'The Game of Labelling': Lewis in Academia Today

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It is because you are fundamentally like, as like as two peas to, your less informed, less polished brother, that you have need of him [...] You must furthermore be careful never to touch, mingle with or attack anything before first convincing yourself that it be, in fact, a pea. Do not be so fatuous as to interfere with a melon! It might not result in harm, but it is no fun. – Wyndham Lewis, 1918–1919

I

At a recent gathering of the Wyndham Lewis Society the following question was asked: ‘Why doesn’t Lewis get taught any more?’ There was agreement that at the root of Lewis’s absence from Modernism syllabuses lay the fact that few university lecturers were themselves sufficiently familiar with his texts. This, together with the relative inaccessibility of the material – both written and visual – often results in Lewis’s relegation to handouts that gloss over the pictorial revolution of Blast, which is more often than not overshadowed by crisp, high-resolution extracts from Zang Tumb Tuum that illustrate and contextualize ‘the modernolatry of Futurism’ in its graphic form.¹ When I remember the Modernism modules I took as a student at a very modern university, I wonder how Lewis’s work could have effectively been inserted into curricula constrained by time, limited attention-spans, and political correctness. Studying Lewis independently has alerted me to the problematic nature of the texts engaging with his work that are aimed at undergraduates, and it is my suggestion here that a closer look at some of these intermediary texts may bring us nearer to understanding Lewis’s academic neglect. In a survey of Lewis criticism, Alan Munton has suggested an academic consensus exists on the more difficult aspects of Lewis’s work, arguing that current criticism is generally able to rely on the expectation of a stock response on the part of the reader, given that ‘Lewis attracts his own version of agreed opinion’,² not one that is always anchored in the original texts but which relies instead on second-hand impressions.³ With this in mind, I would like to examine some of the recent critical texts that place Lewis’s work in the context of Modernism, in order to identify the probable reasons not only for his absence from the classroom, but also for the frequent misapprehensions brought about by selective critical engagements, which, in turn, present him as a figure of unpleasant extremes.

II

Restrictive accounts of Lewis are all too frequently the consequence of the study of an era defined by the multiplicity of its practices, where the analysis of a multiplicity of idiosyncratic cultural manifestations prevents a cohesive, all-encompassing critical appraisal. In the study of Modernism, it becomes difficult to define the parameters when Modernism’s contents overlap, replicate and contradict each other, so it is understandable – up to a point – that Lewis’s most distinctive contribution to this pool (Blast, Vorticism) should be used to illustrate the experimental

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combination of the philosophical and artistic at its most innovative. Lewis is permitted to embody
the moment of Modernism’s historical context, a matter of incalculable importance. It follows
that the study of Vorticism at undergraduate level – (and it is always Vorticism!) – would then
have the twofold effect of presenting a gateway into the complex ecosystem of modernist culture,
while at the same time demonstrating the potency of Lewis’s literary style. This shows Lewis’s
influence at its most expansive. But there also exists a model of limitation.

The attempt to synthesize the character of Vorticism by ambitiously using a single work
to embody the meaning of an entire period may, on the other hand, narrow the reader’s optic,
to the detriment of both the quality of the criticism and the enlightenment of the reader.
Dominic Head’s 1992 study The Modernist Short Story is an example of this speculative style
of criticism, proposing as it does a minimalist definition of Vorticism, and then offering a
carefully-chosen collection of stories to represent its claims. Head’s chapter on Lewis tries to
encapsulate the practice of Vorticism (1913–15) and then discover its symptoms in the revised
version of The Wild Body volume, published in 1927. He argues, therefore, that Lewis’s
earliest ideas remain steadily present across close to two decades’ worth of revision, from the
conception of The Wild Body as a travel diary in 1908–1909 until its publication as a volume
of short stories in 1927. Students approaching Head’s chapter on Lewis are in line for a
double benefit, since it first establishes the conceptual domain of the modernist short story in
sections on Joyce, Woolf, and Mansfield, and then introduces them to an understanding of the
principles of Vorticism by their direct application to literary prose.4 Head’s assertion that ‘these
stories enact the Vorticist aesthetic’5 is buttressed by his discovery of core Vorticist principles
pervading the narratorial stance, symbolism, descriptive imagery, and characterization of the
eleven stories in the volume.

