'Can you teach me how to paint pictures in oils oh do please say yes!':
A new identification for Dan Boleyn

Richard Warren

To be an artist now he had always wished, thought Dan to himself [...] now Mr Zagreus had made him the offer to be an artist – he absolutely believed in his genius (what artists had) he had written to him. And he would take a great studio for him in the Paris Latin Quarter, Dan was simply as exultant as a swan and his throat half-burst with rapture.¹

Though The Apes of God may, understandably, have been taken for a roman à clef at the time of its publication, the monstrous scarecrows that stagger through its many pages are best regarded as independent satiric creations – composites or modifications of actual people – as Paul Edwards advises in his ‘Afterword’ to the Black Sparrow edition.² Even so, the Finnian Shaws can hardly be anyone other than the Sitwells. Similarly, Matthew Plunkett and Betty Bligh – despite Betty’s Lancashire accent (an inspired Lewis touch) – are entirely and absolutely Lytton Strachey and Dora Carrington, even though, as Edwards cautions us, the section that features Plunkett and Bligh is not ultimately ‘about’ Strachey and Carrington. In other characters we may suspect that we can detect elements of more or less recognisable identities. The London Jewish painter Mark Gertler, in his younger, up-and-coming years, seems a fair fit for the young and up-and-coming, ‘gold-curbed, flat-buttocked, East-end cupid’, Archie Margolin.³ In the vampiric Mélodie Blackwell, who launches her ‘cat’s body’ upon the terrified Dan Boleyn ‘in a melting movement that was a running crouch’, there may be more than a little of the young Nina Hamnett, the notorious ‘Queen of Bohemia’, whose ‘laughing torso’ was celebrated in stone by Gaudier-Brezska, and whose forays into painting (a little) and partying (a lot) at Juan les Pins parallel those of Mélodie at ‘Azay-le-Promis’.⁴

Though Horace Zagreus must be essentially Horace de Vere Cole, his extraordinary hieratic costume for Lord Osmund’s party, ‘bristling with emblems’ of every occult and arcane variety, strongly suggests the ‘magickal’ eclecticism of Aleister Crowley. Lewis certainly knew Crowley, as he had fallen out with him as early as 1909, delivering his verdict on the ‘High Priest of Elemental Passion’, or ‘The Crow’, in a letter to their mutual friend Augustus John:

He is a spotty-waistcoated, pot-bellied, cockney-voiced little shit, with a truculent journalistic attitude in life; just the sort of boy the girls like [...] I would take it out of his dirty carcass only a ‘High Priest Assaulted’ would be such a good advertisement for him.⁵

Zagreus’s bizarre masquerade as the ‘divine magician’, encumbered with symbolic
paraphernalia and cabalistic names of power, but beneath the robe a mere Houdini with a ‘bag of tricks’, is pretty clearly Lewis’s delayed revenge on ‘The Great Beast’. In Crowley, we are reminded of Paul Edwards’s definition of Zagreus as ‘an unsatisfactory representative of the Dionysian principle’.6

Consideration of the origins of the Apes prompts the question of the identity of the Ape watcher. Who could have been the model for Dan Boleyn? Is Dan simply Lewis’s ‘self portrait of the artist as a young man’?7 Perhaps Dan is no one at all, but just a narrative device, the innocent camera eye of the satirist, before which passes the parade of follies. Dan indeed serves this purpose, but I want to suggest that he is also very much of his time and place, and based on an identifiable young innocent known to Lewis.

The name at least of Dan Boleyn existed by April 1924, when an ‘Extract from encyclical addressed to Daniel Boleyn by Mr Zagreus’ appeared in The Criterion, six years before the publication of the complete novel.3 Given Dan’s Irish background, an identification with W.B. Yeats has been floated, but this seems improbable. A more likely bet might be, bizarrely, the young Francis Bacon, born in 1909, and raised in Ireland, who at the age of seventeen began his education in life by trawling through the bohemian and homosexual underworlds of Berlin and Paris. In Berlin, Bacon was under the doubtful care of a lecherous uncle, but in Paris he was mothered by Yvonne Bocquentin, a pianist and ‘connoisseur of the arts’.4 Though Lewis was to champion Bacon’s painting two decades later, I know of no evidence that they met in the 1920s, though they must have shared acquaintances, and both were in Paris in late 1927.

