sense that his door to the future is too much ajar for cynical realists. Their mode of thought would acknowledge modernity’s predicament but then carry on regardless, as though nothing can be done to improve things. Glossing Sloterdijk, Hal Foster remarks in The Return of the Real: ‘The cynic knows his beliefs to be false or ideological, but he holds to them nonetheless for the sake of self-protection, as a way to negotiate the contradictory demands placed upon him … [t]hus ideological and enlightened at once, the cynic is “reflexively buffered”: his very splitting armors him, his very ambivalence renders him immune’. In other words, the cynical realist’s failure to cope with ambiguity is a way of coping with it; a way of ‘detaching’ himself from the thing or condition he has already acknowledged to be causing his cynicism in the first place. Now I do not think Lewis reaches or even describes this position, though he gets close to it in the situation of the hollow man René Harding in Self Condemned. As I see it, Lewis’s reinscription of the Wild Body problematic in his later work leaves the paradox of representation to be negotiated by his readers, and thus amounts to an ethic of modernity which carries within it a critique of the kind of armouring in Foster’s gloss of Sloterdijk. This critique leaves us with the problem of how to negotiate the Other – Lewis’s ‘wild’ bodies, ‘Nature’ – when the term names that whose identity has been inscribed by Enlightenment as pharmakon.
3. **ENVIRONMENTAL ‘POST’-MODERNITY**

It will be one of the supreme ironies of modernity if an environmental catastrophe (whether of the bang or whimper variety) brings us up sharp against the claims of the referent in the age of the signifier and the dance of simulacra. The onward march of environmental degradation, buttressed by inadequate remedial measures such as the Kyoto agreement, and propelled by the self-serving agendas of global capitalism’s power brokers and the cynical realists of ‘democracy’, will in the end compel us all to think again about the way we think about environmental modernity. Only by re-thinking our attitude to ‘Nature’ as Nature already subject to modernity might we be able to stave off the worst of what is to come. At the moment, though, one is in a way reminded of Beckett: it will go on like this, but it cannot possibly do so when time is fast running out. This is a matter of historical awareness at what may turn out to be the end of a kind of history: the history of exploitation, of a certain kind of progress, of a whole set of cultural assumptions about the natural Other. When history comes to an environmental end, modernity will too late gain a new relevance for postmodernists.

Meanwhile, Lewis’s modernism stands as an extended metaphor for the encounter between modernity and its ‘wild’ bodies. Lewis was no champion of Marxism. But he would surely have appreciated Marx’s canny remark that philosophers had merely explained the world: the point was to change it for the better. For Adorno, for Nietzsche, for Heidegger, for Derrida, and I suspect for Lewis at his most insightful, such explanations are part and parcel of the problem. Indeed, John Bellamy Foster argues that Marx was trying to use a materialist critique of modernity to critique materialism itself, and was thus more Kantian than many commentators would have us believe. Foster refers to a ‘non-deterministic materialism that he [Marx] thought he had found in Epicurus (but couldn’t quite prove given the sources then available)’. This is the Epicurus whose ‘dialectical’ method ‘extended freedom and contingency to human beings and all of nature, while not losing sight of the realm of material necessity’. If we translate this back into the most radical ‘post’-Kantian context (the one that Habermas identifies as the gateway to postmodernity) it becomes possible to re-contextualize Nietzsche’s thoughts on the relationship between Apollo and Dionysus, with the latter’s ‘wild’ body now standing as the implicated Other to the visual bias in metaphysical thinking. Read this way, Lewis becomes an exemplary figure of modernity, rather than a relic of its worst political effects.

Foster clearly believes that a sense of modernity’s possibilities has been undervalued when Marx’s willingness to argue against the grain of an instrumentalist materialism reinstates heuristics in the place otherwise occupied by an Adornoan Jeremiad. By extension, the closures forced on the ‘wild’ body by Lewis’s increasing insistence on a spatial corrective to modernity’s manifold errors looks profitably reflexive. The question then becomes one of what it is still possible to think about Enlightenment’s promissory note when both Marx and Lewis are for some thoroughly historical, the one forever tainted by the violence of left-wing totalitarianism and the industrial pollution of the Eastern Bloc, the other condemned by his own fascist sympathies. Foster acknowledges the danger of ‘merely reading contemporary views on ecology ahistorically back into [Marx’s] work’, and one might add ‘ditto Lewis’. Yet Foster’s remarks on the possibility of using dialectical materialism to interrogate blindspots in Green thinking bring Marx up to date by rescuing his work from its own ‘failure’ to recognize that progress – the socialist Utopia premised on an environmentally unproblematized ‘means of production’ – comes at a price. The autocritical element in Foster’s version of Marx belongs to a critical discourse which includes Lewis. The narrator’s encounter is both confrontation and engagement; a fascination with the idea of what is properly ‘wild’ about this body as well as a seemingly inevitable process of domination.
As I have argued before, the artistic identity of Bestre can be theorized along a Nietzschean axis, where the aesthetic overcoming of modernity stands as a critique of a world reduced to instrumental rationality. But as in Nietzsche, so in Lewis: as well as signifying the deep structures of modernity’s alienation from itself, dualities such as Apollo/Dionysus, Metaphysics/Aesthetics, Self/Other and Spatiality/Temporality also figure for an aspiration that the current limitations of modernity can somehow be overcome, and this means that the capacities of reason cannot be simply sacrificed on the altar of quasi-religious notions of Nature. The debate between ‘rational’ and ‘irrational’ elements in human progress is one that cynical realism cannot, by definition, take part in. What Foster describes as the ‘deeper critique of the alienation of humanity from nature that was central to Marx’s work’ is also inscribed in Lewis’s Wild Body stories, if we care to contextualize their nascent modernism as both symptomatic and predictive. It is precisely the productive tension between exploitation – the first base of a ‘postmodern’ vogue for the politics of cynical realism – and value that we find in these stories. This is what makes them both historical and contemporary in the environmentalist sense of these two terms.

