Advanced Introduction

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That old question: what is an Introduction? I should make it clear at the outset that Gasiorek’s book does very well to cover so much, and in so much depth, in a mere 130 pages of text, plus notes and bibliography: it would have been good to see what an expanded version of the argument would have looked like. The fact that Gasiorek omits anything on Lewis’s visual art is, of course, dictated by the limitations of the series, though it is a pity: I have always thought that you can’t do Lewis properly by limiting your range of reference to his literary works and books of cultural criticism, as here. But let me say straight away: this book should be required reading for anyone interested in Lewis, even if, as an introduction, it may be tough going for the uninitiated, especially students. (What exactly is the target audience of this series?).

Given the limitations of a short review, perhaps I can best serve readers by eschewing a descriptive account of Gasiorek’s arguments in favour of a few gestures towards some of the historical and critical contexts that Gasiorek was unable to include or develop, starting here by laying some emphasis on the importance of the early Wild Body stories to Lewis’s later, and hugely provocative, constructions of Otherness. It seems to me that Lewis’s early explorations of a ‘primitivist’ critique of modernity are one of the keys to our understanding of his works’ political significance, including some unexpected autocritical components that complicate obvious criticisms of a deterministic right-wing politics avant la lettre of the 1930s. The idea of an irrational Nietzschean body has always been double-edged (one aspect leads, after all, to fascism), but the ‘wild’ body can now be seen to function as a sort of Foucauldian critique of modernity’s refication, a subject that motivates some important examples of Vorticist art. I mention this at the outset because, predictably, Lewis’s politicisation of Art (the capitalized controller of values in Blast 1) is the ultimate target of a mainly adverse critical trajectory. In this, and other respects, I should also point out immediately that essential critical material can be found outside the pages of the monographs listed on a selective, though very useful, bibliography.

Undoubtedly, Gasiorek gives us insightful and productive readings of Vorticism and the Blast publications, Tar, The Apes of God, The Revenge for Love and Self Condemned (the last four seen as key novels in Lewis’s critical armoury), together with some astute comment on Lewis’s contradictory politics and, relatedly, his often despairing, though also contradictory, ruminations on the relationships between art and the public sphere. All this should by itself convince the open-minded reader why Lewis’s work remains both important and contentious. What’s missing, then, is a developed sense of historical and theoretical contexts. To take an obvious example, it is a pity that modernism’s dis/connections with postmodernism are not explicitly broached, even if some remarks are suggestive: a reference to ‘the discursive nature of all values’ (93) in the pages on The Revenge for Love immediately call to mind arguments about the nature and legacy of Enlightenment modernity which remain largely bogged down along the neo-pragmatist axis (Nietzsche’s Rorty vs. Weber’s Habermas, so to speak), with Jameson’s Fables of Aggression (bound up as it is with the elaborate theoretical apparatus of The Political Unconscious) as a problematic contributor to this debate. A greater sense of what is at stake in contemporary theory is required here, and elsewhere, though I am generally sympathetic to Gasiorek’s analytical method, given the limitations of his brief.

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Gasior is an admirably assured grasp of his subject, and he writes very well, though perhaps a bit too well when some of the deeper contradictions of Lewis’s work are treated to a kind of critical élan which can foist an unwarranted degree of lucidity on decidedly problematic ideas and contexts. Some readers will welcome this approach, which on its own briskly-focused terms is always apropos, and thus decidedly useful for those struggling to find a way through the Lewisian thicket. But there are limitations when the all-too-brief ‘Conclusion: Beyond Action and Reaction’ is unable to follow up on the theoretical leads littering the previous chapters. For example, there is surely much more to be said about Lewis’s sometimes strikingly ‘Adornoan’ aspects (see Mark Perrino’s study of The Apes of God, listed on the bibliography, for starters) and I found myself occasionally clucking at this and other ‘missed’ opportunities. The Notes sometimes point the way, but what’s really needed is a better sense of how Lewis can be shown to be an important (some might say major) player on the stage of twentieth century artistic and cultural theory, not least because of the conflicted nature of his ideas. Unfortunately, and despite ten entries in the Index and a claim on page 122 that he was a ‘huge early influence’, Gasior short-changes Lewis’s Nietzsche inheritance – I’ll come back to this issue in a moment.

