The Enemy and his Enemies

Philip Head

'I don't want rudeness to be underestimated: it is by far the most humane form of contradiction and, in the midst of effeminacy, one of our foremost virtues'

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*

I. THE ENEMY

Lewis took up the public persona of ‘the Enemy’ in mid-career, in 1927, when the first issue of his literary periodical of that title appeared. Publication ceased after its third issue, in 1929. The cover of that (unpremeditatedly final) issue, proclaiming it as ‘the vehicle of his criticism’, had observed:

The ‘Enemy’ is the notorious author, painter and publicist, Mr Wyndham Lewis. He is the Diogenes of the day: he sits laughing in the mouth of his tub and pours forth his invective upon all passers-by, irrespective of race, creed, rank or profession, and sex.

In retrospect, 1929 marks the apogee of Lewis’s self-promotion as ‘the Enemy’. The years next following, 1930 and 1931, saw (as well as his marriage to Anne Hoskyns) travels to Germany and Morocco, publication of his controversial satire *The Apes of God* and the ‘notorious’, if prescient, book on Hitler. The persona of ‘the Enemy’ per se played no explicit part in these matters. The salience of ‘the Enemy’ nevertheless lingered in the public realm. Following an earlier article on the art of enmity by Maurice Dekobra in the popular *Daily Herald* newspaper, Lewis provided a humorous follow-up article in May 1932 on ‘What it feels like to be an Enemy’, observing that the Enemy ‘will be a lucky dog if he doesn’t find himself lumped with a low-down lot of the type of [several notorious named miscreants such as Al Capone]’. It was also in 1932 that the critic Hugh Gordon Porteus – who had direct personal access to Lewis at this time – included a 42-page ‘Note on the Enemy’ in his *Discursive Exposition* upon Lewis and his works, where he records that ‘Behind the warlike disguise and riotous front of the Enemy proper, the metaphysician is always in ambush’. The Enemy subsequently made a public reappearance in 1933 in an 18-canto section of Lewis’s long verse-sequence *One-Way Song*. Notes made by Lewis for a reading in America some years later indicate that he had intended the reappearance to provide ‘at once a ceremonial interment of The Enemy, and a glorification of that personnage [sic]’. In his 1950 autobiography *Rude Assignment* Lewis explained that he had originally adopted the title with its ‘sinister sound’ ‘on the principle of giving the sensation-loving public what it wants’, and – quoting what he had written in the editorial to the first number of *The Enemy* – also to combat ‘that peculiar, debilitated, unanimity typical of the present period’.

In a less pejoratively phrased, but implicitly parallel view of the 1920s as anti-climactic, the
historian Noël Annan commented thirty years later: ‘What had been revolutionary [among the intellectual élite] between 1900 and 1920 was now to become orthodox’. If, as Lewis’s article in the *Daily Herald* perhaps indicates, and as Paul Edwards has suggested, the image of ‘the Enemy’ caused a ‘lasting detriment’ to his reputation, it also constituted a successful sortie in ‘brand marketing’ whose impact long outlived him. Of the half-dozen or more published books on Lewis to have included the words ‘the Enemy’ in their main titles, the most comprehensive usage appears in Jeffrey Meyers’s eponymous biography (1980), which implicitly extended the ‘enemy’ carapace over Lewis’s entire career. It suggests, even, that Lewis’s 1912 *Timon of Athens* portfolio ‘gave him the first public opportunity to present his hostile “Enemy” persona’. The adversarial approach adopted by Lewis in his critical writings sprang from his belief in its effectiveness. ‘It was probably a good thing’, he wrote in *Rude Assignment*, ‘to have something as contradictory around: somebody who did not hasten to agree with everybody else’. (213) The ‘Enemy’ ethos had forerunners in his previous incursions into uncompromisingly combative editorship, in *Blast* in 1914–15, and in *The Tyro* in 1921–22. Here and elsewhere Lewis took up the archetypal role of *der Fremde* (the stranger or outsider), someone who dares to put in doubt the once-and-for-ever character of the order imposed on and by a common praxis, and consequently to question the common culture and ordering structure of a particular established entity. That Lewis estranged himself consciously, and played the role of ‘the Outsider’ deliberately, he made evident in his editorial to the first number of *The Enemy*:

I have moved outside. [...] The advantages incident to this removal are many. First, being in solitary schism, with no obligations at the moment towards party or individual colleagues, I can resume [summarize] my opinion of the society I have just left, and its characteristics, which else might remain without serious unpartisan criticism.