In Bacon’s memories of the atmosphere of violence that coloured his childhood in Ireland during the Troubles, there is an uncanny echo of Dan’s vision of the state of perpetual warfare that underlies all human activity. This is Bacon’s experience, described by Michael Pepiatt:

> It was something like a glancing landscape, like a dream that was there – he had had that as a schoolboy in Ireland, when the Rebellion was, the night before the arrest of his father. […] There was a world that ran through things, like pictures in water or in glassy surfaces, where a mob of persons were engaged in hunting to kill other men.10

This is Dan:

> The sensation of living in a place that might come under fire at any moment of the day or night haunted Francis. […] Later in life, when asked about the violence in his paintings, he would often recall the tensions that had plagued Ireland throughout his childhood.11

However, Bacon did not hit the artistic fleshpots of Europe until the spring of 1927, and in 1924, as the character of Boleyn was beginning to take shape, he was a mere schoolboy of
fourteen. A similar age gap makes problematic the claim by Stephen Spender to have been Boleyn’s prototype, given that Spender was born in the same year as Bacon.\textsuperscript{12}

Jean Cocteau is a guest at Lord Osmund’s party, very thinly disguised as Jacques Coq d’Or, and in Dan there may well be a ghost of the writer Raymond Radiguet, Cocteau’s lover, who died in December 1923 at the age of twenty. For that matter, the Dan-Zagreus affair may in part have been shaped by Lewis’s likely knowledge of the relationship in 1925–6 between the young writer and painter Adrian Stokes and Osbert Sitwell, the original of Lord Osmund.\textsuperscript{13} These instances, and others, build up a picture of a sort of post-war cultural complex in which young men, naïve but seen as artistically gifted, submit to the tutelage of more or less predatory older patrons who may help to form and resolve their approach to life. Such ‘modern’ relationships were sometimes physical, sometimes not. Dan is, in Pammie Farnham’s phrase, ‘a sort of Trilby’.\textsuperscript{14} But he may also have a more specific genesis.

I have a painter friend here called Wyndham-Lewis [sic] who is one of the cleverest men alive, he is also an author. He is a great artist who will never make a penny whilst he is alive.\textsuperscript{15}

This brief mention of Lewis occurs in a letter by the young English painter Christopher Wood to his mother, dated 20 October 1923, a few months before the publication of the ‘encyclical’ to Dan Boleyn. For someone who struck all who met him as charmingly naïve, Wood’s assessment of Lewis seems pretty sharp, to the point where we may suspect that he is parroting Lewis’s own judgement of himself. Wood’s biographer Richard Ingleby implies that he was introduced to Lewis by Augustus John, perhaps on the grounds that John is mentioned as a fellow visitor a month later, but this is not certain.\textsuperscript{16} Throughout an extensive surviving correspondence, Wood never mentions Lewis again.

More generously, Lewis devotes a couple of pages to Wood in Blasting and Bombardiering, introducing him as ‘a big healthy blond’ who ‘camped in my garden’.\textsuperscript{17} A little journalistically, he focuses on the opium addiction of Wood’s later years, which indicates that their friendship lasted well beyond 1923.

‘Kit’ Wood was born in 1901 into a respectable English middle class family in the Liverpool area. In 1921 he abandoned his studies in architecture and moved to Paris to stay with the financier and connoisseur Alphonse Kahn, whom he had met by chance. There he also met the Chilean diplomat Antonio (Tony) Gandarillas, with whom he lived for the next six years as he struggled to establish himself as a painter, and to resolve both his artistic and sexual identities. Gandarillas was in his late thirties, and seems like an unlikely Zagreus, but it is worth noting that Zagreus also ‘was in Panama or some country in the tropics as a young man’ and also was at one time ‘in the Diplomatic Service’.\textsuperscript{18} Gandarillas supported Wood financially and introduced him to innumerable contacts, including Picasso and Cocteau, as they travelled together through the bohemian circles and high societies of Europe.\textsuperscript{19} In his letters to his mother Wood wrote:
I must say that Tony is awfully good to me in introducing me to people who really are worth knowing and who can do me good. He seems really to take a great interest in my career and wants me to have every chance and learn everything I can and meet everyone who is really interesting.\textsuperscript{20}