The ‘limitations’ of Gasior’s approach may be felt in paragraphs (sometimes sentences) which might be thought to cram in too much, such as the following on pp. 36-7, which is not untypical. Those familiar with the territory will know what Gasior is talking about, but I wonder what qualifies this as part of an ‘introduction’ when the uninitiated reader might well cry out for a bit of unpacking:

Lewis argued in Time and Western Man that the greater part of post-war avant-garde art and writing was derivative and in thrall to philosophies of flux, which dissolved a shared public world into subjective sensation. No longer committed to the distillation of meaning by the search for conceptual clarity, such art immersed itself in the flux (for example in Futurist celebrations of movement, modernist evocations of the stream of consciousness, Surrealist defences of aleatory writing) and succumbed to its contingent, formless, and arbitrary temporal flow. Lewis followed Schopenhauer in believing that art should concentrate on particular objects, remove them from temporality, and, by so isolating them, reveal their essential qualities (WLA 208). Bergson argued the opposite, claiming that the act of conceptualisation falsifies human experience of reality since it obscures temporality and cuts out discrete ‘moments’ from an interrelated whole. For Lewis, this neo-heracliteanism condemned human beings to a life where public criteria were dissolved into a self-asserting solipsism in which individuals were ‘thrown back wholesale from the external, the public world’ and driven into their ‘primitive private mental caves’.

Aside from any disagreements one might have with the line of argument here – for example, Bergson’s objections to the reified nature of modernity have a good deal in common with Lewis’s aesthetic critiques of same – piling up references and contexts in this way tends to push the reading out towards its contexts. In the wake of Derrida there is a deeper point to be made here about the way that Lewis poses problems for critics who attempt an overview of his work, and in so doing close down its symptomatic aspects. As I’ve argued elsewhere, Lewis’s notorious ‘externalist’ aesthetic is constructed out of both rational and aesthetic components, where Kant’s aporetic sense of philosophical modernity remains for me decisive.1 Schopenhauer (cited as a key influence on ‘Physics of the Not-Self’) is in this respect less useful than Nietzsche. In this latter
respects things come to a head when Gąsiorek claims in his ‘Conclusion’ that Lewis ‘systematically rejected all arts and philosophies of a dionysian [sic] hue [which] depended on the mistaken belief that [social and cultural] regeneration may be brought about when the intellect is abandoned and the subject achieves union with a mystically conceived [Bergsonian] élan vital’. (122) If this were true (and leaving aside the imbrication of Nietzsche and Bergson) Lewis’s modernism – and hence his politics – would be a good deal easier to fathom. (Indeed, many critics have played down the twists and turns of Lewis’s thought for political convenience, usually grounded in Lewis’s espousal of fascism in the 1930s.)

The truth is more complex when, beginning with the early Wild Body stories, the Dionysian impulse in Lewis’s thought figures for an aesthetic rejoinder to his own attempts at a rational understanding of what it means to be enlightened. Though Gąsiorek is essentially correct on p. 116 when he invokes Kant in the cause of a critically disjunctive Lewis, the possibilities arising from Nietzsche’s relationship to a self-critical enlightenment are absolutely crucial. If we accept Lewis’s diagnosis of reified modernity (which, in extremis, actually becomes aporetically autoreferential with the proliferation of satiric tropes in The Apes of God), an aesthetic rejoinder to ‘externalism’, or ‘detachment’ (both signifying rationality’s claims for objectivity) is actually derived from a Dionysian impulse that is never quite banished from his rationalist protocols. Thus, while Lewis’s own attempts to preserve art from an indifferent, or compromised, public sphere are themselves symptomatic of modernity, they also contain an antidote, however inchoate, to the cultures of reification, commodification and alienation, to include (Perrino’s Apes of God again) the socially autonomous, and thus politically ring-fenced, visual formalisms of Roger Fry and Clive Bell.