This *modus operandi* absolved him from the implicit obscurantism of participating in a critical consensus where many things are left unsaid, not because they have ceased to be problematic, but because a collaborative *démarche* can be ‘spun’ as constructive, rather than as the prudential evasion it really reflects. As Lewis noted in *The Writer and the Absolute*, ‘once concessions start there is no end to them, until everything that lends force to the writing has at last disappeared’. In the 1920s Lewis focussed his critical attention particularly on two pervasive forces of that time, each with its own distinctive (and in many ways contradictory) ‘common praxis’, one classifiably ‘creative’ and the other ‘reiterative’ (terms in certain respects overlapping). Those other antagonists who passed by the mouth of his tub attracted his invective, but they did not provide the over-arching impediments to a resolution of the major cultural issues of the day presented by his two main enemies, ‘Bloomsbury’ and the ‘One-dimensional Man’.

Vol. XIII 45

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II. BLOOMSBURY

Home, in the early 1900s, to members of an artistic-literary coterie, most of them approximate coevals of Lewis, linked frequently to one another by family ties or university acquaintance, the central London district of Bloomsbury became, after 1910, identified more with a particular attitude of mind, or mode of conduct, than with any residential propinquity. It constituted an outstanding example of a *Denkkollektiv* (thought collective), the phenomenon classified by the Polish medical scientist Ludwik Fleck in 1935 as ‘a community of persons mutually exchanging ideas or maintaining intellectual interaction’, with a ‘thought style’ that is ‘the entirety of intellectual preparedness or readiness for one particular way of seeing and acting and no other’, where Truth ‘is always, or almost always, determined within a thought style’.

After an acrimonious dispute in 1913 with Roger Fry, Bloomsbury’s leading art pundit, about the placing of artistic commissions, Lewis fell out decisively with the coterie. In his biography of Lewis, Meyers suggests ‘five main reasons’ why Lewis subsequently ‘hated’ [sic] ‘Bloomsbury’: ‘He felt they had deliberately hurt his career, he disliked their aesthetic values, their snobbish behaviour, their politics and pacifism, and their homosexual ethos’. (163) These charges all hold, and Meyers substantiates them in detail, although it might be more correct to say that Lewis despised rather than ‘hated’ them, and his antipathy derived more from his sense of the overweening constringency of the Bloomsbury thought-collective than those particular aversions. To oppose Bloomsbury became a matter of intellectual principle, a facing up to a deleterious clique able to intimidate others from justifiable criticism by the ruthless exercise of their influence. Historians have mostly reaffirmed that view. For example, in his study of twentieth-century neo-romantic artists, Malcolm Yorke recounts that, after 1918:

> With no other grouping strong enough to oppose them, the Bloomsburys inserted fingers into every pie. Virginia Woolf became influential as a novelist-critic, Maynard Keynes as an economist, Leonard Woolf as political scientist and publisher, Lytton Strachey as historian-biographer, Desmond MacCarthy as literary critic, and Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant as painters. Their intertwining talents, life styles and love affairs set a fast pace for London’s social and intellectual aspirants to follow, and to be excluded from their salons was to be cast to the outer fringes of modernity.

The passing of its best-known figures, Lytton Strachey in 1932 and Roger Fry in 1934, did not bring the Bloomsbury influence to an end. Reinforcements came from some second-generation members of the original ‘Bloomsburys’, and several young, usually well-connected, aspirants to literary or artistic fame found association with the Bloomsbury coterie potentially career-enhancing. The poet, editor and publisher John Lehmann (1907–87) recorded that ‘in the late twenties and thirties I had many friends in Bloomsbury and among its adherents’. Commenting in 1950 on how, in the 1920s, most journalistic
channels had been blocked to him by ‘Bloomsburies’, Lewis added that they ‘filled, *as they still do*, the politico-literary press’ (my italics). Malcolm Yorke also comments that ‘the Bloomsbury was still sniping’ at those they disliked in 1952. (140) The Bloomsbury phenomenon, although increasingly merged with the more diffused literary ‘establishment’ of the time, disappeared only around the date of Lewis’s own death in 1957.