And:

It was a most interesting dinner and I thoroughly enjoyed hearing these people talk. It is the best way to learn.\textsuperscript{21}

This mode of ‘learning’ is that of Dan Boleyn at Lionel Kein’s, a passive hearer of the brilliant chatter of which he understands little or nothing, occasionally contributing a monosyllabic response while his near silence is taken as a sign of depth:

‘He’s very shy,’ said Horace Zagreus, indicating Dan. ‘You’d hardly think to look at him that he heard what we were saying would you, but he takes it all in every word of it, nothing escapes him, he is a genius!’\textsuperscript{22}

How much actually escaped Wood is debatable, but his letters show virtually no analytical understanding. His fellow dinner guests may be ‘brilliantly clever’, and the conversation may be ‘most interesting’, but the letters never provide the detail of this. Even allowing for the possibility that he limited his remarks to generalities for his mother’s benefit, the reader is left with the strong suspicion that Wood simply absorbed the general ambience of brilliance and cleverness, whilst understanding little of the specifics. A telling moment comes in his report of a dinner in late 1923 with Augustus John and Iris Tree, the poet and Bloomsbury acolyte. Wood takes the trouble to quote a poem by Tree, with the title of ‘Analysis’, which he felt to be ‘particularly clever’:

\begin{quote}
The perplexity of many dreams, I am
The trivial roses at a funeral
That will not pine at death.
I am the day before disaster,
The morning after feasting,
The ball that tosses between Grief and Hope,
Alighting never in their clever play \ldots \textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

The merits of a poem are a matter of personal judgement of course, but many might consider this to be spectacularly awful, almost to the point of parody. It is significant that, when he does for once get down to details, Wood, much like Dan Boleyn, reveals himself to be easily impressed.
Throughout his letters, the register and tone of Wood’s remarks often echo Dan’s interior voice. Wood describes the many personalities he encounters as ‘a great character’, ‘awfully nice’, ‘extremely clever’, ‘great fun’, ‘a person of extremely good taste’ – or instead as ‘a horrid bore’ or ‘not a pleasant man or quite a gentleman’. When a social situation is to Wood’s liking, ‘everything is so first rate and gay and pretty’. But there are also moments of disillusion. In 1924 he writes from Paris:

I loathe Society […] The people are so terribly false, and one must become the greatest liar and the hardest nut on the face of the earth to ‘get away with it’ here. The scandals, the gossip, the cruelty of it all bores me to tears.

This is Dan:

He could not give a name to his sensations of confused dread but he was positive he would never be able to know awfully clever people because they were so horrid.

And again:

Must people be cruel – how he fought tooth and nail with that thought! – it was a beastly one to have …

Dan’s incomprehension in the face of the General Strike is mirrored by Wood’s political naiveté. In late 1924, for example, he writes from France:

There is a panic here as everybody thinks there is going to be a revolution and a terrible upset to change the government. I hope to goodness there is not.

So many resonances of Daniel Boleyn sound in Wood’s person and words that it is hard to imagine that at their meetings in late 1923 Lewis did not consciously absorb his voice, outlook and personality with a view to helping to shape Dan’s character, on which he must have been working at the time. As Dan crystallised in his imagination, Lewis must have valued in Wood such an opportune specimen of the cult of youth.

No matter how one-dimensional Wood may sound in his letters, it is abundantly clear that he impressed all who met him by his charisma and charm, his boyishly English good looks, and his sincere determination to become a good painter. Photographs show not a shabby bohemian, but an appealingly Woosterish young gentleman, dapper in plus fours or languidly sporting gloves and cane.

At the close of The Apes of God, Dan escapes from strike-torn London to join Mélanie
Blackwell in the promised land of Azay-le-Promis. We do not know if he will become a serious painter, but we somehow doubt it. Through sheer will-power, Christopher Wood did eventually become a remarkable painter, but it is interesting to note that his mature paintings abandon the more knowing style of his earlier years and assume a greater naïveté, though this rarely appears contrived. In Wood’s best work, it is hard to prise apart the naïf and the faux-naïf. It was he and Ben Nicholson, after all, who ‘discovered’ the naïve St Ives painter, Alfred Wallis. In her slim, but very worthwhile recent study, Virginia Button characterises Wood as a naïf, and argues perceptively that this sheds light on ‘the peculiar type of modernity at play in his work’.29