In short, Lewis almost manages to have his cake and eat it when a rational, or sociological, analysis of modernity goes hand in hand with a more ineffable aesthetic rejoinder to the business of such critique. In this respect I doubt that Lewis ever consciously got to grips with the real implications of his own achievement, and it is a pity that Gąsiorek tends to treat his works as simply historical, though there are suggestions of how things might be taken forward in a concluding reference to the politics of ‘difference’ in the ‘Conclusion’. What’s ideally needed here, as elsewhere, is a shift of focus away from Lewis the man, to Lewis as an inheritor of a complex and still unfolding Enlightenment heritage. Here, as elsewhere, modernism, and especially the kind which anticipated poststructuralist initiatives, sets traps for an unguardedly positivist hermeneutics. Again, this is not to deny Gąsiorek’s achievement, and his readings are in many ways suggestive. But in my view the needs of an introduction are not incompatible with a more contextually-organized historiography: one can (given the space) have one’s cake and eat it, albeit this would challenge any narrowly-focused picture of Lewis as one of modernity’s pre-eminent seers.

All this said, there is more than a hint in Gąsiorek’s analysis of Tarr that deeper currents are moving. I agree that this important, and in some ways still underappreciated novel, is a reflection on its central character’s existential realization of his philosophical manifesto (art as ‘deadness’, etc.) when this is counterposed to the activities and (my word) Dionysian values of Kreisler as Tarr’s other half, and further that this scenario is complicated by the novel’s sexual politics (where in my view the proto-feminist role given to Anastasya is yet another complication for those who look for a straightforward misogyny). At one point Gąsiorek says that Tarr ‘can no more escape the consequences of the [mind-body] dualism he sets up than Jekyll can evade the clutches of Hyde’. (31) This is, in fact, an inappropriate comparison: once we read Kreisler as a Nietzschean ‘wild’ body, Tarr’s dualism is not so much a matter of repression as a search for an impossible solution to modernity’s disreption. So yes, it is correct to aver that ‘Tarr turns
ambivalence into a structural principle’ (32); the more extensive point being that under modernity no single existential viewpoint, artistic credo, political orientation or sexual preference can repair the damage done to the world by modernity, at the same time that for Lewis what one might term a Nietzschean ‘perspectivism’ (now ‘philosophically’ vested in Rorty’s anti-foundationalist neo-pragmatism, whose modernist precursors can be found in Cubism’s multiple viewpoints, the Bergsonian flux, Virginia Woolf’s exploration of interiority, etc.) was also decidedly problematic. I don’t see Tarr as a ‘philosophical’ failure because Tarr’s artistic credo cannot live up to its stated aims. But nor does it represent the kind of self-interrogation that Gałsiośek seems to imply (33) when the text’s use of ‘detachment’ as a philosophical principle accords with Lewis’s longer term hope for rationality to be restored to itself, thus to achieve a more constructive dialogue with a ‘genuine’ aesthetic perception increasingly annexed from the refined public sphere. (What would Lewis have made of Brit Art? Or the Turner Prize? See The Demon of Progress in the Arts for his anticipation of this kind of postmodernism, whose manifestations can only acquire critical value through their frank embrace of the consumerist modus operandi.) In the end I think Gałsiośek just about gets there when he says that ‘[Tarr] rejects those modernisms that embrace psychological inwardness in an attempt to represent life more fully, but it shows uncompromisingly that another modernism — Lewis’s own — may entomb reality in a mausoleum [so that] Kreisler is a “wild” body run amok, and Tarr is a frozen ratio masquerading as a human being’. (33) This is fine as far as it goes, but the reader will have to search for the larger picture elsewhere.