Head’s mapping of a somewhat simplified concept of dynamic form on to the tales’ narrative
style explains the dichotomy of art and life translated in the narrator’s detached stance, but
the reader is soon made aware of the limitations of the argument on which Head’s chapter
hinges: he warns that even in his paintings Lewis employs the image of the vortex somewhat
figuratively, so an expectation for its application in literature should be, at most, cautious:

Lewis employs in his paintings dynamic forms which incorporate the
aesthetic concerns of the vortex image, but which do not bear a direct physical
resemblance to it. The model is, naturally, even more removed in Lewis’s
literary output: like other visual metaphors for the short story, ‘the vortex has
a value in locating guiding artistic principles, but it is an imprecise analogy
for literary composition’. (142, my emphasis)

This analogy is imprecise because, Head explains, it ‘does not apply to the structure of
the prose in any specific syntactic, or semantic, sense’ but instead ‘to the activities of the
characters under observation’ who behave in patterns that ‘echo certain forms used by Lewis
in his paintings’. (144) The chapter unfortunately includes no plates to illustrate these ‘echoes’, so students/readers are left to supplement the conceptual ellipsis of plastic and literary art with only the elusive Ker-Orr as the stuff of Head’s argument. Ker-Orr is methodically objectified as a fictional projection of the Vorticist artist, and his emphasis on laughter is for Head a symptom of ‘contemplative distancing’ that ‘lifts him above the unconscious Wild Bodies of the stories’. (143)

The suggestion that The Wild Body of 1927 is, firstly, a concerted replication of Vorticist aesthetics and secondly, a showcase for Lewis’s pseudo-biographical narrator’s reinforcement of its principles, inevitably poses a number of questions. Head’s account is apt to leave them unanswered, partly because of the rather austere definition of Vorticism with which the chapter opens. Readers may wonder for instance, how the bleak grotesques in ‘Sigismund’ or the Imagistic prose of ‘You Broke My Dream’ would fit this scheme of Vorticist patterns, which apparently so relies on the dichotomy between a narrator’s overarching presence and the earthy stock-realism of his subjects. Making little reference to the bibliographic history of The Wild Body; its history of revision, and the earlier version of some stories, Head’s account anticipates the complications of his chosen method by suggesting that there is an intrinsic contradiction within the narratorial implications of Vorticism. Citing Ortega y Gasset’s 1925 essay ‘The Dehumanization of Art’, Head locates a supra-textual Vorticist narrator, whose perspective will organize and validate the action of the observed puppets. Ker-Orr thus appears to be a necessary element in the development of stories such as ‘The Death of the Ankou’, where the narrator’s inconsistent stance is, we are told, essential to the story’s true aim, which Head reads as the transgression of the traditional supernatural story and the temporary replacement of narratorial detachment with a satirical purpose. It would seem that for Head, the point of Vorticism is, in keeping with the short story genre’s disruptive nature, a series of spasmodic stylistic shifts that override the conception of the aesthetic parameters of Vorticism so far elicited. Disconcertingly, Head soon prevents his argument from moving further by loosening the connection between Ortega y Gasset’s work and Lewis’s, remarking that ‘[it] describes an artistic stance which the Lewis stories show both affinities with and differences from, and this unevenness underscores the contradictions implicit in Lewis’s aesthetic’. (154)