NOTES

2 Weber’s well-known paragraph, now read with an environmental slant, occurs at the end of The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1904-5). I quote from the Talcott Parsons translation (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 182: ‘No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved”.
3 See Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, ‘Les Données Bretonnantes: La Prairie de Représentation’, in Orton and Pollock (eds), Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996). Their essay contrasts the myth of an historically static and ‘backward’ Brittany with the realities of ‘rapid economic developments’ (p. 62), mechanized farming, tourism, etc. It was on the back of these capitalist-industrial practices that a ‘bourgeois’ conception of the region’s (paradoxical) virtues as Other was built.
5 Ibid., p. 17.
6 As is well known, Kant granted aesthetic perception a kind of knowledge that was yet not the knowledge of rational understanding. The ‘Holy Dread’ that Nietzsche refers to in Nachlass (an unpublished manuscript, part of which appears in The Will to Power) arises when aesthetic ‘truth’ is seen to lie outside rational understanding as such. The critical orientation of such ‘truth’ to rationalized modernity is thus constituted in its alienation from rational critiques of modernity. Since both rationality and aesthetic perception are forms of knowledge about modernity, their relationship is aporetic. This aporia is then symptomatically critical of modernity’s philosophical incompleteness. In the context of
critical theory and poststructuralism see J. M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993). Note too that Heidegger, to whom I refer later in my argument, drew on this document when attempting to establish Nietzsche’s authentic philosophy, and particularly his interest in Nietzsche’s thoughts on what cannot be said within the history of Western metaphysics. A useful discussion can be found in Alan D. Schrift, *Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation: Between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction* (London: Routledge, 1990), particularly pp. 14-20.

7 As early as *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche attempts the overcoming of rational(ized) modernity from within his own metaphysical horizon when he says that the world can only be justified as an *aesthetic* phenomenon. In this context the figure of Apollo exists for many commentators as the symbol of metaphysical modernity that the ‘primal’ figure of Dionysus undercuts. From a Kantian perspective this amounts to more than a mind/body opposition.

And with Foster in mind we should note Maurice Blanchot’s comment that Nietzsche writes under a ‘double refusal’ in which both mediation (Apollo’s metaphysical rejection of Dionysus) and immediacy (a Dionysian rejection of Apollo) are denied. A good discussion of the issues in a Kantian context occurs in Alan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (London: University of California Press, 1987).

8 *The Complete Wild Body*, p. 18.


12 I am thinking here of those elements of colour which appear to have no specific denotational function in Lewis’s pictures of modernity and which appear to exist ‘for themselves’ as aesthetic components. Their aesthetic identity then appears more fluid than would otherwise be indicated in a rational critique of rationalization. *Planners (A Happy Day)* (M145) would be one example.


15 Adorno’s theory of modern music sees Schoenberg’s twelve tone system as a mirror of rationalized modernity. Only through such mirroring can rationalized modernity’s inhumanity be revealed as a form of critique. In the act of denying the immediate gratifications and triviality of ‘mass’ cultural music, such a composition enchains its own freedom from system. In *Philosophy of Modern Music* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1987) Adorno writes: ‘This seriousness is today so much greater since the alienation present in the consistency of artistic technique forms the very substance of the work of art .... Modern music sacrifices itself to this effort. It has taken upon itself all the darkness and guilt of the world. Its fortune lies in the perception of misfortune; all of its beauty is in denying itself the illusion of beauty .... It is the surviving message of despair from the shipwrecked’ (p. 133).


17 *Green Political Thought*, p. 11.
18 Ibid., pp. 60-61.
19 *The Caliph’s Design* is a key document of Lewis’s avant-garde dilemma. When he states on p. 12 of the ‘Author’s Preface’ that ‘You must get Painting, Sculpture, and Design out of the studio and into life somehow or other’ (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1986, original italics) this is not only an advance comment upon his own isolation in the 1920s, but also an indicator of the problems faced when aesthetic perception fails to measure up to the demands of utility. This ‘failure’ is the basis of Lewis’s (auto)critical platform, beginning with Vorticism. In short, to get a grip on ‘Life’ you must be detached from it; to be socially relevant means that art must be socially useless.

21 Ibid., pp. 252-3.
22 Ibid., p 158, original italics.
23 Ibid., p. 160.

25 Given Lewis’s sociological trajectory in *The Art of Being Ruled* I use the word ‘Subject’ in its Althusserian sense. In *Essays on Ideology* (London: Verso, 1984), the structuralist Althusser famously tells us that ‘ideology has always already interpellated individual as subjects … Hence individuals are ‘abstract’ with respect to the subject they always already are’. (p. 50) For Althusser, the category of the ‘individual’ is produced by pre-existing ideological structures, notably the ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’. Lewis’s sense of democracy in 1926 runs along these lines when individuality – that prized category in *Blast* 1 – is reduced to the demands of democratic conformity, where the idea of critical (self-) consciousness is a contradiction in terms. The connection with Adorno on the standardization of thought under the ‘culture industry’ is obvious enough. The donkey which ‘powers’ the wheel at Carisbrooke in ‘Inferior Religions’ is the key metaphor in 1917-1927.

27 Ibid., p. 273.
28 See *The Art of Being Ruled* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1989), Part XIII.

31 See, for example, Jürgen Habermas, ‘The Entry into Postmodernity: Nietzsche as a turning point’, in Thomas Docherty (ed.), *Postmodernism: A Reader* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 51-61. This is a convenient extract from *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1987).