**III. One-Dimensional Man**

Unlike the ‘creative praxis’, however blemished, of ‘Bloomsbury’, the ‘reiterative praxis’ of ‘the masses’ (a term to be defined) presented Lewis with a community of ordinariness, in terms of its valuations, attentiveness and social presuppositions. In the 1960s the German-American ‘Critical Theorist’ Herbert Marcuse identified a mass of ‘mutilated individuals’ within a society based on commodity production whom he designated as ‘one-dimensional men’, unable to express themselves in ways not already prescribed for them. Fredric Jameson summarised the Marcusian thesis in these terms:

> For Marcuse [...] it is precisely increased sexual freedom, greater material abundance and consumption, freer access to culture, better housing, more widely available educational benefits and increased social, not to speak of automotive mobility, which are the accompaniment to increasing manipulation and the most sophisticated forms of thought-control, increasing abasement of spiritual and intellectual life, a degradation and dehumanization of existence.

The concept lying behind the idea of the one-dimensional man (or ‘anti-individual’ as Michael Oakeshott described him), and no less pertinently behind Lewis’s earlier misgivings about the prevailing culture – the conflict between the critical spirit in philosophy and ‘the masses’ – had in the mid-nineteenth century preoccupied the left-Hegelian philosopher Bruno Bauer (who died in 1882, the year of Lewis’s birth). ‘The masses’, he wrote, ‘desire nothing but simple ideas to avoid the trouble of coming to grips with things; shibboleths to settle all matters in advance; high-sounding phrases with which to destroy all criticism.’ Bauer’s contemporary, the libertarian Max Stirner, suggested that the issues lay less between the philosophical ‘critical spirit’ which Bauer professed and ‘the masses’, but rather between the pair of them, linked by a common sense of dissatisfaction with prevailing bourgeois ethos and its ‘cashbox aesthetics’, and consequently with the entire bourgeois world around them. ‘Does not the critic, so placed’, he asked, ‘himself belong to the “masses”? Bauer had, in fact, accused the ‘middle class’ of devoting itself ‘to nothing but the interests of its mediocrity; i.e. it remains always limited to itself, and conquers at last only through its bulk, with which it has succeeded in tiring out the efforts of passion, enthusiasm, consistency – through its surface, into which it absorbs a part of the new ideas.’ (75) Reading Lewis *in extenso*, one can see in his revulsion from the ‘reiterative praxis’ of ‘the masses’, a distaste not specifically, or primarily, with the ‘proletariat’, but with a
much more widely-drawn class-spectrum of ‘anti-individuals’. The ‘masses’ thus represent for him mixed social elements, characterised by their impoverished aesthetic.

The problem later to be identified as ‘one-dimensionality’ Lewis had perceived as early as 1917 in his ‘Code of a Herdsman’, where he advised the Herdsman (the individual aloof from the herd) to ‘cherish and develop, side by side, your six most constant indicators of different personalities’ and to hunt down ‘weaknesses caught from commerce with the herd’. A decade later, in The Art of Being Ruled, Lewis replaced the concept of ‘the herd’ with that of ‘the puppet’ (an image derived from Goethe) to denote the carrier of a ‘reiterative’ culture, in effect a more ‘political’ concept that ‘the herd’, whose members can still express unbeholden their own bovine (or ovine) nature. The ‘puppet’, manipulated by the puppet-master, has by comparison nothing to express except what the puppet-master ordains. (Arguably the typical ‘bourgeois’ may himself be merely a ‘puppet’ of ‘the immanent laws of capitalism’. Also arguably, an extended class-concept of ‘the masses’ does not indicate a greater integration within society but a wider atomization and vulnerability to manipulation in particular by means of what Lewis described as the ‘mesmeric methods of advertisement’ which affect all classes, not least those actively engaged in the pursuits of ‘public relations’.)