If readers intend to press on and clarify the mechanics of Lewis’s ambiguities, Head’s final approach to the Wild Body stories brings them to the tale where ‘Vorticist detachment’ is more consistently undermined – incidentally the first story in Lewis’s volume, and one written relatively late in what Head calls ‘the short lifespan often accorded to Vorticism’. (141) In ‘A Soldier of Humour’ Ker-Orr’s intervention amounts to a real-time verbal battle with a caricaturesque bigot, and the resulting explanation for its conspicuous failure to remain outside the fictional Vorticist dynamic seems to shift the focus of Head’s analysis once more. The development of this plot and its implicit negation of Head’s original proposition is itself turned into a symbol for the purpose behind the tale: ‘A Soldier of Humour’ and
its triumphant climax is after all, a cleverly designed oxymoron of detached involvement and polite satire. Head’s analysis moves from Lewis’s technique to the narrative aesthetic motifs in ‘A Soldier of Humour’ in order to justify a text which does not appear to fit his theory of Vorticism. Although this ultimate contradiction is linked with the concept of a fragmented self that Head has touched upon in earlier chapters, and ties in Lewis’s with the book’s general argument, in the discussion of and indeed will reassure puzzled students, it succeeds in disqualifying Lewis from the modernist pursuit of ‘the fluid representation of personality’ (163) that Head claims for the genre. Head’s kaleidoscopic vision of Vorticism actually presents a complex – and frankly unfathomable – internal logic for the movement and for Lewis as its chief practitioner, in ways that leave little space for argument or indeed any indication of the benefit to be gained through studying these stories, let alone their wider implications in Lewis’s work.

As a reading of Vorticism, Head’s chapter overlooks many of its core notions, while choosing a set of stories that is doubtfully connected to its aesthetic dynamic. If reading Head’s chapter is an undergraduate’s first or only contact with Vorticism, it is likely to lead to a misunderstanding of both the content and the context of an essential part of Modernism. By restricting his definition of the movement to what fits the topic of his book, and by limiting Lewis’s work to what he perceives to be most malleable, Head short-changes his reader in a variety of ways. An isolating and ill-represented exploration of Vorticism denies its readers the opportunity to view it as part of an ongoing intellectual progression within its historical moment, as well as in the flux of Lewis’s early career. However slight its contribution, Head’s book ought to be held accountable for its limitations, and considered in the light of Lewis’s ever-decreasing presence in academic readings of Modernism in the fifteen years since its publication.

More recently, the tendency to partition Modernism on account of its interdisciplinary nature has given critics a space to discuss Lewis without the problematic distractions stemming from his more controversial work. Charles Ferrall’s book Modernist Writing and Reactionary Politics (2001) applies a general theory of fascist tendencies to a selection of modernist authors whose literary work, he argues, appears on the surface to be affiliated to right-wing radicalism, while in fact parodying the essence of such tendencies through incorporation and negation. Ferrall selects his authors cogently, and Lewis’s inclusion is certainly justified, given the range of different ‘fascisms’ the volume explores: Ferrall’s study travels from Yeats’s Catholic élitism to Lawrence’s homo-social leadership reform, via Pound’s concern with rhetoric, and Eliot’s veiled anti-Semitism. It is fitting then, that observations so far down the spectrum – as are Lewis’s texts dealing with the early stages of National Socialism and later on the figure of the antisemite – are used to demonstrate Ferrall’s argument. This straightforward approach notwithstanding, Ferrall’s chapter title “Always à Deux”: Wyndham Lewis and his doubles’ suggests a concern to map Lewis’s dualism historically; this story then functions as a conceptual framework for Ferrall’s argument about Lewis’s
elusive politics. Commencing as it does with the 1914 ‘Enemy of the Stars’, it should perhaps make readers aware more clearly of its author’s intention to orientate a sizeable part of Lewis’s career towards an explanation of what most specialists believe to be ‘unfortunate’ yet virtually free-standing works which should be read as no more than exercises in rhetoric.