Lewis recognised this naïveté as a strength. Although – or perhaps because – Wood ‘had not so fine a mind’, his ‘romantic nature was able to organize itself sufficiently’ to give his paintings an ‘imaginative beauty which is as easy as a reverie […] It is the gentle dream of a dairymaid. But it is a pukka dream’. Here is the crucial point at which the real Wood parts company with Lewis’s projection of him as Dan, for Dan’s downfall is that his romantic nature is not able to organise itself at all. Unlike Dan, Wood was to Lewis not merely ‘charming’, but also “talented” – in fact, ‘the only “post-war” English painter of outstanding merit’.50

The first edition of The Apes of God appeared on 3 June 1930. While there is no indication in Wood’s letters of that year that he knew of its publication and of the resulting controversy, let alone of his own starring role, nevertheless his sense of his own past was certainly about to catch up with him, with tragic consequences. In July he was in Paris working on what were to be his final paintings, but in August he returned to England. In a state of severe paranoia brought on by his withdrawal from opium smoking – a habit introduced to him by Cocteau – he apparently became convinced that he was being followed by agents of the Guinness family, who had some years earlier opposed his involvement with the heiress Meraud Guinness.51 On 21 August at Salisbury railway station, a revolver in his overcoat pocket, he dived, screaming, in front of the incoming London train, and was killed instantly.

Had he been aware of it, the public portrayal in The Apes of God of the shameful nature of his relationship with Gandarillas might well have heightened Wood’s paranoid sense of being persecuted by his own past and by those shadowy figures who wished to hold him accountable for it. But there is no evidence that the novel was actually a contributory factor in his spiral into disaster.

Lewis declared himself ‘indignant’ at Wood’s ‘fearful death’, and at those – ‘the bad, rich, opium-eating company’ – who had helped to shape it, consoling his readers with the thought that the locomotive under which Wood threw himself ‘doubtless […] was kinder than those to whom he gave his young friendship’. ‘The people who had so maltreated him could have selected something less unusual than a good artist for their purpose – though of course it was because they had detected something rare within this big blond envelope that they had coveted it.’32 This humane insight does Lewis credit. For him, both Wood and Dan are victims.

Death is present in the closing pages of The Apes: a police inspector has been murdered.
in the East End, and the corpse of Sir James, still slumped in his indoor bathchair, watches as Lady Fredigonde proposes to Zagreus. Outside, the street musicians sound the arrival of Death-the-Drummer. Dan himself escapes. But earlier, in his vision of the landscape of cruelty that ‘ran through things’, he has seen death:

‘Arrests and murders they had been mentioned especially, at a certain point he believed Horace had spoken about blood. There must undoubtedly have been some murder. Perhaps it was a big case or a cause célèbre. Someone had been done to death.’35

Intuitively, Dan understands that the life of the Apes is a masque of death. In the suicide of Christopher Wood, Dan’s intuition was realised.

NOTES

4 Lewis, *The Apes of God*, p. 106. Lewis had worked with Hamnett at Roger Fry’s Omega Workshops.
8 O’Keeffe, *Some Sort of Genius*, p. 254. In the published novel this ‘Encyclical’ is addressed to Zagreus by Pierpoint (pp. 118–125).
15 ‘Letters from Christopher Wood to his mother 1923’, Tate Gallery Archive 773.3, 20 October 1923.
19 For many years, the only published account of Wood’s career was Eric Newton’s brief essay in *Christopher Wood 1901–1930* (London: Heinemann, for the Redfern Gallery, 1938), in which his ‘close friendship’ with Ganderillas is mentioned only briefly. More recently, a biography has been written by Richard Ingleby (see note 16), and a study of his work by Virginia Button (see note 29). Wood is also the subject of a perceptive appreciation by Sebastian Faulks in *The Fatal Englishman: Three Short Lives* (London: Hutchinson, 1996).
23 ‘Letters’, 19 November 1923. I have not checked Wood’s version against Tree’s published works.
25 ‘Letters from Christopher Wood to his mother 1924’, Tate Gallery Archive 773.4, 16 February 1924.
31 Button (see note 29), pp. 12–13. p. 16.
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