In the processes of ‘suggestion and persuasion’ practised in ‘western democratic countries’, Lewis gave primacy to popular education, as providing ‘a decade of soaking in certain beliefs and conventions’, a form of ‘character-stimulus’ that was, he thought, ‘the reverse of mind-stimulus’. ‘What we call conventionally the capitalist state’, he suggested, ‘is as truly an educationalist state’. Pragmatically the ‘educationalist state’ provides as usefully for the growing bureaucratic needs of advanced capitalism, those of an incursive state socialism, and those of the hybrid economies which developed in the general furtherance of political and economic planning in the 1920s and 1930s in Europe and America. Half a century after Lewis, the sociologist Gianfranco Poggi, in his study The Development of the Modern State, commented:

[T]he state’s costly effort to enlarge and modernize the public education system, whatever the stated aims behind it, serves the end (not always achieved) of supplying industry with inputs of trained manpower and sophisticated scientific, technological and managerial know-how it needs to function and to advance.

To underline Lewis’s argument we have the later comment of the distinguished French historian Fernand Braudel: in developed countries generally ‘universal education tends to produce more specialists and a lower level of general culture [...] a small elite, a very small number of illiterates and a mass of people for whom education is mainly vocational, not a form of higher intellectual training’.23
IV. NEMO

In 1964 the novelist John Fowles published *The Aristos*, a book whose title means – both etymologically and in the author’s usage – ‘the best attainable’, not its class-arrogated derivation. Fowles collected here his ideas on ‘matters of general concern (such as the meaning of life, the nature of the good society, the limitations of the human condition)’. In his preface to a revised edition he disclosed that ‘the great bulk’ of the text was written in the 1950s – which was the time of Lewis’s last major critical writings, *The Writer and the Absolute* and *The Demon of Progress in the Arts*. Fowles told ‘how the world struck one young Englishman’ at that time, a reflection that resembled in many ways a Lewisian view of the world, if less ruminatively so. Wishing, he said, to maintain ‘the freedom of the individual from all those pressures-to-conform’ and ‘to record his disbelief in the quasi-liberal emotionalism’ that surrounded him, Fowles published the book ‘against the advice of almost everybody who read it [as] it would do my “image” [as an emergent successful novelist] no good’. Attracting, in consequence, ‘the kind of view that goes more with avant-garde social milieux and fashionable newspapers than with any deep-held conviction or reasoned attempt to destroy reaction’, he subsequently endured allegations that he was a ‘crypto-fascist’.

Like Lewis, Fowles believed in ‘the polar view of life: that individuals, nations, ideas are far more dependent for strength, energy and fuel on their opposites, enemies, and contraries than surface appearances suggest’. In his later preface he recorded that history ‘has persistently seen life in terms of a struggle between the Few and the Many, between “Them” and “Us”’. These represent ‘ideal types’ where the descriptive form has a purposively exaggerated unity, and Fowles’s intention in *The Aristos* had been ‘to attempt to analyse, through a parable, some of the results of this confrontation’. He held that ‘the vast mass of mankind are not highly intelligent – or highly moral, or highly gifted artistically, or indeed highly qualified to carry out any of the nobler human activities’, but Fowles conceived that mankind could not be split into two clearly-defined groups exclusively embodying the ‘ideal types’: ‘the dividing line between the Few and the Many must run through each individual, not between individuals’ (his italics). Here lies a parallel with Lewis’s earlier concept (in ‘Physics of the Not-Self’ of 1932) of the Self and Not-Self, attributes of mind available to every individual but embraced unequally by the philosophically inclined and those (the majority) not so inclined.