Despite making some historicizing moves, Modernist Writing and Reactionary Politics does not try to achieve a comprehensive or chronological study of Lewis’s output. Ferrall’s argument requires, rather, the exploration of certain dualistic tendencies in large portions of Lewis’s work, tendencies which effectively result in an explanation for Lewis’s apparent sympathy for totalitarianism. Ferrall’s exploration of the philosophy behind Lewis’s theories on art visits the customary places and uses familiar images and quotations, but early on warns its readers of the complexities inherent to the ideological postulates of an artist who, unlike the book’s other subjects (Yeats, Pound, Eliot and Lawrence), ‘does not express nostalgia for any kind of premodern culture’. (35) From this premise, Ferrall seems to argue that Lewis champions the mechanical aspect of the modern age in an effort to celebrate and preserve its sterility. Although this chapter on Lewis is not a text that aims to introduce readers to his work, its methodology may, inevitably, lead students into all-too-common assumptions about the background to its theoretical stance. Hastily-made connections between Lewis’s ideas on mechanical bodies and their application to the field of art bring Ferrall to dangerously banal conclusions, such as saying that ‘there is little if any ironic distance between Tarr and his author’ (38), whilst further on he justifies a vision of Lewis’s portrait of himself as a Tyro as an ‘identification with the mechanized other [that] only serves to armour the self’. (39) Because readings like these seem on the one count facile, but crucially appear to ignore the corpus of interpretive criticism that exists on these issues, the reader may find himself increasingly sceptical of Ferrall’s overall capacity to extricate Lewis from an allegiance with fascism. This is not helped by the chapter’s in-depth analysis of Tarr, which takes the argument for Lewis’s dualism to extremes in an at times over-speculative connection between the couplings in the novel and an allegedly conspicuous use of Oedipal conflict theory within Modernism. When dealing with Hitler (1931), and later The Hitler Cult (1939) and The Jews, Are they Human? (1939) however, the benefits of Ferrall’s approach begin to show, as the overly-succinct interpretations of Lewis’s other works are justified by the moral weight of the ‘fascist’ works on which the chapter centers. Most importantly, the theory of Lewis’s rhetorical ‘doubling’ presented by Ferrall coheres rather more successfully with Lewis’s texts on National Socialism. Here, the argument is not predictable. Ferrall plausibly deflects the emphasis in Hitler from the figure of the Jew to that of the over-keen Hitlerite, whom Lewis typifies as having neurotic fixations, crystallized in an imaginary interaction with the liberal Englishman of the day. The strategy of ‘represent[ing] his adversaries as comically married to their obsessions’ (49) precludes a dangerous repetition of the obtuse totalitarian dichotomies of race and class that Lewis discusses, and Ferrall is correct to link this with Lewis’s deliberate avoidance of any direct replication of contemporary political discourse.
Ferrall’s analysis is nevertheless problematic because it appears undecided as to whether Lewis’s refusal to identify with either side is effective beyond its artistic craft, and indeed whether this effect compromises his position as an artist and political observer. Ferrall’s book presents the reader with contradictory passages intended to demonstrate that Lewis’s comical banter with stereotypical Germany makes no attempt to hide his own very partial stand. As Ferrall puts it, ‘while Lewis dismisses German fascism as merely a parody, he also expresses his distaste for what it parodies’ (153); Lewis re-creates the mistake he denounces, and neatly confirms Ferrall’s theory of an inescapable duplication of opposites throughout Lewis’s—and other people’s—work. What debilitates Ferrall’s argument is, alas, the overstating of this theory, since he makes it applicable to almost any section of Lewis’s texts, political or otherwise. This ‘doubling-up’ of subject and observer affects Lewis the fiction-writer, the political commentator, and even the cultural critic, given that his critique of Jews easily translates, for Ferrall, into the world of art and the figure of the artist, who ‘as an “outsider”’ must himself resemble ‘the so-called “Chosen People” status of the Jews to which he so objects’ (154). Ferrall’s chapter on Lewis presents a figure that devotes considerable effort to cultural critique but nevertheless cannot himself escape the mechanisms he denounces, oscillating between images that undermine the subject-object relationship and leaving Lewis in a similar state of exposure as his victims.

Although a rare discussion of some of Lewis’s most vilified texts, Ferrall’s chapter amounts to a minimalist study of Lewis the articulate writer, and does no justice to material he decides lies outside the domain of ‘radical politics’. It perhaps demonstrates most eloquently Lewis’s current status, subjecting his work to scrutiny under the convenient lens of politicised literary and critical readings, and therefore accessible only as a small part of the modernist sparatagmos (tearing apart), with the consequence that the field is narrowed for academics and students alike. Although welcome as a discussion of neglected texts, and closer to its material than Head’s contribution, it seems fair to question whether Ferrall’s chapter does not after all serve the purposes of the modern academic publishing market rather than what should be its true audience of undergraduates, postgraduates, and researchers generally. Ferrall’s text, like others of its kind, seems content to identify the more refractory aspects of ‘literature-and-politics’, and package them without making any substantial contribution to the academic environment which it will (or should) enter. Its benefit to students and to the general diffusion of Lewis’s work is, as a result, limited; this is an overly-politicized engagement with a challenging set of texts, seemingly self-sufficient and not prompting further investigation into its field.