An ‘ideal’ introduction, of the kind posited here, would place some emphasis on Lewis’s claims for a spatial recuperation of modernity when Time and Western Man confirms that a putatively philosophical text is written to prioritise the values of the eye. Aside from the actual paintings and drawings (for example, how did Vorticism deal visually with Futurism?), there are the metaphysical implications of spatiality (what Jameson called Lewis’s ‘Archimedean’ principle) which inform Lewis’s struggles to establish a ‘detached’ overview of modernity, and hence a definitive political position. Any want of theorization here is bound to compromise the argument. I find it hard to accept Gałsiośek’s claim that Lewis ‘maintained a “purist” view in which art was conceived as an autonomous practice that functioned at its best when free from all extraneous pressures, ideological or otherwise’ (37) when this is not contextualized by the ‘Nietzschean’ issues referred to above. True, some statements in The Art of Being Ruled can be made to fit Gałsiośek’s formulation. But in proclaiming the partiality of the eye in Time and Western Man, Lewis’s sense of an ‘autonomous practice’ runs into the problem of how a visual/spatial recuperation of modernity can acknowledge its own historical contingency, and hence its political provisionality. (Lewis’s move towards, and then away from, fascism, is instructive in this respect.) At a more basic level, how is it possible to discuss Blast 1 without adequately dealing with its typographical layout (Wees of 1972 is listed on the bibliography), when what this text looks like is a key component of its ‘avant-garde’ meaning? Rather than a tilt at Gałsiośek, my reservations here can be taken as a comment on precisely the kind of (academic) specializations that Lewis was trying to overcome. In any event, Habermas on the development of modernity’s autological spheres is surely a key reference point where the fate of art and aesthetics is concerned. Given the presence of Nietzsche, how else can one come to terms with the working out of Enlightenment implied by Gałsiośek’s claim on behalf of Lewis that the ‘independent life predicated of artists requires them to be able to stand outside the machine’? (123) The marginality of art, to some extent actively embraced by Lewis in the 1920s, both enables and disables critique when rational and aesthetic perceptions are tied together in pursuit of an avant-garde profile.

Gałsiośek’s reading of Self Condemned hits a nail on the head, and despite any incidental reservations, for my money Chapter 6, entitled ‘History, Identity, and the Role of Art’,
contains the best of this ‘introduction’ to Lewis’s work. Whether we are dealing with art, politics, or just the terrifyingly banality of modernity’s brute experience, history tells us that parcelling things up into neat containers is disastrous. Gasiorek sees Lewis’s final novel as facing up to the dilemmas he set himself in Tarr. Here

It is not just that Tarr’s asceticism is shown to be a disaster for the subject, but that it is connected to a wider historical macrocosm. The novel implies that any attempt to achieve enlightenment by suppressing affect and desire, on the grounds that they are irrational, cannot succeed. [...] Internal repression mirrors the utopian desire to exclude the irrational from history, and the text portrays this as insane idealism. It is the mark of the promethean fantasist. (111)

Gasiorek’s claim that ‘Lewis had never believed that art should serve politics’ needs a tighter definition of the political (what is going on in Blast 1 for example?), but it is undeniably the case that a dialogue between detachment and engagement (Sartrean or otherwise) was central to Lewis’s thought because it was so fraught at the level of both theory (Tarr again) and practice – Lewis’s disappearance into the reading room of the British Museum to work on the big books of cultural criticism in the 1920s after he had called for the integration of art and life in The Caliph’s Design of 1919 being a notable case in point. The problem for Lewis, as is so often the case with a certain stripe of modernist ‘elitism’, is one of how to protect one’s special insights while testing them out in a largely uninterested, endemically trivializing, and thus generally hostile, world. I’m still not sure if Lewis is to be admired or pitied for his ‘solution’ to this dilemma when, as Gasiorek puts it in establishing a continuity from early to late work, ‘he was urging a position beyond action and reaction and arguing that balance was central to true artistic vision. [...] a transfiguring vision that went beyond the familiar insights of profane life and transcended the clash of ideologies [found there].’ (116) My admiration for someone who continued to believe in the value of art for modern life is almost boundless, while the sheer scale of the world’s problems makes such a belief increasingly hyperbolic when menaced by the cultures of reification.

Finally then: can we agree to call this an ‘Advanced Introduction’, with all the conundrums such a title entails? And please don’t forget that a visual consciousness was absolutely central to Lewis’s understanding of modernism, and indeed the whole business of Enlightenment modernity....

NOTES

1 See David A. Wragg, Wyndham Lewis and the Philosophy of Art in Early Modernist Britain: Creating a Political Aesthetic, New York and Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2005 (manuscript submitted in 2003), which develops ideas first broached in previous publications, none of which appears on Gasiorek’s bibliography. There are some overlaps between Gasiorek’s and my own readings of Lewis’s work – see, for example, p. 12 where we learn that ‘the sliding apart of the symbolic from the material results in an existential dread and a sense of the absurd expressed through a self-deconstructing textuality’. I am less convinced about the critical value of ‘existential dread and a sense of the absurd’ when it comes to the fate of Enlightenment modernity, but the other components of this sentence certainly deserve attention.
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