In *The Aristos*, using a Latin term in a common linguistic mode appropriate to Freudian terminology, Fowles introduced the nemo, a fourth element in the human psyche, supplementing the conventional Freudian trilogy of ego, super-ego and id. As a fictive ‘explanation’ of the workings of the psyche, the Freudian trilogy has evident shortcomings. Andrew Bowie points to

Freud’s difficulties in giving an account of the overall structure of the psyche, given the fact that psychic energy is seen as deriving from the id, which is unconscious. The id splits itself and directs its own forces against itself by the
integration of the ego and the super-ego into the structure of itself [and] the id itself cannot be represented theoretically as it must already be split into the representor, the conscious ego, and what is supposed to be represented, the unconscious id.25

Given, as Bowie suggests, that ‘Freud’s reflection is remarkably glib about the ease with which the dissection [of the psyche] can be legitimised methodologically’ (53), the additional fourth term, the nemo, representing ‘the state of being nobody – nobodiness’, embodying for Fowles ‘man’s sense of his own futility and ephemerality’ (47), may offer a more comprehensible (albeit still hypothetical) exploratory segmentation of the psyche. As a concept attuned to the existentialist angst more evident in the dolorous 1950s than in the hedonic jazz-age social environment against which Lewis had written in the 1920s, the passage of time explains a difference in emphasis in personal social behaviour encased in the nemo, but Lewis himself had moved on. In The Writer and the Absolute (1952) he confronted the phenomenon of existential ‘nothingness’ as it had been developed by Jean-Paul Sartre in L’Etre et le Néant (1943; trans. as Being and Nothingness, 1956). Among Sartre’s several French critics, the Communist writer Henri Lefebvre particularly attracted Lewis’s attention. Finding himself ‘not entirely unexpectedly, upon the side of the Marxists’ in denouncing Sartrean existentialist nihilism, Lewis quoted Lefebvre approvingly:

For, as anyone can see, the human reason is a capital ingredient in our concept ‘Man’. And that concept withers beneath our eyes if its rational advertisement and prestige are removed from it and the intellect becomes a little clockwork plaything – highly unreliable – in place of the living breath of what otherwise would be a mere machine.26

Lewis nevertheless departs from Lefebvre’s political stance, saying: ‘in his case it is, as a good Party man, the Soviet Socialist Republics that he is concerned to protect from contamination […] whereas in my case it is Western society I had [in the late 1920s and 1930s] uniquely in mind’. In The Demon of Progress in the Arts (1954), Lewis directed his critical attack on the prevalence of ‘nothingness’ in the artistic fashions of the day (often those favoured by the then recently-established Institute of Contemporary Art). For Lewis, ‘beyond a certain well-defined line – in the arts as in everything else – beyond that limit there is nothing. Nothing, zero, is what logically you reach past a line, of some kind, laid down by nature, everywhere’.27 Fowles’s nemo, by a process of posthumous transference, thus becomes the source of the least definable, yet most all-pervading, of Lewis’s enemies, the embodiment of personal values detached from the culture of a common praxis. Sartre’s philosopher-contemporary Maurice Merleau-Ponty saw such an approach as offering merely a ‘vertiginous freedom’. For him the Sartrean “something or other” that ‘takes
possession of praxis’ presumed a kind of ‘magic power’, allowing us ‘to act and make ourselves whatever we want’ (should we know what we want).  

Having unveiled the nemo as ‘a supreme source of anguish’, Fowles argues that there are two ways to defeat it: ‘I can conform or I can conflict. If I conform to the society I live in, I will use the agreed symbols of success’, and if success does not come about, then ‘part of the failure can always be put on the group […] They all fail together; if there is success, they all share it’. (Aristos, 50) Conforming, though, leads politically, Fowles argues, to a ‘sense of total non-participation, of being a pawn in the hands of chess-players’. (56) Thus the ‘puppets’ of Lewis’s world in the 1920s reappear as ‘pawns’ of Fowles’s world of the 1950s. And, he argues, ‘All states and societies are incipiently fascist. They strive to be unipolar, to make others conform. The true antidote to fascism is therefore existentialism; not socialism’. (121)