After the two examples discussed above, it is clear that the problem of Lewis’s inclusion within the wider considerations of Modernism does not lie in the nature of these cross-sectional studies, but in the way their obvious selectivity implicitly acknowledges the existence of further material otherwise ignored. This is particularly significant, given Lewis’s current absence from the majority of academic curricula. Lewis’s work may survive segmenting for the purposes of shaping it to pedagogical needs, if the work is ultimately presented as
part of a cohesive whole, or else is given the opportunity to function as an introduction rather than an implausible synthesis. The dangerous merging of fiction and author, and the confusion of fiction with cultural commentary, has, however, become a problem for such singular figures as Lewis. The outcome is likely to be an impression so far removed from the source that a parallel authorial persona begins to appear (and, as well-acquainted with Lewis’s notion of duality as we should by now be, it is easy to see the danger of this position). When incorporated into a particular discourse, and measured only within the parameters that serve the interests of that particular argument, the writing itself is made to adopt ideologies and intentions that turn out to be conversant with the critic’s own factious agenda. Kathy J. Phillips’s study *Manipulating Masculinity: War and Gender in Modern British and American Literature* (2006) leaves the overall impression that her brief – if memorable – readings of Lewis are the result of having selected two stories and stripped from them anything other than what will align itself to a personal standpoint rather than a literary argument.

Phillips looks at Lewis’s stories ‘The French Poodle’ (1916) and ‘Cantelman’s Spring Mate’ (1917) in a chapter entitled ‘World War I: No Half-Men at the Front’, and under a heading that reads: ‘I Fight to Prove I’m not My Sister (but I Suspect I Am).’ Her analysis centers upon the stories’ protagonists as men under pressure to conform to an ideal of manhood that traces its heritage to notions of empire and colonial ethnography, but Phillips remains oblivious both to Lewis’s own background and to previous interpretations of these pieces. Perhaps because Phillips draws ‘The French Poodle’ and ‘Cantelman’s Spring Mate’ from Trudi Tate’s *Women, Men and the Great War: An Anthology of Stories* and from *Blasting and Bombardiering* respectively, her outlook is that of someone who believes Lewis’s ultimate aspirations to have been fulfilled by the armed conflict, and so justifies the study of this apothecary fiction above any stories or novels dealing more directly with the subject of masculinity. Phillips conflates the popular image of Lewis as ‘violent, fascist, misogynist and pathologically insane’ with the fictional social construct of male supremacy under which Lewis’s characters frequently operate, and thus analyses the war as a conflict of the sexes where Lewis, unsurprisingly, is found to espouse a bellicose ethic whilst revelling in its dehumanizing consequences. Discussing ‘The French Poodle’, Phillips presents it as the fictional exploration of a gender conflict and, strangely, divides her attention equally between Cairn and his one-time sweetheart Dolly. This not only exalts a virtually non-existent character, but also denies importance to the animal in the title, as well as the significance of Cairn’s business-partner Fraser.

Given the diminished role of women in Lewis’s other short fiction around this time (for example ‘The War Baby’ of 1918-1919, where womanhood is, at best, a drawback with which to contend), it is difficult to agree with Phillips’s view that Cairn’s overweening anxiety is ‘solely to confirm he is not a woman’. (42) Phillips reads the tale as a succession of instances where Cairn staves off femininity in one form or another, be it aesthetic, libidinal, or socially determined, whilst she ignores the obvious totemic connection between Cairn and his dog, or indeed its resonance with a typically Lewisian scepticism towards a wild psychoanalysis.
Although this eludes the critic, the story's humour hinges on an ironic exposition of the folly of an all-purpose primitivism, and of a type of manhood that emasculates itself when it attempts to adopt bestiality. Still, for Phillips, Cairn is an isolated entity whose psychosis reinforces the parallel that Lewis draws between Dolly the 'Lady-love' and Carp the Poodle, as masculine commodities resulting from 'his society's assignment of women to the level of subhuman pets, heedless children or objectified trinkets'. (42) This implies in Lewis a watertight gender compartmentalization that Phillips too easily cuts from Lewis's prose and pastes into his mentality, particularly given that she equates Cairn's experience with Lewis's own in the scanty biographical details added to her analysis.

Indeed, Phillips's analysis of Lewis's gender politics is so reliant on isolated instances within carefully chosen short stories that is it interesting to think that had she come across Lewis's comment on the sartorial mores constraining women at the time, and his exhortation to 'break up the world-uniformity that the snobbishness of fashion imposes', her argument for Lewis's stand on sexual difference might have been abandoned altogether. (43) Despite the lack of actual interaction between men and women, and the emphasis on the scarcely-present Dolly in Lewis's story, Phillips finds Cairn attempting to temper and remedy his own sexual shortcomings, all the while haunted by the suspicion 'that he has strayed to the womanly side'. (44) Phillips reads Cairn's dilemma as a result of living in a historical moment when society 'constructs gender as a strict binary, men must avoid anything women are supposed to be' (43), and transfers this urgent indictment to events in the story. As much as Dolly, or the prototypical woman, is conditioned in her gender by her likeness to a mascot, for Phillips the measure of Cairn is the shell-incident described in the opening paragraphs. So we learn, from a worryingly offhand reading, that 'because [Cairn] did not respond correctly to the prospect of being blown up, Cairn has failed a masculinity test'. (43)

Although central to the story, and to his characterization, Cairn's response to the explosion is important because it helps his partner Fraser to diagnose and classify the malady of a creature that is not displaced into its sex but rather into its phylogenetic position in an evolutionary process. (45) In the story, Lewis's protagonist presents a concept of primitivism that would operate as a safety valve for the over-civilized townsfolk, and deflect natural predatory instincts in a vertical rather than pathologically horizontal scheme. When in touch with 'the sanity of direct animal processes' (55), Cairn's modern man can self-determinedly moderate violence and marshal the results of living 'among human swarms'. (55) The savagery that Cairn commends is not, as Phillips suggests, motivated by his desire to become an 'ideal caveman never worrying about the future, never regretting the past, never caring about a soul'. (45) Rather, it is teleologic and looks to 'the savagery we arrive at' (56) as an evolutionary measure developed to incorporate the modern situation, both as the locus for suppressed atavistic tendencies, and as fertile soil for innovative survival techniques. (46) While Cairn moves from the outmoded sham primitivism so rife in his time to embracing modern barbarity in an almost pre-conscious state, the contemporary and the savage compound the narrative in one of Lewis's most memorable passages:
Rob Cairn discussed these things with a persistent and often mildly indignant solemnity. The trenches had scarred his mind. Swarms of minute self-preserve and active thoughts moved in the furrows. Little bombs of irritable logic appeared whirling up from these grave clefts and exploded around his uneasy partner.11 (56)

Cairn’s ‘uneasy partner’ – inexplicably omitted from Phillips’s analysis – is the aptly named James Fraser, who gathers first-hand knowledge of his subject and later recounts his story and conclusions to the narrator of the story. The reference to the author of The Golden Bough ought to orientate the reader towards the narrative’s wealth of anthropological allusion and, even more interestingly, towards Lewis’s tongue-in-cheek handling of its discourse.12 Unfortunately, this aspect of the story is not part of Phillips’s critical project; she instead circumvents the primitivist element and replaces it with a disappointingly bi-dimensional take on the relationship between Cairn and his canine companion. Phillips presents the reader with an explanation for Cairn’s attachment and violent disengagement from the animal in terms of the protagonist’s identification with, and fear of, the over-dependent brute, accounting for the story’s violent conclusion while confirming her very personal interpretation of it. She explains that ‘Because Carp’s name resembles his master’s, Cairn appears to be trying to blast away parts of himself. Yet when he targets emotions such as anxiety, love, and grief, supposed to be present exclusively in doglike women, Cairn commits some fundamental violence against himself as well’. (46) However many similarities Phillips suggests between Cairn and the author of the story, Lewis’s character appears to be better off than Lewis, if only because he pays dearly for his crime against femininity: Phillips concludes that after delaying his return to the front Cairn ‘is resigned to die, as if death were the only fit retribution for Carp’s death’. (47)