By conflicting, rather than conforming, ‘by adopting my own special style of life […] I build up an elaborate unique persona, I defy the mass. I am the bohemian, the dandy, the outsider, the hippy’. (58) Some considerations of ‘the Demon of Progress’ follow from that. Fowles argues that much recent art ‘has been conditioned by the pressures of the nemo […] A jungle of pastiche grows around each work or artist that is felt to be genuinely “creative” – that is nemo-killing’. (50) For Fowles himself the nemo represents ‘potentiality, what I am not. But instead of utilizing the nemo as we would utilize any other force, we allow ourselves to be terrified by it’. (58) In short, as individuals, we confront, or succumb to, the dilemmas inherent within a ‘vertiginous freedom’. Fowles’s declared inability ‘to reject existentialism though it is possible to reject this or that existentialist action’ (123) illustrates his positive appraisal of existentialism as an ‘antidote to fascism’ in furthering the individual revolt against ‘social and political pressures that rob him of his individuality’. (122) The evident contrast with Lewis’s unfavourable reaction to Sartre partly reflects the difference in generational perspective identified above, but neither existentialism nor socialism are words with straightforward, unambiguous meanings. A kind of mist or marsh-gas prevails.

Lewis took Sartre’s philosophically unrepresentative, though popularly influential, ‘psychologism’ as a sort of existentialism-in-general; ‘merely a gallic [sic] variant of Heidegger’. (79) The German’s own Teutonically dismissive appraisal of L’Etre et le Néant was ‘Dreck’ (‘muck’). (30) Fowles correspondingly depicted socialism-in-general as ‘bedevilled by the spirit of endless and unconstrained yearning towards an impossible equality’, where Lewis had pointed out in The Art of Being Ruled that ‘socialism’ could mean ‘very different and indeed opposite things’.

V. ENVOI

Lewis opposed his main enemies, as we have identified them (a pernicious ‘thought-collective’, a conglomeration of alienated ‘anti-individuals’, an indefinitely numerous array of those persons ‘able to make anything of anything’) with his own idea of ‘what it is all about’, perhaps most succinctly argued in Time and Western Man.
The world of classical ‘common-sense’ – the world of the Greek, the world of the Schoolman – is the world of nature, too, and is a very ancient one. All the health and sanity that we have left belongs to that world, and its forms and impulses. It is such a tremendous power that nothing can ever break it down permanently.\(^1\) (177)

If, by the 1950s, in *The Demon of Progress in the Arts*, Lewis, all too conscious of the seeming ‘triviality of everything’ around him, no longer expressed so unqualified a confidence in the ‘tremendous power’ of the ‘world of nature’ (in the Aristotelian or Thomist sense of a teleological system), it still provided for him ‘all the health and sanity that we have left’.

**NOTES**

11. A distinction between a ‘creative’ and a ‘reiterative’ praxis is set out in Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, *The Philosophy of Praxis* (London: Merlin Press, 1977), pp. 199–227. In essence it depends on ‘the degree to which the consciousness of the active subject penetrates the practical process’. The level of a particular praxis in turn depends on ‘the degree of consciousness revealed by the subject in the practical process’, and ‘the degree of creation manifested in the product of his activity’ (p. 199). See also note 28 below.


15 Lewis, *Rude Assignment*, p. 210. Recounting an experience similar to that of Lewis at the hands of a literary-political New York ‘thought-collective’ in the 1960s, the American author Norman Podhoretz tells how seeing individual reputations ruthlessly besmirched by the collective ‘was enough to prevent most people from voicing serious criticisms [and] it was enough in some cases to prevent them from even allowing themselves to entertain critical thoughts’. Norman Podhoretz, *Breaking Ranks* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), p. 215. Podhoretz’ own combative no-sense should not be underestimated, however.


17 For Oakeshott “‘The masses’ as they appear in modern European history are not composed of individuals; they are composed of ‘anti-individuals’ united in revulsion from individuality”. Quoted in W.H. Greenleaf, *Oakeshott’s Philosophical Politics* (London: Longmans, 1966), pp. 69–70.


29 Aristos, p. 50. A self-consciously ‘bohemian’ individual may well pursue an essentially ‘reiterative’ praxis, the point being that the nominally ‘unique’ persona will in those cases merely imitate a stylish form of dissidence – as did the ‘bourgeois bohemians’ castigated by Lewis.


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