Phillips’s reading of Lewis’s fiction may perturb readers already familiar with the material and the criticism surrounding it because of the relative critical and textual isolation of its arguments. It is clear that Phillips’s book is not a study of any cultural movement or group of writers but of the type of fiction emerging from a particular historical context. The war fiction Phillips discusses is, surprisingly, disconnected from similar and often better-known works by each of the authors she selects, and contextualized only with selective biographical information. It is for this reason that students or readers accessing the fiction she explores in this book risk a twofold misconception: if they interpret these stories as the projection of their authors’ personal beliefs – understood to be aligned with and contributing to gender inequality – a confused image of these writers’ priorities will become established. This will surely lead readers to dismiss other material by Lewis, so that it becomes the impossible to eliminate or redress the original assumptions. Phillips’s account of the motivation for the author/protagonist of this story is a wider argument purporting to show that men embrace war’s violence as compensation for their own anti-masculine inclinations. It is unfortunate that the Lewis fiction she tests this theory out on neither illustrates Lewis’s stand on the war, nor his position on gender issues. To
achieve this it would have been helpful to direct the reader to non-fiction texts where Lewis fully and unrestrainedly develops theories on both, as in The Art of Being Ruled (1926) or Rude Assignment (1950). As it stands, Phillips's argument appears to select a piece that she believes to wholly represent Lewis's perspective on war, gender, and social progress, while depriving her readers of an insight into the extensive writings where Lewis approaches these issues beyond the constraints of the short fiction format.

Having looked at three discussions that propose to place Lewis's output in an identifiable section of the modernist spectrum, it is now perhaps possible to assess whether the 'inclusive' ethos of this type of criticism is likely to have any impact on Lewis's academic and historical situation. The fact that Head, Ferrall and Phillips seem to identify Lewis as a unique example of a modern mode of perception, and his work as representative of transactional genres that merit further analysis, is encouraging. So is the inclusive conception of modernist art such a choice implies. In each case the context in which Lewis's work is placed constitutes an addition to traditional readings of modernist craft: the short story as a site for agonistic modes of expression, readings of fascism incorporated into literature, and social constructions of sexuality as they condition biographical fiction. Very encouragingly, all point to the loosening of certain constricting parameters that for a long time made Lewis a multidisciplinary rara avis. Added to this is the fact that, with the exception of Ferrall's use of Tarr, these texts take on relatively little-known works by Lewis and attempt to integrate them into a traditionally hostile academic mainstream which has been particularly prescriptive in its treatment of Modernism. But are these new solutions to Lewis's old problems quite able to bridge the gap between a highly complex corpus of literature and student audiences today? To answer this will pose, inevitably, more questions. For while it is refreshing to see Head bringing Lewis's potentially objectionable stories to the fore in the midst of a post-feminist revival, or Ferrall's courageous reading of texts that even hard-boiled Lewisians prefer not to discuss, there are problems attached to this selectivity. Chief among them is, in my view, how good a service such studies do when it comes to exploring Lewis's diversity, or to promoting his literary fiction to the timorous beginner.

The relative isolation in which these critics consider small segments of Lewis's work hints at the problematic situation they place their arguments in, as they separate themselves from a critical tradition that has often viewed Lewis's work in an unfavourable light. By ignoring existing criticism, the authors of these studies furthermore renounce a limited but well-established line of Lewis scholarship, characterized by its efforts to present Lewis's work as an integrated whole. Out of the three critics considered here, it is interesting to note that two make very brief mention of Jameson's 1979 analysis Fables of Aggression to justify their own similar views on Lewis's radicalism. On the very rare occasions when these three critics refer to secondary texts on Lewis the cut-off point is in the mid-1980s. Writing in 2001 and in 2006 respectively, Ferrall and Phillips ignore Paul Edward's watershed monograph, as well as the resurgence of Lewis in other general considerations of Modernism. Crucially, they omit to mention the monumental textual contribution found in the critical apparatus.
accompanying the Black Sparrow Press editions of Lewis’s works. Beyond the stimulus provided by these critics’ engagement with some of Lewis’s more obscure pieces, succeed or fail as they may, lies an extensive body of work that exists beside the selected pieces, and beyond the ideological extension of the lines these critics have explored. In other words, if it were allied with a critical tradition that aims to reinvigorate Lewis studies, the criticism I have discussed would be able to promote the ideas they analyse within a much wider creative context. Lewis’s other fiction, criticism, social commentary and autobiography needs to be considered, as it is here that the true extent of his versatility becomes apparent.

As this article has hoped to demonstrate, the consequences of presenting only the material that is deemed likely to support specific arguments will prompt further critical selectivity by the readers of texts that have already been unevenly handled, and exacerbate existing misconceptions, to the detriment of Lewis’s already debilitated academic reputation. While this is not a new phenomenon in criticism, it is paramount to consider that for each new undergraduate cohort whose contact with the work of Wyndham Lewis is coloured by myopic critical attitudes, the opportunities to bring more just assessments of his work into the academic mainstream diminish in proportion. In this situation, it would seem naive to question the persistent vilification found in contemporary references to Lewis. It is nonetheless imperative to note how Lewis’s poor image can be traced to the type of criticism I have discussed. Since commercial criticism functions, increasingly, as a barometer for the future of academia, its consequences would best be observed with caution, and some concern.

NOTES

3 Though less recent than the other texts I look at, this example is essential to anyone attempting to trace the predecessors of the current trend towards a compartmentalized, and at times over-specific study of Modernism.
4 Reviewers of Head’s volume almost invariably remarked on the odd inclusion of Wyndham Lewis at the apparent expense of other authors whose contribution marked a more significant style-shift in the short-story genre. One reviewer referred to Head’s ‘arbitrary (even suspect) choices’, while another suggested that the last two chapters – on Lewis and on Malcolm Lowry – ‘seem less integral to his argument than tacked on’. See J. Fora in Modern Fiction Studies 40, 1 (Spring 1994), 210–212; and C. May in JEGP, 93, 1 (January 1994), 128–130.
5 Dominic Head, The Modernist Short Story: A Study in Theory and Practice (Cambridge

6 Kathy J. Phillips’s study Manipulating Masculinity: War and Gender in Modern British and American Literature (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), I quote extensively here since Lewis’s presence in this publication appears to have gone largely undetected in Lewisian circles so far.

7 Alan Munton, “‘Imputing Noxiousness’: Aggression and Mutilation in Recent Lewis Criticism”, Wyndham Lewis Annual IV (1997), 5.


10 It is interesting to note how Phillips ignores anything but the immediate reality of the characters in this story, even though it might have strengthened her argument to consider the narrative’s primitivist overtones, and indeed Lewis’s concept of savagery in modern times. Although the narrative irony throughout the story complicates the connection somewhat, its portrayal of a weakened modern male is reminiscent of Lewis’s complaint of ‘the particular variety of demasculinization’ he compares to certain savage customs in The Art of Being Ruled (1926). Rather than giving us the full extent of Lewis’s views on sexual inversion, the reader wonders whether to include the passages where Lewis quotes Bogoraz to disprove ‘this sublime hardness […] that we associate with many northern races’ would not have been more persuasive for Phillips’s argument, especially because Lewis connects them with the effects of shell-shock. This section of The Art of Being Ruled includes, in addition, a very florid exposition of primitive male courtship-rites that could have helped Phillips unravel Lewis’s views on the subject. See The Art of Being Ruled, ed. Reed Way D densbrook (1926; Santa Barbara CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1989), p. 260.


12 For a complete account of references to J.G. Frazer and his contemporaries, as well as enlightening details of Lewis’s familiarity with anthropology texts, see note 9.

13 I make reference here to the work of critics who have endeavoured to approach Lewis’s pictorial and literary work with as little favouritism as possible, culminating in Paul Edwards’s monograph (2000).
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Paul Edwards curated Wyndham Lewis Portraits at the National Portrait Gallery in 2008, and is preparing to do the same for a major Lewis exhibition at the Fundación Juan March in Madrid for 2010.

David Gervais has been writing on art and on poetry for PN Review for many years. He is an editor of Cambridge Quarterly, and his Literary Englands: Versions of ‘Englishness’ in Modern Writing was reissued in paperback by Cambridge University Press in 2008.

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